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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the experiences of a U.S. professor involved in field research in Hungary. The professor visited classrooms and observed civics education practices in Hungary. The paper combines a review of the literature with observations, interviews, and field notes from the Hungarian experience. Specific emphasis is placed on a "Good Citizen" class in the Textile Industrial Vocational High School in Szeged, Hungary, as an example of a people struggling with democratic ideals and implementation of those ideas into society. (EH)

Uncertain mediation, unrestrained dialogue, and the role of the civics teacher: Learning about civics instruction from Hungarian educators

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During my visit to Hungary as a part of the American Civitas Delegation, I had the opportunity to interact with both teachers and teacher educators who are pioneers in teaching civics in their country. They emphasized the problems involved in developing a cadre of teachers (as well as teacher educators) who could go beyond the dominant transmission-orientation and overemphasis on a technicist approach to teaching and learning in social studies classrooms, to a more constructivist one which might better develop civic attributes in youth.

This problem is discussed in a paper entitled *Teaching democracy in an unpopular democracy* (1995) by Dr. Janos Setenyi, a member of the Board of Directors of CIVITAS in Hungary. Setenyi identifies several of the perplexing and challenging issues that educators face in teaching democracy in Hungarian schools. He suggests three major elements that impact upon education about and for democratic society: 1) *social and political concepts*, and the expectation that youth will understand global variations of democratic theories; 2) *institutions*, such as Parliament, the Constitutional Court, local government, and the role of the free press, and the importance of students understanding the evolving role of these institutions in a democratic society; and 3) *knowledge, attitudes and*

skills of citizens in a democracy, and the necessity of students developing each of these elements (p. 2).

His writings underscore the tremendous challenges facing Hungarian educators in their struggles to promote civic virtue and an understanding of democratic theory and practice in Hungarian youth, in a country that held its first free elections since World War II in 1990. I will emphasize the third level, *knowledge, attitude, and skills* because it appears to be the most difficult arena for a civic educational community to penetrate In Hungary and in the United States, yet may be the most important for classroom-based civic educators to address if youth are to take an active role in constructing a democratic society. This difficulty exists despite the significant attention given to this level by educational theorists during the twentieth century.

In discussing the complex obstacles educators face in addressing civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes, Setenyi states the following:

> *The world of civic knowledge, attitude and skills is an entity, a "soft" field that is undoubtedly very difficult to grasp for school education. It means not only the acquaintance with civil rights but the ability to apply those rights as well. Its teaching is complicated from two points of view: on the one hand it implies civil techniques or skills which can only be "radiated," and on the other hand - differently from concepts and institutions which can be taught from books - here the values and forms of behavior young people adopt from the family home are strongly predominating.*

The basis for these values and forms of behavior adopted at home is provided by the Kaadarean bourgeoisie, which "understands" the importance of efforts made in one's private life or in the family, deems that it is the orderly, bourgeois world inside the house, the car, and the garden that counts, and holds that the outside world is a mere enemy. It is characterized by a lack of willingness to cooperate, impatience, inability to reach a compromise, the usage of simplifications and public distrust, which stem from the unpredictability of fellow citizens, of institutions, and of a "distributing-plundering"state.

It is here, under these circumstances that we have to establish the culture of unrestrained dialogue, the "proprietor's consciousness" of democracy. The question is to what extent the traditional Hungarian school delivering knowledge from books will be able to conform with the requirements of unrestrained dialogue. It is impossible to comment on cases, values, the truth, or forms of behavior ex cathedra; *however, at present, school education overburdened with natural sciences is operating in this manner. This calls for the revaluation of the teacher's role. The teacher's role in the last century was to be the model, whose task was to civilize. In the 1960s, a new role was attributed to the teacher, that of the professional distributor of knowledge, who is dressed into a white laboratory uniform, and by measuring and assessing is the embodiment of the new test culture. The teacher of today is an uncertain mediator: the consensual contents of education have vanished in the air, and the expectations of school users have become diversified. The school of the future will presumably require a kind of partnership relationship, where questions can be asked. And for this there is no pattern in the tradition of the Hungarian school system.* (p. 5)

This lack of pattern is certainly not unique to Hungarian educational circles. In the United States, social studies teacher educators have long espoused the merits of democratic classrooms filled with the spirit of inquiry, however, little research exists which documents this pattern of

classroom interaction.

