

Conversations on engaged pedagogies, independent thinking skills and active citizenship

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This paper will consider the relationship between engaged pedagogies and the development of what is referred to as independent skills, as well as active citizenship. The significance for their development in the context of the Irish teaching and learning context will be sketched, particularly at first and second level. In particular, the author will make reference to the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry Methodology (OSDE) which was developed at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at the University of Nottingham. The author's experience of engaging with this particular approach, especially as it pertains to the development of independent thinking skills and active citizenship will be discussed. It will involve a case study, as well as findings from a questionnaire that was distributed to the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Inquiry Network.

Introduction

This paper will explore the potential of the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) as a methodological approach for the promotion of participants' independent thinking skills (ITS) as well as enhancing their active citizenship capacities. The approach was pioneered by Vanessa Andreotti and her colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham (see <http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk>). It offers a set of procedures and ground rules to structure safe spaces for dialogue and enquiry about global issues and perspectives focusing on interdependence. The author interprets OSDE in a manner that approximates to the understanding of 'service learning' as a teaching/learning method that connects meaningful community service with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility, so as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (see AACTE 2002). The ITS and active citizenship capacity building skills of OSDE intersect with key underlying processes of 'service learning'.

Open spaces for dialogue and enquiry

Before progressing to explore the potential of OSDE for the development of independent thinking skills and active citizenship, it might be helpful to consider some of the essential aspects of the approach. It is important to recognise that it is premised on the concept of a safe space, which is also considered a prerequisite for the enactment of real dialogue. Such dialogue engenders respect for the learner and this respect is regarded as another essential component of OSDE. Furthermore, it is claimed that a learning context that is characterised by respect and openness facilitates the practice of 'problem-posing' education which Freire equates with "the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (1969, 1997, p. 64). He refers to it as 'conscientization' which equates with Greene's (1995, p. 56) concept of 'wide-awakeness' as "a mode of opening up the world to critical judgments and to their

imaginative projections and in time, to their transformative actions". This process of 'conscientization' is central to the OSDE approach also. The Department for education and skills (Dfes) (2007) acknowledges this when it refers to the OSDE approach as "a methodology that has a central focus of developing critical literacy and independent thinking".

Significance of open spaces for dialogue and enquiry

It is reasonable to enquire however why the development of critical literacy and independent thinking might be considered necessary for successful engagement with present-day society. For a response to this query, it might be helpful here to consider Barnett's (1999) contention that we live in an era of 'supercomplexity' which is characterised by uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability and contestability and that the capacity for independent thinking provides resources for navigating through this complexity. He also outlines this in more detail where he describes what he refers to as "pedagogies for an age of uncertainty". Such pedagogies, in his view, affirm the humanity of each individual student; allow each student his or her authenticity-in-the-making and offer space to each student to forge his or her own becoming (Barnett, 2007, p.137).

As this paper has a particular focus on the teaching and learning context in the Republic of Ireland, it might also be reasonable to inquire as to why the capacity for independent thinking has relevance there at this time. The *Taskforce on Active Citizenship Report* (2007, p.21) affirmed its relevance however when it stated that:

Schools and colleges are places where people learn about behaviour, dialogue, decision-making as well as a range of skills, knowledge and attributes that enable people to act as thinking, critical, responsible and caring citizens in a democratic society.

Despite this recognition however it is important to acknowledge that the Irish schooling system does not always provide fertile ground for the propagation of independent thinking skills. This is partly due to the fact that the said system is beholden to an overarching economic agenda. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Report 2004 on Higher Education in Ireland clearly associates the primary purpose of higher education with the prioritising of national prosperity. Accordingly, Collins (2005) contends that the wider concepts of higher education as a critical presence in society merit hardly a mention in this report.

There are some promising developments on the horizon for the Irish schooling system however that have the potential to embed the skills for independent thinking for future generations of learners. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland for example is conscious of the impact of globalisation and acknowledges that the skills "of critical discernment and information handling become increasingly important" (NCCA) in such a globalised context. It is no surprise then that in its re-vamp of the senior cycle, the NCCA has given a central place for the development of a learner's critical and creative thinking capacities.

