

Democracy as Learning; some aspects on pedagogical practice and democratic competence

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Abstract

Within the context of a project concerned with how tools for assessing democratic competence in schools can be developed, we have also made a critical examination of three national evaluations in this area conducted during the 1990s by the National Agency for Education in Sweden. We point out that the concept of "democratic competence" in these evaluations has been treated as an individual quality, while intersubjective processes have been excluded. The same may be said about how democratic skills have been assessed in international assessments like the Civic Education Study. From both methodological and theoretical points of view, we argue in this paper that a theme as complex as democratic competence demands much more distinct ways of problematisation as well as variation in terms of methods.

Democratic competence, interpreted in its deliberative sense, may focus on the pedagogic practices in which these kinds of competences are supposed to be trained and developed. According to some results from a pilot study including pupils assessed through deliberative assessment criteria, and some experiences made by teachers in in-service training and student teachers using this assessment "tool", we try to identify criteria for what can be considered as an attitude of self-interest, or placing the group in the center or justice-grounded. In this study both pupils and teachers have done several self-evaluations or "meta reflections" around a model of analysis that aims to take into consideration various aspects of an "ideal democratic context" where all are allowed to participate, where all can participate and where all will participate in a communication in which all have the possibility to learn.

This perspective, related to Habermas's communicative theory, provides a methodological approach and an analytical framework that considers the impact from the contextual environment maintaining both the pedagogical practice and the democratic practice. We argue that more attention needs to be focused on the communicative actions that take place among groups of students, teachers in the organization of vocational education as well as in-service training. Most importantly, democracy as communicative or deliberative competence can be looked upon in terms of democracy as learning in a more qualified way.

A changing society and educational system

As an introduction, we want to turn the attention to that an understanding of a changing view upon democracy and education most likely has to be seen in the light of a larger political and economical situation in the society.

Firstly, the economical and social crises during the 1990's constitutes such a contextual background. It is possibly also relevant to talk about a moral crises due to different political affaires and scandals that are revealed more and more often (Lundqvist 1998, p 203). We see during the 1990's the consequences of a political and economical legitimacy crises for the public welfare sector. A line of neo-liberal ideas presents as an answer to this and a revolution of liberty of choice is produced by putting parts of the public sector under private ownership (Blomqvist & Rothstein 2000, p 161).

Secondly, the apprehension of a political proceeding crises is being stressed. The confidence in what the political system can deliver in terms of welfare is questioned more and more. This crises is now also defined as a crises for democratic values including opinions about a escalating lack of norms and moral in the society (Kymlicka 1998, p 107, Petersson 2000).

Thirdly, there are proceeding changes in the political administration. In the educational system this has been expressed mainly in an increased decentralization and a system that operates by objectconducting. This development emphasizes a need of a strong central responsibility for evaluation and control of efficiency. What appears though are difficulties to find adequate instruments in order to both control and conduct productivity and quality in the public sector (Petersson 1998, p 31, Alexandersson 1999, p 14).

The Swedish investigation about democracy (SOU 2000), also argues for a critical wiew upon what the political system can deliver in terms of welfare if you don't also include the importance of a local democracy when you discuss participation as a significant element. The importance of a moral ground for decision-making and a competence to communicate in order to solve common problems is described as the lifeblood of democracy (SOU 2000:1, p 34). Further, a need of common civic virtues like critical rationalism, solidarity and law-abidingness is pointed out. These virtues are looked upon as the base for a democracy more orientated towards deliberation. How this can be developed is regarded as a central question for Swedish democracy and society development.

The above described interlacing changes in the society can be seen as processes that in different ways have influenced and challenged the democracy.

The question is what consequences these changes brings out for the educational system, and especially in relation to evaluations what democratic competence is, should or could be.

Assessing democratic competence

In 2001, the University of Växjö, was asked by the National Agency of Education to participate in a project concerning how tools for assessing democratic competences in schools could be developed. As a part of the project, a critical examination was made of three national evaluations in this area during the 1990's, conducted by the National Agency of Education. Both similarities as well as differences were found in the way to evaluate democratic values and competences.

