

"LEARNING TO READ THE WORLD ..." HOLISTIC LEARNING OF DEMOCRACY WITH A FOCUS ON CROSSCULTURAL COMPETENCE

"APRENDIENDO A LEER EL MUNDO..." EL APRENDIZAJE HOLÍSTICO DE LA DEMOCRACIA ENFOCADO A LA COMPETENCIA INTERCULTURAL

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Resumen

Este artículo aborda los métodos y la teoría de la didáctica del aprendizaje democrático y señala la importancia de la reflexión en el proceso de aprendizaje para crear un aprendizaje sostenible en el área de la educación democrática y política. Existen innumerables métodos en esta área en muchas disciplinas diversas, por ejemplo, formación global e intercultural, educación sociopolítica y educación cívica, educación en derechos humanos y educación para la paz. Sin una reflexión sobre las circunstancias sociales y estructurales y sin la disposición a asumir la responsabilidad en la sociedad democrática, todos estos métodos no tienen una influencia real en los resultados del aprendizaje de los estudiantes. Este artículo da una visión general de las principales teorías y métodos y muestra cómo enseñar estas disciplinas de una manera sostenible. Da impulsos para reflexionar sobre los métodos de enseñanza y para encontrar un buen

equilibrio entre la teoría y los juegos de auto-conocimiento. El enfoque se centra en un programa de formación de más de 3 sesiones de media jornada que comprende preguntas para activar el pensamiento, metodología de autoconocimiento y conocimientos teóricos.

Palabras Clave

Aprendizaje de la Democracia. Aprendizaje intercultural. Comunicación intercultural.
Prejuicios. Estereotipos.

Abstract

This articles handles methods and theory of the didactics of democratic learning and points out the importance of reflection in the learning process to create sustainable learning in the area of democratic and political education. There are countless methods in this area in many diverse disciplines, for example global and intercultural training, socio-political education and civic education, human rights education and peace education. Without reflection on social and structural circumstances and without the readiness to take responsibility on democratic society, all these methods have no real influence on student's learning outcomes. This paper gives an overview of the main theories and methods and shows how to teach these disciplines in a sustainable way. It gives impulses to reflect on teaching methods and to find a good balance between theory and self-awareness-games. The focus lies on a training-program over 3 half-day-trainings/lesson which comprises impulse-questions, self-awareness-methods and theoretical insights.

Key Words

*Democracy learning. Crosscultural competences. Crosscultural communications.
Prejudices. Stereotypes.*

1. Introduction

Learning and teaching democracy in pedagogical training we are doubly challenged! On one hand the students should develop, reflect upon and internalize the basic principles of democracy through theoretical knowledge and didactical methods such as simulation games, group discussions and roleplaying games. On the other hand the question arises of how they can later practice democracy education with the students with whom they are entrusted. As an educator of future teachers I am often confronted with questions about effective methods and games that are applicable both in the classroom and in work with parents. One big concern of the students is figuring out the manner in which to interact with parents of different cultural backgrounds and how to handle intercultural conflicts. The unpopular answer to questions of this kind is: There is no patented remedy. There are countless methods of democratic learning in many diverse disciplines, for example global learning, intercultural learning, socio-political education and civic education, human rights education and peace education. Without self-reflection and reflection on social and structural circumstances- from personal social environment to global questions- and without the readiness to take responsibility as a citizen of democratic society, these many methods have no real influence.

2. Methodical scheme: Democracy training

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian liberation pedagogue, explained this in the 1960s as: Learning to read the world. By this he means the skill of interpreting the world and giving it meaning in order to orient yourself. Freire's method of consciousness raising draws on the life experiences of the people. People can make conscious decisions and therefore become creators of culture and society (trans., Novy, 2005, p. 4).

With this in mind, this class invites the students to deal with their own identities, their personal cultures, their prejudices and stereotypical ideas of society and their self-

awareness as citizens. These methods vary depending on the group dynamic and interests. Inherent to all of the methods is the prompting to critical analysis through one's own attitude and societal conditions. The ideas behind this are derived from the following policy document. In the handbook written by the Council for Cultural Co-operation (CDCC), titled "Democracy-Learning in Europe" it is recorded that a democracy:

[...] needs well-informed, conscientious, engaged and critical citizens--citizens who are aware that life in a community not only includes rights but also duties ... In modern democracies the danger that participation rights could be taken or damaged by the state is far less of a threat than the danger that the idea of participation as a duty would not be taken seriously by the citizens. (trans., Dürr & Ferreira-Martins & Spajić-Vrkaš, 2000, pp. 11-12)

As goals for democracy training three points are emphasized: 1. Teaching Knowledge, Skills and Competence through active participation; 2. Offering opportunities for dialogue and discourse, problem solving and consensus, communication and interaction and 3. Creating awareness for rights and duties, code of conduct and values and for ethical and moral questions within the society. This process of democracy education is comprised of cognitive, social and affective dimensions. The CDCC considers democracy-learning to be a lifelong process and confirms... "... that adult education is important as an instrument of personal and societal growth and significantly contributes to the prevention of intolerance and racism in an intolerant world" (trans., *ibid.*, 2000, p. 47).

