What happens in the classroom stays in the classroom – the limits to the transformative approach to education for political citizenship

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Abstract

This article offers a critical examination of the transformative approach to education for political citizenship. The argument offered here is that the transformative approaches lacks the capacity to fully acknowledge the asymmetries of political power and as a consequence, it promotes an idealised construct of political citizenship which does not transfer readily to spheres of political activity outside of the learning space. Learning about the 'ubiquity of power' should not be construed as indoctrination. Rather, it offers learners the possibility to challenge all aspects of political activity and to explore alternatives to established discourses.

Key words: (transformative learning, power, political citizenship)

Introduction

It can be argued, with some conviction, that the nature of political engagement and citizenship has been transformed in recent times. The recent loss of political sovereignty to transnational and economic institutions, coupled with an ever growing cynicism with elected representatives, has impacted on our understanding of politics in the Irish context. Further afield, the pronounced activism of the Arab Spring and continuing civil unrest in EU countries such as Greece, Spain and Italy asks us to question fundamental notions of political and democratic citizenship. However, other changes in our understanding of political citizenship have been ongoing for decades. The impact of economic globalisation and resultant fears over an emergent democratic deficit has taxed the minds of policymakers and political activists alike, where the promotion of active, participatory citizenship is viewed as a remedy of sorts. Education for political citizenship is identified as an important element in this process and is evident in the Council of Europe initiating the 'European Year of Citizenship

through Education' in 2005. More specifically, adult education has been identified as playing an important role in this endeavour - for instance, the Irish government-sponsored Active Citizenship Taskforce acknowledges the uniqueness of adult education in facilitating 'how people can draw on their own experience of life to enrich learning and make new discoveries.' (Taskforce on active citizenship, 2007b: p21) Likewise, the nexus of adult education, citizenship and democracy appears as a core theme in the Irish government's White Paper on Adult and Community Education (2000), where adult education is viewed as 'enabling individual members of the society to grow in self-confidence, social awareness and social responsibility and to take an active role in shaping the overall direction of the society…' (Department of Education, 2000: p20)

From these various policy initiatives, it can be argued that a particular construction of what it means to be an 'active' or responsible' citizen has emerged. The European Commission-funded 'Active Citizenship Education Study' argues that active citizenship is '...characterised by tolerance, non-violence and the acknowledgement of the rule of law and of human rights.' (de Weerd, 2005: 2) Elsewhere, the 'Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education', adopted in 2010, stated that -

> One of the fundamental goals of all education for democratic citizenship and human rights education is not just equipping learners with knowledge, understanding and skills, but also empowering them with the readiness to take action in society in the defence and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

(2010:p4)

> http://www.hrea.org/erc/Library/display_doc.
> php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrea.org%2F2010cmrec7E.
> pdf&external=N

Unsurprisingly, this policy construction is not to everyone's taste. Many commentators have been critical of its inception, arguing that political power has shifted greatly over the last number of decades towards highly centralised and unaccountable transnational political bodies. As a consequence, decision-making has been moved further and further away from the general populous. Moreover, the predominance of neoliberal thinking ensures a reconfiguration of citizenship, where citizens are 'encouraged' to be '...more self-sufficient (and

self-interested) consumers or customers...' and as a result, '...good citizens must, increasingly, look after themselves.' (Martin, 2003: 599)

Within this highly contested terrain, it is opportune to revisit one of the more established, discourses on education for political citizenship within the discipline of adult education. The transformative approach, most readily identified with the writings of Jack Mezirow, contends that individuals, through transformative, reflective and dialogical processes, are able to contribute to positive social change, which, in turn, will ultimately lead to ongoing, ethical and undistorted democratic processes. It is an approach that favours rational deliberation in the pursuit of authentic political discourse and borrows heavily from the writings of Jürgen Habermas.