One remarkable thing is the view upon knowledge and how this effects the way to evaluate. Parts of the national evaluations of 1992 and 1995 are built upon the philosophy to "catch" what pupils in a written way can express about knowledge and values that are established in advance and from that evaluate democratic competences. This could be called an essential view upon knowledge and the way to evaluate this is to *sum up* the outcome.

In the national evaluation of 1998 the direction is more pointed out towards an ambition to develop democratic competences at the same time as they are assessed. The view upon knowledge appears more as something being constructed and the way to evaluate is more contextual and emotional. This could be described as a displacement from focusing on the ethical, in the sense what is good for the individual, to what morally can be right in a societal wider context.

The way to evaluate, however, doesn't pay attention to that this understanding is created in a social context, in the relation between individuals. Instead the evaluations tend to function as instruments aimed to measure quantity rather than quality. It is more a matter of measuring knowledge about the democratic system than the competence to participate

in and vitalizing this system. As a contrast to this it can be mentioned that democracy in schools often is expressed in terms of attitudes where critical reflection, dialogue and mutual respect are central elements. These elements are as well central in a democratic, pedagogical practice when we refer to deliberation. Lately the concept deliberation also has appeared when the relation between democracy and education is being discussed by the National Agency of Education.

Towards a democratic, pedagogical practice in terms of deliberation

The concept deliberation has been and is used in political and sociophilosophical sciences (Habermas, Elster, Gutmann & Thompson etc). The National Encyclopedia defines the meaning of deliberation as comparable with the meaning of consideration or consultation with somebody on something. In a political meaning it could also be related with discussion or debate. A question, in the sense of deliberation, is defined as something you could ask about your own way of acting. Here deliberation is close to concepts like discussion, reflection and to problemize.

Deliberation though, should be looked upon as more general, also including a social exchange of reasons and arguments. The potential of deliberation is mainly the ability to create a basis for collective understanding, making decisions better and a line of effects which are considered to strengthen the democratic legitimacy as well as the moral learning. In this sense it is as well a collective as an individual learning process of the ability to, for example, compare and balance different arguments against each other (Fearon, 1998, p 62). The use of deliberation in an educational context could therefore be described as a relation between democracy, knowledge and learning (Fritzell, 2003).

Criteria for pedagogic deliberation

In accordance to the above reasons we further discuss the fact that pedagogical deliberation could be looked upon as a qualified, cultivating discussion. But what more specific criteria could we use to estimate how the discussion turns out? What aspects should be observed when we value if qualities of pedagogical deliberation take place in a discussion?

In order to answer those questions we need to take a look on how a discussion in terms of pedagogic deliberation could be described. In an ideal discussion, as many aspects of a question as possible, are being considered. All have the right to express their meaning, raise new questions and suggestions on how to move forward. The ability to see things from different perspectives and to try to understand others arguments is important as well as the ability to perceive and remain open and constructive to different interests. Other persons, present or not present, are respected by letting their voice be heard and by taking their opinions in consideration. The integrity of all participants is regarded by having the question of fact in the center of the discussion. All are expected to express their true views upon the matter and to establish connections to what others express. A very important aspect of this type of discussion is the listening; to listen actively to what the other person really is trying to say and to demand the same in the growing exchange of views.

Fritzell (2003, p 29) points out criteria for pedagogic deliberation in a qualified discussion. In an ideal situation “all” have voice, “all” are allowed, are able to and want to participate and finally, “all” can learn.

Analysis schedule for pedagogic deliberation

The following schedule tries to visualize the relationship between three different attitudes and three practical principles for pedagogic deliberation and how this relationship can be analyzed and understood when a group of people is discussing a dilemma .

We assume that the ability to discuss and make decisions from a sociomoral point of view is a competence that can be, at the same time, assessed and raised to consciousness. The competence could also be described as the ability to reach wellgrounded convictions concerning social and individual justice.