The dominant pattern in classrooms in the United States is typified by Thornton (1991), in the following:

> *To many teachers, "curriculum" appears to be synonymous with a body of knowledge identified by "experts" and encapsulated in a textbook. In other words, many do not appear to be aware of, and may not be particularly interested in, the degree of control that their gatekeeping exercises over the curriculum they plan for their students.* (p. 245)

Theory which promotes the importance of facilitating powerful civic attitudes and concomitant behaviors has been evident in the professional literature for decades. As Engel and Ochoa state, "... the unique characteristic of good citizens in a democracy is the knowledge and skills which they are able to bring to the problem-solving process" (p. 27). They also complain that these requisite knowledge and skills, typically have been acquired in a passive fashion as educators transmit information and socialize students for good citizenship in a sterile, rules-dominated classroom climate.

> *We must stop exhorting students to be "good citizens" according to our own unquestioned view of good and help them instead to ask "good questions" about their own values and those of others. We must engage ourselves, teachers and students alike, actively and directly in the difficult task of reconsidering our behavior as individuals and as a community in light of the traditional values that we may have taken for granted or even ignored in the past. The ultimate training ground for civic competence is engagement in the*

resolution of the issues and problems that confront our society. (pp. 7-8).

Parker and Jarolimek (1984) suggest that civic competence is demonstrated by a good citizen, one who is informed, skillful, and committed to democratic values. Like Setenyi, they acknowledge the challenge this presents for the educator, and they suggest that a crucial element in the development of good citizens is the emphasis on the notion of the well-informed, participating citizen. They define the democratic citizen as "... an informed person, skilled in the processes of a free society, who is committed to democratic values, and is able, and feels obliged, to participate in social, political, and economic processes." (p. 6)

Despite the history of the United States as a model for democratic theory and practice, both in its institutions and in its discourse in educational theory, very few public school teachers in the United States are "uncertain mediators" by choice and strength. Facilitators of thoughtful debate of controversial, substantive issues are undoubtedly in the minority. Instead, like in Hungary, teachers tend to adopt a parallel role to what Setenyi labels as the "professional distributor of knowledge."

This is even more problematic in the United States with its long history of democratic institutions and of abundant educational theory that

has provided the intellectual underpinning for the teacher-as-mediator role.

Of this theory, most significantly, perhaps, is Dewey's seminal theory of experience which speaks directly to the importance of the teacher who facilitates an active, thoughtful, issues-based classroom (see e.g., Dewey, 1916, 1933; Scheffler, 1974). As Ross, Cornett, and McCutcheon (1992) suggest, this concept of experience is one which stresses the following:

> *a) the interplay between objective conditions and organic energies; (b) deliberate alteration of the environment by inquirers, leading to new knowledge ... and (c) the Peircean notion of meaning, in which our conceptions are analyzed and transformed in terms of the consequences of our actions.* (p. 10)

Building on Dewey's philosophy, many contemporary educational theorists promote the parallel notion of the constructivist classroom. Fosnot (1996) describes constructivist theory about knowledge and learning in the following:

> *Based on work in psychology, philosophy, and anthropology, the theory describes knowledge as temporary, developmental, nonobjective, internally constructed, and socially and culturally mediated. Learning from this perspective is viewed as a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human-meaning making venture with culturally developed tools and*

> *symbols, and further negotiating such meaning through cooperative social activity, discourse, and debate.* (p. ix)

Educators who hold a constructivist vision and implement that vision in practice, must deviate from the traditional transmission-oriented practice that has dominated social studies classrooms for generations in the United States and move toward cooperative dialogue and activity. As Fosnot describes,

> *The classroom in this society is seen as a minisociety, a community of learners engaged in activity, discourse, and reflection. The traditional hierarchy of teacher as the autocratic knower and learner as the unknowing, controlled subject studying to learn what the teacher knows begins to dissipate as teachers assume more a facilitator's role and learners take on more ownership of the ideas. Indeed, autonomy, mutual reciprocity of social relations, and empowerment become the goals.* (p. ix)

While there is a significant intellectual tradition in the United States that promotes this type of classroom, as in Hungary, there are very few patterns of constructivist classrooms in the social studies literature to serve as examples for educators. Researchers have clearly determined that individual classroom teachers significantly mediate the curriculum through their decision making during the planning, interactive, and reflective phases of instruction (e.g., Cornett, 1990; Thornton, 1991; Ross, 1994). Therefore, it is important that the civic education community learn from examples where the practitioner is a constructivist

mediator of civics curriculum.

I was privileged to have the opportunity to visit the classroom of one such teacher during our visit to Hungary. What follows is a narrative of that experience. In constructing this account, I relied on the expert translation provided by Mr. Balazs Hidveghi, the Executive Director of CIVITAS in Hungary. The account is based on my observations, interviews, and resultant field notes from this encounter. All direct quotations assume fidelity between the actual events and the translation provided.