The central argument offered here is that the transformative approach fails to address issues of power asymmetries in an adequate way, particularly in relation to issues of conflict and contestation. As a consequence, the deliberative, critical citizen may well thrive in a carefully controlled learning environment, but this does not necessarily translate into any meaningful political engagement outside of the classroom, where political power relations are characterised by domination and marginalisation. In other words, what happens in the classroom invariably stays in the classroom. This article looks at three integral issues in order to illustrate this argument. Firstly, the issue of deliberative democracy is examined with the contention that "the rules of the game" in the adult education context do not manifest themselves in spheres of political activity. This is due to conceptual assumptions made in relation human nature and motivations in the political sphere. Claims towards a universalising notion of rational discourse, respect and mutuality simply do not stand up to scrutiny primarily because the transformative approach fails to acknowledge "context". This brings us on to the second key point – the transformative approach prioritises individual agency to the determent of any appreciation of pre-existing structures of power – a key criticism identified by other writers such as Inglis (1997) and Pietrykowski (1996). Again, this has consequences for how power relationships are, or more pertinently, are not considered. Thirdly, it is argued that because individual empowerment occurs within pre-determined processes, the type of citizenship championed by the transformative approach lends itself more to adhering to responsibilities and conformity rather than encouraging critical activism. In this respect, the transformative discourse inadvertently reflects a strong policy discourse which emphasises civic responsibility, respect for the law and voluntarism. Lastly, it is proposed that learning about power inequali-

ties does not necessarily translate as a form of indoctrination of learners, a claim made by Mezirow (1998). Rather, an adequate understanding of power asymmetries allows and encourages creative, critical thoughts and deeds, questions "common sense" assumptions made by policymakers and can facilitate exploring alternatives to the existing status quo. This, it is argued, has always been a key strength of adult education as a discipline.

It must be stated from the outset that the transformative approach is not being equated here merely as intellectual "cover" for policy pronouncements on active citizenship and education. At the same time, there are certainly commonalities and they are alluded to throughout this article where relevant. We begin first with a brief overview of the transformative approach to citizenship education.

Adult Education for Democratic Citizenship – the Transformative Approach

According to Ellis and Scott, '...an informed, involved demos (people) is the indispensable foundation without which no truly democratic social system is possible.' (2003: p253) From this premise, it can be argued that the transformative approach to citizenship education has been incredibly influential within the discipline of adult education. Within the broad context of critical reflection, there is an acknowledgement that as a preliminary, the individual must become aware that she/he is exposed to knowledge distortion, principally through processes of self-reflection. This, it is hoped, produces a state of 'enlightenment', which is 'a necessary precondition for individual freedom and self-determination and eventually, social transformation' (Ewert, 1991: p346). For Mezirow, it is the individual that takes precedence, where 'subjective reframing', is 'involved in the most significant transformative learning experiences.' (Mezirow, 1996: p9) Critical reflection and transformative learning, therefore, are integrally involved in developing the skills and capacities necessary for democratic citizenship (Mezirow, 2003: p62), where adult education encourages this development through processes of 'dialogic learning' (Ewert, 1991: p366). Reflecting the influence of Habermas, Mezirow claims that this process is based on the key objective of establishing 'mutual agreement' between individuals who enter into free, deliberative processes (Mezirow, 2003: p61). It is a process that is premised on the idea that participation requires education for meaningful engagement - 'Deliberatively filtered political communications are especially dependent on the resources of the lifeworld – on a free and open political culture and an enlightened political socialisation...' (Habermas, 2002: p252) In this vein, Fleming asserts –

Some people wonder if adult education has a vision. It has....adult learning is participatory, critically reflexive, open to new ideas and changing frames of reference. It has a vision of learners engaged in dialogic participatory discourse, collectively seeking ways changing themselves and society and that all systems, organisations and individuals respond to the needs of others.

(1996: 52)

Elsewhere, Fleming outlines what he sees as the work of critical political citizens. Citing instances of the Habermasian public sphere, Fleming notes the Enlightenment coffee houses and Salons of Europe as an ideal where '...people can discuss matters of mutual concern as peers, and learn about facts events and the opinions, interests, and perspectives of others in an atmosphere free of coercion and of inequalities that would incline individuals to acquiesce to be silent.' (2000: 304). This is an important point. Undistorted deliberation occurs only in a carefully regulated space, where a number of rules must be adhered to. (Fleming, 2000: 307) Taken together, these political activities contribute to a recalibrated public sphere, where –

…there would be less emphasis on hierarchical authority and more on participatory decision making; the elimination of corporate culture and the nourishing of self-government; a clear priority given to social justice, social analysis, critical reflection, and reconstructing the teacher-student relationship where both become co-investigators of reality.

