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Citizenship as active participatory learning in the teaching of Geography

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Abstract

Sustainable development is economically, socially and ecologically friendly local and global development. It is based on co-responsible behaviour of each and every one. Active participatory learning and active citizenship are common concepts in current educational discourse in sustainable living. Constructivist approaches require the learner's involvement in knowledge construction. Educational content (in our case geography content is integrated with citizenship and sustainable development content) is no longer primary here. Instead, developing the abilities and mental-cognitive processes of the students and transmissibility of knowledge between various areas of learning and life are at the forefront.

The article presents active learning which should be planned as creative and problem-based. Active learning should be focused on such educational goals that will challenge students' mental processes and stimulate their awareness of their rights and also their responsibility for the future. An example of active learning is presenting through role play in a geography student seminar work where students (future geography teachers) tried to find an answer to a research question as a teaching goal: How to teach about sustainable development and stimulate pupils for active citizenship? Students worked in small groups and prepared a couple of different ideas for project work on the subjects of common sustainable development problems to stimulate a socially responsible citizenship through geography teaching. They discovered through their own experience that geography teaching can substantially contribute to develop citizen competences and civic culture and that it is crucial that all school teachers are aware that they can and must co-create their pupils civic role as a role for better life through participatory learning.

Keywords: *active learning; teaching; geography; citizenship; sustainable development.*

Introduction

Contemporary concepts of education emphasize that lecturers not only transfer ready-made knowledge to students, but specifically train them for the independent acquisition of knowledge and skills (posing questions, doing research, solving problems and using sources, etc.). Such educational concepts emphasize the fact that learning goals are not the end of a path, but only open a path along which students must walk them (Kolec Kolnik, 2009) The overall facets of good teaching may be framed in terms of "context, connections, competence, and conscience." Situated learning is learning in context, and is widely accepted as the most enduring way of learning. Understanding a topic in relation to experience and with respect to other topics is part of situated learning. Active

connections of concepts and phenomena to one another are thus essential to learning. If these connections are not made explicitly, the learner may connect new knowledge to his/her existing knowledge framework sometimes erroneously, giving rise to misconceptions. Thus establishing context and connections intentionally is an important part of providing learning experiences. This is the basis of constructivist teaching. (1 <http://www>, 2011)

The pressure of information/knowledge transmission affects teacher training through the belief that teachers ought to have specialised knowledge in several subjects. While many student teachers develop independent work, this often involves little more than the collecting and organising information. How teachers deal with content coverage and their own role is central to active learning in citizenship and sustainable development education.

1. The geographical point of view on active learning

Geography education can also contribute significantly to active learning (knowledge), understanding and respecting (evaluation) one's own homeland, national space and their co-dependent connection with the world. The complexity of the geography is best conceptualized in interdisciplinary terms. We integrate geography as subject matter and pedagogy to attain our objectives. Therefore how future geography teachers learn is as important as what they learn.

We would like to stimulate our students (future geography teachers) to use participatory teaching methods for building skills and influencing attitudes of their future pupils (class discussion, demonstration and guided practice, field work, role plays, small group work, case studies, educational games, etc.), to address major issues, such as sustainable development and responsible citizenship.

There is a special obligation on the educators of future teachers to present wide ranges of ideas and methodologies to enable students to introduce and continue active learning approaches in their classrooms.

Our approach is based on students attaining five areas of understanding and experience: core knowledge of geography, problem-solving and decision-making framework, including analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills, student mental models and conceptual change, learning to learn and team work.

Nowadays we all agree that civic, social and political education aims have to encourage and prepare students for active participatory citizenship. (Rone et al, 2004; Mohanty and Tandon, 2006; Kolenc Kolnik 2009) To participate actively in seminar work, students not only require knowledge and understanding of the way teaching operates but more importantly the skills to be able to actively participate in educational process. Through active involvement in a wide range of learning activities it is hoped that students can develop not only the knowledge but also the skills necessary to actively participate in making the lessons be practically orientated. It is only through being given the

opportunity to participate themselves in their own classroom or school that students can develop and practice the skills of active citizenship.

1.1 How to learn about Sustainable development issues in Geography teaching seminar?

Our basic research question was as follows: What kinds of knowledge and skills can be acquired and developed by students in geography education so that, as adults, they will be able to make decisions that will permit active citizenship in sustainable development. We tried to encourage the sensitivity to recognize co-responsibility in solving global problems in seminar work with geography students – future geography teachers (Kolenc Kolnik, 2006). We wanted the senior class of geography students to obtain a learning experience that would motivate them to plan and use creative ways of teaching and incorporating all three bases of citizenship education.

Our students, future geography teachers, were given the task of finding an answer to a research question as a teaching goal: Can we teach about places to develop a sense of active citizenship in sustainable development?

The students worked in small groups and prepared a couple of different ideas for project work on the subjects of sustainable development and stimulating a socially responsible citizenship through geography learning. The methodical procedure was carried out in the following order, shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Scheme of the teaching project: Geography teaching to develop a sense of active citizenship in sustainable development?

