

# The crisis as an opportunity to learn. Or: 'Collateral civic education' in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

## An essay in times of crises

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### 1 INTRODUCTION: CREATING IMPACT AS A TASK OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

People learn when they have to learn. This quite simple but antiquated insight of motivational psychology can be interpreted in various ways. First of all, it can be understood in a very traditional way as an argument for authoritarian class-management and educational control through external incentives like grades, shame and punishments. On the other hand, the sentence also illustrates that people only grow, adjust and really learn something new if they recognize the need to get involved in the learning processes.

After three weeks in the lockdown triggered by the Corona Crisis, I at least learned a lot. I now know way more about virology and epidemiology. I can also handle logarithmic scales, bake bread, sew nasal protection masks on my own and use various tools to carry out video conferences, even though I have also learned that none of these tools are safe concerning data protection. So, I have learned a lot in the last three weeks, really a lot - and so have many other people. Teachers have rapidly learned to initiate and manage homeschooling processes, universities run fully digital almost overnight, doctors organize their waiting rooms so that patients hardly have to wait, seniors can meet with their absent grandchildren on digital platforms and much more. Is it possible that in the shadow of this crisis some hidden opportunities appear? Disruption as a breakthrough innovation? When the crisis is over will we proudly look back at this time and point to all the things we may have achieved in the end? To me this seems to be an inappropriately romantic view on learning and innovation processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because - as the crisis is currently unfolding - we are - to be honest - also learning to renounce civil liberties, trust authoritarian politics, protect national borders - only to mention just a few aspects. With regard to civic education, these latter

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aspects are unfortunately more significant than the (aforementioned) rather technical skills that seem to develop in context of the crisis.

Therefore, in this article I would like to pursue the question of the pedagogical and didactical collateral effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and make clear that in the context of the crisis enormous opportunities do exist, but so do dangers too - particularly for civic education. The starting point of my considerations is the concept of "collateral learning" coined by John Dewey. Following Dewey, I will first examine the concept in the context of formalized learning processes, then I will refer to collateral learning in the processes of informal learning which result from major political and social events.

## 2 COLLATERAL LEARNING IN FORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The term 'Collateral learning' may sound unusual, perhaps even martial when we think of collateral damage - a term we know from military language. Collateral damage often refers to victims who were not intended to be killed in a military operation, but whose death has nevertheless been taken into consideration. This euphemism intends to conceal fatalities. For good reason collateral damage was chosen as the German non-word of the year in 1999. Therefore, why should this term be used in the context of civic education? There are various answers to this question. An obvious one is because in the context of civic education we are often confronted with unintended but serious consequences of our work as well. We nevertheless avoid to address this seriously. Regarding this we also use the term 'hidden curriculum' in German-speaking education-oriented discussions. It marks an ambiguity within educational processes an emphasis that next to the already obvious learning procedures, less obvious learning tasks and objectives on a second level are being provided too.<sup>1</sup> But while the term 'hidden curriculum' implies that the less obvious is eventually also intended institutionally, John Dewey's concept of collateral learning indicates that other - possibly even more harmful - effects are linked in the field of (civic) education and that we accept these effects even though we know that they are actually difficult to justify. Dewey writes:

"Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned." (Dewey, 1938, p. 29)

As we can see here, the concept of collateral learning encompasses far more than the 'hidden curriculum'. It shows that the processes of learning are self-determined and fundamentally difficult to control. This insight is not new (see Autorenggruppe Fachdidaktik, 2015; Besand, 2019a). However, especially in formal pedagogical environments, such as schools, this context tends to be forgotten. Through the years we have gotten used to thinking that students are able to learn content and gain competences that teachers or curricula consider relevant. Although there is little indication that learning processes can be controlled in this way (and all current research in the field of learning strategies and theory proves the opposite), this common assumption is surprisingly stable even today.