(Fleming, 2012: 134)

Running out of Deliberative Road?

On the face of it, this approach towards the development of free, open deliberative spaces as a prelude to democratic, political citizenship is appealing. However, I would like to argue that problems quickly arise when attempts are made to transpose this construct outside of the highly regulated environs of the learning space. Firstly, both Habermas and Mezirow make claims to an essentialist, universal construct of human nature which, to say the least, are claims that would be difficult to substantiate. For example, Habermas notion of communicative action is based partially on an Enlightenment hope of 'using human reason to create a more humane world' (Brookfield, 2005: 1154), coupled with an adamant belief that communicative rationality is universal (Ewert, 1991 : 359). Secondly, both Habermas and Mezirow have little to say on the power

relational context in which deliberative political processes are meant to occur. Certainly this is Inglis's (1997) main criticism of Mezirow and finds resonance with Giroux's observation that '[t]eaching students how to argue, draw on their own experience or engage in rigorous dialogue says nothing about why they should engage in these actions in the first place.' (2004: 85) Given that the current, dominant discourse on active citizenship invests so heavily in political participation and deliberation, it is vital that these processes are contextualised not as ideals, but within broad, historical, political, economic and cultural power relations. In this respect, there exists much evidence that suggests participatory and deliberative processes such as public consultations or partnership arrangements are exercises in the asymmetries of power, rather than demonstrations of mutual respect and shared values (Murray, 2006; Rui, 2004). This salient point is, at best, underplayed in Mezirow and Habermas conceptual frameworks.

It can be argued, therefore, that Habermasian deliberative democracy is a construct of politics that exists primarily in the realm of an idealised state. Great caution must be taken in assuming that the dynamics of classroom interaction is a replication of other politicised spheres of activity. Deliberative engagement works very well when there is a minimum of disagreement, conflict and division. However, while these conditions could be constructed in the learning space, what occurs in such reified spaces is far from a reflection of political engagement. It is an argument that is made by Welton - himself an advocate of the transformative approach - in his examination of events leading up to war in Iraq in 2003. In attempting to outline a response from critical adult educators to the imperialist expansionism of neo-conservatives, Welton asserts that we must acknowledge that 'we do not live in the best of all Habermasian worlds', and that communicative action 'so valued by deliberative democrats – is far removed from the centres of decision-making powers.' (Welton, 2003: pp. 648-649) He concludes rather soberly that –

> ...critical adult educators committed to the norms of the 'active citizen', 'communicative power' and a 'mobilized civil society' confronts a world that has moved, and continues to move, far away from these ideals. It is no longer of much help at all for adult education in its present confused and fragmented state to propagate the myth of deliberative democracy without ever engaging the actually existing world of power and ruthlessness.

(Welton, 2003: 649)

Moving between Structure and Agency

One of the key reasons why deliberative approach is distanced from a world of 'power and ruthlessness' is that political engagement happens within existing power relationships – in other words, context is not incidental, it is crucial. The premise that a collection of individuals operating on their own volition who are open to compromise and mutual respect simply does not account for the distinct machinations of structure and agency. For instance, a frequent complaint from those who engage in consultations or partnership processes with the government has been that, all too often, the process of deliberation and engagement is merely a prelude to the actual decision-making and that participation has little impact on final outcomes (Crowley, 1998; Murray, 2006). Instead, for some, participation is characterised by exclusion, marginalisation (Meade, 2005; E-consultation project, 2006) and in some cases, more blatant attempts at coercion (Murphy, 2002).

Commentators have previously argued that the transformative approach lacks an adequate account of structural power (Inglis, 1997; Pietrykowski, 1996). In one sense this is understandable given Mezirow's seemingly unequivocal view that '…a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education.' (2000 : p26). This has implications for the transformative construction of political citizenship - but also reflects a broader process of the individualisation of citizenship in policy terms. One particularly dominant discourse that has emerged in recent times aims to promote the notion that the structures and channels of power in contemporary society are synonymous with the concept of individual choice and individual freedoms. It is '…a citizenship that gives pride of place to the individual and his rights, and relegates to the background the affirmation of collective and partial, in the geographic and cultural sense, identities embodied by States.' (Audigier, 2000: pp. 9-10) Crucially however, Bauman argues that this move towards individualisation should not be construed as increased self-determination and individual freedom. Instead, individualisation is merely an indication of consumption patterns, where choice itself is illusionary, where '…individualisation is a fate, not a choice….' (Bauman, 2000: 34) Moreover, this focus on the individual works to the determent of organised, collective political action, the perquisite to social change, where Mezirow's approach 'leads to an over-reliance on the individual… and, consequently, to an inadequate and false sense of emancipation.' (Inglis, 1997: 6)