Content and activity	Date
1. Initiative and motivation - Group forming (Case study, creative reading, group discussion, brainstorming, pro and con)	First week of May
2. Goal determination, choice of content of project work and time table: - Following media reports on global problems - Sketching the idea, introduction and evaluation - Detailed plan (Collecting data, analysing data, time planning, decision-making)	Second week of May
3. Performing the plan and conclusion of group work (Collecting data, analysing data, forming a report/product)	Third week of May
4. Presentation of results and evaluation of the work (Role play, decision-making)	Final week of May

Source: Teaching project plan (spring 2011)

Initiative and motivation.

The first step was meant to stimulate initiative and motivation. How can geography teaching educate for responsible citizenship of the world?

A group of students was given the task of finding answers to the following questions: Why do we take on this educational content, and why do we use these teaching methods? The answers to these questions should motivate their fellow students to co-operate and continue working. Motivation was achieved with the help of a case study: introducing the result of previous students' seminar work named "World - the junkyard or Why should exactly I care about the garbage?" as an example. Fellow students were motivated to thinking through group discussion with directed questions: What has the case study brought to me on a personal level and what on a professional level?

Formation of groups was done according to the individual wishes of the students, and each group chose its own coordinator.

Goal determination, choice of content of project work and time table.

Analysing the geography curriculum for Secondary school – common educational programme Gymnasium (2 <http://www>, 2008), each group found educational goals and content linked to knowledge of global problems. In order to check if the chosen goals and content were up-to-date and global, they followed reports of various home and foreign media for a week and took note of which global problems were the subject of reports. They collected information on the world's current events and sought possible content ideas for their project task. They presented the results of this media follow-up, together with commentary, to the other groups. Based on the data collected, each group formulated a title, a research question and goals for their project and made a timetable for the work involved.

Performing the plan and conclusion of group work.

The groups went to work on their projects. Some groups needed mid-stage coordination (adjustment check with planning, changes, additions or plan corrections), which were led by and discussed with the professor by the group leader. All groups finished their projects on time. Each group also had to choose a title and a striking research question for its learning project.

The chosen titles and research questions reflected versatility in the chosen teaching approaches (table 2).

Table 2: Chosen titles and their research questions

Title of the project	Research question
1. Do I live in an energy-saving house.	How to save money and have fun doing it?

2. Separating of waste: Yes, because I respect the Planet.	Learning by doing: we are making our own solutions.
3. Mission impossible	Others should take care of my waste.
4. Eco tourism or vacations little bit different.	Corporate Sustainability in ecotourism: a story of my home region.
5. Mine, yours = our rights.	Why should Slovenian youth care about minority kids
6. Light pollution.	Why butterflies can't slip?

Source: Students project plan (spring 2011)

Presentation of results and evaluation of the work.

The presentation of results and evaluation of the work were the final stage. All six students groups presented their work in a limited time without any technical or spatial limitation. The emphasis of the presentation was on argumentation of the idea and the creativity used when presenting the results of their work. In the fourth stage the groups assessed one another. They assessed three fields: the quality (consistency regarding methodological procedure) of planning, the originality of the idea and the creativity used in the presentation of their results. Their grading had to be defended as well.

For most students, the final part of the project work, meaning evaluation, seemed to be the most difficult. Each group compared their own work plan with the results and thus defined common results also as individual contributions

Picture 1: Do I live in an energy-saving house?



Source: Students project work, 2011

In the final word, group leaders presented the opinions of students involved in the

project, interesting examples and problems they encountered that could not be solved. They also presented some possibilities for further work and evaluated the adequacy of their chosen topic and methods of seminar work, and also the importance of education on common global problems and their role therein.

All participants rated the results of the complete seminar work, lasting one month, as a good learning experience, and the students also assessed the significance of such work for acquiring teaching experience.

Picture 2: Separating of waste: Yes, because I respect the Planet.



Source: Students project work, 2011

2. Conclusion

In presented examples of learning simulation, we wanted to encourage geography students (future teachers), to open their minds to seek useful in a wider context and to consciously integrate the knowledge of and skills at different school subjects in interactive way.

We discovered that the geography curriculum enables us to reach numerous goals of citizenship education and education for sustainable development and thus confirms the great benefit of connecting the natural and social sciences. Students found out that they can and must connect geography teaching with sustainable development and citizenship education. Sustainable living will only occur when consistent curricula messages are embedded by actively working through all school subjects which school integrate a wide range of cross-curricula values and contents,

Future teachers must be prepared for the difficult and responsible teaching task as early as their professional school days in order to face the present need for reconciliation and evaluation of different interests in the decision making process at various levels.

The students, through the analysis of the seminar, also learned that as future teachers of geography, they have much better knowledge of those areas of sustainable development based on ecologic content, as all other areas (social or economic or cultural theme of sustainable development). As a result five out of six groups have decided to participate in those seminars. Apparently more work is ahead of us in the field of social geography, so that the topics of human rights, intercultural dialog, economic rights, etc., will be more present in the line of work of the future geography teacher's when they will be planning education for sustainable development and active citizenship.

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