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The Beutelsbach Consensus

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In 2016 there is an important anniversary coming up: The Beutelsbach consensus will have its 40th birthday. This consensus is of vital significance for the German dispute and discussion on teaching civics. Therefore we want to comment on how it was generated and how big its importance still is.

The Beutelsbach consensus

For a number of decades after its inception, the school subject of civics was shaped by disputes over its goals (for a survey of the German context, see Gagel, 1994). For a long time, teachers were watched suspiciously for fear they would impose their own political opinions on students. When teachers were accused of manipulating students, the charge was that they - without full disclosure and against the interests of learners - were imperceptibly but potently disseminating one-sided information, judgments, and choices in their classrooms. It took quite some time for the subject to be treated like any other subject - until, for instance, parents demanded a no more elaborate decision-making and approval process for new civics school books than they did for math books.

In 1976, during a time of polarized teaching concepts in Germany, the Baden-Württemberg Agency for Civic Education hosted a conference in the locality of Beutelsbach. The now-famous outcome of this conference was not a substantive agreement on goals and concepts, but rather the establishment of a consensus on fundamental principles for classroom instruction. Although Wehling (1977), the minute taker, added a question mark to his summary ("Konsens à la Beutelsbach?") because the outcome, at the time, was intended as a proposal for consensus-building, the consensus has long since become a generally accepted building block of civics instruction in Germany. This also became evident after reunification, when the three tenets met with great approval in former East Germany.

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They are as follows:

Beutelsbach Consensus

1. Prohibition against overwhelming the student. It is not permissible to catch students off-guard, by whatever means, for the sake of imparting desirable opinions, thereby hindering them from 'forming an independent judgment.' This is the difference between political education and indoctrination. Indoctrination is incompatible with the role of a teacher in a democratic society and the generally accepted objective of making students capable of independent responsibility and maturity (Mündigkeit).
2. Matters which are controversial in scholarship and political affairs should also be presented as controversial in the classroom. This requirement is very closely linked to the first point above: a teacher who loses sight of differing points of view, suppresses options, and leaves alternatives undiscussed is already well on his or her way to indoctrinating students. We must ask, on the contrary, whether teachers should in fact play a corrective role. [...]
3. Students should be put in a position to analyze a political situation and their own personal interests as well as to seek ways to have an effect on given political realities in view of these interests. Such an objective strongly emphasizes the acquisition of operational skills, which follows logically from the first two principles set out above (Wehling, 1977, p. 179f.).

These three principles - the prohibition against overwhelming students, the imperative to present controversy, and the consideration of student interests - make intuitive sense, and they have been discussed at length in the literature on teaching civics (see Breit and Massing, 1992, Schiele & Schneider, 1996). I would like to emphasize two points here: that of the formulation of interests in the third principle and the practical question of teacher behavior.

The third principle regarding students' interests, that is, the focus on the student as subject, is aimed exclusively at the individual. This is understandable for the time these principles were articulated, when advocacy groups did not have the same status as they do today of important and legitimate parts of a pluralistic society. The Beutelsbach educators did not want to support subordination or conformity, but rather students' ability to stand up for their own interests. In time, the flipside of this - still appropriate - goal became evident: the ruthless

assertion of self-interest without consideration of the interests of others or a notion of the common good. Serious political problems cannot be solved “if members of a community do not display solidarity with each other above and beyond their own interests” (Schiele, 1996, p. 7). One of the suggestions for a revision of the third tenet is as follows (cf. also Schiele & Schneider, 1996):

Students (as well as adults) should be enabled to analyze political problems and to see things from the perspective of those affected by them, as well as to seek ways to contribute to solutions to such problems in view of their own interests while taking into account their shared responsibility for society as a whole (Schneider, 1996, 201).

This version of the third tenet has a greater social and political reach and includes the triad of individual (need), integration of others (rules, institutions), and critical reflection on the system. Its more sophisticated concept of interest comprises short-term self-interest as well as long-term self-interest (which in an enlightened anticipation of dependencies factors in the interests of others), and, finally, an idea of or a commitment to the public interest. For these reasons, it has come to replace the original third tenet.

In addition to this conceptual criticism, there was also the question of how teachers should handle the imperative to present controversy. For working teachers, demands such as those of the Beutelsbach Consensus are abstract postulates that have to be rendered concrete in the classroom. As a young teacher - even prior to 1976 - I struggled with the problem of controversiality (as did, it seemed to me, all of my colleagues). Based on my experience of classroom discussions, I put together a typology of learner groups and suggested strategies for teachers (Reinhardt, 1976 and 1988), which I draw on in the next section.

May civics teachers express their political views in the classroom? Should they?

Scenario 1: The learner group is politically heterogeneous, i.e., harbors the potential for controversy. Since the group itself represents the controversy, the teacher need only moderate.

Scenario 2: The learner group is politically polarized, potentially even aggressive in debates. In this case, the teacher must ensure a minimum consensus (rules).

In both cases, the learner group’s composition represents the content of the dispute. The teacher’s task here is to create the form conditions for the dispute to be carried out. She can remain “apolitical” - her own opinion is rarely of interest to the students anyway, nor is it necessary for the dynamics of the process. The following situations are an entirely different matter:

Scenario 3: The learner group is politically homogeneous; unity and calm prevail. In this case, the teacher must take corrective measures by introducing other points of view.

Scenario 4: The learner group is uninterested in the presented issues and lacks spontaneity. The teacher must galvanize the class, possibly provoking the students with her own opinion.

In both of these cases, the learner group represents no controversy whatsoever and must be motivated to debate. The cognitive representation of other points of view can suffice for this, although sometimes a forceful statement of opinion on the part of the teacher—either genuine or merely provocative - is necessary in order to galvanize learners. The teacher will come across as politically one-sided in this phase of the lesson, making it necessary for her to explain this strategy later on.

In short, it seems that a “political” learner group does not need a political teacher, while an “apolitical” group does. This can easily lead to misunderstandings and make people suspicious (see also Blanck, 2006). The approach described here is not about inculcating students and does not implement the question-based format for classroom discussions, which makes it - in the overall school context - rather unusual and therefore potentially confusing to learners and parents (who hear about it from their children or from teachers). The classroom conversation is a difficult form of interaction, so it is important to find ways to introduce controversy less by means of teacher guidance and more by means of rules for interaction established from the outset (see the methods proposed in this book, also Reinhardt 1992). Classroom research has shown the problems substantive conflict and contentious interaction pose for teachers (particularly when they are teaching outside of their subject area) (see Henkenborg et al., 2008).

The Beutelsbach Consensus is a key building block of civics teaching, but also applies to other subjects involving debates over controversial issues. It is particularly essential for civics instruction because it describes the dynamic of the subject matter (politics) as well as that of the learning process (development). In the same way, the principle of controversy constitutes a general principle of education in the social sciences and should be applied in all related subjects - thus also in law and economics.

(Reinhardt, Sibylle: Teaching Civics. A Manual for Secondary Education Teachers. Opladen, Berlin, Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers 2015, pp. 29-32)

Still today, in the year of 2016, the Beutelsbach consensus renders central criteria for the planning of lessons, the steering of ongoing interactions and their evaluation afterwards. It gives democratic orientation to what is going on in the classroom. It is also a tool for judging on materials and school books. Just today it is the main reference point for a bitter dispute on the publication of



the German Federal Agency for Civic Education on "Economics and society" (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb, 2015; for a case study see: [Weber, 2015, p. 5](#)). The key message of the Beutelsbach Consensus – controversy – is without any doubt a landmark of education for democracy.

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