

A Review of Research: What Do We Know About Civic Education in Classrooms in Germany?

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Paper presented at the German-American Conference “Democracy-Promotion and International Cooperation”, cosponsored by the Center for Civic Education and the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, September 24-29, 2006, Denver, Colorado/ USA

First of all, there are a few points to mention that complicate the study of educational goals achieved in Germany. Strictly speaking, German research has nothing to contribute to the panel's topic, "A Review of Stated Goals and Achieved Results". Also, with respect to the specific question raised in the draft programme for this conference, which is that of the effectiveness of teaching materials, there has only been one study, in 1990, which was commissioned by the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the bpb [Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung] (Breit; Harms). The results of this study showed that the Agency's materials are of central importance to the teaching staff as planning aids for lesson preparation. Whether or not the materials had any beneficial effects for the students was not investigated.

I would therefore like to paraphrase the topic in the second section and present to you the results of some qualitative research into subject-oriented teaching.

1. Research situation

1.1 No standardisation

Neither the goals, nor the content or competencies of political education are standardised in Germany. Teaching and learning objectives are specified in the curricula and general guidelines of the individual federal states. In this respect, teachers and subject heads meet for commissions of the ministries of education and cultural affairs, but professors seldom participate. The objectives formulated come from various sources, not all of which have a scientific basis: from normative convictions of the participants, from a mix of traditions and new social developments and as the result of orientation towards the German standard requirements for school leaving examinations, the "Einheitlichen Prüfungsanforderungen in der Abiturprüfung" (EPAs), in other words, towards the knowledge to be imparted in school years 12 and 13. Yet even the latter are not standardised: they are in fact oriented towards educational competence structure models. The requirements include generally formulated subject-specific and analysis competences. However, ultimately, each federal state interprets the guidelines differently. Even the teachers appraise Abitur examinations according to their own criteria. According to today's at best partial standardisation, the EPAs do not have to fulfil any test-related theoretical quality criteria such as objectivity, validity and inter-item reliability. Often, teaching staff fear that having set content to be tested intensifies selection pressure and may diminish the students' motivation to learn. And there is still the belief that political education should not be tested.

Hence, there are some similarities amongst the various curricula, but there are also many differences. Each individual federal state decides which teaching materials, e.g. school books,

will be used in education in that particular state. This fragmented education situation complicates research into the “Stated Goals and Achieved Results”.

In Germany, discussions regarding national education standards were only initiated a few years ago. Since a subject without educational standards threatens marginalisation, the German Society for Civic Education Didactics and Civic Youth and Adult Education (German abbreviation, GPJE) decided to produce a draft (2004). It is considered a consensus paper on the goals of the subject. However, the paper does not correspond with the standards required of the education standards (for critical appraisal, see Weißeno 2006): the field of specialised knowledge remains vague; there is no canon of knowledge. There has been no formulation of core concepts to be learnt. Some dimensions of competence are not formulated to be domain-specific, such as judgement and decision-making skills, for example (see Abs 2005). The competence models outlined do not have any empirical basis because of the lack of research. No competence-oriented learning tasks were developed. The tasks presented as test tasks cannot be standardised.

1.2 Little valid research

There are a few empirical works from the early years of political education (e.g. Ellwein 1955). There were some studies at the end of the 1960s that found political education offered a small degree of effectiveness for pupils and students (e.g. Becker; Herkommer; Bergmann 1967; Habermas; Friedeburg et al 1961; Teschner 1968; for overview, see Hilligen 1993). Subsequently, there were various individual studies that pursued different objectives and applied different concepts. They did not lead to the establishment of main research foci in subject-oriented didactics. It was not until the end of the 1980s that there was talk of an “empirical change in subject-oriented didactics” (Ackermann 1996).

Finally, it was not until the turn of the century that international comparative studies, such as TIMSS and PISA, “empirically stirred” the subject. There were then discussions in Germany about education standards, competences and how they could be tested. Many subject-oriented didactics, including in political education, were unable to make a contribution in this respect. For example, what exactly does “forming political judgement” mean? How does it differ from other judgements? Can it be tested, or in other words, operationalised? What do the various levels of political judgement look like? Can it be developed gradually over the years during which a student is at school? These are new questions for the subject and as yet have not been answered. There is no basic empirical research. There is no action or effects research. Even the general conditions for empirical research are complex, because there are only a few professorships for political education, not all colleagues carry out empirical research and there is no coordination centre for research relating to political didactics.

