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Citizenship Education and Post-16 Students: A Habermasian Perspective

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Abstract

This article is based on a research project carried out at the Graduate School of Education, Queen's University Belfast. The researchers conducted a study of discussion-based citizenship education for post-16 students in Northern Ireland (UK) over a period of 18 months. One of the researchers designed and delivered a course of citizenship education for students in a case study school (100 of whom were involved). This course was constructed within a theoretical framework that drew heavily upon the work of Jurgen Habermas. The results of the study showed that an overwhelming majority of the students involved gave comprehensive and positive evaluations of a citizenship course that was reliant upon a discussion-based form of education. This article argues that such courses, premised on the need to encourage communicative competence amongst young people, should be offered to all students within the non-compulsory education sector in the UK and beyond.

Theoretical Framework - Jurgen Habermas and discussion-based education

The theory of communicative action and rationality of German sociologist and critical theorist Jurgen Habermas provided an extremely useful conceptual foundation for the implementation of a discussion-based programme of citizenship education within this study. Habermas's ideas on the nature of communicative action as a means of achieving genuinely rational social understanding (*Verständigung*) had a significant influence on the design and delivery of a pilot programme of citizenship education within a case study school setting. For the purposes of this study, there was a particular (but not exclusive) focus on the concepts of communicative action and rationality that Habermas expressed emphatically in 'Reason and

the Rationalisation of Society' (Volume 1 of the 'Theory of Communicative Action'), which was first published in English in 1984.

Universal pragmatics

As part of his theory of communicative rationality and communicative competence, Habermas discussed the hypothetically achievable 'Ideal Speech Situation' (ISS). Within this ISS, Habermas envisaged a situation in which "all disagreements and conflicts are rationally resolved through a mode of communication which is completely free of compulsion and in which only the force of better argument may prevail" (Pusey 1987: 73). In presenting an argument that is premised on the notion of communicative action, it is worth outlining the evolution of this 'ISS' – namely, Habermas's universal preconditions of communicative action that led to the development of the concept of the 'ideal speech situation'.

The primary task of Habermas's concept of 'universal pragmatics' was the identification of the preconditions necessary for the achievement of understanding within discursive communication. In utilising the philosophy of language, Habermas linked Austin's (1962) and Grice's (1975) notions of 'felicity conditions' to Searle's (1970) theory of speech acts, and to a consensual theory of 'truth', which holds that competing truth claims are only resolved through reasoned discussion that culminates in the creation of a consensus. It is worth noting that Habermas did not confine universal pragmatics to analyses of language and speech. Rather, because he argued that language is the medium in which all human action can be explicated and justified, he was arguably using 'universal pragmatics' as the basis of a theory of social action.

Habermas suggested that 'intersubjective communication' is possible, despite the outstanding differences in participants' (citizens') pre-understandings, because citizens in effect posit, as a societal ideal, the attainment of a consensus (concerning the validity of statements) that is free from any constraints imposed upon them by others and from those constraints that they might impose upon themselves. That is, a 'democratic' situation is created in which all citizens can freely try to convince others (or indeed be convinced by them) of the worth of a

certain argument, and in which all citizens have an equal opportunity to take dialogue roles. Participation in this dialogical public sphere underlines the possibility and potential for all citizens to reinterpret and change their own social and economic situation. It was this 'idealisation' that Habermas described as the 'ideal speech situation' (ISS), and which he considered to be the situation of real freedom to which all citizens can and should aspire. Whilst such a hypothetical ideal might never be attained, in attempting to reach it Habermas argued that citizens must overcome 'systematically distorted communication' (often state or elite imposed), which acts to suppress and conceals citizens' real interests. In this context, the task of the social theorist is to act as a sort of therapist, encouraging citizens to reject systematically distorted institutional arrangements (most notably class or oligarchic domination) in favour of an emancipatory process of public discourse and debate.

Habermas was suggesting that the most rational paradigm of communication therefore features action oriented towards reaching an understanding across different dimensions in which "speaking and acting subjects reciprocally proffer three different types of claims for each others' agreement in communicative interaction" (Pusey, 1987: 80). Habermas analysed the conditions of this communicative rationality through a detailed examination of speech acts. From this, he inferred the rational conditions for mutual understanding in communicative action (Habermas, 1984: 305-326). These conditions, according to Habermas, are dependent on the validity claims of coherent and well formed speech acts: firstly, that an objective speech act can be considered true when it is accepted to refer to a state of affairs in the world; secondly, that a normative speech act is considered to be correct whenever it fits within a complex maze of social values and norms; and thirdly, that expressive and evaluative speech acts are considered truthful when they are made by sincere communicative actors.

