Experiential civic learning by using "Projekt: Aktive Bürger" *(1)*

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Reclaiming Citizens as Acting Subjects

One of the core challenges to civic educators is the question what they can do (better) to prepare young people sustainably for their roles as enlightened and autonomous citizens being able and willing to actively carry on with the project of a humane and democratic society. This issue is by no means a new one. However, recent social and political developments (e.g. social fragmentation and individualization, symbolization of politics, increasing political apathy and cynism, debordering of democratic policy-making in the context of globalization, liberal rights under stress especially since Sept. 11, 2002, etc.) are likely to let man become *object* instead of *subject* to processes which for him are neither transparent nor controllable. In so far this process of *de-civilization* turns out to impede – rather than to facilitate – the improvement of a humane and democratic society as well as effects of civic education.

In order to make the project of a humane and democratic society a successful one the need to *reclaim citizens as acting subjects* has become tremendously urgent. The success of these efforts will depend on how far (and how many) people "are able to act as citizens and to experience their ability to be citizens" *(Schmidt 1995, 576)*. Thus pedagogical efforts should be directed to support this assumption and to offer learning strategies that are oriented towards the notion of "action as experiential learning" *(Wöll 1998, 122)* – instead of constantly reproducing conventional patterns of teaching and instructing. The impact of these efforts on "engendering civic identity" seems to be obvious: "By offering youth meaningful participatory experiences, we allow them to discover their potency, access their responsibility, acquire a sense of political processes, and commit to a moral-ethical ideology." *(Youniss et al. 1997, 629)*.

This leads me to my central thesis: *Experience-oriented learning processes will particularly unfold in the course of the (inter)active dealing of the individual(s) with the authentic political and social problems and processes that surround and concern them. This also includes reflection and cooperation. It represents the complex experience-oriented requirements of civic education, from which the following essentials can be extracted: subject-orientation, action-orientation, problem-orientation, authenticity and policy-orientation.*

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Experiential Civic Learning – Five Essentials

I will now look more closely at the essentials of the experience- and policy-oriented learning processes mentioned above.

1. Subject-orientation

(The term *'subject'* in this context does not refer to subjects, disciplines taught in the classroom. It is rather to be understood as synonymous with 'individual', and in so far antonymous to the term *'object'*): Education – in particular civic education – can be understood as *self-determination*, as development of the subject. In so far students have to be recognised as *learning subjects*. Learning subjects are not 'objects' to be taught but to a great extent control their learning processes themselves.

As many studies indicate, sustainable effects can be attributed to subject-oriented or self-controlled, active learning. Moreover, subject-oriented learning processes are essential for a civic education that is interested in acquiring the orientations and competences which allow young people to be active subjects of participatory democracy.

In view of the current social processes of social fragmentation and individualization, greater importance is attached to subject-oriented learning by acting, because these ambivalent processes make higher demands on young people. This is particularly so for their ability to form their identities.

Schools and, in particular, civic education need to focus on these changed conditions of socialization and to use the new opportunities for actively shaping identity. While doing this, one must consider that civic education should not aim at the self-referential subject per se, at selfishness, but at the unity of individual *self-determination* and joint *co-determination.*

Subject-orientation implies the option of co-operative learning. Co-operative learning through (inter)acting becomes an integral part of self-oriented learning, when the subjects understand it as a real (not simulated) option, in which the use and structure is controlled either by the learning subject or by the learning group.

2. Action-orientation:

Subject-orientation and action-orientation are closely connected: "Man is a subject by acting (…) Man is identical with himself (…) only as an acting person within concrete issue-related and social fields" *(Dewey in Kaiser 199, 13)*. So active practical doing seems to play the decisive role in the growth of consciousness and identity.

Action-oriented learning, by forming cognition and consciousness, implies a *reflective* moment. It is bound to the subject's cognitive activities (reflective actions). Action-orientation should not be mixed up with permanent action and overstimulation by a show-master-like teacher. Rather than this, reflective action-orientation means both a reference back to the *conditions* initiating action, and a "systematic and careful analysis of the relations between actions and their *consequences*" *(Dewey 1993, 202)*.
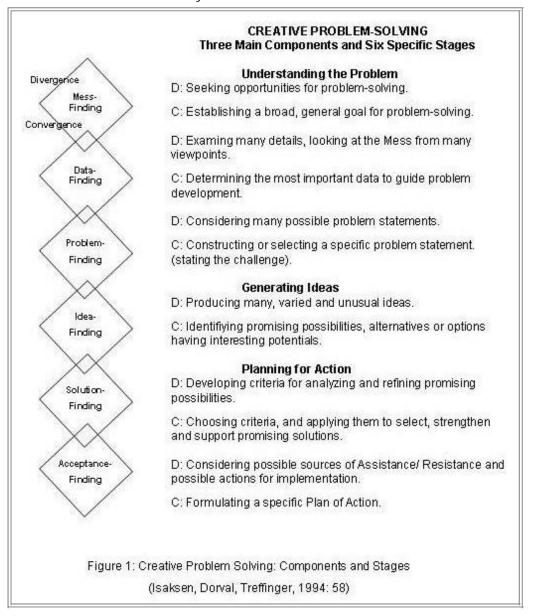
The more acting is practised comprehensively, the more that the pedagogical potential of action-oriented learning in civic education should unfold. That is: politically relevant action ought to "be discussed and

