Trends and Challenges of Citizenship Education for Adults - A German Perspective

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Abstract

The paper presents active citizenship as the main goal of citizenship education. It stresses the interdependence of democracy and active citizenship. It points out that active citizenship needs to be understood as a global concept, defined as participation in civil society, in the community or in political life on the basis of mutual respect and non-violence, and in accordance with human rights and democracy. The paper is based on the assumption that active citizenship in its full sense can only be achieved in adulthood, and that people need to learn how to be active citizens. While active citizenship is listed among the main objectives of the European Union, its development faces several challenges: (1) the formation of active citizens is dependent on economic and social preconditions; (2) the formation of active citizens is challenged by certain phenomena and developments in the digital age of "post-truth" and fake news; (3) the formation of active citizens depends on didactical settings that meet the learning needs of people. These challenges are discussed with respect to Germany and the European Union.

Keywords

active citizenship, adult education, citizenship education, democracy, Germany.

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Citizenship education has been important in Germany for a long time, at least since the end of the Second World War and the downfall of National Socialism. Establishing a democratic government and democratic elections is not enough for establishing a democratic society, formed and filled by the lives of people who are committed democrats. Democracy, as the American educator and philosopher John Dewey already wrote in 1916, "is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey [1916] 1966, p. 87). Therefore, a democratic society depends on having as many citizens as possible who are able and willing to make informed and competent judgments, to participate in decisions concerning society, and to take part in responsibly shaping society while living together. It is not self-evident that the people in a society are informed, competent, active citizens, and citizens who hold democracy close to their hearts and who are willing to defend democracy against its foes; they need to be educated for that. This is the most important goal of citizenship education: enabling and enhancing what is called "active citizenship" – a concept which is defined as "participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy" (Hoskins 2006, p. 4). Please note that it is not activity in society *as such* which is important for this definition, but an activity which is based on a set of indispensable values for a democracy: Active citizens take part in civil society, community or political life on the basis of mutual respect, non-violence, and in accordance with human rights and democracy. In the interdependent world of today, it is not enough to describe active citizenship as being directed only to a certain nation or a certain state. Rather, as the example of climate change perfectly illustrates, active citizenship needs to include global awareness and a global perspective. The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum distinguishes three abilities needed for this kind of "global citizenship": (1) "the Socratic ability to criticize one's own traditions and to carry on an argument on terms of mutual respect for reason; (2) the ability to think as a citizen of the whole world, not just some local region or group; and (3) the 'narrative imagination', the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in the position of someone very different from oneself" (Nussbaum 2002, p. 289). These abilities needed for *global* active citizenship are certainly exacting, but nevertheless they seem to be necessary for democratic development in the world.

The European Union – of which Germany is a member state – has been including the idea of active citizenship among its main objectives; it has done so at least since the launching of the so-called Lisbon Strategy in the year 2000, which strategy is

reflected in the current "Europe 2020" strategy. Moreover, the EU is seeing adult learning as a key to enhancing active citizenship. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the European Union considers adult education to be absolutely necessary for reaching its main goals, which include active citizenship (cf. e.g. Council of the European Union 2011, p. 1) along with equity and social cohesion. Two thoughts guide this assumption: (1) the thought that active citizenship in its full sense can only be reached in adulthood, and (2) the thought (already mentioned) that people need to learn how to be active citizens.

However, the competences and attitudes needed for developing and practicing active citizenship cannot be taught as easily as vocabulary or multiplication tables. There seem to be major obstacles to the development of active citizenship. I would like to distinguish three categories of obstacles all of which need to be overcome – at least to a certain extent:

First, empirical data indicate that the formation of active citizens is dependent on economic and social preconditions.

Second, the formation of active citizens is challenged by certain phenomena and developments in the digital age of "post-truth" and fake news.

Third, the formation of active citizens depends on didactical settings that meet the learning needs of people.

Let me say a few more words about each category.

The first category of obstacles for the development of active citizenship: *The formation of active citizens is dependent on economic and social preconditions.*

In the year 2015, the European Union conducted a survey among the members of its adult population, asking: "Are you an active citizen?" The question was directed at the self-image that people have with respect to active citizenship; the results, therefore, do not reflect the amount of objective active citizenship (which could hardly be measured on a large scale anyway) but what people think is their standing in active citizenship. The concept of active citizenship employed in the survey was a restricted one, and perhaps also a vague one, because an active citizen was understood to be nothing more than a citizen "that had attended meetings, signed petitions, or otherwise participated in activities related to political groups, associations or parties" (European Commission 2017). Note that the term "active citizenship" did not comprise all the other attitudes and types of engagement for democracy and civil society that were mentioned here before.

