A citizenship skills development model among undergraduate students

Modelo de desarrollo ciudadano en estudiantes universitarios

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Abstract

This qualitative study analyzed the perspectives of undergraduate students, faculty members, and administrators of a higher education institution in Mexico regarding the education model of citizenship skills development that the school has in place, with the objective of providing a framework for citizenship education and collecting information leading to the improvement of such learning model. Participant opinions were collected through questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews aimed to identify the development level of skills related to citizenship, as well as the elements in the educational model that most effectively promote such learning. It was found that all the participants share a similar notion of citizenship and identify the same entities —family and basic education institutions— as mainly responsible for providing citizenship education. A positive finding was the recognition of the citizenship education goals that the institution has stated, as well as the different strategies that are in place to achieve such goals.

Resumen

El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo principal analizar e identificar la efectividad del modelo de formación de habilidades ciudadanas de los estudiantes de la institución privada de educación superior de México bajo la perspectiva de estudiantes graduados de licenciatura, profesores y ejecutivos de la institución. Este modelo de formación incluye el componente curricular a través de la inclusión de materias dentro de la formación profesional de todos los alumnos, la participación en proyectos de desarrollo social y ciudadanía, además del involucramiento voluntario en grupos estudiantiles, cuyas agendas incluyen acciones comunitarias. La presente

investigación realizó cuestionarios en línea y entrevistas semi-estructuradas con graduados, profesores y ejecutivos de la institución. Los resultados muestran que el modelo de formación ciudadana es bien conocido por todos los miembros de esta comunidad, cada grupo (estudiantes, profesores y ejecutivos) tiene una percepción particular de su impacto.

Palabras clave:
Educación ciudadana, competencias ciudadanas, servicio social, servicio comunitario, educación superior.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this investigation was to quantify and analyze the effectiveness of a citizenship education program in the *Tecnológico de Monterrey*, a private higher education institution in Mexico, from the perspectives of its undergraduate students, faculty, and administration.

Such citizenship education program, called Social Education Model, includes an academic component in the form of required courses in the study program for all undergraduate students, the mandatory participation in social service projects, and the voluntary participation in student groups that include community service activities as part of their agendas.

Experiences with this model were collected through online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students, faculty members, and administrators of the higher education institution where the investigation took place.

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND LEARNING

To provide a contextual framework for citizenship education and learning in higher education, it is necessary to bring together concepts and approaches from different disciplines. It is not enough to consider political philosophy and its contribution to the ideas associated with citizenship. This perspective often includes undertones that the liberal, communitarian, and republican ideologies insert in the meaning of citizenship, but fails to consider a critical aspect: the notion that citizenship,

independently from any ideology, is a social construct that derives from a learning process.

To be liberal, communitarian, or republican is something one learns. Occasionally, taking part in some established and defined groups conveys a particular identity that may even become a permanent mark in the life of an individual. In this sense, Ottaway (2005) offers some examples in different contexts where being born to a family with a particular religious or political orientation makes it inevitable for the individual to belong to a universe of representations and beliefs stemming from the family.

Citizenship learning and the development of a set of skills related the topic are part of a long socialization process in an individual's lifetime thoroughly described decades ago by Berger and Luckham (1986). It is through primary school (in which identity is acquired), and secondary school (in which social references are evaluated) socialization processes that social skills are developed and the identity of the individual is shaped. Castoriadis (1996) refers to this individual and social learning process as follows:

> Psyche must be, for better or worse, tamed, and it must accept a "reality" that is, from the beginning and, in a sense, until the end, heterogeneous and alien. This "reality" and its acceptance are the institution's task (p. 50).

The development of certain basic life skills, such as the ability to decode messages and meanings from texts through reading, is heavily determined by the reading habits of the parents and in particular of the mother, as research on factors related to academic performance has been able to prove (UNESCO, 1993). Therefore, citizenship learning and political enculturation are two essential references to be able to reflect upon the form, the processes, and the contents of a citizenship education model.