Both Mezirow (1998) and Fleming (2000) flatly reject the charge that the transformative approach fails to acknowledge the 'social' aspects of power with

Mezirow stating that 'Gaining reflective insight alone is not the terminal objective of transformative learning.' However, and tellingly he goes on to assert that '...if we had to make a choice between changing the world and helping learners to transform their assumptions about their world so that they can change it, I would unhesitatingly choose the latter.' (1998: 71) This position is consistent with a central tenet of transformative learning where 'subjective reframing', is 'involved in the most significant transformative learning experiences.' (Mezirow, 1996: 9) It is a view that does not necessarily preclude consideration of social power - it is entirely possible to consider the social from an individualist or agency perspective. This, after all is the basis of Weberian sociology. However, the implications for such an approach can be far reaching where issues of class conflict, gender inequalities and state repression can be reduced to instances of individual perception. Put simply, political actions occur within societies that are marked by structural inequalities, prejudices, preferences and interests where individual transformative experiences are not immune to these contexts - they are actively shaped by them. As Shaw and Martin point out -

> ...the notion of the citizen as *subject* embodies the classical sociological dualism of agency and structure. It is clear that to be active, citizens must act, but it must always be recognised (and understood) that human action is never in any simple sense 'free'; it is always embedded within a pre-existing structure of constraint and partial determination. Indeed, it may be said that the first lesson of freedom is to understand the reality of *un*-freedom.

(2005: 89)

The Power to Conform

The core of the argument offered here in relation to the transformative approach to education for political citizenship is that it lacks an adequate acknowledgment of power asymmetries in social and political relationships. This is evident both in the faith placed in deliberative modes of democratic engagement and the overt reliance upon individual activity and endeavour. Yet, advocates of the transformative approach view it not just as a means of political engagement, it is also a pathway to empowerment and emancipation which aims for 'Effective learners in an emancipatory, participative, democratic society – a learning society...' that incorporates ''...a community of cultural critics and social activists...' (Fleming, 2012: 134)

Given the relative weakness of the transformative approach to power relational

contexts however, a strong argument can be made that conceptualisations of empowerment and emancipation are themselves limited to engagement to pre-determined processes rather than the development of capacities to challenging pre-existing structures and processes of inequality in the first instance. Here, Mezirow's call for self-empowerment translates as instruction for "proper" participation or as a discourse of empowerment which emphasises '...people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and the structures of power...' (Jonssan, 2010: 397) Again, there is commonality with contemporary political/ policy discourses on empowerment, where –

> One seems to be 'empowered' to take a share of management responsibility and decision-making, but the contemporary sense of the word does not seem to entail any direct control of resources or scope to join with others at the same level in the structure, to pursue collective bargaining with the centre.

(James, 1999: 14)

Therefore, from the transformative perspective, it is entirely feasible to argue that engagement and participation within existing governance processes can be construed as "empowerment". However, it can also be argued that such a construction of citizenship is more likely to lead to co-opted and conforming citizens rather than critical and resistant ones (Inglis, 1997). The transformative approach constitutes a simultaneously regulatory and self-regulating discourse of citizenship where the desire to engage effectively means agreeing to the rules of the game – even if others do not adhere to these rules. Here, engagement in such processes is removed from outcomes (the actual decision-making) where participation becomes an end in itself and therefore requires a degree of competence from the citizen. There is the temptation, therefore as Inglis (1997) argues, to view the transformative discourse in the light of Foucault's conceptualisation of power. Here the idea of the 'governmentalisation of citizenship' is of particular relevance, where -

> ...there has been a certain discursive coding of citizenship as a cognitive competence. In this discourse, citizenship is constructed by codes, categories and modes of classification that reflect a governmental strategy into which the individual as citizen is inserted.