The international civic education study (IEA study) for political education has been interesting in that it covered a large number of experimentees. For 14-year old German students, the findings of this study were as follows:

- Identification with democracy is sound, but political knowledge by comparison is mediocre and therefore inadequate.
- National identification and readiness to participate are below average.
- Teachers feel professionally competent. Yet with respect to their own teaching they attach hardly any importance to subject-oriented didactic theories.

However, these results tell us next to nothing about the effectiveness of political education. Also, this study was not based on assumptions relating to a causality of educational effect. The questionnaires were not adapted to suit the German curricula. The German author, Oesterreich, writes that he could not refer to the German curricula, because the IEA required international assimilation. Furthermore, there were also methodological difficulties in terms of test procedures in this respect. Hence, the various difficulties in interpreting the results: overall, it is doubtful “whether the majority of the 13 items identified in the international study as skill items actually measure things like political skills” (Oesterreich 2004, 251).

In the context of the IEA study, there was an empirical study in Switzerland on the effectiveness of participation. The result: participation in public decision-making processes (in the community, in school, etc.) only promotes self and social skills. “Apart from that, no connections to political concepts, attitudes, readiness for activity, and expectations of effectiveness, or to political confidence, interest, trust and political satisfaction were revealed” (Biedermann 2006, 393). All the same, this confirms our presumption that the transfer of knowledge and the promotion of reflection processes in politics classes are important and cannot be replaced by something else.

The result: strictly speaking, there is nothing which can be said with regard to whether they are being achieved in education (see also Richter 2006a). Nevertheless, with this late development the opportunity now exists to learn from the unfavourable developments in other states, i.e. to avoid promotion of “teaching for the test” in the classroom and to be careful in the interpretation of “high stakes tests”.

So, as a quasi alternative, what contribution to this panel’s topic can be made from a German perspective?

2. Empirical Research into the Teaching of Politics

2.1 The current situation

The study group, “Empirical Research into Teaching Politics”, was formed at the start of the 1990s and now resides at the GPJE (for details of current status, visit URL: www.gpje.de/unterrichtsforschung.htm). The work being carried out in the context of the study group primarily involves qualitative studies to be assigned to the interpretative paradigm of reconstructive social research (see, for example, Richter 2000). This means that the rules produced by the individuals in the structured context are being reconstructed. Their particular experiences, or (verbal) actions, are understood and generalised with respect to their general actions. Interpretative or reconstructive social research produces a “switch from the external perspectives to the internal perspectives of actions” (Grammes; Weißeno 1993, 11), whereby either the individuals acting or the workings of the interactions are examined more closely.

The qualitative research available so far, however, does not exhibit any uniform theoretical alignment within the hermeneutic-reconstructive line of research. The studies differ in terms of their methodologies, i.e. from data collection and interpretation of the data, right through to the generation of assumptions, interpretation hypotheses or theory (elements), in other words there are differences in their research logic (see Richter 2006a). Naturally, research logic is connected with the respective cognitive interest. Until recently, the heart of the matter was the very general question: what actually happens in everyday political instruction? A ‘holistic’ interest in teaching processes, in the “basic patterns” of everyday instruction, is formulated. This question also indicates that the empirical study of subject-oriented didactics is in its infancy. Systematic research questions are yet to be generated.

Nonetheless, results and insights regarding comparisons are influencing the formation of theories regarding the teaching of politics. The many individual studies reveal aspects and problems of teaching, which thus far have not been adequately addressed in theory. The studies themselves must be carefully interpreted: although cause and effect correlations of the empirical research are described and plausible reasons are given, causality relationships are not further examined empirically or theoretically explained (e.g. via action theory, learning psychology). The results presented are not representative. They need to be strengthened by follow-up studies.

2.2 Overview of the studies

It is not possible to present a complete overview of the empirical research here (for more details, see Henkenborg 2002 and 2005, Schelle 2002 and 2003, Richter 2005 and 2006b). For qualitative studies, there are common questions and convictions:

- How and why is it that a teaching process does or does not emerge?

- The common conviction is that no entity has complete control over the happenings in class (so that variable controls are barely possible, if at all).
- Furthermore, that it is impossible to clearly separate an observation phenomenon from the context (see Yin 1994)
- And that the ‘interpretative paradigm’ applies to the teaching of politics, i.e. applies to the interpretation of the political over long phases of education (see also Mickel 2002, 46, et seq.): it is a case of interpreting the interpretation in education.

The following section presents a number of results relating specifically to subject-oriented didactics. Many results, which also appear in other subjects taught and which presumably are applicable for all school subjects in Germany, are not mentioned. They refer, for example, to the lack of clarity of briefings, to the imbalance in the talk time of teachers and students, or to the low level of procedural knowledge compared with declarative knowledge.