practised not only with respect to the goal, but also in view of the *process*" *(Koopmann 1996, 22)* of civic education.

Early participation provides "experience with normative civic practices and ideologies, and shapes youth's emerging identities in a long-lasting form" *(Youniss et al. 1997, 629)*. In fact this positive correlation between the experience of socially and politically relevant *engagement* within a participatory climate in the classroom on the one hand and greater civic *knowledge* and *competence* to participate on the other hand has been one of the major findings of the reputated IEA-study *(Torney-Purta et al. 2001, Chapter 10)*.

3. Problem-orientation:

Experience-oriented learning that supports the interaction of the learners with their environments clearly receives its decisive educational thrust

CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING
Three Main Components and Six Specific Stages

Divergence
Mess-Finding
Convergence

Understanding the Problem
D: Seeking opportunities for problem-solving.

C: Establishing a broad, general goal for problem-solving.

D: Examing many details, looking at the Mess from many viewpoints.

Data-Finding

C: Determining the most important data to guide problem development.

D: Considering many possible problem statements.

Problem-Finding

C: Constructing or selecting a specific problem statement. (stating the challenge).

Generating Ideas
D: Producing many, varied and unusual ideas.

Idea-Finding

C: Identifiying promising possibilities, alternatives or options having interesting potentials.

Planning for Action
D: Developing criteria for analyzing and refining promising possibilities.

Solution-Finding

C: Choosing criteria, and applying them to select, strengthen and support promising solutions.

D: Considering possible sources of Assistance/ Resistance and possible actions for implementation.

Acceptance-Finding

C: Formulating a specific Plan of Action.

Figure 1: Creative Problem Solving: Components and Stages

(Isaksen, Dorval, Treffinger, 1994: 58)

from specific situations stimulating learning actions: "Thinking begins in (…) a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives" *(Dewey in Benson &*

Harkavy 1997, 17). And dilemmas or problems call for *solutions.*

This basic idea of problem-orientation, outlined by Dewey almost nine decades ago has lead up to various strategies of problem-solving learning. One of the most prominent of these approaches is the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) model first proposed by Isaksen and Treffinger in the mid-1980s, and which has been under continuous development since then. This model *(Isaksen et al. 1994, 58)* consists of "three components of activity as well as six stages" *(Figure1)*.

4. Authenticity:

The objects, situations and processes of learning by acting are authentic if they are *original,* not yet decided, but open-ended. The students' action may have real consequences, for themselves and for the public.

The notion of authenticity cannot be isolated to the classroom or the school. It must relate to the *entirety* of the students' experiences inside and outside schools. What matters is the use of both areas in an integrated way when choosing projects. This presupposes the readiness of schools to open up.

This is what happens e.g. in the context of so-called *service-learning* programs combining curriculum-based learning with community service *(see Furco & Billig 2002)*. Conceptual variants of *service-learning* programs have been discussed and increasingly practised in the USA since the early 1990s (also in the context of discourses on communitarianism). The core idea is that learners "become involved in authentic inquiry in areas of genuine interest" *(Sewell & StGeorge 1997, 139)* and – while actively taking part in authentic problem-solving – apply "skills and habits of behavior that enable them to be constructively engaged in political and civic life" *(Patrick 1999, 51)*. Education- and community-based service-learning projects may be considered as "*public laboratories*, in which citizens learn democracy by doing it" *(Patrick 1999, 51)*.

5. Policy-orientation:

The concept of experiential civic education is founded on the idea to prevent politics from increasing marginalisation and to support political subjects as enlightened and active citizens. This approach must ensure that the learner does not get stuck in charity and in social matters.

This necessary insistence on political civic education must not be misunderstood as insisting on teaching politics as a narrow political science oriented discipline. The ability to realize social problems and develop adequate political solutions requires overcoming of a mere discipline-related, narrow approach to politics and integrating a subject-oriented dimension into the conception of politics. Such a broader understanding of politics would mean identifying public policy issues in everyday life.