Adult students bring more life experience with them than adolescent students. This means that their knowledge must sometimes be unlearned or relearned. Change is also an inherent part of learning. Something new is always added or something old is taken away. This process can be met with discomfort or even with pain when something familiar and trusted is forcefully abandoned. Learning means that earlier experiences of the learners are examined and newly interpreted, biographies are newly shaped, and all of this has an effect on which ways future situations are approached and experienced. These learning processes are referred to as "transformative or emancipatory learning".

3. The teaching process

The training "Multicultural Society" needs training-sessions about 3 to 4 hours. The blocked-out time offers the possibility to engage with methods of political theater, Augusto Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed," simulation games, discussions, etc. and also to allow enough time for reflection. Students will compile scientific articles about the theme in their own studies before the class period and these articles will then be factored into the discussion and reflection.

3.1. "Culture – Multiculture"

Most young adults experience the process of dealing with their own individuality, sense of belonging and culture as well as the process of dealing with these cultural concepts in general. The simulation game "Albatross Island" lends itself well as an introduction to the awareness of one's own "cultural goggles." The participants sit in a circle and are invited on an expedition to an island untouched by civilization. They should observe the happenings in the circle in order to report on them later. Two people (a colleague and I) play the native population of the island. Concepts like "the woman walks behind the man," "the man eats before the woman," and "the woman sits on the floor, while the man sits in a chair" seem to be derogatory to women through our European cultural goggles. The dissection of the story yields a different picture. The man must walk in front of the woman to protect her from danger; he must sample the food before she eats; he must sit on the chair because only the woman is permitted to be closer to mother earth, etc. The reflection and the analysis of why we interpreted these norms differently often offers many "Aha!" moments for the participants and allows them to be sensitive to not seeing "normalcy" of cultural practices as one norm but rather as one of many (for former information in English see <http://www.peacebag.org/V1/articles/toolkit-p5-visiting.html>).

How different we are as individuals within a cultural and age group is apparent through the activity "The Identity Cake." Every person draws a circle of approximately 15 cm diameter on his or her paper. This "cake" will be divided up into slices with multiple lines. Everyone writes his or her own name over the cake. As individuals the participants should write groups that they belong to in each slice of cake (i.e. student, daughter, soccer player,

animal lover, guitarist, Red Cross, jazz...). In the method description there are many possible categories listed. These categories are subsequently read aloud by the game leaders. Every person who can match a slice of his or her cake to the one of the categories read out loud stands up. The participants can also be given the task of comparing cakes with one another. It is unlikely that someone will find an identical cake in the group. This activity results firstly in a conscious analysis of one's own diverse identity, and secondly it makes clear within relatively homogenous groups (i.e. all Austrians) that even within a cultural circle everyone is different and heterogeneity is the "norm." Thirdly it allows for intercultural groups to realize that there are more similarities than differences among them, for example the "foreign" people are often "sisters, musicians, soccer players, etc." just like you. The reflections on these methods afterwards should be given plenty of time: Why are these methods suitable for intercultural learning and democracy learning? The question of possible application in schools is a part of further method reflection: From what age would these methods apply? Which modifications would be suitable for a younger age group? Would these methods apply at a parent evening? What is to be watched for during this activity? This form of reflection will become familiar to the students throughout the course of the seminar and they will take these methods of approach to reflective action with them into their own living environments and into the schools.

3.2. Prejudices and stereotypes

The second lection block deals with prejudices, stereotypes and inclusive versus culturalistic thinking and action. In addition to various methods, the explanation of concepts before and during the exercises is important: What does one mean by prejudice? What are stereotypes? Can we be prejudiceless? What purpose do prejudices serve? Is there anything positive about them? How can we deal with them constructively? These questions are discussed throughout the three hours, as well as of course those that are added by the students. Edwin Hoffman's article "The TOPOI-Model- a Heuristics for analysis of intercultural conversation situations and their implications for pedagogical work" explains the culturalistic versus inclusive approach as well as the principles of recognized equality and recognized diversity in regards to the tasks of pedagogues. Ideally the article would be read by the students before coming to class. As review you can lead a poster discussion with the

central terms: prejudice, stereotype, culturalistic thinking/action and principles of recognized equality/diversity. The participants pick out individual posters and consider what the terms mean in self-made groups. Excerpts from the text hang on the posters and can be reviewed. Questions and discussion points can be noted on the posters. After about 30 minutes there is a collective discussion about the posters and an attempt to answer the open questions. In my experience this well-known form of text work motivates the students who would otherwise have to work on texts on their own time.