Analysis of an encounter with a Civics program, Good Citizen, in Szeged, Hungary

We visited the Textile Industrial Vocational High School (*Textilipari Szakkozepiskola*) in Szeged, Hungary. Eight professional educators, including the Executive Director of FLREA, and the Executive Director of the Hungarian Association for Teaching Civic Knowledge and Skills, toured the facility and interacted with the principal, assistant principal, a local teacher educator, faculty, and students.

As we entered the school, I was struck by a dramatic contrast. The building and grounds were quite sterile aesthetically. The high school was originally a barracks for soldiers more than forty years ago. The drab earthen colors and well worn furniture made predominately of wood and

arranged in a linear fashion suggested rigidity and lack of change. In contrast, our hosts were very hospitable and were obviously well-informed innovators of signficant educational curricular and instructional change.

They provided an overview of the civics innovations and entertained our myriad questions. According to the school principal, "Civics is a new thing here because, not only is the subject new, the political system is new. The whole staff needs to develop appropriate skills." As a result, they are experimenting with the curriculum and with appropriate methods of instruction.

The curriculum is vocationally oriented around textiles and clothing. At the beginning of the 1990s, a primary aim of the schools was to train youth for handicraft work and to become tailors. In addition, they introduced a sub-project to develop personal identity, and to assist students in knowing themselves and their strengths and weaknesses.

With democratization has come decentralization, local curricular autonomy, and economic challenges that have resulted in reduction in faculty. Currently, there are approximately 800 students, including a large adult education population and a number of students who live on campus.

Agnes is a teacher who works with fifteen and sixteen year olds on civics-related educational topics two times a week for ninety minutes. She stated that the purpose of her enrichment course, "The good citizen," is to "help students to behave as conscious citizens" and "to discuss human rights and citizenship rights." The subject matter of this class is planned by the teacher in consultation with the students. No traditional assessment is made of student performance since it is an enrichment activity and not a part of the graded curriculum.

The Good Citizen Class

The following is a description of the setting and interaction during our visit to the Good Citizen class. Twenty-six students were arranged in a semi-circle (unlike the other traditional, straight-row classrooms in the school). There were pictures of several political leaders fastened on the wall, a small globe on a cabinet, several maps, perhaps a dozen video tapes in one cupboard, and a blackboard at the front of the classroom next to the teacher's desk.

The discussion was mediated by Agnes. Eventually twenty of the twenty-six students contributed directly to the discourse. The central topic was human rights and poverty, and it initially centered on the right

to work and choice of employment. Agnes asked students to list rights they had and then to discuss elements that might work to curtail those rights. Students stated that environmental concerns, scarcity of food, wars, and other factors work to limit human rights.

Agnes asked for examples from history where human rights were expanded. They briefly contrasted the Middle Ages with the French and American Revolutions.

She then asked the students what they had learned from literature about poverty and its relationship to human rights. Students suggested the following: *Oliver Twist*, *Les Miserables*, and various Hungarian folk tales. She built on the laughter which accompanied the brief litany of folk tales, and wrote a Hungarian proverb on the board which was translated as follows:

Poor man,
poor man like the mouse in church,
poor man,
poor man, bitten even by the trees,
no money, no clothing, your chin is worn out,
... tighten your belt, you're losing weight.

Agnes misspelled a word and the students laughed, and Agnes acknowledged her error in good humor. She continued, "Now that we have

discussed this, is there any change now for us? What changes have you seen now that we have become a democracy?"

The students suggested the following: "Beggars." "Street people." "More people on state welfare than before the democratic reform."

Agnes explained that "there was great poverty during the regime, but it was concealed."

Agnes: "What are the characteristics of poverty? Who is poor, how do you know if Somme is poor. The proverb may give you an idea."

Students: "They are homeless." "They're hungry." "They have no lodging."

Agnes: "Is poverty a condition? Can one be poor and have lodging? What are other characteristics of poverty?"

Students: "The poor cannot buy medicine." "The poor cannot buy books." "The poor cannot go on holidays."

Agnes: "How does one become poor?"

Student: "Social policy no longer provides for full employment."

Agnes: "Why do poor people suffer if the state provides assistance?"

Students: "They may not know where to apply for help." "It is limited how they might get that information."

Agnes shared figures on income, lodging, and what constitutes

poverty statistically. They discussed what personal property and household goods are evidence of financial well-being. Students suggested that items such as carpet, curtains, books, and stereos, may be indicators of status. One girl blurted out, "If they have big windows or not." This was followed by a great deal of giggling.

