



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

## **Participation Now! Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change**

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### **Egyptians in transition: the role of emotions in civic education programs**

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Egypt is currently undergoing a deep transition at all levels of society: from the governmental institutions to the marginalized area, all are trying to find their place in the new Egypt or are being pulled into the debate. Between desire of gain, wishes for a brighter future and scepticism, the country and especially its people are going through a roller coaster of emotions. What next? What are the priorities? Finding a new national identity between religious, military and civil or working on socio-economic development?

Two years after the initial uprisings, after witnessing the national power struggle many have lost faith in institutions, much hope has left the streets of Egypt, many youth and marginalized communities with a precarious situation and no path for opportunities are stranded in the process. The current unprecedented violence reflects this despair, lack of trust and hope. As civil society workers, academics and professionals we may not ignore this and more than ever have to acknowledge these emotions to move forward and engage in authentic dialogues. The peace of a crucially strategic country counting 90 million souls is at risk.

Emotions are often shunned from any scientific methodology even in human sciences. Psychology is a discipline barely over a hundred years and only recently have we seen the birth of fields such as community psychology, which dare to address emotions and their impact in societal development. This short essay addresses the importance and urgency to integrate the role of emotions in education, especially in civic and human rights education in marginalized areas. Before we move forward it is important to note two valid reasons why emotions have been sidelined:

- 1) the difficulty to identify and measure them
- 2) its historical use in the promotion of disputable regimes. Those must be noted but not taken as insurmountable obstacles.

It is equally relevant to note the main challenges: modern education emphasizes on the crucial importance to increase critical and scientific thinking. Inserting emotions in this equation can be a challenging exercise because of their liquid nature. Thus, what role can emotions play in civic education and at what level of the process. It is commonly understood that the ultimate indicator for the success of a civic education program is the application of its concepts by the learners in their everyday life. Therefore, all milestones of the program must work towards this goal. This paper argues that two key areas must practice empathy, as they directly affect the desired result: the development of the program's plan of action/strategy and the curriculum.



### Building trust with the community:

Typically as civic educators we can list why in the grand scheme of societal development civic education is crucial to insuring peace, democracy and human rights. However, none of these reasons explain to a single mother how she will be able to feed her children let alone send them to school, or to a young unemployed man how this will allow him to find a job, get a revenue and be able to get married. Yet, only finding these relevant reasons to them can truly get them to understand civic concepts and apply them in their lives.

Most informal settlements and marginalized communities in desperate need for civic education show a high amount of suspicion towards any external intervention and have a hard time perceiving how HR and CE can alleviate their status because of its not so evident impact on their precarious status, especially on the short term. According to the EHDR youth interests focus on the family by 97%, religion by 96%, work by 60%, friends by 47%, leisure by 14%, and finally, politics which ranks sixth and last in the order of key areas in youth's life by not more than 7%<sup>1</sup>.

Hence, when a program is planned two steps are to be undertaken seriously and at length:  
1) empathize with the community members by understanding their cultural, social, economical and political context and how this makes them feel, sets their priorities, affect their daily lives, etc...

2) Take the time to develop a relationship of trust with the community. Many programs come and go in addition to governmental institutions sustaining a climate of fear and suspicion towards the motivations of any 'outsiders'. 50% of organizations working on civic education declared receiving mixed reactions to their program by targeted groups. "The first day of each workshop, people are suspicious. They ask, 'Where do you get your money, who's funding you?' To be transparent, I do the first session in each workshop to explain how NGOs work, how we get our funding, and what is the relationship between us and the donors."<sup>2</sup>

A program not taking the time to build trust with the community including local officials and respected figures cannot have a sustainable impact but unfortunately rare are the donors who are willing to cover someone's salary for an extended period of time to accomplish the above and rare are the NGOs who are willing to risk a source of funding to defend this step or have independent funding allowing this flexibility. Post-uprising, the 'spur of the moment' effect reinforced the absence of this step on the assumption that the 'revolution' made it evident to all, but truly it didn't; suspicion is very much present in marginalized communities who are the first victims of the economic crisis.

A vivid example of this malpractice is a project, which took place in Upper Egypt, targeting illiterate women. The project found its participants slowly fizzling out. Confused as per the reasons for this high drop out, the NGO brought an expert consultant to address the issue other than directly dialoguing with the participants or simple practice empathy. After one day on the task, he informed the NGO that the shape and set up of the newly space did not allow the women to keep their infants with them. Needless to say this was precious time and funding which went away at the expense of the project's objectives simply because the management did not take the time to understand what are the critical aspects it must offer to

<sup>1</sup> Handoussa Heba. Egypt Human Development Report; United Nations Development Programme, and the Institute of National Planning. 2010 – No update after the uprisings of 2011 was conducted.