In order to illustrate this, let us have a look at civic education in schools:

A look at the educational goals formulated in the constitutions of the German federal states show that civic education and the teaching of democratic citizenship are seen as the central duties of schools. During their school years, pupils should become members of the society, who are able to make their own political judgements and act politically in their own interest. They should

understand and share basic democratic values, stand up for others, remember actively (the German history), think globally and act locally etc. (see Besand, 2019a). To fulfill these tasks schools provide diverse structures. Usually, a designated subject exists, where civic and political issues can be addressed and controversial debates can take place. Beyond this subject, civic education is also seen as the duty and task of the entire school. In this context civic education or maybe better: education for democratic citizenship shall be addressed through topics across all subjects and shall be "lived" and "experienced" in the school as a polis. Particularly where civic education as a subject is being taught within just a view school lessons, the concept of the 'school as a polis' and therefore as a space to experience democracy is strongly emphasized. To make this visible, it is often argued that democratic competences - if they shall become meaningful to students - must be experienced and cannot be learned (in a simple sense) repetitively (see: Himmelmann, 2007). To put it in a nutshell: Instead of talking about democracy for hours it is more important for the school to offer various possibilities for students to participate and provide opportunities for them to contribute to school community.

At first sight, this might correspond quite well with Dewey's concept of collateral learning. Because it makes perfect sense to assume that unintended side-effects in the field of civic education - or education for democratic citizenship - can be effectively avoided when civics are taught in an democratic way. But is this really the case and what it looks like? Or - to put it another way: How can we actually bring civic education as a subject, crosscutting issues as a culture into harmony in everyday school life? In looking for an answer - teachers will tell you that the established instruments for students' participation, class and student representative elections, school assemblies are helpful in order to bring things together. But are these instruments free of collateral effects? Or: What do students really learn when they become involved as class or school representatives? What do we know about the effects of these instruments?

Bohnsack and Helsper are two German researchers in the field of educational science who deal with the question of how students experience school culture an everyday school life. In this context, they also explore the effects of student participation and their expectations in this regard (see: Bohnsack, 2013, p. 94 or Helsper, 2001, p. 487f). Looking at their findings it becomes clear that schools as institutions often tend to have a more technical understanding if they provide opportunities for students to participate. From the students' perspective, the perception of democratic participation in schools is a rather poor one. Following this, Helsper distinguishes five dominant patterns of perception. Students often experience the established forms of the students' participation in school administration as...

A	B	C	D	E
<b>... imposed autonomy</b>	<b>... simulated participation</b>	<b>... disciplinary involvement</b>	<b>... instrumental involvement</b>	<b>... supervisory autonomy</b>
students are forced to participate in the activities even against their interests	participation is being promised, but is not going to be achieved	self-organization is allowed but only if it is in line with the expectations of the school	serves image building of the school only	students are supposed to act as controllers or counterforces against unpopular classmates

Illustration based on Helsper et al. 2001, p. 575

If democracy is introduced like that and the mentioned experiences are being offensively declared as "highly democratic" by teachers or other school officials - there is great danger that students will give a thumbs down response and develop inappropriate concepts of democracy as a simulative process (see the extensive literature on the post-democratic turn of Crouch, 2005; Blühdorn, 2013 etc.). This means: Even if we try to teach civics in democratic settings, the risk of dangerous side effects has not yet been eliminated in any way. Students have fine-tuned

antennas to differentiate between real or simulated forms of participation. If democratic participation is only simulated but is at the same time considered to be real - there is a serious danger that learners will get the impression that participation opportunities relate with democracy only in a very superficial sense. In the long run students may get the impression that they don't want to deal with this kind of democracy or they may not put any particular hopes in it (see: Besand, 2019b).

