

Citizenship: A Way of Being *in* One's World and *of* One's World

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Introduction

This article explores the global dimensions of citizenship. By way of contextualising the discussion, the authors describe a component of a course that was designed to introduce students to the lives of people they may otherwise never have had an opportunity to encounter. Our challenge, as we saw it, was to reveal the humanity, individuality and ordinariness of these 'strangers'. The purpose was to gain an insight into the perspectives and values of those who differ from us in significant ways so that we can empathise with them and better appreciate the varied cultural, social and economic contexts that shape the world we all share. We used literature as the means to gain easy access to a range of diverse cultural perspectives. In particular, we selected novels by African women writers. The focus was on what the stories revealed about the everyday joys and cares of the characters rather than on the literary merit of the novels.

Three fundamental principles permeate our approach to citizenship. The first is a belief that awareness and understanding are vital to build a strong civil society because they counter the forces that alienate or disconnect people from each other. The second is that those whose 'voices' have been silenced cannot participate in their society and their exclusion impoverishes the community as a whole. The third is that the primary purpose of a strong civil society is not to fill gaps in the state's provision of services but rather it is to ensure that a multitude of arenas exist where important ethical as well as practical issues can be discussed with a view to creating informed public opinion.

What is meant by citizenship?

This year, 2005, has been declared the 'European Year of Citizenship through Education'. Documents¹ produced as guides to support educators in their efforts to promote citizenship make it clear that citizenship refers to more than a legal status; being an active citizen entails a level of continuous and meaningful engagement in the public sphere. The ways in which people relate to each other determine the quality of this engagement.

The active citizen is generally described as one who has: the opportunity and capacity to participate in shaping the society in which s/he lives; an ability to appreciate difference; and a desire to promote social cohesion. Although the emphasis is on involvement in the local community, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the local and the global are intrinsically linked. Being active at the local level calls for an appreciation of the economic and social forces that can be felt locally but have their origin in distant places. Similarly, decisions taken locally impact elsewhere. Appreciating the complexities of problems such as environmental degradation, conflict, natural disasters and the movement of refugees, requires a global perspective. Therefore, in order for citizens to have the capacity to participate in shaping their local community they need to understand the links that connect peoples and places well beyond their locality and national borders.

Creating Citizenship through Education

Education has been designated as the medium to promote citizenship. Like citizenship, education conveys a sense of on-going process rather than a fixed position. Latin scholars tell us that 'educare' means 'to lead out gently'. It is less about learning new information and more about revealing what we already know. This definition sits well with the radical adult education approach that informs the course under review here. It implies (i) making space for those voices that are not usually heard and at the same time (ii) undermining the conventional and unconscious discourses that shape our ways of thinking and everyday behaviours. In a Freirean (1972) sense the goal is to become reflective, to become an observer of our own behaviour so that we can probe the meanings and inferences of what we take for granted.

¹ See Council of Europe publications listed in the reference section at the end of the article.

The task of promoting citizenship through education, as we saw it, was to reframe our emotional and intellectual understanding of what it is to belong to a local and global community and in so doing become conscious of our assumptions about people whom we perceive as geographically or culturally distant. We wanted to create the conditions that would make it possible for students to consciously encounter their values and beliefs in order to reassess their view of the world, their place in that world and how they want to 'be' in the world.

Who were the students?

The students around whom this learning experience was built were undertaking a BA in Community Studies. This is a degree designed for part-time mature students. In the main these students are aged between 30 and 45. Approximately three quarters are women. For the duration of the degree, most have to juggle family, work and study commitments. As one would expect, these adults bring with them a wealth of experience that greatly enriches the learning across the entire course. Finding ways to tap into this experience was an important consideration in designing the learning experience described here.

How We Constructed the Learning Experience

This learning experience was located within a module entitled Development Theories. The module explores (i) the beliefs that have shaped development interventions over the past fifty years and (ii) the statistical data that illustrate on-going wealth / poverty divides, gender inequalities and such like. We wanted students to further explore these theories and statistics through reading at least one of the works of nine African women authors who either wrote in English or were available in translation in English.