The outline of these five essentials of experiential civic education (subject-, action- and problem-orientation, authenticity as well as political orientation) should support my central thesis: *Experience-oriented learning processes, aimed at the sustainable acquisition of competences which are relevant in politics and civil society, will particularly unfold in the course of the (inter)active dealing of the individual(s) with the authentic political and social problems and processes that surround and concern them. This also includes*
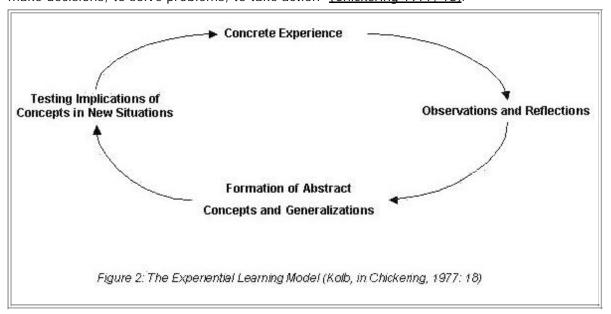
reflection and co-operation. It represents the complex experience-oriented requirements.

Experiential Learning

The pedagogical organization and practical realization of an experience-oriented perspective of civic education demands appropriate ways of learning. These would have to include the essentials outlined above.

In the 1920s, and to a greater extent in the 1960s and 1970s, American educators and psychologists developed models of the phases and steps of experiential learning. They substantially draw on the work of John Dewey. One of the most widespread models was developed by *David Kolb (1984)* *(Figure 2)*.

According to this model, efficient experiential learning consists of "four ingredients that themselves call for four different abilities. The learners must be able to enter new experiences openly and fully without bias; they must be able to stand back from those experiences, observe them with some detachment, and reflect on their significance; they must be able to develop a logic, a theory, a conceptual framework that gives some order to the observations; and they must be able to use those concepts to make decisions, to solve problems, to take action" *(Chickering 1977, 18)*.

Figure 2: The Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, in Chickering, 1977: 18)

Experiential Civic Learning in Practice

One example of how to practice an experiential learning strategy in the context of civic education is well being demonstrated by the program "Projekt: Aktive Bürger" *(CCE & Koopmann 2001)*, the German adaptation of "We the People ... Project Citizen" *(CCE 1995)* designed by the American Center for Civic Education (CCE). This program for middle school students actively engages students in learning how to monitor and influence public policy and encourages civic participation among students, their parents, and members of the community. As a class project, students work together and accomplish the following steps:

1. Students begin *identifying public problems* in their community that

they think are important.

2. The class *decides upon the problem* to study.

3. The students will *gather and evaluate information* about the problem from a variety of sources.

4. In the fourth step the students will *examine possible solutions* and alternative policies being suggested by political institutions, by groups of people, like non-governmental institutions etc.

5. Next the class will *develop a public* policy to solve the problem.

6. The students will *develop a plan of action* to show how they might influence the political institutions, governmental agencies, public administration etc. to adopt their proposed public policy.

7. In the seventh step the students will *develop a portfolio* displaying the essential steps taken during the active learning process. They will do this in four different groups:

   - Group 1 will present and explain the problem

   - Group 2 will present the various policies dealing with the problem

   - Group 3 is to present the political strategy the class decided on

   - Group 4 will line out the action plan the class developed

8. In a culminating activity the class *presents its portfolio* in a simulated legislative hearing, demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of how public policy is formulated.

9. The class will *actively participate in the political process* dealing with the problem. The class sticks to the political institutions and the public administration implementing the solution the class has worked out.

10. Finally the class *reflects* on their learning experience.

All in all: "Projekt: Aktive Bürger" as well as its American origin offers students *experiential learning* in the authentic public process by *doing* the process themselves (as *acting subjects*) and by bringing them into active contact with officials and institutions involved with public administration and policy. In so far "Projekt: Aktive Bürger" and "Project Citizen" function as a guideline and tool-box for young people to actively prepare for democratic citizenship.

Conclusion

Experiential learning seems to be an appropriate means of meeting the challenges of political and social trends of de-civilization, because this learning strategy offers young people the possibility to act as citizens and experience their ability to be citizens. It seems rather obvious that the sustainable effects of experiential learning will unfold particularly in the course of an (inter)active, co-operative and reflective dealing of the individuals with authentic political and social problems as well as decision-making processes being meaningful to them within their public environment.

Notes

(1) This article is based on a paper being presented on May 24, 2002 at the ATINER (Athens Institute for Education and Research) Fourth International Conference in Athens, Greece

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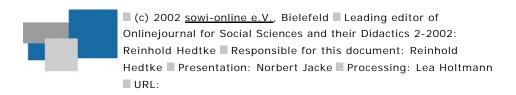
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