Another perspective to consider is the previous work on citizenship education in the context of higher education in Mexico. The conceptualization, the resources, the processes, and the frameworks the institutions adopted about citizenship education enables reflection upon the current state of citizenship learning, but most importantly, it leads to the improvement of such learning within the classroom.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNING AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Learning is the outcome of an individual and his/her social process. To understand the learning process, psychology has made many contributions. Here we will only briefly summarize those most relevant to the social aspect of learning, as well as some elements that sociology has contributed.

If the learning process favors the development of competences but only the procedural skills —specific skills and competencies to carry out particular tasks (with a special emphasis on those that derive in economic results)— are emphasized, there is a risk of losing sight of the comprehensiveness of the learning process in areas such as those related to the different social competences or skills upon which citizenship is built.

Therefore, it is essential to recognize that, from the psychological perspective, the construction of a reflective consciousness is the result of social and representational mechanisms, then commitment is made as a result of a complex network of motivations and experiences developed by the individual, both intra and interpersonally. Two elements are identified as distinctive to reflective consciousness: flexibility and criticism to dogmatisms: "In summary, the reflective consciousness is displayed through life skills, which can be understood and explained as social competence" (Gómez, 2005, p. 27).

The concept of social competence has evolved with the contributions of different authors over three decades, from a set of skills susceptible to be quantified through psychometrics in the 1960s, to more emotional variables, such as empathy in the 1990s.

According to López de Dicastillo and Iriarte (2006), social skills include a set of dispositions in the individual from which stem the abilities to relate to others; of understanding and accepting opposing points of views; of mediating conflicts; as well as the creation of emotional bonds and the personal self-concept about others.

Therefore, social skills are foundational to citizenship education as they enable and prepare the ground for the civic participation of the individual through mechanisms of formal or informal involvement in the social arena.

It would be inaccurate to insist on the idea that expert knowledge of citizenship models and democracy as government form constitute the only desirable elements in citizenship education. However, it is essential that this set of social skills and dispositions related to the harmonious coexistence within a social group and oriented to its care and survival are developed and learned.

From a sociological perspective, it is also possible to find the concept of reflective consciousness in Giddens (1986) and his structural theory. In such theoretical proposal, reflectiveness, from its inception, implies that every social actor becomes a social theorist, someone whose actions come after reflection, and only then he or she is defined as a social agent. On this regard, one of the contributions of phenomenology and mostly of ethnomethodology was to prove that: 1) Behavior in social life involves an ongoing theorization; and that, 2) Even the longest running habit —or the deepest rooted social norm— involves reflective, continuous, and careful attention (Giddens, 1986, p.5).

This ongoing theorization grants the social actors a permanent social competence that enables them to act through a so-called practical skill, and to discursively express their acts in the world through language and oral expression. This is consistent with the concept of social competence as defined in psychology, as both definitions share the self-referral aspects of the individual as common foundations, a matter that has also been pointed out from the ethics perspective in Camps (1990) and the decentralization processes related to the discursive consciousness in Giddens (1986).

The knowledge body of a social theory of learning has been classified by Gómez (2005) into: The practice theories, in which he identifies Bourdieu (2003) and other authors within the french, neo-marxist critical sociology, and where learning is conceived as the result of an ongoing process of meaning production. This process is the result of a continuous interaction between the social actors within specific contexts.

Secondly, identified within the so-called symbolic interactionism —rooted in the School of Chicago Blumer (1938)— Blumer (1938) postulates that —as a result of the interaction and through the exchange of symbols— the individual develops their perception of the environment; increases its problem-solving abilities; and, creates identities for specific contexts. This perspective stresses the role of exchange and the individual decentralization of the symbol, while the former stresses the role of the context and the interpretative practices of the community.