The writers were chosen because they give a perspective on issues of citizenship that transcend religion and nationality and are therefore of universal concern. The topics included: the impact of national and international conflict on women's lives and roles; the experience of colonisation; the barriers that make it difficult for women and girls to access education; constraints posed by economic dependence; the importance of motherhood and children in defining a woman's identity and the psychological and social problems that childlessness induces. These were all issues the students had encountered at a theoretical level within the module. We hoped that through the novels these issues would be re-encountered within the intimacy of individual lives and so elicit responses beyond those of the purely intellectual.

Why African Authors?

In terms of development Africa is the continent where the gap between the wealth of the west and the poverty of the rest, evidence of environmental degradation, and the impact of wars, gender and religious-based discrimination are blatantly evident. It is also a continent of great natural beauty, close-knit, strong communities and renowned storytellers. The combination of these problems and strengths drew us to this literature.

Talking with paper: the shift from the oral to the written

The early African writers in the 1950s belonged to a generation to whom “this thing of talking with paper” – to borrow a phrase from the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka – was new. Many people do not know how to write in their first language. There is little indigenous publishing other than school textbooks and religious tracts. The fact that Africa has primarily an oral culture means there is no tradition of reading as a leisure activity. To sit and read is, in many cultures, regarded as anti-social behaviour. The on-going shift from the oral to the written emanates from the drive towards modernisation that accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century.

In Search of a Reader

The vast majority of African literature is written in English, French and Spanish, reflecting the colonial past. The economics of publishing and the range of languages within a country (Sierra Leone, a country the same size as Ireland with a similar population, has over six languages) militate against the likely development of indigenous African language publishing. The cost of books is also a consideration. Most books cost more than the average civil servant earns in a month. These factors, combined with an overall low literacy rate in most of the African continent, make it necessary, for those who want to make their living from writing, to look overseas for the type of international audience and market necessary to earn a living.

The Struggle of African Women Writers to be ‘heard’

In selecting women writers we wanted to encounter voices that are not generally heard within development literature or within literature in general. The experience of African women as writers, echoes the silencing and exclusion their fictional characters struggle to overcome.

Among the first anthologies of writing by black Africans was *Native Voices: an Anthology of Native African Writing*, published in 1958, in which 2 of the 37 African voices are female. Women fared little better in subsequent anthologies. The establishment of the UK-based Heinemann African Writers series in 1962 was the first major effort to promote African literature. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was the first book published in the series. Achebe's theme was the clash between colonial and mission institutions and traditional African society. This was a theme addressed by a number of the first generation of African writers.

Most of the writers in the series came from families where they, or their parents, were the first generation to attend western style schools. The vast majority of these writers were male. Exceptions, such as the publication of Nigerian Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966, (Achebe sent her a guinea to post her manuscript to Heinemann in London) were rare.

The predominance of male writers reflects the colonial bias which favoured the education of males and the fact that the first generation of sub-Saharan women writers – Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Flora Nwapa (Nigeria), Grace Ogot (Kenya), Efua Sutherland (Ghana) and Bessie Head (South Africa) – were largely ignored in the emerging African literary criticism. In the 1980s, with the strengthening of the women's movement internationally, female African writers received more attention. However, it wasn't until Charlotte Brunner and later Yvonne Vera (1999) produced collections devoted exclusively to African women writers that many new writers were made known to an international English speaking audience. Despite these efforts and the global literary boom during the closing decades of the twentieth century, many African women writers remain unknown.

In selecting women writers we wanted to make space for the voices of these writers and for the voices of their characters.

Student Responses

Students were asked to read at least one² of the range of novels and to respond to the content on two levels. First, there was a discussion of the stories with a view to (i) getting to know the characters (ii) identifying the forces that shaped the events that are depicted in the stories (iii) speculating on the values that

² We were surprised to find that many students had read two or more of the novels.

underpinned the behaviours of the main characters. Second, students were given an option to write an assignment that used one or more of the texts to demonstrate the impact of dominant development theories on the lives of individuals, families and communities.