Habermas has therefore argued that within all speech acts there are three different validity claims present: factual truth (true / untrue); normative rightness (right / not right); and sincerity (sincere / insincere). There is a clear correspondence within this theory between the three differing validity claims and three different worlds that are constituted through speech acts - the objective world, which is 'factually correct'; the social world, of morally binding

justifiable principles; and the subjective world of expressions of personal desires and evaluations (Sitton, 2003). These concepts of validity claims and their correspondence to different worlds also build upon the notion of 'value spheres' first outlined by Weber.

Habermas claimed that a citizen's ability to communicate is "derived from a pretheoretical knowledge that is universal to all speakers" (Braaten 1991: 58). He labelled this knowledge 'communicative competence'. This concept of communicative competence is a particularly important consideration within the Habermasian paradigm, especially when it is considered in the context of citizenship education. It refers to the mastery of the methods of communication necessary for progress towards the ISS. Here, there is an important distinction between mere linguistic competence and communicative competence. Linguistic competence refers simply to the vocabulary and grammatical skills necessary to produce coherent sentences (Pusey, 1987). Communicative competence is an altogether different kind of language use within critical and reflective dialogue ('discourse') that is fundamental to the resolution of conflicts and the creation of consensus. It is possible to argue that one of the most important tasks of educators involved in citizenship education is to develop the communicative competence of young people in order that they can be encouraged to engage in discourse related to social, cultural and political issues. Young (1989) noted that in terms of the development of critical teaching and learning within schools, communicative competence could only be fully engaged and achieved through active student participation.

Habermas was also concerned that dominant instrumental (*zweckrational*) notions of rationality ('strategic action'), as suggested by both Marx and Weber, should not be regarded as the only type of rationality available in democratic societies. Rather, communicative rationality offers a way in which societies can be reconstructed without resorting to narrow purposive instrumentalist aims. In an atmosphere free of coercion, citizens can engage in a form of communication oriented towards *Verständigung*, equipping them with the capacity to formulate and articulate defensible and inherently rational perceptions of the social world, to establish and maintain social relationships according to acceptable norms, and to interpret and express their personal needs and interests. Indeed, communicatively rational action aims to bring about a form of social integration that is "essential to objective inquiry, social

relationships and self-realisation” (Braaten, 1991: 71). For an educator involved in the construction and delivery of a citizenship education course for post-16 students, it is possible to argue that these Habermasian concepts represent an opportunity to establish educational programmes that aim to attain reconciliation, understanding and agreement, and which are achieved through student discussion and debate. The concept of communicative rationality (1984) is in striking contrast to forms of strategic, instrumentalist action that are oriented only towards individual, personal success, and which in the view of Habermas are both inherently irrational and already predominant in the structures of Western democratic societies.

Democracy, communicative action and citizenship

A key consideration with the Habermasian paradigm of communicative action, particularly in relation to citizenship and citizenship education, is the idea of discourse and democracy. In his earlier work, Habermas (1962) argued that a vibrant and truly democratic public sphere (predicated upon a communicatively competent citizenry) was the only safeguard against the possibility of a ‘legitimation’ crisis – a set of normative contradictions within emergent liberal democracies – that included the potential conflict between the need of the state to serve ‘special interests’ (that of the economic or social elite) and advancing the ‘common good’. Some form of public discourse about common affairs (dialogue that arises naturally among citizens, rather than the sort orchestrated and carefully managed by the state), as well as the creation of a suitable arena in which it can happen, were therefore necessary conditions of any stable, truly liberated democratic system.

The public sphere, of course, is primarily concerned with the evaluation of contemporary citizenship affairs and public policy (Outhwaite, 1994). According to Habermas (1962, 1996), however, the modern public sphere has been transformed from its original content-focused openness into something of a nebulous entity that has become meaningless and superficial. Contemporary democratic societies have been ‘colonised’ by the dominance of market economies and bureaucratic regulations. Habermas has also expressed concern in relation to the power of the mass media. “Whereas the press could previously merely

mediate the reasoning process of the private people who had come together in public, this reasoning is now, conversely, only formed by the mass media (Habermas, 1962, quoted in Outhwaite 1994: 09). Put simply, contemporary public opinion is more often a direct result of the increasing corporate and government manipulation than of the dialogical interaction of the citizenry. Democracies societies are no longer being directed by critical reason, rationality and the informed political choices of the public. Rather, the public sphere has been depoliticised and disempowered. Habermas recognised the need for a ‘repoliticisation’ and wholesale reformation of the public sphere.