### 3 IS COLLATERAL LEARNING NECESSARILY NEGATIVE?

In order to avoid the impression collateral effects in civic education are necessarily negative, I would like to briefly mention (and roughly explain) a second example. This example imagines the possibility that a school managed in an authoritarian manner by a principal who might not put greater emphasis on civic education and/or democratic participation. And - to make the picture more complete - this principal is often in conflict with the people who teach and learn in this community. However, it is absolutely conceivable that this principal may have an activating effect on student participation and - whether intended or not - stimulate and inspire them to develop civic skills by fighting against him or her. Collateral learning can always be observed when the intended learning effects which come along with the complexity of learning situations are overshadowed by other and sometimes complete different effects. In this sense, collateral learning does not have to be negative. Dewey speaks rather of ways of *formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes* which determine future learning process. Nevertheless, Dewey uses the term 'collateral learning' primarily to put the focus on dangers within educational processes that are not easy to perceive under the conditions of everyday school. Here comes a final example: Even if students are able to properly illustrate the complex institutional structure of the European Union and its legislative procedures in an exam, because they are aware that the grade of this test influences their final grade, we still do not know whether and in what regard the EU has become relevant to this group of learners. It is perfectly possible to imagine that the very same learners, based on their learning impressions, may have decided that they would not like to deal with this topic ever again - if avoidable.

### 4 COLLATERAL LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF CRISIS EXPERIENCES

Circling back to our starting points, collateral learning is also happening in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously shown, these processes are not necessarily negative, but often very ambivalent. So what are the civil achievements of this crisis? If we look at the debates presented by social media, an insight in regard to the corona crisis may be that the health care system cannot and should not be regarded as a profitable business model. Another one could be that societies with the infrastructure of a welfare state (or remains of it) seem to have a significant advantage in the case of a pandemic. What has also been learned is that not only banks are flagged as essential structure (as it seemed to be after the financial crisis of 2008). Under the circumstances of a pandemic it has become obvious that not only doctors and pharmacists but supermarket cashiers, poorly paid nurses, and the parcel delivery staff are essential to keep "the system" running through their commitment and willingness to ruin their health.

At the same time, the work of teachers and scientists has also suddenly appeared in a different light. While the former are sorely missed by parents of school-age children who are working from home, the latter ones have become highly demanded annotators of the world and contingency managers overnight. Their impossible task is to transform the unknown into the known as quickly as possible - or to support society in withstanding the present state of unknowing at

least for a while.<sup>2</sup> Very appropriately, Jürgen Habermas formulated the following in an interview in the Frankfurter Rundschau on 8.4.2020:

“Our complex societies are constantly confronted with major uncertainties, but those occur locally and non-simultaneously and getting normally handled more or less unobtrusively in one or the other subsystem of society by relevant experts. In contrast, existential insecurity is now spreading globally and simultaneously, in the minds of the media-linked individuals themselves. (...) Furthermore, the current insecurity does not only relate to the management of epidemic dangers, but also to the completely unforeseeable economic and social consequences. In contrast to the virus - this much is known - there is temporarily no expert who could assess these consequences for sure. The economic and social science experts should be cautious of making imprudent forecasts. However one thing can be known: There has never been so much knowledge about our not-knowing and about the compulsion to act and live under uncertainty.”

In the sense of collateral learning, one of the most challenging learning tasks the COVID-19 pandemic has in store for our societies is to keep this knowledge about our not-knowing alive, rather than to handle it in a very simple sense through the knowledge production of the virologists and epidemiologists. Formulated as an educational goal, we speak of resilience or the ability to deal with ambiguity. There has never been a better opportunity to train skills to achieve these goals than the current pandemic.

