

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 44

Engaging People in Active Citizenship

Context of the Research

Across Europe, there is clear evidence of declining engagement in traditional democratic processes, with governments, companies and other organisations considered to be remote, and insufficiently accountable to their stakeholders. Yet, it is also widely believed that globalisation calls for new, and more devolved kinds of political and social structure, in which individual citizens will play a more active part.

This suggests that people need to be re-engaged as “active citizens”, and enabled to take informed decisions about their lives, communities and workplaces. However, many people are both disengaged and lack the skills, knowledge or understanding to do so. This is particularly true for people with little formal education and most at risk of social exclusion on other grounds.

Governments have sought to address the issue through citizenship education programmes within formal schooling, but this can only have an impact in the long term and the benefits have yet to be demonstrated. Little research has been conducted about how individuals learn to become such active citizens, the role of formal schooling in this, and the potential role of lifelong learning including less formal mode of learning.

The project has explored the nature of citizenship in six contrasting European countries (UK, Belgium, Finland, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain). It has investigated how people have learned to be active citizens and what kinds of education and training exist to support this.

The project considered “active citizenship” as the active engagement in collective activity in one of four areas or “domains” - the state/formal politics, the workplace, civil society and the private domain.

Key Conclusions

The following key conclusions were reached: -

1. Decision-making is being increasingly devolved in organisations of all kinds. This is because there is a belief that large centralised systems are increasingly difficult to manage and plan. There is also a need to ensure democratic legitimacy for decisions and actions.

2. In several countries there was evidence of government trying to re-engage its citizens in these processes.
3. There is no simple standard model of what an active citizen is, nor any single process for developing citizenship. The sense of citizenship is embedded in each individual's unique life history and formed through relationships with others (individually and in groups).
4. Active citizens have a strong sense of their place and responsibility in the world and are driven by a sense of commitment to other people, rooted in notions of justice and care.
5. The reasons for becoming an active citizen are formed early in life through the family and the community, at least as much as, or even more than, in school.
6. National differences in individuals' understanding of citizenship appear to mirror the differing historical experiences of citizenship and democratic politics in countries.
7. Despite notable changes in the operation of formal democracy and in social structures over the last half-century, no significant differences were found between active citizens born in the 1930s and 1940s and those born a generation later. This may mean that change has been overstated or that the factors which make individuals active citizens remain constant, but apply to different, or fewer people.
8. Active citizens engage with the state when they wish to do so and on their own terms. They are driven by personal ethical values and many are resistant to the competitive cultures of traditional political processes and parties.
9. Active citizens usually learn their citizenship skills through trying to solve a problem or to fulfil a mission, rather than by setting out to "learn to be good citizens". Learning, and citizenship emerge as a consequence of this primary motivation. Learning therefore has to be embedded in those processes.
10. Therefore, learning citizenship is unlike many more formal kinds of learning. It is interactive and deeply embedded in specific contexts.
11. The outcomes of citizenship learning are unpredictable, and public interventions are most likely to be effective if they provide individuals with opportunities to explore and acquire the skills in context, rather than through formal instruction.

12. The skills and knowledge that active citizens develop in one area (political, work, civil society or private) are frequently transferred into the other areas.
13. Active citizens are notably energetic people and typically are active in several spheres.
14. Lifelong learning has become a major focus of policy attention for governments, private sector organisations and social movements, but the learning of citizenship in the area of civil society is still usually under-resourced by comparison with the workplace.
15. Whilst non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have succeeded in stimulating significant learning in civil society, its importance is still generally underestimated by governments.
16. As a result, work to develop citizenship skills in civil society tends to be short term, less systematic and less sustainable. Those who suffer most from this are those who are already most vulnerable to social exclusion and least likely to become active citizens in any context.
17. Gender is a significant factor in determining how and where people engage as citizens, conditioned particularly by expectations of gender roles (which vary between the countries), by social and political structures, and by the low value typically placed on citizenship in the private domain. This is unfortunate since the home and early upbringing (typically dominated by women) are critical in creating the predisposition to be active citizens.
18. Other important areas of difference, including ethnicity, disability and sexuality, interact with gender to create complex patterns of inclusion and exclusion. In addressing this it is important to ensure that educational interventions seek to give individuals the ability to analyse critically how institutions and cultures differentially affect individuals. They also need to use group solidarity as a basis for empowering those least inclined to put themselves forward.
19. Active citizens appear in general to be more highly educated than their peers. There is therefore a danger that citizenship becomes yet another area of exclusion for those who have previously been less successful in education, and who are already more prone to exclusion. However, those who become active despite low levels of initial education often re-engage with formal education as a result.