This can be looked upon as a more or less developed competence where a *justice-grounded attitude* is an ideal level in our definition. The other two levels are described as an *attitude of self-interest* and an *attitude of placing the group in the center*.

In order to see how they relate to each other we point out three practical principles for pedagogic deliberation that are carried out by questions. The questions are used to analyse and value to what extent the discussion of a group relates to the different attitudes.

All want to participate

Does everybody want to make an effort to solve the task?

Does everybody want to take responsibility?

Is everybody concerned by the problem

Does everybody want to contribute to a free and for all meaningful discussion?

All are allowed to participate

Is everybody allowed to participate in the discussion under free and equal conditions?

Is everybody allowed to criticize any argument?

Does everybody get good
acknowledge for their opinions?

All have the possibility to learn

Does everybody have the possibility to participate?

Is everybody able to clarify what is behind their opinions?

Is everybody able to understand each others points of views, interests and experiences?

Is it possible for everybody to agree how the problem should be looked upon?

	Attitude of self-interest	Attitude of placing the group in the center	Justice-grounded attitude
All want to participate			
Does everybody want to make an effort to solve the task?	Everybody hasn't felt the same engagement to participate. Each one has been able to decide if its worth while making an effort.	Everybody has made an effort for the best of the group and to come to an agreement. It has been important in the group that everybody say their opinion.	Everybody has made an effort to augment the understanding of the problems in the task and to make the basic data better for what they think.
Does everybody want to take responsibility?	We don't think that we have any responsibility to solve this kind of problems.	Everybody has taken responsibility for the work in the group so that the task can be fulfilled.	Everybody has taken responsibility for the work in the group. We understand that we are personally responsible for the argument and end up with.
Is everybody concerned by the problem	We don't think that the problem concern everybody as much. We have difficulties to understand what we have to do with these problems.	We think that the problem touch subjects that mainly concern ourselves.	We consider that the problem the task concern everybody. We also have to consider opinions others may have.
Does everybody want to contribute to a free and for all meaningful discussion?	We haven't thought about if the way we are discussing the task influence the possibility to participate.	It has been important for us to discuss the task in order to come to a common agreement and to avoid conflicts.	Everybody has shown an interest for each others opinions. It has stimulated us to be open to each other. We have been able to express our opinions in a free
All are allowed to participate			
Is everybody allowed to participate in the discussion under free and equal conditions?	Each one has to decide if they want to discuss or not. You either stay quiet or participate	It has been important that everybody gets the same amount of time and sticks to what the group think is the right and important.	We have tried to let everybody express their opinions and the possibility to develop their arguments. In that way the discussion has deepened.
Is everybody allowed to criticize any argument?	Everybody hasn't had the same right or possibility to criticize or question . We don't think that we have to question our earlier opinions.	We have tried to find arguments that everybody can accept, to compromise. The discussion can be characterized as giving and taking arguments.	By questioning, we have got more sure about our opinions. It has been accepted in the group to criticize and question any argument.
Does everybody get good acknowledge for their opinions?	It varies. Everybody hasn't got the same acknowledge. It has been more important who says what than what is being said. I has also been important to agree with the "right" person.	Yes, if the opinions have been much alike the ones of the group. Otherwise it has been difficult to give and take arguments.	It has been very important that we have listened to each others opinions and that we have put arguments to the test. It has been the strongest and best motivated arguments that have given acknowledge.
All have the possibility to learn			
Does everybody have the possibility to participate?	We all have different backgrounds, ways to speak or knowledge. There are different conditions for each person and that we cannot do anything about. We'll have to accept it.	We all have different backgrounds, ways to speak or knowledge. This can make it hard for some but we have really tried to make it possible for everybody to participate.	We all have different backgrounds, ways to speak or knowledge. This is looked upon as an advantage. Everybody has been able to participate with their own way of thinking.
Is everybody able to clarify what is behind their opinions?	Everybody have told their opinion without making clear why they think that way or the reason for the opinion.	We have tried to find reasons for what the group think and argue for. We have used our own experiences as references for our considerations.	The reasons for our arguments have been fully clarified. We have put the arguments to the test by posing critical questions about what we think the way we do. We have also discussed in what way our ideas can be right for all people.
Is everybody able to understand each others points of views, interests and experiences?	No. Everybody have their own interests and needs. We haven't thought much about trying to understand each other or being influenced by what others are saying.	We, in the group, have tried to understand each others points of views and experiences. We have discussed the problem from the point of view of what the group thinks. We understand each other better if our thinking is the same.	After having clarified the reasons for our different arguments, we have been ready to think over our earlier thoughts. We have tried to find an agreement that can include the interests and needs of all people.
Is it possible for everybody to agree how the problem should be looked upon?	We don't think the problem is so complicated. It has been up to each one in the group to decide what is right or wrong. No one has had to change their opinion.	We have transferred the problem to our own experiences and from there tried to find out what is right or wrong. What we have agreed upon has been chosen as important.	We have discussed the problem from what is right or wrong between people in general, and in other contexts. We have been aware of that the problem consists of different reasons and conditions of interests and values.