<sup>2</sup> Corbel Nelly, Pollok John. "Citizens in the Making: Civil Society and Civic Education in Egypt"; The John D. Gerhart Center for Civic Engagement and Philanthropy - The American University in Cairo 2012 p.19

retain its participants and create a suitable environment for them. A simple question would have allowed them to prevent this problem: “if I was an illiterate mother from Upper Egypt and wanted/had to attend classes, what would I need?”

The most dangerous aspect of not building authentic relationships and providing sustainability is in nourishing the disappointment, suspicion and lack of trust in civic work, pushing the population to more extreme solutions such as fundamentalism, anarchism or drug use which endemically leads to the growing disillusion about HR and citizenship making it harder for the next project to pick up.

#### Practicing empathy in defining curricular methodologies:

As established above we must first gain the trust through understanding the participants’ situation. This merely lays down the foundations for developing the program and finding the right approach to start teaching. When teaching, a new relationship needs to install itself between the learner and the educator. On the one hand the teacher must understand the feelings the learner may have towards the principles of civic education and on the other the learner must be brought in a journey of discovery in which s/he is engaged at each step of the way intellectually, practically and emotionally. Civic education involves a significant amount of self-discovery, which can bring discomfort, fear and trouble to the learner. As much as this is normal, the teacher must address it. In many cases of marginalized areas, common practices establishing normality goes against civic education principles and human rights. This often is hard to accept for the educator who tends to fight it rather than work with it, further alienating the learning process. Only by truly understanding the source not only societal but also emotional can the situation be reversed. Mentoring in these cases is essential.

Let us take the example of tolerance. Tolerance is a value, which involves accepting differences. When developing a program for tolerance education, the first question the curriculum developer and teacher should ask themselves is: what causes intolerance in essence and specifically in this given area? Interestingly enough when we look at the word intolerance in a medical way, we get a hint in understanding its mechanism. When someone is lactose intolerant, this person suffers from hypersensitivity to lactose. If we apply this logic to the role of emotions in civic education, we can get a hint that intolerance is due to an internal development preventing one to comprehend and be at peace with differences. This individual has been pre-disposed socially to be hypersensitive to certain differences. Therefore the next question should be how does it make them feel and why? Evidently, human interactions, perceptions and learning processes are not an exact science as medicine. Nonetheless, this logic provides us with a beginning to work with when developing strategies for civic education program implementations and curriculum development, especially in accepting the role of emotions from the learner and the educator/program developer sides.

The internal development leading to intolerance can be the result of a series of reasons both natural and societal. In many cases this can be linked to a lack of exposure to diversity, a comfort zone around homogeneity/conformity created by socializing agents and often an association created as ‘the other’ being a threat to the current situation or in some cases as a threat to be fought for religious elevation. In this paper, we will not enter the motivations in sustaining an intolerant environment as we are here to explore the role of emotions in the relationship between the learner and the educator, therefore assuming the educator is not seeking political gain or any form of power over the learner. Rather we focus on the learner’s internal understanding of tolerance and the causality for developing intolerance.



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Differences, envisioning the world from a different lens can create discomfort. After all, humans are creatures of habits, changing the lens will inevitably involve a change in these habits and require one to go out of their comfort zone. Often, thankfully not always, we as civic educators tend to behave as truth holders, therefore assuming that even though this lens swapping exercise is difficult, it is for the best and naturally one should focus on the benefit of the result. However, all the challenge resides in the process of changing the lens, the end result being merely a consequence of it. By allowing time to focus on the journey and accompanying the learner through the various emotions, the result will naturally be more sustainable and a true life-long changing experience. Not only will this impact the individual directly but s/he will act as a multiplier in the community, instilling true change.

#### *Moving forward to hope*

Egypt is undergoing an unprecedented transition, the 'revolution' by the people is failing to trickle down, no stakeholder engagement process is undertaken, debates revolve around issues that most Egyptians cannot relate to and national institutions fail to address their daily concerns. Civil society struggles to juggle between national actions and local needs. Therefore, it needs to urgently prioritize and donors agency must listen to their ordeals on the ground to define their strategies. Civic educators and civic education programs must give the necessary time to build a critical mass for true citizenship. Emotions are at play in this process. Courage and despair took people to the streets. Fear and exhaustion are bringing the country into more violence, but as long as some are fighting peacefully on the ground then hope is present and well alive. Hence, before these emotions turn into anger and aggression we must accompany Egypt into positive emotions, empathize with the local cultural understanding of societal organization and develop concrete tools for hope.