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Challenges of Social Science Literacy – Editorial

Since international tests compare the performance of students in different subjects, the issue of literacy in the social science subject is becoming more pressing. The successes and failures in international tests influence the national education policies considerably. First, the inclusion of subjects in international comparisons has consequences for their importance. Second, the race in the Olympics of education leads to an increasing focus on the output of educational processes, also measured in the central exams. Social Sciences can refuse to take part in the national comparison studies with the price of losing much more importance; they can participate with the danger of undermining their goals. This raises a lot of questions: What competences students need in this social world to reason about it and to act responsibly? What is the foundation of concepts from social science students need for guidance and understanding their place and role as an individual in society? The social science disciplines, as sociology, political science and economics in a narrow sense, history, law and geography in a broader sense, supported by philosophy, pedagogy and psychology are able to select them for educational purposes or determine such educational aims. This Journal wants to resume and discuss competences and core concepts for political and economic teaching and learning as Social Science Literacy". Contributions in this issue do not only discuss and recommend competences and core concepts from a domain specific political or economic point of view, but also from an interdisciplinary or psychological point of view. They analyse preconditions and interdependencies as well as obstacles and problems of development and diagnosis core concepts and competences of Social Science Literacy.

Keywords:

Social Science literacy, competence, core concepts, political literacy, economic literacy

The definition of key competences and key concepts represent a particular challenge especially for the social sciences. As a topic social sciences are not well anchored in school systems, but are spread over a wide number of subjects and school activities. From 1st to 4th class the first perspectives on the social, economic and political world are introduced. Social, economic and political learning between 5th and 9th or 10th grade exists in schools compulsory or elective in different proportions of hours and different grades. It can be a subject of its own or separated in different subjects or combined together with history, geography and law. It exists in a lot of different combinations as politics/sociology, politics/history, politics/economics, economics/geography or economics/law. In 10th to 12th grade it is partly as social science than politics and economics or taught separately as sociology, politics, economics or business.

Besides this curricular situation the challenge for social science education would also occur because of the subject itself independent of its anchoring or organization. The social, economic and political challenges of the world are not only complex and interdependent, but they also change dynamically. There are key future challenges for which in social sciences and in social groups different and opposing interpretations and solutions are available, whereas also national cultures and institutions differ. The school social sciences – in its integrated or separated form of organization – can also be misused for producing only acceptance of social, economic and political order, even

if they are problematic, or to create the conditions for certain political or economically desirable solutions. The school social sciences can just as easily be misunderstood as miniature academic social sciences reproducing its highly specialized knowledge interests and perspectives without asking for the meaning of and significance to the learner.

As almost any international survey of student knowledge refers to literacy standards for teaching and learning, social sciences tend more and more to define its own sets of concepts, competences and literacy standards. This happens against the background that as a knowledge domain the social sciences are characterized as loosely structured, with competence often based on the performance of fewer heuristic procedures than in the well structured domains (like e.g. the "hard" sciences). Given the curricular diffusion and the requirements for standardization, the different didactics in the social sciences – e.g. the didactics of political or economic education in Germany – currently are trying to characterize their specific domain specific key concepts and competences in contrast to each other, finally allowing testing performance with the simplest possible quantitative measurement. Although this communication process is essential for professionalization and importance of the subject in order to reduce arbitrariness of subjective teacher opinion, curricula or examination constructors and textbook producer, a lot of problems are connected with this process. One problem occurs by simplification of complex challenges, the other by reducing dynamics by reproduction of unilateral recognition of the specialized ways of relating science. Other problems arise as the definition of concepts and competences cur-



rently can hardly be based on the empirically derived evidence, to which extent learners' understanding is age-appropriate or over- or under-challenged. It is also not possible just to transmit scientific concepts to the learner without regarding their perspectives on contemporary economic and political realities, without looking at their preconceptions, specific socialization effects and belief systems that affect student attitudes and the outcomes of social science educational activities.

Seen the intense proliferation of definitions of literacy as well as of subsequent approaches to teaching and learning, this new emerging field of scientific needs inquiry as well as debate in social science. The domain lacks a coherent set of core concepts because the (academic) reference domains like political science, economics and sociology fail to provide agreed upon basics that are interdisciplinary enough to feed a common knowledge base for teaching and learning. The discussion is urgently necessary what core competences should be fostered in the social sciences, what relevant scientific concepts for guidance and analysis, understanding and explanation, judging and decision, acting and designing in the social, political and economic world are useful. On the one side seen the differences between political and economic education it is crucial to define the different competences and concepts separated, but on the other side seen the requirements of composed and integrated subjects as well as the interdependencies of the social, economic and political order it is an urgent task to look for differences and similarities as well in the acquired competences but also with regard to the use of concepts, models, values and ideologies. Common didactic approaches could allow the combination of perspectives without ignorance of the differences and without dominance from one didactic approach upon the other.