In the modern era, it should of course be acknowledged that the realisation of the Habermasian ideal is undoubtedly increasingly difficult (although modern technologies and information networks are arguably making it somewhat more possible), in that citizens all over the world, and throughout diverse nations, cannot literally “come together” in one large forum to exchange ideas and debate. The process of democratic critical discourse is therefore necessarily spread throughout and across disparate and diverse forums – for example: home; schools and colleges; the workplace; voluntary associations; political parties; the media; different levels of organisation within civil society; trade unions; and government agencies (at the micro and macro level).

Dealing with such diversity and complexity requires the concepts of communicative action and deliberative democracy to “link deliberation and decision making within the citizenry” (Rehg and Bohman, 2002: 37). Habermas (1996) achieves this with the creation of a ‘two-track’ model, in which the institutions of representative government (parliaments, for example) provide an institutional focus for a process of ‘subjectless’ decentred communication that is spread across the public sphere and which, in theory at least, involves all citizens. This means that the decision-making power of government is closely tied to, and indeed dependent on, a widespread and complex process of public deliberation. In this way, deliberative democracy is not simply the preserve of representative agencies of the government (MPs, for example), nor that confined only to ‘active’ citizens who are content to delegate power to such agencies. This model can be broadly conceived as one that is reliant upon the use of communicative action to establish a rational, consensus-based system of

democratic government. Within the Habermasian framework, democratic procedure should encourage a communicatively competent citizenry to engage in critical public discourse. Government and institutions of the state should then channel the results of that discourse towards rational political decisions that are supported by socially effective power. Discursive structures underpin this process, and as such the process is one that can be judged (in Habermasian terms) to be rational, and its outcomes (ideally at least) reasonable to all citizens.

The communicative imperative within the Habermasian conception of modern democracy provides a rationalising effect, enabling citizens and their political representatives to approach agreement and consensus on persuasive and reasoned outcomes. Whilst this model appears to concede the complicated plurality of real, situated public discourse and deliberation within modern liberal democracies, it retains the key notion that at the ideal level, the rational nature of public communication and debate is still dependent upon discursive idealisations. This idealisation seems to present some unavoidable problems within the context of societies that are deeply divided – ostensibly, intractable disagreement and conflicts (Israel/Palestine; Northern Ireland for example) undermine the concept of communicative action and deliberative democracy. However, whilst discursive structures might not always produce an idealised consensus and agreement, they do act to raise the level of public debate and interaction, even when this debate does not result in a consensual ‘coming together’. This contributes to the construction of a vibrant and rigorous public sphere, in which an increasingly communicatively competent and educated citizenry can *move towards* the rational resolution of conflict. Rational deliberation therefore generates a revision of substantive arguments (Rehg and Bohman, 2002) that can bring differing positions together so that *some form* of compromise becomes possible (even if it is an ‘agreement to disagree’ on certain issues, provided that those issues have been adequately debated). It is precisely within such deeply divided societies, therefore, that the Habermasian ideal of communicative rationality is arguably most needed. The effectiveness of critical discourse in such situations has been evidenced within recent years, for example, in Northern Ireland - where the collective imperative, right across the political spectrum, has been to engage in a process of public debate and negotiation. Whilst this has not resulted in a total

convergence or transformation of opinions in relation to the overarching political desires of the ‘two sides’ (Irish nationalist – the end of partition and Irish reunification; and ‘British’ unionist - the retention of the linkage with Great Britain and Northern Ireland remaining a part of the United Kingdom), it has led to the creation of an emerging and stable society, forged on compromise - an evolving internal political framework that can accommodate seemingly intractable positions within one democratic structure. Even in the most difficult of situations, then, communicative action can help to create a public sphere in which a communicatively competent citizenry subject uninformed rhetoric (of which there has been much in Northern Ireland throughout its history) to critical analysis, measuring the arguments of politicians, political parties, social groups and governments against a detailed and public scrutiny of the ‘facts’.