Only 11.9 percent of the adult population in the EU, and 13.9 percent of the adult population in Germany, answered that they were active citizens in the sense of that

concept (cf. ibid.). This rather sobering result of the EU survey may indicate that the concept of active citizenship employed in the survey was too restricted and too vague. Still, the result suggests that active citizenship, in a very traditional sense at least, does not seem to be an attractive idea, to be integrated in one's own lifestyle, for the majority of EU citizens and German citizens. The evaluation of the survey also showed that people with a higher level of education were more active than people with lower educational levels; the higher the level of education, the greater the amount of active citizenship. In addition, people with a higher income were more active than people who belonged to lower income groups (cf. ibid.). These results concerning active citizenship are mirrored by data on participation in adult and continuing education, for example, by the data of the Adult Education Survey, a survey which is carried out every two years in EU states and which is the most prominent survey on adult education in Germany. According to the Adult Education Survey, people with higher educational levels and people with good fulltime jobs participate much more often in adult and continuing education activities on a voluntary base than do people with lower educational levels and people with less qualified jobs or part-time jobs (cf. BMBF 2017, pp. 24ff).

Other studies support these findings. For example: the study "Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship (EduMAP)," which is currently carried out by several European universities and research institutions and which is funded by the European Union. This study confirms that the so-called "vulnerability" of certain groups makes members of those groups less likely to be active citizens. People are considered "vulnerable" if they belong to a disadvantaged group in society, or to a group with limited opportunities, for example, people with poor literacy or people without a job. Vulnerability, therefore, goes along with tendencies of exclusion, discrimination, or marginalization (cf. Hyytiä 2017): "People's social inclusion or exclusion shape or limit their societal participation" (ibid.). This means: Persons who feel powerless in the social and political system are not likely to become active citizens; these persons are not likely to commit themselves to democracy; on the contrary, these persons are in danger to become indifferent or even hostile to democracy and the existing political system.

The second category of obstacles for the development of active citizenship: *The formation of active citizens is challenged by certain phenomena and developments in the digital age of "post-truth" and fake news.*

While it is true that the sphere of citizenship has been widened by digitalization and increasing internationalization (cf. e.g. Field/Schemmann 2017), this development proves to be Janus-faced. On the one hand, the possibilities of communication and participation

have very much increased. The new technologies allow people to learn about political matters and to become involved in society and politics in manners and to extents which were heretofore unknown. Examples are open lectures, webinars, online-petitions, or simply the possibility to share political information within a very short time. On the other hand, however, the internet, with all its possibilities, has at the same time become the main source of political *disinformation* and hidden propaganda. Whether information is true or false, especially within the social media, has become hard to decide in more and more cases. This is true even for institutions of the state, and all the more for private individuals. In Germany, we just had a heated discussion concerning the president of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which is the German inland intelligence service. This is the context: At the end of August 2018, in the German town of Chemnitz, supposedly two foreign Asylum seekers killed a German. What followed were demonstrations, which included many right-wing nationalists, who acted violently. In this connection, a video circulated in the social media, displaying right-wing violent people running after foreigners, apparently trying to attack them. The president of the intelligence service, after two days, declared that his office had no certified information on whether this video was real or fake, on whether a hunting of foreigners by a right-wing mob had actually taken place or not, and he even declared that he had good reasons to doubt the authenticity of the video. At the same time, reports about violent incidents and Nazi greetings were disseminated by all the media, and the result was that many politicians, from several parties, demanded that the president of the intelligence service resign: he was considered to be a hidden supporter of violent incidents committed by right-wing extremists. Eventually, he was removed from his office.

We know that false information, or half-true information, is disseminated in our time every day by real people and by automatic algorithms, so-called social bots, and by what can be regarded as veritable factories for the production of false news, manipulating "likes" and "artificially" increasing the number of followers of certain accounts. When we reflect on what these developments mean for active citizenship, we certainly must agree that becoming politically involved in society on the basis of false or half-true information is not what stabilizes democracy, quite on the contrary (cf. Crouch 2008). We cannot afford being the puppets of manipulated information streams.