OSDE: A case study

I drew on the principles underpinning the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry approach both to develop and to deliver a core Masters in Education module on the 'Theory and Practice of Education' for the University of Limerick, in the academic year 2006-2007. The module was informed by OSDE's acknowledgement that every individual brings valid and legitimate knowledge which is constructed in their own contexts. It was also informed by its perception that all knowledge is partial and complete, as well as by the view that such knowledge can be questioned.

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed and forwarded to each of the participants in the module (see Appendix 1) to invite them to comment on particular aspects of the OSDE approach that underpinned it. On the question as to whether the module recognised and validated the knowledge that each of the learners brought to the learning context, the following participant commented that:

We certainly recognised that we're all coming from different experiences and backgrounds within the one education system but that this added to the group – listening to and hearing other angles widened our perspective and therefore our understanding of our context and the influencing factors that resulted in how we experienced and viewed the education system (Student 1).

The same learner also acknowledges the partiality and incompleteness of knowledge, especially in her recognition that "some of the theories were acceptable in theory but in practice there were too many variables and so you could say that the theories were incomplete and partial". Equally, she perceives that:

Our own knowledge was certainly partial also in the sense that we only experienced certain parts of the education system. Our own attitudes and experiences coloured our views on the theories we discussed (Student 1) .

And, on the question of whether all knowledge can be questioned, she responds that knowledge when discussed is subjective in the sense that we all understand it in context of our experience, attitudes and what we want the knowledge to mean. She goes on to contend that "if we didn't have the freedom to question knowledge we would have to question what freedom we actually had at all".

The module's intended learning outcomes in respect of the underlying OSDE principles mentioned above were also succinctly captured in the following participant's comments:

The module opened up the senses to view education from a positive critical manner and not a blear eyed 'educationalist' ... It helped to develop a lighthouse effect on all aspects of education and its possible implications whether good or bad (Student 2).

It also occurred to me however that practitioners of the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry approach might also have a valuable perspective to offer, particularly in relation to its potential for the development of independent thinking skills. Accordingly, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to the OSDE Network (see Appendix 2).

On the question of whether engagement with OSDE helps learners to develop their critical thinking skills, one of the respondents commented that:

Yes, but it only works with certain students who are already engaged in the learning process and open to new perspectives. Decidedly, a smaller group would yield better results, as the teacher would be able to address individual issues more closely (Practitioner 2).

In a similar vein, another practitioner suggested that:

The strengths of the methodology, from my point of view, were its transparency and inclusiveness, flexibility, adaptability (across disciplines, age groups, cultures, social groups, etc.) and its contribution towards the development or enhancement of critical literacy skills (Practitioner 3).

The economic undertow: A spanner in the works?

Previously, it was acknowledged that there are serious impediments in the Irish teaching and learning context which discourage the development of critical thinking skills. In that connection, it might be also helpful at this juncture to make reference to the General Secretary of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland's comment about on the impact of League Tables on Irish education. He contends that such tables "did not recognise the role of education in developing key competencies, which would be needed for society in the future" (White, 2007). He identifies these as learning to learn; social and civic competence; initiative taking and entrepreneurship; and, cultural awareness and expression. Here, he makes reference to another very important aspect of the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry approach, which is its capacity for promoting a learner's capacity for active citizenship.

OSDE: Developing civic engagement capacities

It was recognised previously that the economic under-tow in Irish education does not provide an ideal context for the development of independent thinking skills and, in a similar manner, that same under-tow also inhibits schools from realising their civic remit. The Higher Education Authority (HEA), for example, in its submission to the Active Citizenship consultation process emphasised that:

It is important that we do not let our discourse emphasise the economic role of higher education at the expense of the critically important social contribution that higher education makes to our society (HEA, 2006).

Such a sense of the social dimension in education is also integral to the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Inquiry Approach. Its own training manual acknowledges that 'Learning to live together in a 'global', interdependent, diverse and unequal society involves the development of skills that can support learners to negotiate and cope with change, complexity, uncertainty and insecurity in different contexts' (Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, n.d.) It is also affirmed by the following OSDE practitioners' acknowledgement that the approach fosters

a sense of agency, a feeling that they can promote changes in society, and mostly it creates in them the responsibility for implementing this change. They feel that they can change society because they can change themselves – and from here to participating actively in society there is only a very short distance (Practitioner 1).

