

European Conference  
**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:  
What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

14-16 November 2013  
The Hague, the Netherlands

**Input**

**Workshop 3**  
**Diversity of concepts of citizenship education in Europe:  
Is there a need for a common understanding?**

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**Chasing an illusion? The diversity of citizenship education  
practice in out-of-school education across Europe**

After decades of sharing best practices, harmonising policies and mainstreaming funding approaches, we are still confronted with an impressive number of definitions and understandings of citizenship, complemented by an equally impressive wealth of learning frameworks and educational approaches.

From critical to political citizenship education, organisations and associations as well as governments and institutions offer uncountable summer schools, training courses or learning journeys to the interested citizens. Why are we offering such a dazzling array of options? Are we yielding to despair, or is this a wanted feature? Are we chasing an illusion when we nonetheless seek to develop a common understanding of citizenship education?

**We currently are.** There are too many dilemmas across practices of citizenship education that are commonly hidden behind the curtains of to-be-welcomed diversity. To kick off discussions at the NECE Conference I picked five dilemmas to illustrate what needs to be tackled on the way to a common framework of which the following three most strongly resonated with the audience.

**First dilemma – definitions:** Despite numerous attempts over the years, the term that brings us together at conferences like this one, whether from the formal or non-formal spectrum of learning, **citizenship education** remains disputed. While we tend to agree on the importance of its existence there is no unanimously agreed definition of citizenship education. Two recent sample definitions showcase that:

**Education for democratic citizenship (1):** “Education for democratic citizenship” means education, training, awareness-raising, information, practices and activities which aim to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviour, to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society. *Source: Council of Europe (2010). Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.*

**Education for democratic citizenship (2):** “Education for democratic citizenship” (EDC) is a set of practices and activities developed as a bottom up approach, which seeks to help pupils, young people and adults participate actively, and responsibly in the decision-making processes in their communities. Participation is key to the promotion and strengthening of a democratic culture based on awareness and commitment to shared fundamental values, such as human rights and freedoms, equality of difference and the rule of law. It focuses on providing life-long opportunities for acquiring, applying and disseminating knowledge, values and skills linked to democratic principles and procedures in a broad range of formal and non-formal teaching and learning environments. *Source: Confusing conversations (2011). Education for democratic citizenship.*

None of these definitions are fully contradictory, but they focus on divergent elements of citizenship education – and in doing so, they habitually include disputed aspects: How many of us would agree, in the face of continued and consistent institutional programmes and projects, that e.g. education for democratic citizenship represents a bottom-up approach?

There is a second dimension to these definitions, namely the terminology in use across contexts as well as languages. What some call education for democratic citizenship, others refer to as citizenship education, some as political education for active citizenship and yet others as human rights education for democratic citizenship.

I am not arguing that we should do yet other attempts to force the emergence of a universally accepted definition – on the contrary: I am convinced such attempts would be futile right now. It would, however, be helpful to acknowledge - without disappointment or bitterness - that there currently are **no universally accepted definitions** for practically all terms we work with. While academics can usually rely on established procedures for dealing with such cacophonies of definitions and tend to see it as a standard feature of emerging fields of inquiry, practitioners have more trouble to acknowledge and embrace the diversity of existing definitions and deal with the resulting ambiguity.

But despite the initial hesitation of many practitioners, using an array of definitions is immensely useful in educational practice. It's easy for one to showcase that even famous philosophers have trouble defining citizenship: “The peaceful struggle through a public sphere which is dialogical” by Jürgen Habermas earns you an impressive variety of non-verbal expressions of confusion. More importantly, it helps to identify some of the underlying notions and concepts, such as human rights, human dignity, diversity, peace and rule of law, which are more widely shared than the citizenship education definitions that build on them. And finally it allows you to illustrate how and why some of these notions and concepts - and hence definitions that work with them - are disputed and disputable: How far does the rule of law carry in a dictatorship, for example, is a question most people of all ages in Europe can relate to, not the least in light of the widely reported recent events in the Ukraine.

**Second dilemma – concepts:** In much of our current educational practice, I have argued for the sake of debate at the NECE Conference, we are using buzzwords instead of concepts. While a detailed analysis would certainly result in a more nuanced picture than the stark contrast painted in my presentation, it is an increasingly recognisable and worrying trend.

In relation to citizenship education, the concept most frequently concerned is ‘multidimensional citizenship’, a notion we relentlessly use but ultimately fail to make understood, experienced and critiqued. Even when we do run sessions that explore the multiple layers and dimensions of citizenship - whether using a cube, an onion or a chair to illustrate the concept - we tend to stay in the feel-good-about-everything zone.

We do not confront the multi-dimensional constructions of citizenship consistently enough, with one of the more disgusting side effects, as Gavan Titley and others have demonstrated in their critique of intercultural learning, that it becomes possible to hide racist attitudes behind the façades of layered onions:

“The damage to intercultural education is that for several decades it has not paid sufficient attention to the parasitical reversals fostered within its core concepts and conceits (...): if intercultural education promotes cultural literacy, it runs into a problem when racist practice is culturally literate.” *Source: Titley, Gavan (2013). Where do you stand, and where are we placed? Intercultural learning in an era of cultural hierarchy and post-democracy.*

How can you deconstruct an argument that the national layer of citizenship and identity is more important to an individual person, when you start from the notion that any mix of layers must be acceptable? We have trapped ourselves with a non-committal set of concepts, which are rooted in little more than nice rhetoric. The critical agency of learners to engage with the concepts we use, and to confront those who abuse them remains underdeveloped, and we create legions of young people who avoid challenging racist behaviour **because they don't know how.**

**Third dilemma – relevance:** More often than we care to admit, citizenship education in non-formal environments ‘preaches to the converted.’ We fail to reach out to those who are critical of democracy in more general terms as well as those who are critical of the current state of democracy and its institutions. We tend to treat every project and programme as a solution to the perceived lack of information and to produce tons of flyers, brochures, websites and promotional material about parliaments, elections and democracy.

There is, even without going to the trouble and consulting research findings, no doubt that the problems leading to an increasing estrangement of young people and political institutions are multi-faceted. Information literacy of young people is at an all-time high, and given the resources at their disposal, is unlikely to decrease substantially any time soon. If we assume for a moment that enough information exists and is available in sufficiently varied formats, what does this suggest?

It implies a widening gap between the real-life forms of young people’s civic engagement and the non-formal practices of citizenship education. We should work with those young people who are active on the streets; from the Spanish *Juventud Sin Futuro* movement (<http://juventudsinfuturo.net>) to *We're not leaving!* in Ireland (<http://werenotleaving.com>) and help them to deal with their struggle – which has nothing to do with a lack of knowledge on where or how to engage, and has everything to do with current political elites that are not willing to listen. Today’s youth movements are engaged in a peaceful power-struggle, one we ought to support, not ignore.