# ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Citizenship Education And The Teaching Of Argumentation In Schools

The concept of citizenship is one which is currently being scrutinized, debated and revised nationally and internationally. An apparent disengagement from civic society and a breakdown in the sense that we share certain unifying values have contributed to a crisis of legitimacy in governments. Along with these general trends, the two factors of globalisation and immigration have led us to ask questions about the nature of citizenship. Maria van der Hoeven, the Dutch Minister for Education, in a speech given during the Dutch presidency of the European Union in 2004 stated that the lack of a sense of citizenship among people is the 'largest social problem we are facing'. She went on to argue that the fast pace of change – social and technological – has outstripped the family's ability to educate citizens, requiring 'additional efforts on the part of society… to define and further social cohesion' (Hoeven, 2004). These thoughts are echoed in many countries by people right across the political spectrum. As a result of these trends and ideas, citizenship education has, in the last decade, become one of the most researched, debated and legislated areas in education.

There are a number of different approaches being taken to citizenship education. These differences can be characterised in various ways. David Kerr's international comparison focused on the degree to which national values are expressed and prescribed was used to distinguish between different educational policies (Kerr, 1999, p. 5). In a report for the European Commission, published last year, a three-way distinction was made between different schools of thought on civil society: as associational life (Putnam), as the good society (Keane) and as the public sphere (Habermas). Maria van der Hoeven's statement reflects one dominant approach in giving to citizenship education the task of defining and furthering social cohesion. She cites the American Pragmatist, Robert Putnam, in justifying the construct of citizenship with which her government was working. This construct is based on

the notion of social capital – bonding and bridging – the development of identity in relation to one's immediate community and in relation to other communities. I wish to argue that an alternative conception of citizenship in terms of human well-being elevates the status of argumentation skills, as a fundamental aspect of citizenship, to a constituent part of well-being, rather than a strategic instrument or civic competency by means of which we may achieve social cohesion.

The theoretical basis of this preference draws on the Capability Approach as developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (see, for example, Sen, 1985; Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). This approach addresses the need for a normative account of human well-being for the formation and assessment of national and international policies. Rejecting the relativism of neo-liberalism and drawing on a modified Aristotelian essentialism, the capability approach asserts that there are features of humanness lying beneath local traditions and differences and the identification of these features is achieved by participatory dialogue. The recognition of these 'parts of the story', as Nussbaum calls them, gives us the starting off point for thinking about and planning for human well-being. Nussbaum lists ten of these features which map on to human freedoms or capabilities. The one feature which is architectonic -that is, it gives distinctively human structure to the other parts of the story – is what Nussbaum calls 'affiliation' which corresponds to Aristotle's category of *association and living together and fellowship of words and actions* (Nussbaum, 1993, p. 246). The ability to argue well, taken in the broadest way this may be understood, is a specific human capability which realises affiliation.

I have said that within the various discussions on education for citizenship there are significantly different conceptions of purpose. The exposure of these conceptions in terms I outline above is important because in one view the teaching of argumentation is instrumental – and so limited in its scope. In another view – the teaching of argumentation is connected to an understanding of human well-being – and so not limited in its scope to the achievement of an extrinsic end, the details of which are set by industry or a particular political system or government. I advocate the explicit teaching of argumentation in the curriculum and that a conception of citizenship which is based upon ideas of human well being first and foremost is most conducive to the success of learning to argue well.

Evidence that the teaching of argumentation is recognised as an intrinsic part of

citizenship education is already present in current discussions and policy. Alongside the requirement that we build social cohesion and foster civic participation there is a strand of thought which often is described in terms of skills and dispositions. The model of citizenship education as the induction of children into associational life is clearly present in Scottish discussion but there is also a thick strand within this discussion of citizenship as entailing an ongoing democratic participation and debate and the skills and dispositions which are necessary for this.