Necessary as well is the discussion and development of instruments that can be used to diagnose and test without undermining the key objectives of the subject. So for example a gap can occur, when on the one side analytical, judging and evaluating perspectives are needed, while the measurement of concepts leads more to factual knowledge. The goals of social science education are ambitious: consumers and producers, employees and employers, members of groups in society and citizens of the nation and the world, who are able to act as well as change the rules, but also to judge and evaluate in self-determined, enlightened, responsible, critical but also constructive way should be fostered by social science literacy. But how can this be diagnosed and tested?

This Journal aims at resuming and discussing the state of the discipline(s) on the topic of "Social Science Literacy: In Search of Competences and Core Concepts for Political and Economic Teaching and Learn-

ing". With this requirement the journal will start with this issue and continue with Social Science Literacy II in 2011. The contributions in this issue discuss the need of basic competences and basic concepts and recommends special competences and special basic concepts for social science literacy. They discuss and analyse their preconditions, development, obstacles and problems, arguing from a domain specific political or economic point of view or from an interdisciplinary or psychological point of view.

JAN LÖFSTRÖM, ARJA VIRTA and MARKO VAN DEN BERG lead directly into the heart of the problem and the necessity of searching core concepts and competences for social science literacy. With their question "Who actually sets the criteria for social studies literacy" they point to the necessity of an agreement about adequate core concepts and curricula for social science literacy. By a case study of the situation in Finland they present the gap between vague criteria in a national core curriculum and central exams that can be interpreted by the constructors of national exams, which could be little relativized by teachers and students, who are in charge of assessment. The Finnish case study is also interesting, because Finnish students assess with high knowledge but with low interest for political activity. Presenting the development and verified with empirical evidence the contribution gives plausible hypothesis to how such a gap can appear and gives some recommendation of what kind of concepts as intellectual tools should be at hand to support the development of competences as an analytic gaze, critical reasoning and preparation for actual participation. The problems Löfström, Virta and Van den Berg point at, do not only occur if the interpretation power is handed over to the constructors of exams, but also to the constructors of international comparison tests. They show the necessity to search and discuss core concepts and core competences for social science literacy, but also adequate instruments, which are able to diagnose and test those abilities without leaving crucial competencies behind.

LILIANA MAGGIONI, EMILY FOX and PATRICIA A. ALEXANDER bridge the gap between epistemology debate and competences in the social studies domain. With a psychological point of view epistemological beliefs function as a path leading to competence as those beliefs influence comprehension and understanding as well as interpretation and evaluation of arguments. In their study "The Epistemic Dimension of Competence in the Social Sciences" Maggioni, Fox and Alexander present picturesque results of students' problems of understanding. They found out that students are constantly changing their epistemological beliefs without being conscious of it, when they try to collect plausible facts by ignoring conflicting elements tend-



ing to simplify their thinking process. If the teaching process concentrates on textbooks as the only truth, if the way of thinking and evaluating has not been cleared up, whereas the task regarding multiple perspectives is only used to found self assumptions with factual information by ignoring others this fact can also be a result of the way of teaching. The authors conclude that competences and concepts should be brought into a broader horizon of the entire process of building knowledge in the disciplines, so that students are able to see that human knowledge is restricted as well as possible. Only if the epistemological beliefs are taken into account, the teaching can reduce arbitrariness, meaningless formalities and overcomes creating only mechanical skills or sterile bits of information.