Learner types

Weißeno (1989) interviews individual sixth-form students about their understanding of subject-oriented didactics. Schelle (1995) continued this approach in the form of group discussions with secondary school students. They differentiate between political, sociological and economic learner types, and between the political, economic, sociological, historical and cultural orientation of the students. The learner types differ in their primary patterns of interpretation, in that they favour different specialisms. The types are not personality traits, but they can be updated depending on the topic or situation of the students.

In practice, such a survey can help teachers in the planning and execution of, or reflection on their lessons, because not only the wishes and interests, but also the typical learning difficulties of certain learner types are clarified. In this respect, they can contribute towards the diagnosis of teaching processes. For the formation of theories, they confirm didactic sub-concepts such as “option-oriented content selection, case principle, topicality, problem orientation, methodical three-step, multi-dimensionality”, etc. (Weißeno 1991, 325).

However, the latter also confirms that no-one ventures outside of the sphere of what they are acquainted with: since the students only become acquainted with the instruction that corresponds with our pedagogical culture and with the didactic concepts, and fragments thereof, which exist in practice, they can also as a consequence only shape their learner didactics around them. Culture-comparative research into teaching has only become fashionable in recent years, in particular through the TIMS video studies; with respect to learner didactics, a culture comparison would be interesting.

Non-political teaching of politics – vague political concepts

Interpretative reconstructions of political instruction have repeatedly shown that teaching staff often find it difficult to bring out the politics of their subjects in the class (e.g. Grammes; Weißeno 1993, Massing; Weißeno 1995, Kuhn; Massing 1999). It became apparent that

neither the creation of problem awareness nor promotion of the ability to deal with conflict or demands for justice are intrinsically aimed at a political level. Also, knowledge of individual political facts does not automatically lead to political thinking. This has generated arguments about educational goals and about conceptual weaknesses in literature on subject-oriented didactics: should it be a case of social, societal or political learning? Which political concept, broad or narrow, should provide the basis for instruction? Is there a step sequence from social learning to political learning? In this respect, empirical research into subject-oriented teaching has revealed deficits in the formation of theories relating to subject-oriented didactics.

The category model as a diagnostic instrument

Categories act as a bridge between “the person learning and the subject” (Sutor). Categories are generalising concepts, in which defining elements of the political are clarified. Their scientific and didactic service consists of reducing complexity and structuring subjects (see Massing 1999, 11, et seq.). According to Massing, the political categories incorporate the following: political problems, constitution/law, experience, values/ideologies, agents/participants, interests, conflict, power/leadership, decision-making. Categories relate to specialised political knowledge and should open up avenues to the political. They refer to the basics of politics, to what can be generalised in politics. The students should learn how to use them to analyse and assess real politics (see Massing 2006).

It is not easy to gain the skills required to understand political categorisations and to use them to adequately interpret politics. Time and again, the students form their arguments from the perspective of the parties affected. They argue in terms of morality and are persistent in continuing this line of argument, even though this may go against the directions and interventions of the teaching staff (see Massing 2003, 102). They do not advance to political categories (also see Rothe 1993). This was, however, achieved in a comparison class. A student differentiates legal aspects of a problem. The teacher picks up on this. Assisted by the ‘debate’ method, the argument develops successfully with two contrasting positions. Now the students can break away from their emotional consternation and integrate other (legal, political) categories into their arguments. Learning progress is clearly apparent.

Massing concludes that category models can help not just teachers, but also education researchers in the diagnosis of teaching processes. Teachers can use the category models to structure the students’ reasoning.

Subject-oriented didactic frameworks of teacher/student interactions: transparency instead of ambiguity

The general consensus is that knowledge acquisition should be linked with critical reflection on that knowledge. In teaching politics, the processes of understanding should be given plenty of space. This includes negotiating meanings, group interpretation and critical reflection on the knowledge acquired. In particular, political knowledge must be constantly reinterpreted and restructured in new contexts. To a large extent, this is dependent on neither time nor

location. In political instruction, knowledge should be transformed from unmediated knowledge (believed to be certain) to mediated (to be interpreted) knowledge (Grammes). The lessons should offer scope for interpretation. Knowledge should always be presented as hypothetical. In many classes, this is not the case, however. Time and again, classroom discussions, even when using materials, involve excessive guidance around a topic and ultimately the production of dogmatic knowledge. Discursivity, therefore, tends to be prevented rather than promoted (Grammes 1998, 95 et seq.). Sometimes there are also misunderstandings and/or rash agreements or ‘pluralistic’ arbitrariness of opinions and viewpoints (Grammes; Wicke 1991, 19), which likewise prevent discursivity. In school pedagogy, the theory was developed that students’ problems relating to experience, identity and understanding can be handled in a constructive manner by presenting various interpretation possibilities in respect of changing contexts and perspectives (Combe). Topical ‘disambiguation’, however, restricts these possibilities.