If citizenship education is to be a vehicle, then, by which such a process of liberating public discourse can be delivered, it is imperative that young people are educated within a system in which the dominance of philosophies of instrumental rationality is undermined by a more deliberate focus on alternative methods of co-ordinating social action. Citizenship education premised upon a dynamic of social action that is exclusively geared towards the exertion of ‘influence’ (occurring when one or more people utilise inducements other than rational reason – the threat of coercion; money; emotional blackmail) is a disempowering phenomenon that contributes to the perpetuation of strategic action and the continuation of conflict. It leads citizens to regard the resistance, objection or critique of other citizens as simply something to be ‘altered’ – changed, overcome, or subjugated. This, in effect, means that the importance of intersubjective relations and the establishment of a rational consensus are completely sidelined, further destabilising the democratic process.

As an alternative strategy, communicative action and rationality is reliant upon social co-ordination that is generated by consent and an accepted ‘common knowledge’ of facts, norms or subjective experience. For Habermas, such ‘common knowledge’ is of course more than those opinions which are merely held in common. Rather, it is opinions that are grounded in reasons and rationale that “can be engaged if social co-ordination weakens” (Sitton 2003: 53). Habermas refers to knowledge as ‘common’ only if it represents consent that relies on

intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims (Habermas, 1990). Communicative action therefore offers a method by which citizens can enter into “fully dialogical and quintessentially social” relationships that are aimed at the achievement of understanding and the advancement of the (consensually established) common good (Pusey, 1987: 79). This understanding can only be acquired, however, in a free, open and non-coercive environment. Therefore, a concept of citizenship education in which an educator (or an educational institution) is cast as an autocratic figure of authority is clearly incongruent with a desire to create and maintain a process in which students can engage in a mode of dialogue, debate and discussion (‘discourse’) that is not forced to adhere to externally imposed social, cultural or political ‘norms’. White (1994: 42) argued that within discourse, “actors orient their communication to the sole purpose of coming to a rational consensus on whether or not a specific claim is supportable”. As discussed earlier, Habermas regarded discussion that took place within an atmosphere of coercion and manipulation as ‘systematically distorted communication’ (Habermas, 1984) - an inherently irrational form of communication that is distorted by conscious or unconscious manipulation, and which is of no value in attempting to generate understanding or conflict resolution, and which creates beliefs and ideas that are incapable of retaining any validity if subjected to ‘rational’ scrutiny.

The theory of communicative action and rationality supports the objective of creating an educational environment that attempts to foster co-operative, participative student learning. It also provides conceptual rationale and justification for the design and delivery of a citizenship education course that has student discussion and rational discourse at its methodological core. Discussion-based citizenship education can therefore become not only a way of attempting to reconfigure classroom practice in order to place a greater emphasis on student learning, but also a means by which citizenship issues can assume a central role in the establishment of an educational programme aimed at achieving meaningful social understanding and the reconciliation of conflict. Encouraging rational communicative action that could conceivably provide a basis for the amelioration of social, cultural and political division, and thus constitute a positive reconstruction of liberal democratic society, could be argued to be a key aim of a citizenship education (and in a transcendental context, all education). The communicative action theory of Jurgen Habermas therefore proved

enormously valuable in informing the design, delivery and analysis of a pilot programme of discussion-based, student-centred citizenship education within this study.

The pilot programme of citizenship education (PPCE)

As noted, this study was based on the design and delivery of a pilot programme of citizenship education (PPCE) for post-16 students in a case study school (100 of whom were involved). Finding an effective method of ensuring that the experiences of the students who were involved in the PPCE were reflected within this study was undoubtedly necessary and challenging. This section offers an analysis of the experiences of the students who volunteered for the PPCE, as expressed by them. It is based on a detailed evaluation document that they completed immediately after the teaching sessions of the course had finished. Such an evaluation was designed to provide the students with adequate scope to give a full and frank account of their perceptions of discussion-based citizenship education, and the methods by which it was delivered. It is important to note that anonymity was a key feature of this evaluation.

The evaluation was constructed so as to provide ample opportunity for the students to articulate their opinions on a wide range of elements of the PPCE. It thus contained 15 questions, 13 of which were open-ended and required detailed replies. It is possible to suggest that the dominant social and educational culture within an increasingly pressured and crowded academic post-16 curriculum has seldom required the input or reflections of the students, and they have been unused to situations in which their opinions are fundamental to the design and maintenance of programmes of education. The evaluation document required the students to go beyond a superficial process of simple teacher and programme ratification, and instead was aimed to make it incumbent upon each and every student to engage in self-analysis, and to become introspective in terms of attempting to provide a meaningful, insightful, honest and perceptive account of the PPCE.

