

## **EDUCATION FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP: but for which dimension?**

The paper identifies different meanings and domains of citizenship and argues that the majority of the European population have accepted the rhetoric of education for active citizenship without reflecting on the underlying concepts of citizenship. Taking into account the concepts and domains as identified by various scholars one therefore has to ask oneself whether there could be one programme on education for active citizenship or several. The paper suggests there should be several programmes on active citizenship. If there is only one it can only be a basic one building up communication, tolerance, team work, negotiation skills and methods to be used by active citizens in order to achieve their aims.

Reflection on effective learning for active citizenship and discussion regarding such learning is hardly possible without firstly considering the content and meaning of the word citizenship and active.

In the dictionary of the Slovene language, and also in the lexicon 'citizenship' is defined as 'a legal affiliation to a country'<sup>1</sup>, and as 'international-legal distinguishing mark vis-à-vis foreigners and persons without citizenship'<sup>2</sup>. For citizenship in the sense of legal affiliation to a country the lexicon states citizenship as 'membership of a state organisation giving a special protection to a citizen'<sup>3</sup>.

Veldhuis (1997) writing on citizenship states that the definition of the word citizenship is a delicate one. The concept of citizenship, according to him, has evolved together with the social, economic and political development and is still evolving. Carr and Hartnett are arguing<sup>4</sup> that the concept of citizenship is a contested one, in the sense that the criteria defining its proper use are a matter of constant dispute and reflection. According to them these are essential since the arguments are centred on basic political questions for which a rational and final solution is not

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<sup>1</sup> Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika, prva knjiga, SAZU, Inštitut za slovenski jezik, Državna založba Slovenije, Ljubljana 1993, p. 520.

<sup>2</sup> Leksikon Cankarjeve založbe, Ljubljana, 1973, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Carr, W. in Hartnett: Beyond Communitarianism, V: Veldhuis, R.: Education for Democratic Citizenship: dimensions of citizenship, core competences, variables and international activities, Council of Europe, Council for Cultural Cooperation, Strasbourg, 1997, p. 3.

available yet. Veldhuis believes citizenship to be a political concept, and the question who is a citizen and who is not, is in the majority of the European countries defined in the process of the political decision making. He argues citizenship to be a political concept on the grounds that the definition of citizenship is affected by author's political status. Demaine<sup>5</sup> while defining the aspects of citizenship stated that the attention of the theoreticians is mainly centred on civic, political and social rights, social justice, citizens' obligations and principles of equality. Regarding aspects of citizenship Veldhuis identifies four dimensions, namely political/legal, social, cultural and economic dimension of citizenship. Honohan (2004) speaks about a number different dimensions citizenship has e.g. membership, legal status and practice being perhaps the most important. On the dimension of membership she connects it to the membership of a state or political community where citizens are contrasted to non-citizens explaining that 'membership is often taken as a precondition for exercising the next two senses of citizenship' (Honohan, 2004, p.1). Authors like Delanty (2000) argue that 'citizenship is no longer defined by nationality and the nation state but has become de-territorialised and fragmented into separate discourses of rights, participation, responsibility and identity'.<sup>6</sup>

However like the nature of 'citizenship' is changing the understanding of activities taken on by citizens is changing as well. Hvinden and Halvorsen (2001, pp. 3 - 4) list a number of its current meanings:

- participation in local community activities (as a productive contribution to society and as a means to achieve new social and economic goals);
- self-organised and voluntary civil labour in return for civic money, as a supplement to paid work (Beck 2000, 1999);
- charitable giving, voluntary work and community service to the benefit of others;
- self-activity of people at the margins (for example self-help);
- participation as a part of the social-democratic citizenship ideal;
- notions of deep or thick citizens (where rights and responsibilities are seen as mutually supporting, where participation in the broader political community and not just vis-à-vis the state is emphasised (Clark, 1996);

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

- participation as learning-by-doing-activity.

Problems which the theoreticians encounter while defining the term 'citizenship' can not be avoided when reflecting on education for active citizenship. The crucial question to be dealt with in this context is the question of the aim and content of such education.