The pivotal contribution that education can make in the civic capacity building area is succinctly captured in the following statement from Garret Fitzgerald, Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, in his keynote address to Community Knowledge Initiative at the National University of Ireland Galway, where he contends that:

Unless firm ethical foundations can be laid in our schools for what I would describe as a new 'civic republicanism' – the prospect of improving, or even maintaining, the quality of Irish society as we move further into the 21st century seems pretty grim. We could eventually find that we had created an ethical waste-land (Fitzgerald, 2006).

This is very much in sync with Greene's articulation on education's capacity for active citizenship as "the intentional bringing into being of norm-governed situations, situations in which students discover what it is to experience a sense of obligation and responsibility"(1995, p. 66).

Concluding comment

There are considerable economic pressures weighing down on the Irish educational system which do influence the extent to which schools there can provide spaces for the development of independent thinking and civic capacity building skills. The impact of those pressures however are being further compounded by what could be referred to as the 'League Table' phenomenon. The General Secretary of the Association for Secondary Schools in Ireland (ASTI) recently pointed out that such tables seriously compromise the role of education in developing key competencies, which would be needed for society in the future. These he identifies as learning to learn, social and civic competence, initiative taking and entrepreneurship, as well as cultural awareness and expression (White, 19 November, 2007). It was also pointed out that despite these obvious challenges, there are initiatives underway by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) that have the potential to embed those skills for future generations of learners. It might also be helpful to take stock of Szymborska's (1996) comment that "there is, there has been, there will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and to do their job with love and imagination". This was very much evidenced by the educators who participated in this research. It was the very recognition of the daily challenges that they encountered in the classroom that prompted them, in the words of Sartre, to conceive "of a different state of affairs" (Sartre, 1956, p. 435).

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Appendix 1: Letter to colleagues

Dear Colleagues,

I am preparing a presentation for delivery at the Development Futures Conference 2007 entitled 'Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry: Toward Enhanced Democratic Practices'.

OSDE is a methodology for the introduction of global issues and perspectives in educational contexts, such as teacher, adult, higher and secondary education. It also offers a methodology for structuring safe spaces for dialogue and enquiry where participants feel comfortable to express themselves and ask questions. The presentation will offer the view that it is very difficult for learners to actively engage with informed debates and discussions around rights and participatory democracy on the global scale, if they are not fully informed about such issues in the local scene initially.

I am presenting the *Theory & Practice* module that was delivered at Mary I in the Fall of 2006 as an instance where the intended learning outcomes suited the OSDE approach, especially in its attempt to provide participants with opportunities to build on their professional experience and to bring a critical insight to their work.

Some of the principles underlying the OSDE approach include:

1. That every individual brings to the space valid and legitimate knowledge constructed in their own contexts
2. That all knowledge is partial and incomplete
3. That knowledge can be questioned

Would you like to share any thoughts that you may have about how the approach that was taken in *The Theory & Practice of Education* module, especially in terms of providing a teaching & learning space that could related to the underlying principles of the OSDE approach.

I appreciate that there is a bit of a time-lag between now and when the module was delivered. Certainly, your anonymous course review feedback comments do provide an insight but if you would like to share any additional thoughts or comments they would be very welcome. And, of course, your confidentiality will be respected.

Appendix 2: Letter to OSDE practitioners

Dear OSDE practitioner,

I am currently preparing a paper presentation entitled 'Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry: Toward Enhanced Democratic Practices'.

The presentation will provide evidence of experiences with OSDE from the international community of practitioners. I would greatly appreciate any thoughts or comments that you may be able to provide about the suitability of OSDE as a methodological approach, especially from the learner's perspective.

1. From your experience, does engagement with OSDE help learners to develop their critical thinking skills?
2. Currently, there is a lot of concern in Ireland that the moral fabric of society is being eroded. First and second level schools are being charged with the responsibility of re-invigorating a sense of what it means to be a good citizen. From your experience as a practitioner with OSDE, can this approach encourage learners to develop the skills of active citizenship. What effective approaches have you adopted to achieve those intended outcomes?

I thank you for your time and consideration of this request and look forward to any comments that you may be able to provide.

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Critical independent thinking skills are very important for your children. These important skills can enhance self-esteem and promote an ability to meet any challenging situation with ease and optimism. However, as parents we can hinder our children's ability to develop independence thinking skills, by helping or doing more than they actually need. Sometimes, we may even never realize that we are actually doing all the work for them. In life, parents just love their children and they want to take care of their children in every possible way. However, parents may also forget that going all