In each case, a reminder of the question that prompted the various responses has been provided. Throughout this section, it is important to note that in terms of student evaluations and perspectives, the contributions of each student in this co-educational context are regarded as equal. The quotations that are offered are designed to be representative of both the male and female students. It is also important to note that within the student evaluation documents the 'teacher' was referred to as the 'tutor'. Within this analysis an indication of the identity of each respondent is provided (through a coded reference) to confirm for the reader that an over-proportion of quotes from a single individual or a small group of individuals has not been used. As these evaluations were anonymous except for the gender and group of the participant, the code has been based simply on the student's gender (M or F), group (A, B, C, D or E) and each student within each group has been allocated a number. The number given to each student as part of each group is based only on the number of male or female students within the group. So, for example, within Group A (which had ten male participants), the range of codes applied to the ten male students ranges from (M, A, 1) – (M, A, 10). In this code, M= Male, A= Group A, and number = the student's number to differentiate him from the nine other male students in this group. Similarly, the range of codes for the female students is (F, A, 1) – (F, A, 9).

The Evaluation

The students were asked to reflect upon their reasons for choosing to volunteer for a discussion-based course of citizenship education. Often labelled as highly instrumentalist, basing their educational or social decisions only on what Habermas (1984) referred to as “strategic action” (whether conscious or unconscious), the present cohort of students in post-16 education has been subjected to a fair amount of disdain by the mainstream media, which laments the passing of a “halcyon” age of more tasking examinations. The suspicion might well have been that these students would not sign up in any significant number for a course that had no direct functional purpose. However, nearly 100 students volunteered (over 80% of the year group). They outlined their motivation, with some simply regarding it as the “least bad” option.

Question 1 - Why did you sign up for the citizenship course?

To get away from the study area. (M, B, 5)

Because it was something to do instead of a study period. (M, B, 1)

However, there was genuine interest in the issues and the course:

I thought it would be interesting to learn more and discuss about current affairs. (M, D, 4)

I thought it would be an interesting way to learn about citizenship and other people’s views on the issues. (M, D, 6)

I was keen to find out what the class was about, get involved in debate, and broaden my knowledge of current affairs. (F, B, 1)

There were also a minority of overt instrumentalist motivations for participation in the course:

It was something to put on my UCAS (university entrance) form. (M, A, 2)

To have something extra for my UCAS form. (F, A, 3)

In terms of the discussion-based methodology that was utilised within the programme, the comments of some participants in response to Question 3 and Question 4 (below) are particularly relevant:

Question 3 - What did you expect the classes to be like?

Question 4 - Did the class meet your expectations?

3 - A bit like my politics class, with lots of debate and discussion. (F, A, 6)

4 - Yes, it was good and I enjoyed it. There was a lot of chances for us to discuss issues we care about (F, A, 6)

3 - Interesting, fun. (M, A, 6)

4 - Yes, it did. There was open debate that I felt moved wherever we (the students) wanted. (M, A, 6)

3 - Debate and discussion classes. Everyone talking and arguing about relevant issues. (F, A, 5)

4 - Yes, I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was interesting and informative. (F, A, 5)

3 - Formal but also pupil orientated. (F, B, 1)

4 - Yes, better as the debate was not restricted and the informal atmosphere made a nice change. (F, B, 1)

Not all of the students were as unstinting in their praise. One male participant, who outlined his reason for volunteering as peer pressure, had expected the classes to be completely student-controlled, but found that:

I felt that we did control some topics and I enjoyed the debates and the different style of teaching, but I felt that the class was perhaps directed by the tutor and not us (the students). (M, A, 3)

Questions 8 and 9 (below) provided a revealing insight into the extent to which the students felt that they had been actively encouraged to discuss and communicate their viewpoints to one another openly in class.

Question 8 - Did the tutor encourage you to discuss your viewpoints openly in class? How?

Yes, he challenged the points that I and others made and encouraged me to elaborate and explain myself. (F, B, 4)

Yes, he challenged my viewpoint and asked me to explain my answers, always looking for informed reasons as to why that was my opinion. (F, C, 2)

Question 9 - Do you feel that the tutor valued your arguments and opinions? Why?