So far we have been discussing the meaning of citizenship and also, to some extent, the dimensions of citizenship as defined by Demaine and Veldhuis. In this instance there is another part to be taken into account – active citizenship.

In various dictionaries the word 'active' usually denotes 'doing things; able to do things, in action; moving; capable of functioning; causing or initiating action or change; engaged in activity; contributing; participating. Reflecting on the definition of citizenship offered by the dictionary of the Slovene language and starting from the discussions of Demaine, Veldhuis and Hartnett and Carr it is possible to think of an education which would familiarise citizens with legal measures provided for them by the state. Thus the citizens would therefore be able to express their affiliation to the state. Adhering to what lexicon defined as citizenship (legal affiliation to a country, international-legal distinguishing mark vis-à-vis foreigners and persons without citizenship, membership of a state organisation giving a special protection to a citizen) it is easy to imagine that education would be geared towards knowing the measures of special protection offered to its citizens by the state. The term 'education for active citizenship' would thus indicate education preparing the participants to be active members of the community, also to be socially active people in the state or community which members they are. And, since citizenship presupposes, according to the dictionary, legal affiliation, it is possible to understand that the content of such an education would be in the legal and normative field.

The debate in the European Union is putting an emphasis on the "active citizen". The Communication from the European Commission Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality (EC, 2002) defines active citizenship as 'the cultural, economic, political/democratic

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<sup>6</sup> [www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/staff/gerard/books/gd\\_3.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/staff/gerard/books/gd_3.htm) (July, 20, 2005).

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and/or social participation of citizens in society as a whole and in their community.’ Whereas the EU document Learning for Active Citizenship (CEC, 1997) offers more exhaustive definition clarifying the issue. “... This means seeking to encourage people’s practical involvement in the democratic processes at all levels and most particularly at European level.... turning Europe of knowledge into reality importantly includes promoting a broader idea of citizenship ... the aim is that people take the project of shaping the future into their own hands” (CEC, 1997, p. 6).

But taking into account H. Arendt’s reflections on active and activity one would best define ‘activity’ in active citizenship in her terms of action. Arendt distinguishes three categories which correspond to the three fundamental activities of our being-in-the-world: labour, work and action<sup>7</sup>. She accords action the central place in the hierarchy of human activities and endows it with the potential to realise highest human capacities such as freedom and individuality.<sup>8</sup> She argues that by acting we preserve the world of human affairs from the corruption and decay. Namely, to act means to take initiative, to introduce the novum and the unexpected into the world. Moreover, for her action is not something what can be done in isolation from others, that is independently of the presence of plurality of actors who from their different perspective may judge the quality of what is being enacted. Without the presence and acknowledgement of others, that is without the presence of community of like-minded actors who can see and judge the performance action would cease to be a meaningful activity.

Taking into account what has been pointed out earlier regarding citizenship and activity one would then think of education for active citizenship to be related to the measures and instruments empowering citizens to ‘take the project of shaping the future into their own hands’ as EU document puts it. Looking at the understanding of activities undertaken by citizens as enumerated by Hvinden and Halvorsen another domain of citizenship enters the equation, i.e. participation and involvement in the activities or in a broader political community. This indicates in Arendt’s terms ‘acknowledgments of others’ i.e. working in a group or groups which give feedback on what was done or is being done or undertaken. Reflecting on this education for

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<sup>7</sup> For Arendt each activity is autonomous in the sense of having its own distinctive principles and of being judged by its ability to disclose the identity of the agent, to affirm the reality of the world, to actualise our capacity for freedom and to endow our existence with meaning (Human Conditions (1958), p.7-11, 175-88).

active citizenship would therefore mean that first and foremost such a programme should equip the participants with communicative skills, with knowledge how to act in a group and as a part of a group, how to discuss, listen to each other, tolerate differences of opinion, how to find solutions acceptable for members of group, how to work with the community. Apart from these skills one would imagine that such a programme should also aim to stimulate critical thinking and tolerance. Further on it should also equip participants with the instruments of influencing, changing and reshaping the reality citizens live in. There are many methods to achieve democratic changes which the majority of the citizens are not familiar with. Furthermore in any learning adults are involved in there should be meaning and purpose of such learning. The learning should be attached to solving problems relevant for the participants and the community and consequently induce changes either in person's life or in the life of the community. All the rest are just the necessary preconditions to really equip adults to act as the agents of change. And these are to my mind the basics for active participation in the society as well as the fundamentals of effective learning for active citizenship.