A helpful method to reflect upon the stereotypes in one's own head is called "Apartment for rent." The participants are split into small groups of 4-5 people. The assignment goes like this: You live in a beautiful two-story house. After some renovations there are three residential units that can be rented out. The apartment is advertised and lots of candidates have applied. Pick three population groups that you would most like to have rent the units. Pick three groups that you would rather not have rent the units. Justify your choices. On the worksheet there are 13 different population groups described, for example a five person Roma family, very musical...; a single 72 year old woman, minimum pension; two brothers from Afghanistan... Important to note is that students often adhere to a certain political correctness in terms of culturalistic statements and consciously avoid naming societally formed prejudices. The following questions can create the personal distance that is necessary to discuss stereotypes and prejudices that are common in our society: What would our parents or grandparents argue? Are there collective prejudices against specific groups of people in our society? How are they passed on and spread? Here the role of the media and also of the family is brought to light.

3.3. Equal opportunity and participation

The following training-block focus on equal opportunity, participation and reflection of power relations. The literature on this topic is manifold. In regards to intercultural communication and democracy learning it is important that the students receive insight into which categories asymmetries of power can manifest in, i.e. gender, sexual orientation, social class, cultural belonging, language, religion, skin color, education level, disability. Power should not be confused in this case with control, but rather as advantages with regards to possibilities for action.

Power builds upon unequal availability of different types of resources, expressed in the sociological terminology of Bourdieu, on bigger material, social or cultural capital, and not uncommonly on all three types of capital together. Power can be founded on institutional status, on social relationships or on access to information. The people who have power are those who make an impact, those who determine the rules of the game. (Auernheimer, 2010, pp. 47-48)

Equality is not to be equated with equal opportunity. In our democratic state all residents are not similarly "powerful." A proven method to thematize unavailable equal opportunity is called "One Step further." The participants each receive a role-card with a short description of a person. They should empathize with this person through the help of questions such as: Where do you live? How was your childhood? Who are you afraid of? The players are asked to form a line. Different situations are read out loud. Every time that a person can answer a statement with "yes," they should take a big step forward. (A more accurate result is achieved when people just take one foot-length step forward, because shoe size of adults doesn't vary as much as the concept of "a big step.") Here are a few example statements: You have never experienced financial difficulty. You have a decent apartment with a TV, internet and a telephone. You have the feeling that your opinion about social and political questions matters and that your opinions are heard. After about 20 situations you have a still image in which a few people stand far forward, a larger group stands in the middle, and a few stand basically on the starting line (i.e. the illegal, HIV-positive prostitute from Moldova). The participants allow the picture to sink in. The reflection can begin with this image wherein the participants declare their roles and explain why they are in the position they are in. In the debrief the participants should discuss their sensitivities, the difficulties in empathizing with different roles, the questions and critique of this method, and their assessment of equal opportunity. I also always ask the prospective teachers which insights they can take from the method as teachers. (Former informations in english: <http://www.peacebag.org/V1/articles/toolkit-p5-step.html>).

4. Conclusion

The process of democracy learning also requires methods that strengthen self-confidence or serve as argumentation training. The confident yes- or no- statement, naming one's own strengths, leading someone and being lead ... you can find many such participatory methods in the Forum-Theatre-Literature, which I will not elaborate on in detail here. It is important to mention that our colleges should practice increased application of the opportunities for methodological diversity that are offered in open adult education. I emphasize these methods because learning without experiencing or thinking without feeling will always remain superficial. Augusto Boal formulates the following guiding principles for learning that should be taken into consideration in formal as well as informal educational processes:

Don't say what you think, show what you mean! Organic learning is living and lively. It happens in good moods and many short breaks. The minimum definition of oppression is: Oppression rules in the places where monologue takes the place of dialogue. Reality consists of movement, sensation, feeling and thinking--all of this makes everything that I can experience concrete. (trans., cf. Fritz 2013, pp. 29)

It is also noted that any form of democracy learning requires a reflexive approach from the students. Paul Mecheril coins the concept "competence in being incompetent" in regards to intercultural competence. This idea also seems important in the diverse areas of democracy learning.

Competence in being incompetent refers to the double need that arises from circumstances wherein there are no prescriptive and "simple" professionally related action patterns: professional action is reliant on a basic reflexive relationship to one's own professional action in the ability to step into one's conditions and consequences. (trans., Mecheril, 2013, p. 25)

We are all challenged as adult educators on all different levels to help people develop the competence and skills of a democratic citizen. The political and legal dimension, the social dimension, the cultural dimension and the economic dimension should all be developed through theoretical content, reflection and societal analysis. It is valid to support the following basic competencies of our students: to be critically skilled and to think based on arguments, to be creative and productive, to name problems and solve them, to evaluate and assess, to apply knowledge and to employ ethical considerations. Through the learning and teaching process you will begin to notice which methods and questions fit best with which groups. Do specific questions arise out of the first block of the course? Is the group introverted and difficult to bring into discussion? Which methods or theoretical approaches are logical next steps for this group? What can I learn from the participants of this group? All of these questions make teaching and educational work even more interesting. According to Paulo Freire adult educators can be "teacher-students" and our students "student-teachers." The first step of democracy teaching is sharing the responsibility of learning and teaching with the course participants and with students of all ages.

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