2.2 Some experiences made

Try-outs of the material - students in teachers training and pupils

As a part of their education, 80 students got the task to arrange an educational situation where pupils should discuss a dilemma related to a school subject. The purpose for the students was to practice the ability to value democratic qualities of communication in a democratic way. The students should reflect upon and analyse the conditions that surrounded the educational situation and, with the help of the analyse schedule, value the discussion according to criteria important for the democratic outcome. The students should also reflect critically upon difficulties that were connected to the use of the analysis schedule. The pupils were also asked to give their opinions about the effects of the material after having tried it. The result is structured in four categories that we found essential in the answers.

A. Active or passive attitude towards the task

One important element, according to both the students and the pupils, that influenced the pupils' attitude towards the task, was if the dilemma to be discussed was understood as fictitious and forced on. In these cases the pupils could certainly participate in the discussion but the problem was rather that they didn't find the dilemma interesting enough.

Another element that influenced the attitude was if the pupils were used to this type of educational situation and if they were acquainted with the subject of the dilemma, a question of habit and knowledge. The pupils point out that it has great importance if you are well-informed about the subject and are used or prepared to discuss the matter.

One more element of importance is, according to the students, how the pupils understood the "pay-off" of their engagement in the discussion. The discussion was not regarded as important for the outcome of the grades and the result had no real signification. This instrumental attitude among the pupils is a frequent theme when the students reflect upon motivation, engagement and opinions expressed by pupils in the discussions.

The students also reflect upon other elements of importance for the attitude towards the task. They mention the composition of the group and number of pupils in the group, pupils fear to say things that can hurt somebody's feelings and the way the task is introduced.

One thing that seems to be very important for an active attitude, mentioned by both students and pupils, is that pupils must be allowed to identify and formulate the problems they are supposed to discuss. Questions and dilemmas that are concrete and connected to everyday life are regarded as interesting and engaging.

B. Different roles, self-assumed or allotted

One aspect, as an explanation to the outcome, is how different roles and group dynamics influence the result of a discussion.

The pupils are considered to be fixed in given roles and orders of status which they have difficulties to cross. Internal relations and eventual conflicts are generally

believed to influence the atmosphere in the group and the outcome of the discussion.

Some students use this as an explanation why it is hard to judge if the pupils have reconsidered their original apprehension in a more democratic way or if they just have surrendered to the atmosphere in the group. This could also be a reason for the occurrence of compromises (all-think-the-same) when the pupils try to find solutions to a dilemma. In this regard the pupils are more or less described as having an *attitude to place the group in the center*. This also seems to occur with the help of the discussion rather than leading to more developed arguments and identifying important dividing lines in opinions. The pupils possibly avoid to confront each other because of this will of conformism. They also don't seem to apprehend certain arguments as better than others. The pupils do not point out that it is important to know each other in order to have a discussion. More important is the ability to dare to speak and to take part in the discussion.