Yes, he did not discourage anyone, particularly not me and I felt very happy with it, especially the chance to get involved in discussion, which doesn't usually happen in my other classes. (M, D, 2)

Yes, I was encouraged to develop my opinions and explain them. (M, D, 8)

Yes, he always seemed very interested in what I had to say and why I felt it. (F, D, 1)

Yes, he let me express my opinions without stopping me, and I felt able to discuss things openly with other people in the class. (M, D, 11)

An overwhelming majority of the students thought that sixth formers (Year 13 and Year 14) in the case study school (and by implication within other schools) should be offered the chance to enrol in a discussion-based citizenship education course. A selection of responses to Question 11 (below) outlined their viewpoints on this issue. None of the students thought that either they or their peers should be denied the *opportunity* to volunteer for a discussion-based programme of citizenship education such as this.

Question 11 - Should post-16 students be offered the option of enrolling in this type of course? Why?

Yes, because it is a better way to learn than the traditional way. (M, B, 3)

Yes - because the way it is taught would be informative but fun. We should get a chance to debate things more. (M, C, 2)

Yes, because we (post-16 students) have the maturity to gain most from this class. (M, A, 1)

Yes!! We don't get the chance to talk about this sort of thing otherwise, especially about what's going on in our own country. It's good to encourage discussion and find out what other people in your year think. It gives you variety from your subjects. (F, C, 2)

Yes, because I think that it is very useful – not only is it educational in the sense that you learn about different matters but you also learn different viewpoints on those matters. The class helps you to be able to argue points and to appreciate both sides of the argument. (F, E, 4)

These responses suggested that the chief advantages of enrolling on such a course, from the perspective of the students, were the opportunities that the citizenship education course provided for the students to openly discuss (without coercion) a range of social, cultural and political issues. It seemed that many students held the expectation that the course would retain elements of a traditionalist and inflexibly formal pedagogical approach, but also hoped that it might prove to be an innovative departure from their educational norm. Some students were indeed surprised that the programme *did* foster a discussion-based learning dynamic. These students were satisfied that the programme had met and even surpassed their expectations. One of the aims of the PPCE was to advance the self-confidence and self-esteem of the students, and to assist them in developing their skills of articulation. The replies of the students to Question 14 therefore underlined, to an extent, how successful the programme had been in achieving this objective. Students offered detailed analyses of the ways in which they believed that the PPCE had improved their skills of discussion and debate.

Question 14 -Do you think that citizenship education course helped you to develop your debating and discussion skills? If so, how?

Yes. We were constantly asked to argue our opinions, always giving our reasons why we believed this viewpoint, and trying to reach an agreement with people who disagreed. (F, D, 2)

Yes - you had to be prepared to make a point - but to make sure you had thought through what it was that you wanted to say. (F, B, 4)

Yes, because I now know how to approach different people and types of personality in debates, and also how to explain my own point of view to other people, without it just becoming a pointless argument. (M, B, 3)

I now feel more confident in expressing my views in a group situation, and I found that you can debate with somebody else and often you can end up actually agreeing, or compromising. (F, E, 3)

It helped me to speak out more and develop my argument. It also helped me to be less shy and to be confident about expressing my view in front of everyone. I realised even if people disagree sometimes what they say can be right. (F, E, 9)

Question 15 offered the students to opportunity to freely express their overall evaluation of the course:

Question 15 - Describe, in your own words, the way(s) in which the tutor delivered, or taught, the course. In this summary you should include everything that you think is relevant, such as: teaching style, suggested improvements, criticisms, comparisons and so on. In this section you are free to write anything that you want in relation to the delivery of the citizenship education course.

The thing that I really enjoyed about the course was the relaxed ambience of the class. The tutor treated us with great respect and made the classes very pupil-orientated, which was such a refreshing change from normal classes. We were encouraged to speak out in class and therefore developed our debating and oral skills. The pupil-teacher relationship wasn't so formal and so the classes were very relaxed. (F, B, 2)

The relaxed, informal atmosphere was a welcome change to the normal rigidity of subject lessons. I really appreciated the respect shown toward us by the tutor; this, in turn, made us have respect for him. I looked forward to the class each week - and discussion and debate often spilled over to break and lunch times. I feel that it was an important step to developing our characters and our viewpoints. I thoroughly enjoyed the class and I was glad to have been part of this project. (F, B, 1)

The tutor immediately created a relaxed atmosphere in the class. He provided us with topics to discuss but allowed us to speak on the issues that we felt most strongly about. We discussed relevant and interesting topics which most people had an opinion about. Everyone was encouraged to speak and if someone was quiet the tutor would prompt him or her without forcing them to speak. When we disagreed we were encouraged to try and

come up with an acceptable compromise. I really enjoyed the class! (F, C, 6)

Two of the female responses offered a note of caution amidst their praise; both implying that more could be done to find ways of making less vocal members of the group central parts of the discussion process. They also argued, though, that as the programme progressed the relationship between the group *did* encourage them, without pressure, to build their confidence and become increasingly more involved in the discussions and debates. One of these female responses is provided below.