## 5 THE ABILITY TO DEAL WITH AMBIGUITY AS A CENTRAL CIVIC VIRTUE

However, not only the pandemic but civic education can indeed help to train the ability to deal with ambiguity, because civic education in a democracy makes visible that democratic action is always action under uncertainty. If we understand democracy as the institutionalization of uncertainty (Przeworski) democratic systems are built on ambiguity. They do almost consist of ambiguity. Indications of this are easy to spot, because in democracies nobody knows how future elections are turning out. Democracy is about a balance of interests, revisable decisions, the sharing of power and the protection of minorities and this is true even if they express strange opinions and cultivate peculiar habits. Therefore, ambiguity is visible in a democracy wherever you look. Therefore, the ability to deal with ambiguity is the central citizen's virtue in a democracy and civic education is in charge to train this virtue. According to general understanding, civic education is about preparing young people for their role as citizens in a democracy. Civic education is about helping them to create their own point of view and to develop answers to the questions: How do we want to live together? What is important for our life and survival? By implication, this also means that civic education cannot be about presenting a clearly contoured issue (like ‚the politics‘, ‚the society‘, ‚the economy‘, ‚the law‘, etc.) which is well defined and simply needs to be communicated in an appropriate way. Or to put it even more pointedly: Civic education is not about teaching politics as indisputable facts, but about becoming a political individual and being a self-determined political person. It is clear and unavoidable that in these contexts we also deal with political information and facts. But these have no meaning themselves.

Civic education as a process is much more about perceiving something in a new way or differently, something which I may have already known yesterday and about which I may have or may not have had a point of view on before. It is about gaining new, different, controversial perspectives, recognizing them as valuable and maintaining a long-term scepticism towards my own painstakingly worked out ideas. In this sense, civic education is not an instrument of

securitization. Civics do foster peace and quietness in our social or political communities. Civic education encourages critical thinking. First of all, it paves the way to the ability to judge and act politically and therefore it also opens important paths to self-determination and criticism. If we understand the ability to deal with ambiguity as a central citizen's virtue, then promoting this competence is an important task of civic education. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic offers unforeseen and highly energetic learning opportunities, but these are - as Dewey showed us - mostly not clearly recognizable. More than that, they are hidden behind the obvious practical and technical learning occasions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be managed by teaching people how to wash their hands or sew face masks. It is not getting any smaller by the knowledgeable observations of algorithmic graphs. Not even the development of the effective vaccine (we are so eagerly longing for) will really save us in this context. The following applies instead: After the virus is before the virus and after the crisis is before the crisis. However, which kind of (collateral) learning processes the COVID-19 pandemic is able to trigger, will only be indicated retrospectively. It might make us recognizing that in a globalized world we must learn to deal with challenges on a global scale, because a retreat into national problem solving is not advantageous while the virus crisis burns the rest of the world around us. However, this is only one possibility among many. We could also learn that national borders can indeed be closed overnight even after a long phase of European integration. We could learn to think more in terms of solidarity, because we might realize that the cashiers, elderly people and care-workers will no longer place themselves in the fog of the virus, if the recognition of their social achievements is not also expressed in changes towards labour laws and salaries. But we could just as well learn that the shortage of skilled-care workers will be also be solved if we just let the elderly and sick die. Learning is an active and self-determined process - from outside it can just be stimulated but not controlled. What we learn in this challenging situation is in our hands - we will soon see what we as a society are able to learn in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, to sit quietly, subordinating oneself or to intake and render contents without complaint, which is now and then necessary in the context of tests and performance requirements.

<sup>2</sup> That this can certainly succeed became clear in particular by the example of the Berlin virologist Christian Drosten, to whom a considerable proportion of the German society listened willingly. At the same time his listeners stood that Drosten often did not give them answers but a reference regarding the aim and time consuming effort of quality-guided scientific cognitive processes. See also the explanations of the NDR about the popular podcast of the virologist under: [https://podcasts.google.com/?feed=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubmRyLmRIL25hY2hyaWNodGVuL2luZ\\_m8vcG9kY2FzdDQ2ODQueG1s&episode=QVUtMjAyMDA0MDEtMTMzMzAwLUE&hl=de&ved=2ahUKEwjDkpPykd7oAhXqQxUIHaa3ARMQieUEegQIARAO&ep=6](https://podcasts.google.com/?feed=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubmRyLmRIL25hY2hyaWNodGVuL2luZ_m8vcG9kY2FzdDQ2ODQueG1s&episode=QVUtMjAyMDA0MDEtMTMzMzAwLUE&hl=de&ved=2ahUKEwjDkpPykd7oAhXqQxUIHaa3ARMQieUEegQIARAO&ep=6)