Analysing the contents of programmes on citizenship education one finds out that the majority of them deal with the structure of parliamentary democracy thus enabling the participants to understand the governance in a democratic state. As much as this knowledge is relevant for understanding the working of institutions of a democratic state it nonetheless does not empower the citizens to take actions or to be active. One of the reasons lies in the fact that this knowledge is a passive one.

Considering Veldhuis and his dimensions of citizenship education for active citizenship would therefore mean that there must be several programmes on 'active citizenship', at least one for each dimension. But since dimensions in a human being often overlap each other, people have roles in each of them in their everyday life, it would seem obvious, that there should be some core curriculum to each and every one, the one I referred to as basics for effective learning, and a negotiated one which would depend on the situation adults and communities find themselves in. I would therefore argue that there can not be prescribed curricula on active citizenship, based

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago, p. 7.  
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on the top down approach but tailor made, bottom up ones, taking into account real life situations of everyday life of real persons and communities.

Even we do not dwell too much on the conceptual definitions of citizenship, not to mention democracy and civil society, and focus on what Demaine has written where the attention of the theoreticians is drawn to and transform it into effective learning for active citizenship in the domains of the theoretician's interest – civic, political and social rights, social justice, responsibilities of citizens and state and principles of equality, combine all these with the needs of people and with the core 'curriculum', the content of such learning expands considerably. Thus this would mean that effective learning would encompass education on personal, political and social rights and on responsibilities and obligations of all parties involved and on ways how to achieve them. In this way people would really be empowered to take actions. But...

The issue presenting itself immediately when reflecting in such a manner is the following: does the content of what the 'state' thinks of learning for active citizenship match what people think this should be. And to elaborate this further – if we link the outcome of learning with a citizen who is active in all areas of his/her personal and social life, who can reflect, is critical to what is going on around him/her, do we really believe that the state and its institutions wish for such a citizen? Is this not just a motto which catches the attention with a hidden agenda behind, namely to attract people to participate in the voting exercise. That is to participate in the public sector (government and parliament), in free elections where voting is considered the main action of political activity. But to be really involved in shaping one's own future – is this not too complicated for the masses to understand?

My concern in the respect of learning for active citizenship or for education for active citizenship is the nagging question of the hidden agenda. Is this renewed interest in active citizenship not just a façade to cover the real need of such and education or learning – participation in the elections which gives, with adequate numbers of votes, political legitimacy to various political parties whereas inadequate participation and consequently inadequate number of votes denies it or at least is dubious? How can we otherwise interpret various surveys on participation before elections and reflections and consultations of the parties after the event?

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In Slovenia and in the states of long standing democracies the problem of participation in the election procedure has been a reason for some concern. From this point of view the increased interest for education for active citizenship is understandable. In a way it is hard to believe that when the institutions of state governance are speaking of education for active citizenship anything else is in their mind, least of all the sincere wish to support education of their citizens which would really empower them to participate in decision making at all levels starting with the local community upwards.

It seems far more likely that in reality such education and learning is geared towards winning the votes or as an answer to the pressure of trade unions or workers' and political associations but all in order to secure one's own models of decision making against other models.

I would therefore urge the community of reflective and critical thinkers not to succumb to the prevailing rhetoric but to consider the options with reflection taking into the consideration what is needed from the participants' point of view. They are adults and have problems to solve. Helping them to solve those problems by equipping them with the necessary tools is a way to active citizenship, at least from my point of view. But to do this we have to listen to them, acknowledge their needs and build from there onwards.

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