Agnes smiled, and acknowledged that the design of the home was an indicator. She asked, "What kinds of food do the poor eat?" The students agreed that "if the family eats a lot of meat, like bacon, then it is not poor." Agnes asked about the type of clothing as an indicator of poverty. Students suggested that the poor may not have socks, or a winter coat. One girl stated, "They may inherit clothes and may not buy their own." Several girls started to giggle and discussed that their teacher must not be poor because she has so many coats. Agnes sighed good-naturedly and asked the students how they spend their money.

Students: "Chocolate!"

There was more laughter and the discussion shifted to toiletries. They indicated that the poor may not have personal hygiene items with the exception of soap and shampoo and perhaps toothpaste.

Agnes: "What do you they do with their spare time?"

Student: "Oh, the poor probably can't go to the theater.'

Agnes asked for a summary of what poverty means. They discussed this for several minutes and she concluded: "It means being excluded from things; it is a state of life where you lack things you need."

She read a citation from an American sociologist who stated that poverty is not only about wealth, but also about social and political exclusion. She then shifted to Hungarian gypsies, and to people who live in villages versus large cities and rural areas. The students' discussion ranged from the impact of minorities such as gypsies and immigrants, to the disabled, people who are ill, widowers and pensioners. She asked them to speculate about the number of people in poverty. She then suggested that approximately two and one half million citizens are living in poverty.

Agnes asked for solutions. Students argued various points including: "People should be left alone." "The government should help." "Foundations and other organizations should help." "Charities." "Religious groups."

Agnes asked why aid is not a long term solution. Students responded that some people misuse aid and that life conditions will not change.

Students: "Education is a way out of poverty." "Well if that's true, why are there unemployed teachers?" "People should be retrained." "Doctors can do free work."

The class bell rang and she summarized that there are many factors

which contribute to poverty and this condition impacts on human rights. She concluded that it is a signficant problem, "One which we can't solve in one day."

My Reaction to the Observation

I was struck immediately by the exemplary nature of what Agnes was facilitating. Using the criteria Agnes described in our interview, the lesson certainly served as a discussion of "human and citizenship rights, and it had the potential to help students "behave as conscious citizens."

Using the powerful teaching and learning criteria developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (1994) as a lens, this class met all five criteria. The lesson was: 1) **meaningful** - the teacher helped students focus on important ideas, and the discourse was centered on a basic theme, poverty and human rights, rather than on superficial coverage of many ideas; 2) **integrative** - the discussion drew from a variety of disciplines and integrated student attitudes, knowledge, and skills; 3) **value-based** - ethical issues related to poverty and social policy were discussed in-depth; 4) **challenging** - students provided serious thought and drew on their experiences to discuss the topic, the teacher probed responses and modeled thoughtfulness and inquiry approaches; 5) **active** -

the teacher provided up-to-date data, participated with the students and developed a community of learners, and local examples were utilized that related the content to their daily lives. It was clear that there was a tremendous rapport in this community, where ideas could be shared freely, where learning was serious, but warmth and humor were prevalent as well.

Student Perspectives on Civics Instruction

Several students provided responses to our questions following the actual classroom interaction. When asked about their views of the teacher and instruction, the students smiled and one girl stated, "It's very good." All the students nodded in agreement. They concurred that the Good Citizen class allowed them to entertain good questions and to think about important issues, unlike the regular curriculum. When asked what they would change in the overall school curriculum, one girl stated emphatically, "More classes like the Good Citizen class."

Conclusion

While Setenyi suggests that there are no models of uncertain mediation in Hungary, it is clear that this school and classroom provide a

wonderful glimpse of what such a tradition might contain. A qualitative study of this classroom would provide an excellent constructivist model of curricular and instructional decision-making for both Hungarian and American civic educators to emulate.

In sum, because of the depth and breadth of the discussion, the quantity and quality of student participation, and the overall climate of community that was evident, I believe that this was one of the most effective examples of teacher as uncertain mediator and facilitator of student learning that I have witnessed in the past twenty years. Agnes clearly demonstrated constructivist principles as she facilitated learner engagement in activity, discourse, and reflection. The ownership of ideas in this classroom was shared by learners and the teacher. In addition, it was accomplished in under the pressure and scrutiny of eight outsider observers.

I was truly inspired by Agnes and these pioneers of civic education in Hungary. They are facing many problems in the development of civic education. However, if the quality of teacher educators, teachers, and students that I observed in Szeged is in any way typical of the civic stakeholders in this country, then the future is quite promising for democratic education in Hungary.

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