In an extremely changing world with a high grade of uncertainty with opposing solutions the question to find determined concepts seems to be a dubious enterprise. JEAN SIMONNEAUX and ALAIN LEGARDEZ present with the example of globalization the difficulties to find remaining concepts in ages of uncertainty especially for social science teachers, when controversial discussions in the real world show a lot different interpretations. As an important competence of social science literacy they suggest the empowering of students to judge controversial topics of socially acute questions. These questions building upon human situation without being discipline-centred make teaching a delicate task between the extremes of heating or playing down, combined with the important task to interpret the current affairs as well as the scientific debate. At the example of globalization Simonneaux and Legardez present the variety of meanings of the term depending on economic, social or political kind of view. Through examining economics, history, geography, politics and sociology as different schools of thought as well as the extreme positions of ideologies and different kind of social practices the authors present a way to find out relevant concepts in social acute questions, to orientate within ideologies and to differ between social practices as a means for standardizing and differentiation in interdisciplinary social science literacy. Those concepts, ideologies and practices should not be used as aims of teaching, but as means for a better understanding of the world. Besides the epistemologies of positivism/Scientism and utilitarianism they suggest critical realism as inevitably necessary in social science education. Although epistemologies have different connections with didactic strategies, a critical strategy compared with others and critical attitude can help to hide before simplifying solutions. With this way of thinking the authors help with analytic tools for conscious didactic decisions without defining narrow overlasting concepts in a world of uncertainty and controversies, which is to

be examined by disciplines but could not to be split up into them.

BERND REMMELE draws our attention to a special core concept in economics education in order to present the problems of modelling competences according to relating scientific concepts and the age-specific abilities to handle complexity. In his contribution “Two peculiarities of economic education” he explains at the example of the market that the comprehension of this fundamental concept draws a lot of problems for understanding and comprehension. Experiencing a market as a place of economic interaction within social embeddedness could thwart the understanding of the concept market in its function of coordination individual actions. Those problems are the consequence of the characteristics of the market as unintended systemic effects and unintuitive feedback processes in a temporal dimension. Remmele recommends the necessity to enfold a “system competence” with systemic reasoning about cumulative or aggregated effects instead of looking at single action, personification, directional causes and faults. In contrary to typical didactical strategies the author suggests in regard to Vygotsky to teach the market system from an abstract scientific perspective, willingly distancing from intuitive concepts, thinking about top-down replacement of concepts, confronting students with other metaphors as rules of reflections or let them experience systemic effects in simulation games. With this example and the necessary competences it also seem to be clear that there is a long way to measure those competences with a quantitative approach and it also seem to be prematured to define concrete competence models for testing, when we are not in charge of empirical diagnosis of age specific requirements.

With the Core concept „political compass“ ANDREAS PETRIK proposes to fill the “Ideology gap in Civic Education”. Regarding the crucial role of individual value orientation for political judgement abilities to Petrik such a compass of values, ideologies and forms of social order is urgently needed for a political literacy to help political orientation, judgement, stating and participating with one’s own point of view. With this contribution he wants to set a counterpoint against the value neutral mainstream fostering of only objective thinking and analytic skills. Based on the model of Herbert Kitschelt and examining alternative cleavage models Petrik creates a differentiated political compass with four ideal-typical forms of democracy and their non-democratic extremes between the two axis of a distributive or economic cleavage and a communitarian or social-cultural cleavage referring to ultimate political values. Upon this construction empirical evidence of Kitschelt’s socio-demographic approach and the social milieu Approach of the European and



World Value Surveys is placed in order to find out the connections between social milieus and the political value orientation. At least Petrik demonstrates ways of teaching by using the political compass to sharpen student's political orientation. In order to give students a chance to locate their preferences he suggests questionnaires of compasses with highly controversial issues and his "Found-a-Village-Project" confronting students with conflicts to debate basic political issues, orientate in values and ideologies and judge current politics.

Searching for core competences needs to ask if there are competences that are more important as others and how competences influence each other. From a psychological point of view FRANK REICHERT questions whether the objective political knowledge, the political reasoning or rather the subjective political competences are more important to influence different types of political participation from electoral and conventional over unconventional up to non-normative activities, and how they mediate with each other. With his study of 76 19 to 36-year-old university students, who studied psychology, he finds out that political structural knowledge might be explaining electoral participation. His results show that political knowledge loses its explanation power, since it seems to be mediated by subjective competence, whereas political participation in school shows impacts on feeling competent and the willingness to participate. Political reasoning and analysis also are proven crucial for participation. Reichert detects mediation of political knowledge via subjective politi-

cal competence, whereas political knowledge seems to be more necessary for voting; subjective political competence seems to influence non electoral political activities. During individual development subjective and objective political competencies seem to overlap more and more in their influence on participation. The conclusion is obvious: If various kinds of political competence and knowledge have more or less diverse effects on various forms of political action and if school will help to develop competently active and reflective citizen, it is necessary to foster political knowledge as well as the ability of political analysing and reasoning and it is crucial to give the chance for engagement.

With this issue about Social Science Literacy we can publish one of the central topics at social science education right at the end of the 10th anniversary of JSSE. Sincere thanks are given to

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