I liked the teaching style. It was open, relaxed, unbiased and created a good atmosphere. The tutor made me feel at ease and that my points were relevant, and I was pleased that I got to have an input into this type of discussion. I think, however, that he should maybe do more to try to encourage everyone to have an input, whilst still avoiding putting them on the spot. (F, A, 1)

One female student offered a considered and thoughtful evaluation of the way that the PPCE had been delivered.

I think the way the course was delivered helped and encouraged us to discuss and debate the topics at hand. The fact that our arguments and viewpoints were valued encouraged us to offer our views more openly and with confidence. I felt that the informal style and respect we were shown also helped the classes to run smoothly. I think if we had been lectured and talked down to and treated as if we would not know about the issues it would have de-motivated people, and less people would have talked for fear that their views would be criticised. (F, A, 5)

No evaluation of a discussion-based course of citizenship education would be credible without a significant and substantial reflection of the experiences of the students. Without student support for a programme of discussion-based citizenship education at this level, it is possible to argue that it would simply prove unworkable. The student evaluation process showed that a majority of the students found the course to be a worthwhile experience. There was clearly strong support amongst the post-16 students in this case study school for the introduction of this type of citizenship education course, which offered the students an opportunity to become enthusiastically involved in meaningful political, social and cultural debate and discussion aimed

at generating rational understanding and consensus. Similarly, the majority of the students expressed clear support for a discussion-based teaching and learning environment that assisted them not only to acquire confidence and self-esteem, but also improved and increased their knowledge and understanding of a range of social, cultural and political issues. From the perspective of the students involved therefore, the thematic structure and the discussion-based approach of the course proved to be an effective and enjoyable way of promoting and developing critically informed debate and discussion in relation to a wide range of citizenship issues.

Discussion-based citizenship education at post-16 level - A Habermasian perspective

The group discussions of the students involved in the PPCE were aimed at emancipatory knowledge, and the development of a rational perspective on the nature and complexity of social and political structures that represent an opportunity for the resolution of conflict. The PPCE demonstrated that the implementation and maintenance of a specialised communicative relationship between the teacher-researcher (or ‘tutor’) and the students was important in creating a dynamic of open, critical debate and discussion. In the context of a reshaped teacher-student relationship (which sought to obviate the traditional barriers to Habermasian dialogue) the students were encouraged to bring deeper insight and reflection into the pursuit of social and political understanding. For them this offered an increased amount of educational, social and political autonomy. According to Habermasian theory, it represented a form of emancipation, and an increased amount of rational self-control. The process of continual verbalisation can offer students a chance to engage in programmes of education that seek to promote the value of the force of ‘better’, more reasoned, argument.

In the contemporary democratic public sphere, the imposition of teacher attitudes and opinions is no longer an appropriate or conceptually justifiable method of encouraging young people to act as responsible, informed citizens. Educational institutions should instead attempt to develop a level of communicative competence that enables young people to master the methods of construction needed to engage in dialogue. It would be difficult to justify the value of a requirement that schools and educators merely design and implement content-driven traditionalist models of citizenship education that ignore the central importance of “speech” and

student-directed discussion. Habermasian theory points to the primacy of language in creating social consensus and agreement between two or more speaking and acting subjects. It would be insufficient to suggest that the didactic process of closed questioning and response would even approach anything close to an ideal speech situation.

Discussion-based courses of citizenship education aimed at creating understanding rest on the students within the courses reconciling the diverse opinions that they bring to the group, where possible, and which are premised on their existing knowledge and beliefs. It is, in effect, a process that seeks to bridge the gap between personally held beliefs and justified, rational knowledge and understanding. As demonstrated by the students in the PPCE, the rational consensus that can be achieved through this type of teaching and learning dynamic can be regarded as justified and credible knowledge because it has been subjected to sustained scrutiny (in the form of informed counter claims and arguments from other students, facilitated by the teacher) and has been tested by the best available evidence, which the students have sought out to support their own points of view and arguments (Bruner, 1996).