(Delanty, 2003: 599)

The result is a self-disciplinary reading of what constitutes an active, conforming, and therefore, worthy citizen. Again, this self-regulating, responsible citizen finds a degree of congruence with corresponding policy-driven discourses. Biesta argues that the current construct of EU notions of active citizenship

> ...approaches the idea of citizenship very much from the 'needs' of the socio-political order, it specifies the kinds of activities and 'investments' that individuals need to make so that the specific socio-political order can be reproduced. Active citizenship to put it differently, emphasises the duties and responsibilities of individuals that come with their status of citizenship more than it being a discourse about citizen rights.

(2009: 150)

This push towards civic responsibility is illustrated in the Irish context where the Taskforce on Active Citizenship defined active citizenship in terms of '… the voluntary capacity of citizens and communities working directly together or through elected representatives, to exercise economic, social and political power in pursuit of shared goals.' (Task Force on Active Citizenship, 2007a: p. 10) Crucially, this pursuit of shared goals obscures any notion of conflict and marginalisation. Meanwhile, political activism is equated almost exclusively with responsibilities and voluntarism, to the point where Connolly argues that '…active citizenship in Ireland is now reduced to Tidy Towns committees and participation in Neighbourhood Watch'. (2007: pp111-2).

Conclusion – Indoctrination and Learning

This article has presented the argument that what we need is a far more critical examination of political citizenship, particularly given the turbulent times that we live in. The transformative approach lacks the capacity for this, and the key issue here is in relation to the notion of asymmetries of political power. Transformative deliberative processes may well operate in an undistorted fashion within a highly controlled environment, but the reality is that deliberation within more political environs frequently does not. The quest for an undistorted deliberative political space is resplendent with assumptions about human behaviour and as a consequence, will remain largely unattainable. One of the key reasons for this is that the approach resolutely fails to consider the importance of structures in shaping deliberative political processes. Instead, while this approach could be construed as social, the emphasis placed upon individual agency as the fulcrum of political activity effectively limits the scope of political

activity. Conflict, contestation and marginalisation are obscured by the rush towards working within existing processes and the promise of gradual political reform (Fleming, 2000) to the point that it can be argued that the transformative model may well enhance obedience to existing political processes of engagement, rather that facilitating critical capacities to question and challenge political power relations. This, it is argued, mirrors policy discourses on education for political citizenship.

Mezirow states that the transformative approach is more about facilitating '… the kind of personal transformative learning that results in each learner making an informed decision to take effective, appropriate action…', rather than indoctrinating learners into one particular viewpoint of political action. He even claims that Inglis' call for a 'pedagogy of power' amounts to some form of indoctrination - 'Educators do not try…to get learners to uncritically agree with their viewpoint – even about the ubiquity of power.' (1998: 71) Apart from anything else, this would appear to be a call to limit what should be explored – or otherwise – within adult learning. An acknowledgement or recognition of the vast and sometimes impenetrable networks of power, both macro and micro, structure and agency, should not be equated with indoctrination. Rather, it suggests a preliminary step, based on an understanding of the workings of structure and agency, to questioning and challenging the nature of political power.

This is an important point for citizenship education and learning. As mentioned in the introduction, the current policy discourse on active citizenship emanating from the EU would appear to take as self-evident that respect for the rule of law is the cornerstone to good political citizenship. Elsewhere, in discussing citizen education in the Irish context, Harris calls for 'political literacy and a critical understanding of democracy and democratic political institutions', this premised on developing '…respect for law, justice, democracy…' (2005: 48) Education for political citizenship should be free to question such pronouncements rather immediately incorporating them as indisputable facts. For instance, even a cursory knowledge of political history would suggest that "the rule of law" is not always a good thing and has been used as a justification for discrimination, marginalisation and repression. Likewise, it cannot and should be taken for granted that some universal definition of democracy exists. A useful line of inquiry instead might be to interrogate exactly how democratic our current system of governance is rather than perceiving "democracy" as a self-evident virtue. Such questions may appear trivial, even awkward, but one of the key strengths of adult education as a discipline has always been its ability to ask awkward questions and, crucially, to imagine and explore alterna-

tive futures. Ultimately, as Shaw and Martin suggest - 'Democracy is sustained by the agency of the critical and creative citizen, not the conformist citizen.' (2005: 85)

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