In the discussion students talked about the book(s) they had read and their responses to the perspectives and events they encountered. The facilitators added information about the authors when appropriate. The discussion was animated and moved easily between the different novels and the characters. The cross cutting themes of poverty, gender and power generated the most discussion.

In the novels students encountered African women who are resourceful, strong and resilient and determined to break through barriers imposed by tradition and society on their sex. The texts described life from a woman's point of view giving the female perspective on issues like polygamy, marriage, love, motherhood and relationships, education, economic independence and the impact of national and international conflict on society. Through the skill of the writers, the students saw the characters in the novels as real people, grappling with universal issues.

Exploring Difference

"The African lassie was from a really well to do family. The lad she fancied was an ordinary lad. His father was a plumber or something like that," ...was how one student explained the background to the short story *The Museum* by the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela. He described how being brought up on images of Biafra, Band Aid, famine and wars, it seemed like a role reversal. He had expected her to be poor. *The Museum* is one of the stories in Aboulela's collection *Coloured Lights*. Many of these stories illuminate Muslim immigrant experience in Britain. They are about people who are in an in-between space between cultures. Students loved these lyrical and evocative short stories which provoked much discussion about how different belief systems can be accommodated in our increasingly diverse society and how difference can be a source of growth, strength and solidarity.

The Pressure to Succeed

"Her husband was so horrible to her. It was horrific what happened in Germany. She thought she was going to be so well off when she got to Europe," a women in the group said about Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* – the tragic story of Mara's transformation from a Ghanaian village girl to a prostitute in

a German brothel. Mara believed her husband Akobi when he told her: “In Britain the people are so rich that they throw fridges away. And in Germany they throw cars away”. “Could people in African countries really believe this?” one man asked.

Students were interested to learn that the author Amma Dark had worked in Germany and, while there, met women from Ghana and other West African countries who worked as prostitutes. Talking of these women and their families back home Darko said: “The expectations put pressure on the women there. They don’t have the heart to disappoint their people... Apart from that there are financial situations. People would really part with things to help you go. A brother would sell a plot of land meant for the whole family, and the family would say that’s OK, because we know if you go, you will come back and buy more plots”. Darko admitted that because she was only able to get low paid work in Germany, she felt she had disappointed her family on her return home.

Some of the students had relatives or friends who had gone to England or the United States in the past. Like the African emigrants, their family back home had expectations, and the same regular remittances formed a vital part of family income.

Citizenship as Status

Themes of emigration and exile – the desire for a better life, a new citizenship – ran through a number of the novels. “Bits of it were lovely, but it was difficult to understand,” was the response to Bessie Head’s novels, which draw on her experience of being coloured – a particular South African term to refer to a person of mixed birth – and her desire to cast off the citizenship of South Africa, a country which she described as “a place where it is impossible for black people to dream”. After seven years in neighbouring Botswana, Head was eventually granted citizenship and made a new home for herself and her son.

Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen*, the loosely autobiographical novel based on Emecheta’s experience of finding herself on her own with five children to support on social welfare in 1970s London, drew parallels with Nigerian women in Ireland and the citizenship debate surrounding the rights of children of non-nationals born in Ireland.

Women and Education

The need for female education, as a route to economic independence, featured in many of the stories. In *Women are Different*, by Nigerian Flora Nwapa, pupils from two schools meet to debate the topic “that the education of girls is a waste of money”. Further south on the continent the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga portrays in *Nervous Conditions* – the first novel to be published in English by a black Zimbabwean woman – a girl called Tambu who sells mealies (corn) to raise the money to attend a local school. Her father and her uncle – a teacher – believe that their limited money must be spent on the education of her brother. Marriage laws govern their thinking to some extent. Any money Tambu earns will go to the family she marries into – and this is a society where a woman must marry to be valued.

In her autobiography *Head Above Water*, the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta relates how she had to fight to be allowed to attend school with her brother. Eventually her parents agreed in the hope it would increase the bride price she would fetch. Emecheta, in her novel *In the Ditch*, describes her efforts to get a university education, when she is separated and living in poverty in London with five children, at the age of 22. At the same age her fellow Nigerian Chinua Achebe graduated from the newly established University of Ibadan, later going to study broadcasting with the BBC in London. Many of the students, who have themselves struggled to return to education, empathised with the experiences of these women.