Deficits in the hermeneutic abilities of teaching staff

Teaching staff involved with political instruction demonstrate further professionalisation deficits in that their hermeneutic ability to understand the students’ processing sequences is insufficiently developed. For this reason, the teaching staff do not adequately promote the acquisition of interpretation techniques and critical reflection on the knowledge acquired. “Studies have proven... the theory that time and again students make as many contributions as their teacher, but that these are often ‘missed’” (Grammes; Weißeno 1993, 13). Koring (1989) and later Schelle (1995) also reached this conclusion. In addition to the professionalisation problem, there is also the problem of structure: didactic-methodological planning provides for a complex method of instruction with rapid switching between speakers, in which ‘hermeneutically listening’ to all contributions is impossible.

Overpowerment instead of acknowledgement

Deep hermeneutic reconstructions and interactionistic interpretations in lessons point to failing “acknowledgement relations”. Instead of arguments in which students use patterns of political interpretation, there is often indoctrination, moralisation or overpowerment (see Henkenborg 2002, 96). This does not facilitate political knowledge as normatively acquired knowledge, nor does it fulfil the educational need for developing political personalities. Political knowledge itself comprises ethical and social aspects, issues of justice and human dignity. Through the interpretation of political knowledge, there is the opportunity to become a (political) personality. Hence, in political instruction, personality factors are involved not only because of the teaching situation, but also because of the debates drawing on subject-related knowledge, whereby, for example, value attitudes may differ. The effects of control techniques (classroom management) should be re-examined from a subject-oriented didactical viewpoint.

Gender blindness

There is some empirically significant work available on gender differences and their inadequate consideration in political education. Kroll (2001) demonstrates that girls are not shy of conflict and nor are they disinterested in politics. But the “rules of the communication game” impede their equal involvement in discourse in the classroom. Boeser (2002), who combines qualitative and quantitative methods, proved the theory that girls and boys have different expectations when it comes to lesson configuration (in terms of content and methods), and that social studies lessons are often more likely to meet the boys’ expectations. His study confirmed “that it is right to assume that there are gender-specific learning requirements” (Boeser 2002, 264).

Inadequate specification of the types of learning objectives and learning methods in the classroom

Instruction analyses show that often students do not interpret learning tasks as intended by the teachers. Students usually develop only a limited learning concept, which concerns the acquisition of ideas and memorable facts. From this we can conclude that the various types of learning objectives of political instruction should be conveyed to them on a meta-level. These (non subject-specific) types of learning objectives include, for example, problem solving/discovery learning, knowledge building (concept formation) or value and identity development (see Oser; Baeriswyl 2001).

These objectives should be made clear to the students as part of their learning tasks. Secondary analyses of teaching reveal the consequences of students not understanding what type of learning objective is involved: in one lesson, the teacher announces that the teaching-learning format will be used. The lesson is to involve role-playing in the form of a “reconstructed decision-making process”¹. The teacher does not elaborate on the learning objective. The students think they are supposed to have a controversial debate as if on a podium (type of learning objective: development-promoting / structure-changing learning). The teacher also mentions the more frequently used term “discussion”. In reality, however, the teacher had intended to apply the learning objective type “*political negotiation*”, i.e. a caucus. Nevertheless, it is not until the concluding discussion in the evaluation of the role-play that the misunderstanding is finally revealed. For lengthy periods throughout the lesson, the students were unable to identify the didactic dimension of their learning process. As a result, they were also unable to form learning strategies in the sense of meta-cognitions (see Richter 2005, 152, et seq.).

Summary:

1 From: “Transkript der simulierten ‘Fraktionssitzung’ ” (Kuhn; Massing 1999, 83, et seq.).

Empirical research into subject-oriented teaching in Germany shows that subject-based legitimation and justification knowledge is generated inductively – perhaps also abductively (see Reichertz 2003). Although the individual studies cannot really be compared with one another, past interpretations of political education, which have been produced by comparing these studies, have led to explanations which have in turn become theories in subject-oriented didactic theory formation. They are plausible, but substantiated empirical support for these theories would be more reassuring. There is a long list of desiderata: in addition to methodological discussions, systematic studies, including studies based on case comparisons, are required. New areas of research are to be developed, including intervention studies, effects research, and much more, which face up to the current issues with regard to the development of education standards.

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