Student discussion, in the context of the PPCE, created and sustained social relationships, premised on the open exchange of opinions. As the students noted in their evaluations, conflicting viewpoints were often ameliorated by the power of superior argument. This, in Habermasian terms, was critical ‘discourse’. It involved the suspension of action so that students were able to mutually question their most basic assumptions. White (1995: 238) argued that such discourse must “be a structure that is immunised in a special way against repression and inequality”. This immunisation can be established through the creation of a set of principles for students and teachers that are designed to ensure equality, non-coercion, and fairness within a citizenship education course.

In examining the empirical data that emerged as part of this study, the value of the processes of critical discourse was obvious. Perhaps most persuasively, it met with the overwhelming approval of the students. Their evaluations showed that reaching an understanding (*Verständigung*), particularly with other students, was often their key concern. Policymakers should note, however, that attempting to design a pseudo - communicative situation in which

consensus is coerced through recourse to extraneous or imposed cultural, social and political norms would be artificially achieved and socially worthless. This would represent what Habermas described as “systematically distorted communication”, capable only of creating belief systems that maintain a legitimacy that cannot be validated if subjected to rational discourse (Held, 1980).

Designing citizenship education courses that are based exclusively on fostering what Habermas described as strategic action (instrumental actions oriented towards success over a rational opponent with competing interests) would arguably simply perpetuate a model of social, political and cultural action that values utilitarian concepts of society and education. An exclusive focus on this type of strategic action emphasises the idea of competition (social, economic and political) with others, encouraging young people to develop an adversarial social disposition in which they are encouraged to subjugate the opinions of others. It retains little place within its scope for discursive attempts at the rational resolution of social and political problems. It is not enough simply to reflect that young people represent an increasingly disaffected and disparate section of the population. If the old certainties and customs of the modern age are to disintegrate inexorably, it need not be that the new society has to be locked within the Weberian ‘Iron Cage’ (Weber, 1930). Citizenship education offers governments the opportunity to be at the forefront of attempting to build a society characterised by communicative rationality and aimed at social agreement and harmony. This attitudes of the young people expressed within the PPCE demonstrated that the process of modernisation, educationally, socially, culturally and politically, offers potential for rationality, understanding and agreement achieved through communication.

Citizenship education and post-16 students - An alternative and suggestions for further research

There would be little dispute that in the modern era teachers and educational institutions throughout Europe and North America are overloaded with tasks, some of which demand skills

not considered during their ‘training’. As Young (1989: 96) noted, there is a “tug of war” going on within education (at both government and school/college level) between those who support the objectives and the rationale of autonomous student learning, and those who are seeking to retain traditional models. Traditional education values the certainty and inflexibility of a pre-decided curriculum, which does not stress the importance of the students’ judgements in the post-16 sector, but instead is measured (using continual evaluation and correction) against the type of imposed models of valid responses that could be argued to represent systematically distorted communication (Habermas, 1984). In a critical and rational citizenship education course, it is suggested that students should be given the opportunity to discuss and debate potentially controversial social, cultural and political issues. A reaffirmation of the centrality of ‘norms’ that are validated by educators could undermine the objective of the development of intersubjectively established consensus.

There are significant opportunities for policymakers in the UK (and throughout Europe and North America) to consider implementing programmes of citizenship education for young people that are aimed at educational, political and social transformation. There is no doubt that the educational profession has the necessary skills and adaptability to provide an excellent forum for students to engage in constructive, consensus-oriented rational discussion. If teachers, parents, and wider communities are convinced about the need for this type of course, citizenship education could become an integral feature of the modern educational experience. For governments to be at the forefront of change, both in terms of the way in which a curriculum is constructed and offered, would deflect the criticism that schools and teachers in the UK and beyond remain largely traditionalist and conservative.

Suggestions for further research

It is hoped that the theoretical framework within this study can provide assistance and direction for international policymakers and researchers seeking to evaluate discussion-based programmes of citizenship education; and indeed communicative action and its relationship to citizenship

education in a variety of post-16 educational (and cultural) contexts. Researchers might want to become involved in the evaluation of developmental programmes of discussion-based citizenship education within educational contexts in which post-16 students are enrolled on a diverse range of courses - traditional academic, vocational, and work training/experience. It is also suggested that such contexts would provide researchers with opportunities to assess attitudes of both teaching staff and post-16 students towards the implementation and maintenance of voluntary courses of discussion-based citizenship education that utilise communicative action in seeking to foster critical social, cultural and political understanding.

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