Motherhood

The only novel on the course which covered the position of women in a pre-colonial rural society was *Efuru*, by Nigerian Flora Nwapa. Those that read it found it challenging. *Efuru* is a beautiful and prosperous young woman living in a traditional precolonial Igbo society. Her only child dies in infancy. She is destined to remain childless because a local river goddess has chosen her as a companion. This was a strange and alien story to the students.

They found the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta much easier to relate to when dealing with the same topic – the psychological and social problems that childlessness induces. In her novel *The Joys of Motherhood* Nnu Ego, from an Igbo village, returns to her family home in shame when she fails to become pregnant as a new bride. Her father sends her to Lagos to marry another man. Nnu Ego believes that if she can have a child fulfilment and security in old age will be hers. She becomes the mother of eight children. When her husband inherits his

brother's three wives after his brother's death he brings one of them to share the house in Lagos with Nnu Ego. While polygamy can work in rural societies where each wife can have their own household, it does not sit well in this new urban environment. Nnu Ego strives to educate her sons who, once well educated, emigrate. At the end of her life Nnu Ego dies by the roadside "with no child to hold her hand no friend to talk to her".

Polygamy

The issues raised in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, a poignant look at polygamy through the eyes of a woman, were found to be quite challenging. Ba explores polygamy and wife inheritance – both permitted under Islamic law – against a background of French culture and Islamic beliefs in post independence Senegal. The novel is written in the form of a letter from the recently widowed Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou. She uses the period of mourning prescribed by Islamic law to write a letter, almost a diary, reflecting on her life and the life of her friend Aissatou. Five years before his death, and after 25 years of marriage, Ramatoulaye's husband Modou decided to take a second wife, a girl the same age as their daughter. Hurt and betrayed Ramatoulaye resigns herself to being a co-wife. However, Modou decides to cut himself off from his first family, leaving Ramatoulaye to provide for their twelve children. "He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account," she tells her friend. This novel generated discussion about the status of women even in societies where we assume equality exists.

Importance of Marriage

Of the two novels by Ghana's best known woman author Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*, which uses a mélange of genres – narrative, poetry, drama – was regarded as very difficult. This probably related to the students' experience of previous study of literature as the study of precise forms, e.g. poetry, drama and narrative. Shifting and merging such forms was something that was new to them. Students preferred *Changes*, Aidoo's novel which explores the role or absence of a role for a well-educated divorced woman in modern Ghana. Esi, a divorced middle class woman opts to become a second, or junior wife, to Ali, rather than live life as a single woman in a society which does not acknowledge the existence of single women.

The story is told from a number of viewpoints. Fusena, Ali's educated Muslim wife, has given up the hope of getting a university degree in order to bring up

their children and support her husband's career. "And now here was Ali telling her that he was thinking of making a woman with a university degree his second wife. So Allah, what was she supposed to say? What was she supposed to do?" She goes to the older women in Ali's family, some of whom are second, third and fourth wives. They ask themselves why so little has changed for their daughters "school and all".

Reflecting on the Bigger Picture

Students related the themes in the novels to their own life and work experience. They discussed discrimination in Irish society based on gender, disability and poverty. There was some disagreement as to whether the differences in the extent of the discrimination here and in the novels made for any kind of realistic comparison. The majority argued that discrimination here tends to be more subtle but is nonetheless as debilitating as that described in the literature. Others pointed to the rigidities of society that dominated their childhood and early adult lives and how easily they acquiesced to the harsh rules. They talked about how difficult it is to overcome low self-esteem and how easy it is to oppress those who have not learned to be assertive.

Over a period of weeks following the discussion on the novels students also indicated that African people on the streets began to take on a new visibility. They had begun to wonder what it is like for them to be so far from home in a strange country. Others said they had begun to listen to the stories of African neighbours and co-workers in order to better understand their lives. They were amazed to find how easy it was to make connections and how willing people were to talk about their lives and future dreams. One could say that the authors who had 'talked with paper' induced their readers to talk with words.

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