C. Critical reflection

As one aspect, how the outcome can be understood, a number of failings among the pupils are mentioned. They are described as unreflected and categorical in their argumentation and opinions and often lack understanding for dilemmas to be discussed. The pupils have difficulties to question their original opinion and seem to be more interested in expressing their own ideas rather than listening to each other. It is not likely that they recognize differences that go into argumentation. Because of these elements the pupils risk to miss the point in the dilemma and essential questions to take sides against. With the help of the discussion, earlier opinions rather can be confirmed and an illusory agreement between the reasons of the argumentation and the factual matter is established.

The image of the pupils, here given by the students, shows that they carry both an *attitude of self-interest* and an *attitude placing the group in the center*. They are not used to argue for their opinions, give or take criticism or think in terms of learning from each other. In the discussions among the pupils there is generally a lack of considerations what is relevant and reasonable in the discussed matter. The dilemma is more being approached as a try to find reasons for the dilemma and what is right, at least as long as everybody agrees. The pupils also experience that they mostly agree. One explanation to this can be that they in most cases don't identify any conflicts between different principle values in the dilemmas.

It may though be pointed out that the pupils express themselves as being good listeners ready to change their opinions if someone is coming up with a better argument. And the students also explain the outcome by describing other reasons than just failings among the pupils. The educational situations in general do not ask for arguments and opinions from the pupils and they are not used to critical reflection and collaborative learning.

D. The validity of the analyse instrument

The students were also asked to point out some aspect concerning the validity of the used concepts in the analyse instrument and the relevance of the theoretical basis for the material.

One element discussed is the importance of the linguistic weight of the material. This can be a problem, for example among pupils with immigrant background, difficulties to read and write etc. The students also call attention to that the ability

to communicate and make decisions from a sociomoral point of view is a question of maturity. An observation, in this case, is that girls seem to be more used to discuss dilemmas and ready to interact with each other.

Some critical questions also discuss what possibilities the pupils have to understand the concepts that are being used when they estimate their own discussion. This must of course play a major role when we try to find out if it is possible to estimate and value the level of democratic competence when a group of people discuss a dilemma.

Discussion

The result of the try-outs of the material, points out that three main aspects can be sorted out.

Firstly, it seems like the character of the outcome is influenced by the design of the material. One main problem is how the criteria should be communicated linguistically so that they are comprehensible to both pupils and the ones responsible for the evaluation. At the same time one cannot disregard that processes dealing with deliberation are strongly connected to communicative qualities (Gerrevall, 2003, p 62). Another theme of this aspect concerns to what extent the dilemmas in the material can be understood as authentic and interesting enough to discuss. Discussions concerning “the real thing” and where the participants are getting personally involved tend to be more authentic in themselves.

Secondly the outcome is discussed in terms of competence or lack of competence among the pupils. The evaluations of the discussions are related to attitudes of self-interest and placing the group in the center. Here we can see a problem that deals with how the results are interpreted; as a consequence of competences referred to only individual skills or also if facts connected to the evaluation situation are paid attention to.

In the later explanation roles, self-assumed or allotted, seems to influence the result of a group discussion

Thirdly, the outcome is explained and connected to the way schools practice pedagogics. In this case, it is more a matter of education than assessment. Habit to discuss, ability to analyse from out of different aspects and knowledge about the subject are mentioned as important educational elements. Another part of this aspect is also the view upon education. What signals are given about the “pay-off” of an educational situation. Is it a question of learning or just about the grades?

In order to understand the result, there are reasons to turn back to the question what consequences changes in the society brings out for the educational system, and especially in relation to evaluations of what democratic competence is, should or could be.

The matter seems to be what is needed to enable democracy in general and deliberation specifically to appear as a possible project in schools. There are reasons to believe that evaluations and assessments of democratic competence needs to be further displaced in a direction towards deliberation.

From a starting point in an understanding of democracy in terms of deliberation, an evaluation becomes more a question of formation than just a summary. The evaluation or the diagnosis becomes an integrated part of the educational situation and is by that able to contribute to the formation of knowledge (Fritzén 2003, p 77) .

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