Lastly, a line of thought related to the social construction of learning is identified within the identity theories. This perspective groups the psychoanalytical positions, where the development of the individual is emphasized and therefore learning is an active process of categorical association and creation. Jerome Bruner (1997) is one of its principal authors.

In this way, both individually and socially, citizenship skills are progressively developed in a person. The characteristics that citizens may display under certain circumstances and in specific moments in time will depend upon the process and the historical context. What is important to stress out is that citizenship is learned and put into practice within a common framework or group of persons.

In conclusion, it is possible to assert that citizenship skills are the result of the social context in which a personal history unfolds. It is both individually and subject to historical norms that the social knowledge, the self-awareness and awareness of others, and the abilities and skills to interact publicly are shaped.

THE INSTITUTION AS A CITIZENSHIP LEARNING ENTITY

It has been stated that citizenship as a learning object requires an approach from the educational institution where democratic practices are commonplace, and it's a daily practice. So that it can be understood as a plural learning and not as a monolithic concept that is introduced in the syllabi of one or more courses that some students must take and through a few strategies that permeate into the institutional culture.

Citizenship learning, defined by Gómez (2005) as a production and reproduction process of constructed meanings adopted by social actors, requires the examination and review of the institution's own practices, as well as creating spaces for reflection, besides the training that everyone who participates in them must receive. It is both in the classroom and in the institutional and social areas that students acquire their own sense of citizenship. And in such learning, a combination of norms, values, and behaviors accepted and geared by the sociopolitical system come together and contribute to shaping a political socialization through all the resources that both the institution and the community provide to the students. This enables them to participate in the different political and symbolic scenarios of civil society and government.

In the institution where this study was carried out, citizenship education follows three approaches: Academic, required and elective courses that are part of their study programs; active participation in social service, which for Mexico is a requirement for graduation for all higher education students; and voluntary participation in student groups. It is in these three scenarios citizenship education takes place.

METHOD

An ethnographic design (Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández-Collado, and Baptista, 2006) was selected for this qualitative study, and following questions were formulated to guide the research:

1. What is the perception of the institution's undergraduate students regarding the Social Education Model and its elements in connection with the development of citizenship skills?
2. What is the perception of the faculty on the Social Education Model and its elements regarding the development of citizenship skills?
3. What is the perception of the administrators on the Social Education Model and its elements regarding the development of citizenship skills?
4. How do faculty and administrators involved in the Social Education Model perceive the development of citizenship skills among undergraduate students?

Undergraduate students' questionnaires and interviews

The purpose of these interviews was to learn more about the perception of citizenship education that the undergraduates received during their studies at the institution, to identify the strengths and opportunities among such educational model.

1. In an initial stage, a total of 30 citizenship experience reports (RECs) were selected from a database of 120 records: 15 with the highest possible score and 15 with the lowest score.
2. Contact information (e-mail and telephone number) for these RECs was requested to the Student Records Office. Since the participants were in different campuses and cities, it was decided to hold the interviews via electronic media.
3. An invitation e-mail was sent out to the undergraduate students to participate in an electronic interview (telephone call or another internet based tool).
4. Due to the low response to e-mails, further support was requested to the Alumni Office to contact the undergraduates and invite them to participate; however, there was no response.
5. After that, an online questionnaire was created to facilitate data collection and a decision was made to send them to the 30 participants initially selected, as well as to an additional 90 undergraduate students.
6. From a total of 120 undergraduate students that received the questionnaire, ten of them responded and agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. However, only five of them were available to complete the semi-structured interview. Three out of these five interviews were facilitated and recorded via Elluminate-Blackboard, and the other two were held via MSN.

Faculty questionnaires

A questionnaire was designed to collect the perceptions of the faculty regarding the Social Education Model, and mainly, the development of citizenship skills among undergraduate students. Faculty was segmented into three different groups:

- Sample 1: Faculty members who have designated their AD09 to EM11 courses with the CA-S (Course with Service Learning, by its Spanish acronym) or CCTR (Course with Transversal Citizenship, by its Spanish acronym) attributes (n = 324).
- Sample 2: Faculty members who received training in the Summer of 2011 or who continue to use the CCTR designation (n = 143).
- Sample 3: Faculty members who have not yet participated in Transversal Citizenship or Service Learning (n = 344).