These developments are aggravated by the fact that the social media have become the only source of information for more and more people, people who have become used to reading nothing else than short messages in easy language, and by the fact that the

possibility of so-called personalized news prevents people from informing themselves in a wide-ranging and balanced way. The danger that the political judgement of an ever increasing number of people is affected by one-sided and abridged information, lacking sufficient complexity, is omnipresent and overwhelming.

Active citizenship in a democracy needs truly informed people, not victims of fake news.

The third category of obstacles for the development of active citizenship: *The formation of active citizens depends on didactical settings that meet the learning needs of people.*

In Germany, we have for a long time been confronted with the phenomenon that, in adult education, lectures and organized courses on politics – lectures and courses which are done in the traditional way – do not attract many people, and among those who do come to these lectures and courses, very few are from disadvantaged groups. But at the same time, democracy needs people who are informed and committed to the greatest extent possible, people of all ages, of all educational levels, and of all social groups. Some authors in Germany, when writing about the lack of interest for political questions in the school sector, argue that this lack of interest may be due to an imbalance in educational efforts, which stress the clarification and discussion of topical political issues and neglect the developing of a basic general responsibility for democracy (cf. Sander 2011, p. 150). I doubt that this diagnosis is accurate for the school sector, and all the more I doubt that it is accurate for adult education. Rather, adult education, which is based on the principle of voluntariness, must try to win people – as many people as possible, in competition with the social media – by means of new and attractive didactical settings. We have known for long that acquiring and stabilizing the knowledge and the attitudes needed for active citizenship depend on stimulation, encouragement, cultivation, challenge, and examples of good practice (cf. Friedenthal-Haase 2005, p. 267). In this direction, in the last years, quite a few educational initiatives have emerged in Germany. First, there are initiatives specifically directed at several groups of disadvantaged people, for example, adults with low reading skills. The aim is to give them the means which will enable them to participate in society. In a sense, these initiatives seek to achieve the fulfillment of the preconditions for active citizenship. Second, the American approach of Service Learning, which combines "theoretical" learning with concrete civic activity, is in the process of being adopted in Germany. Third, there are other innovative initiatives for enhancing active citizenship in Germany, which I would characterize as being, on the whole,

low-threshold, connected to people's everyday lives and to the concrete problems of their everyday lives; which are dialogical and action-oriented, partly combining learning with civic engagement, too. Let me give you two examples of such initiatives. The first initiative is argumentation training, in order to deal with so-called "bar room slogans," the bumper-sticker black-and-white rightwing stereotypes, which are quick to identify a scapegoats for each and every social problem (cf. Hufer 2000; Hufer 2006). The argumentation training, developed about 15 years ago, addresses the real experiences of participants, experiences where they felt "speechless" when being confronted with all too easy solutions for global or national problems. They learn how to react to stereotypical assertions and to hate talk, by being given information and by being trained in possible responses. This training has proved to be very successful and attractive. Its range of application has been widened to include the proper response to stereotypes about the nature of politics itself and to the stereotypical (bad) image of politicians. The second example of an innovative didactical approach which I would like to tell you about is an initiative called "village talk." This initiative has been developed recently, among others, at my chair at Augsburg University. The starting point is the observation that "we need to talk" with one another; we need to work on and correct communication faults, occurring between different people who live together in one community but do not know anything about each other; we need to listen to each other and to argue with each other without hate; we need to experience that it is possible to contribute to shaping our community politically. The initiative "village talk" brings together people in a community and stresses their relations and emotions. The first step is to talk about common problems in a community, the second step is to talk with other people about what their values are. People often learn that they share values with other people, a fact which was unknown to them before, and they learn to accept dissent and conflict – by trying to understand the motives and arguments of other people. "Village talk" brings together people who, without the initiative, wouldn't have met and talked with one another about specific problems in their community. In some cases, new initiatives for working on those problems have been created as a result of the "village talks." Talking leads to concrete action, and action in this context means collaboration with other people of the community. A new sense of commonality arises, of communion in the community, a new sense of a "we" is built, beyond traditional structures. Democracy is strengthened by open common action, in which every responsible individual shares (cf. Wenzel/Boeser-Schnebel 2018, p. 4).

For all the initiatives mentioned it is essential that people get and hold on to the

feeling that they can make a difference, by committing themselves to the common good. This feeling, I firmly believe, is absolutely necessary for learning to be an active citizen.

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