In the discussion document, Education for Citizenship in Scotland there is the following general statement which defines the scope of education for citizenship:
Education for citizenship should aim to develop capability for thoughtful and responsible participation in political, economic, social and cultural life. This capability is rooted in *knowledge and understanding*, in a range of *generic skills and competences*, including 'core skills', and in a variety of personal *qualities and dispositions*. [italics added] (LTS, 2002, para. 2.2)

I wish to focus attention on the phrase 'generic skills and competencies'. In the same document these are detailed as follows:
Examples of learning outcomes related to skills and competencies for citizenship
As a result of their learning experiences, young people should become progressively more able to:
– work independently and in collaboration with others to complete tasks requiring individual or group effort as appropriate
– locate, handle, use and communicate information and ideas, using ICT as appropriate
– *question and respond constructively to the ideas and actions of others in debate and/or in writing*
– *contribute to discussions and debate in ways that are assertive and, at the same time, attentive to and respectful of others' contributions*
– make informed decisions in relation to political, community and environmental issues
– persevere, where appropriate, in the face of setbacks and practical difficulties
– *negotiate, compromise, or assist others to understand and respect difference, when conflict occurs, recognising the difference between consensus and compliance.* [italics added] (LTS, 2002, p. 13)

It can be seen in the third, forth and last items that what is being described as a

part of the necessary skills and dispositions for citizenship amount to a description of the elements of good argumentation.

Given this apparent official sanction for the teaching of argumentation, what is happening in schools now? Prior to, and latterly parallel to, all these developments and discussions there has been a movement for the teaching of philosophy in schools which has been quietly gaining ground. Matthew Lipman's work on Philosophy for Children in the US from 1970 on has been perhaps the most influential in this area. Drawing on a dialogical understanding of the process of education, which has its provenance in the work of Peirce, Dewey and Vygotski, Philosophy for Children centres on the idea of shared enquiry. The paradigm of education that he proposes is a community of inquiry whose regulative ideas are reasonableness (in personal character) and democracy (in social character). This is in contrast to a number of other apparently similar ideas which go under the name of critical thinking or thinking skills. It could be misleading to assume an absolute a distinction here but, generally speaking, whereas Philosophy for Children is philosophical and values explicit, the teaching of thinking skills or critical thinking in a schools context has its provenance in psychology and neurology and so tends to have a 'values-thin' approach, concentrating instead on the aims of the mastery, retention, durability and transfer of knowledge and skills. For Lipman, and those who have been influenced by him, critical thinking or the teaching of thinking skills is more about precision whereas Philosophy for Children has an ethical import as children grapple with the creative and caring thinking which is entailed by a community of inquiry.

In Scotland, and, from what I can ascertain, in many countries there is a minority interest in the teaching of philosophy in schools and the people concerned are aware of the links to citizenship education. This brings me finally to a rather crucial issue: Are teachers at present capable of doing what is being proposed? The answer is, I think, no. Most university teachers will, I think, be aware of the difficulties many students have with discursive writing and there is, in Scotland at least, a general trend to displace philosophy from its previously central position in universities (RLF, 2006). Lipman argues that although there is little dispute that children should be doing rather than learning philosophy, teachers need to study philosophy in order to facilitate this: 'Until teachers have learned philosophy *and can do it*, prospects of thinking in education will not be very bright' (Lipman, 2003, p. 68). If the likelihood of realising the possibilities of this fundamental

aspect of citizenship education hinge on a philosophically educated workforce of teachers, then the prospects are dim indeed.

In line with general trends in universities, it seems that there is little specific work being done in the teaching of philosophy to teachers or in initial teacher education although most Bachelor programmes would include a course in the philosophy of education. Were we to do something about this, a return to informal logic, in particular the use of a pragmadialectical approach might be most fruitful. Why pragma-dialectics? It seems the candidate of choice for this purpose since, as a theoretical definition of critical discussion framed as a code of conduct aimed at resolving differences, it appears to be tailor made for an educational context (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1993, chapter 10). The code of conduct is easily stated and easily understood. Once understood by adults it could be easily adapted to be understood at any level, introduced gradually in response to issues which arise in discussion. The aim of the resolution of differences might additionally give satisfaction to the need for a measurable outcome from funding bodies – indeed it has been noted in government inspections of schools in England that the teaching of philosophy has coincided with an improvement in the children's ability to disagree with each other without fighting (see, for example, OFSTED, 2003).

An ability to critique other people's ideas is of the utmost importance for a society which is being challenged increasingly by the rise of new authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism (Law, 2006). I started by indicating the impetus behind the currently high profile of citizenship education. There are indications of an emerging response to the perceived disengagement of young people from mainstream politics and society taking the form of a new authoritarianism, and disquiet is felt by some that citizenship education may end up as simply an instrument of social control. Raising children to be critical thinkers and competent arguers to my mind gives us the best alternative response. In view of the discouraging situation with regard to philosophy in universities and schools, it is of the greatest importance that this issue receives urgent attention from anyone involved in the education of teachers.

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