

Thoughts on transformative education

It strikes me that we talk about the transformative potential of citizenship education quite freely, but that it is one of those terms that is quite slippery and ends up being used in different contexts, by different people, to mean different things. The following alternatives might stimulate our thinking before we meet to discuss this.

1. Knowledge as transformative

Given that the day to day life of a citizenship teacher involves the basic communication, application, and evaluation of information, this is not a bad place to start. Young (2015) has recently breathed life back into curriculum studies debates by arguing that rather than just focusing on the sociological question, *whose knowledge is encoded in the curriculum?* (a question which generally elicits critical commentary about the curriculum as a means of social control); we might also fruitfully return to the more basic question, *what makes some knowledge particularly powerful?* For him this means returning to our underlying subject knowledge as being in itself powerful because the knowledge enables us to see the world in new ways. For example, once I have learned about the concept of *power* in a way which is properly informed by politics and sociology, I can use it to link disparate examples of homelessness, party politics, media campaigns and bullying. I can see how power exists within structures and relationships, and I can start to see how strategies of disruption which have worked in other (ostensibly unrelated) areas can be adapted in my own circumstances. On this view, building our conceptual understanding of the world as citizens helps us make new connections between phenomena and therefore knowledge enables us to see the world differently. A rather more glib example might be provided by the duck billed platypus – knowledge of that animal means the division of the living world into birds, mammals and fish is slightly troubled.

2. Episodes of learning as transformative of one's world view

Linked to the first is the slightly broader notion that what we learn can transform our entire world view. If we stick with the duck billed platypus for a moment, it may be that it sticks with me because it seems to cross some boundaries I had previously established for classifying animals. But if it proves to be the starting point for me to understand that all systems of classification are invented in the minds of people, as ways to make sense of the natural world, it might become truly transformational for the way I encounter the world (and knowledge about the world) from now on. This is more akin to Mezirow's view of transformative education as:

... the process by which we call into question our taken for granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, paraphrased by Taylor, 1998, discussed in Tibbits, 2005)

In other words, serious transformative education transforms not just one little bit of knowledge, but our whole frame for making sense of the world. In citizenship, perhaps this might happen if we can help students understand that politics is not just an annoyingly complicated small corner of civilization in which other people tussle for the levers of power; rather it arises from the need for people to work together in their millions, across religious, class, ethnic, sexual, geographical, ideological divides. Flinders (2012) worries that politicians can do no good in the public's eyes at the moment, that they are damned by everyone by mere dint of being a politician, because most of us have such little interest in politics; indeed for many people a world without politics would be idyllic. Perhaps a transformative learning goal for citizenship would be to help citizens understand there is no escaping politics, just as there is no escaping having to breathe clean air or drink clean water.

3. Transforming agency

Clearly a key aim of citizenship education is to ensure young people develop a sense of agency or political self-efficacy. This is the third possible type of individual transformation we might consider and is about coming to one's own sense of self-belief and self-awareness about one's place in the democratic system. I suspect we all have a slightly different sense of how we fit in to the political life of our communities, and the kinds of activities we think are most beneficial. Hoskins and Janmaat (2016) have demonstrated that on a system-wide level, young people gaining higher level academic qualifications are more likely to engage in forms of political protest than those who only complete lower level vocational education, thus indicating that education may help to reproduce inequalities of political agency. Providing some more grounds for optimism, Keating and Janmaat's (2015) analysis of longitudinal data in England indicates that if young people have experience of some form of civic participation in schools, this can have a lasting effect on their political agency.

4. Transforming classrooms and schools

Moving on from the individual level transformations we might hope for, we also often talk about how citizenship practices have the potential to transform the classroom and the school, especially in terms of sharing responsibility and agency more widely. Here we might see initiatives such as student councils, student voice, students interviewing and observing staff, students being consulted on curriculum reform etc. Taken to its extreme such a commitment leads to radically transformed institutions, such as the famous [Summerhill School](#) where staff and students work together as (almost) equal members of a community, where there is an emphasis on 'liberating' children from adult authority. More realistically perhaps, Tisdall and Punch (2012) have argued that we can think about children's agency on a continuum between 'thick' or 'thin' and this opens up the possibility that teachers should aim to remove unnecessary constraints and build children's capacity to assume greater agency in their education. This chimes with the argument that the best way to learn democracy is to do it, which is the essence of the Council of Europe (1985) Committee of Minister's recommendations to member states that:

Democracy is best learned in a democratic setting where participation is encouraged, where views can be expressed openly and discussed, where there is freedom of expression for pupils and teachers, and where there is fairness and justice.