20. Formal education in citizenship seems to have played little part in the formation of individuals. However, extra-curricular activity during formal education does appear to be important, as do structures which give students a voice in the running of their educational institutions.

Key Recommendations

1. Governments and other organisations should create opportunities for individuals to learn citizenship skills through practice and participation in activities relevant to them across a range of contexts, and by supporting the development of learning resources. Such learning is likely to foster transferable citizenship skills from one area to another and could create disproportionate benefits.
2. Governments, political parties, employers and trades unions should seek to develop more inclusive approaches to engagement in the political and workplace domains so that they appear less hostile and more supportive. This could be aided by adopting a “learning organisation” approach and by encouraging the development of mentoring to help the less confident to develop relevant skills. Trades unions often play an important role in assisting less advantaged individuals to be active citizens in the workplace; this should be recognised and supported.
3. Governments and civil society organisations should provide more non-formal training for citizens involved in voluntary organisations. This is a route through which many people find their way back into the formal education system after previous failure.
4. Governments should support embryonic civil society organisations. The formation and early growth of such organisations provide important learning opportunities for individuals and groups, and are more effective when modest amounts of external expertise and support are provided.
5. Organisations funding informal learning in civil society organisations need to recognise the ‘process’ character of citizenship learning, and develop funding regimes in which civil society organisations are more long-term and equal partners.
6. Governments and education providers (formal, non-formal and informal) should support the development of citizenship skills in home and private life, which may produce significant long-term benefits. Parents and others involved with the primary caring role for young children should be supported to recognise and develop their roles in forming citizens. Parent, family and women’s education are particularly relevant.

7. The EU and national governments should continue to encourage international exchanges for people of all ages, as they enable individuals and groups to see alternative perspectives and develop their ability to think laterally and be constructively critical of the status quo.
8. As citizenship skills appear to be developed more through extra-curricular activities than through the formal curriculum, schools and governments should encourage such activities. Effort is required to ensure they are equally accessible to all, as extra-curricular opportunities are often disproportionately taken up by students from higher social classes.
9. There should be encouragement of initiatives that involve young people in the governance of their own educational and other institutions, as this is likely to be particularly helpful in creating a sense of engagement.
10. As there is a serious lack of research into the processes of informal citizenship learning within the workplace and civil society, funding organisations should support further research into the informal development of citizenship skills and knowledge.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: "Education and Training for Active Governance and Citizenship in Europe: Analysis of Adult Learning & Design of Formal, Non-Formal & Informal Educational Intervention Strategies" (April 2003).

The project web site at <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Education/ETGACE/>

[State of Art Report](#) [Partner details](#) [Final Report](#)

Key Publications

The main publications of the project itself are four reports to the European Commission:

Citizenship and Governance Education in Europe: A Critical Review of the Literature: vi + 205 pages; November 2000.

Learning Citizenship and Governance in Europe: Analysis of Life Histories: ix + 268 pages; May 2001.

Focus Groups: Intervention Strategies for Citizenship and Governance Education: 220 pages; November 2001.

Learning Active Citizenship and Governance in Late Modern Society. A European Perspective: viii + 173 pages; September 2002. (A revised version will eventually be published as a book).

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