5. Transforming learning

Another way in which we may seek to transform education is by turning old established models of learning and teaching on their head. Citizenship educators are often committed to the idea that students learn through experience, which means we have to find more active pedagogies than many of our colleagues. This means getting students involved in political campaigns to understand how campaigning works, helping them to write letters to understand how elected representatives work for their constituents, or organising mock elections to understand how elections work. This also means working beyond the school walls and getting out in to the community and asking community members in to the classroom, for example [School 21](#) have taught children Spanish whilst they campaign for Latin American migrant workers' rights in their borough. But, beyond just doing it in the belief that *doing = learning*, we also need to think about how to facilitate the processes through which learning can be distilled from the experience. This might involve studying the various models of the [experiential learning cycle](#), engaging with the [service learning](#) tradition, or thinking about the role of [reflection](#) in our practice. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) work demonstrates that this is all far from educationally neutral, and there are ideological considerations to bear in mind when deciding how to set up and manage such projects.

6. Democracy as transformative

Hess (2009) has argued that citizenship education is necessarily transformative because it inducts students into democracy, which itself has the potential to change society. It is therefore the transformative potential of democracy, which makes citizenship education transformative. This may well be the case but it is unclear to me how this would be different from seeing citizenship as preparing young people to *conform* to the status quo, or gently pursue *reform*, rather than seeking to *transform* society or our democratic system. Does Hess' view of our current democracy as being inherently transformative really ring true?

7. Learning to transform society

We come then to perhaps the most contentious meaning of the notion of transformative citizenship education – an education which seeks to contribute to a broader process of social transformation. Many advocates of this position follow Freire (1970) in some shape or form in his analysis that (a) schools function as mechanisms of oppression, and it follows that teachers act as oppressors; that (b) we need to tackle this situation through pursuit of some revolutionary change; and that (c) through developing a new enlightened form of political consciousness, the education system has the potential to remove the scales from the eyes of the oppressed and enable them to build an alternative society. On this view education either serves to maintain the inequality which mars our society or it acts as a disruptive force. It cannot remain neutral. Whilst this is the most exciting project for citizenship teachers, because it enables us to see our everyday teaching practices as radical revolutionary acts, it also raises some profound questions, such as: *how do we justify our pursuit of a particular form of politics? How do we deal with the inherently oppositional political role this assigns us? Does this mean we have to organise ourselves as a political force, rather than a profession? How would such a citizenship educator relate to their communities and stakeholders? How do we engage with diverse political opinions?* People like [Michael Apple](#) (2013) seem to freight in their union organising skills to the role of radical educator, and see this as part of the organisation of the Left in opposition to the ideological forces of the Right, which have gained an increasing stranglehold on education. But we do have to sign up to this very political view of education, and then we have to think about what that means for us as employees of the state (or semi-privatised Academy

Trust). And of course, what does that mean if we are a conservative-minded, not to say neo-liberal citizen and teacher?

What does transformative citizenship education entail?

Tibbitts (2005) was my starting point for reflecting on what we mean by transformative education, and so we'll finish with a brief summary of the kinds of pedagogical strategies she sees as being common to efforts to promote transformative education. I think the kinds of strategies we adopt will depend on the kinds of transformation we prioritise, but her initial list is probably a good jumping off point for the conference:

- a. We need to bring in tensions from the community to the classroom so that students have the opportunity to wrestle with real problems.
- b. Teachers should promote critical analysis of oneself and others, and help students to think critically beyond the personal and inter-personal and to engage with the reality of power structures that facilitate and constrain our lives.
- c. Consciousness raising should involve transforming personal perspectives and seek to connect individual experiences and concerns to broader social justice principles. This will form the basis of a broader empathy and facilitate broader alliance building.
- d. Education should also seek individual empowerment and build students' political understanding so they can develop strategic actions.

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