Administration interviews

To collect the perception and vision regarding citizenship education and the Social Education Model, administrators from the Academic Vice-Rector's Office and from the Research, Entrepreneurship and Social Development Vice-Rector's Office were interviewed. Participants were selected from a pool of members of the institution's Ethics and Citizenship Advisory Board:

- Academic Vice-Rector's Office. This area is responsible for overseeing the academic quality and educational model enrichment efforts of the institution, in alignment with the goals outlined in the institution's mission statement.
- General Education Office. This area is responsible for academic strategy design, quality assurance of general education courses, and skills assessment in undergraduate students under a continuous improvement approach.
- Social Education Office. This area coordinates and supports the institution's activities oriented to citizenship education for students.
- Social Development Office. This area is responsible for coordinating nationwide the Sustainable Social Development Institute (IDeSS, by its Spanish acronym) and of the Citizenship Social Service program.
- QEP Office. This area oversees the correct implementation, assessment, and follow up on the Learning Quality Improvement Plan, which aims to strengthen the students' ethical and citizenship skills.
- Academic Evaluation and Institutional Effectiveness Office. This area coordinates the institution's efforts related to the evaluation of the academic

and co-curricular programs, and that contributes to the definition and follow-up of the improvement actions resulting from such evaluation.

- Student Affairs Office. This area is responsible for enriching the comprehensive education of the students, promoting and developing their skills (knowledge, abilities, experiences, dispositions, and values).

Semi-structured interviews were held with head administrators in these areas and then transcribed to analyze the main comments and to provide relevant feedback to the study.

RESULTS

Undergraduate students' questionnaires and interviews

- Half of the respondents assertively identify citizenship skills.
- All of the respondents believe that family and basic education institutions have the primary responsibility for citizenship education, with higher education institutions to a lesser degree.
- Based on the respondents' answers, citizenship involves an identity as a Mexican national, casting an informed and responsible vote in government elections, contributing to the solution of social issues, and, to a lesser degree, being told about the problems that the country faces.
- Regarding the interpretation of having or not developed their citizenship skills while they were students in the institution, respondents expressed both views. Those who responded "no" said that these skills are acquired within the family, in basic education, or that the contents of the undergraduate courses at the institution do not change student mindsets. On the other hand, those who responded "yes" expressed that skills are developed through participation in student groups, understanding and awareness of other people and places, or a mindset oriented to social projects.
- Regarding the courses that effectively promoted citizenship learning, respondents said that learning took place through course activities, course

projects, classroom discussions, and through the professor's enthusiasm and knowledge.

- On average, undergraduate students participated in 2 to 4 community service projects such as: student groups, campus-wide projects, non-governmental organizations, as well as government organizations at the local, state and national levels.

- In some instances, the respondents became highly committed to the cause, to such an extent that they continued participating voluntarily after graduating. One of the respondents said that the commitment led them to establish a non-government organization.

- The respondents believe that community service helps students become aware of different economic, cultural, political, and social contexts, where there are people with many different needs. Service activities allowed them to act as an agent of change. Access to quality education is considered one of the most significant social issues that must be addressed.

- On an average 8.8 out of 10 undergraduate students said that the results of their community service projects were transcendental, while the projects from classes were important but not transcendental. Respondents recommended the continuity of projects from one academic term to another, so that further progress can be made and tangible results can be achieved over time.

- Half of the respondents said they didn't participate in student groups. One of them expressed they participated "unwittingly" but did not believe that this experience had contributed to the development of their citizenship skills. Those who did participate said that the most enriching experience was the unifying bonds created with other students or the satisfaction of organizing professional events in their fields of interest. Two respondents said that they carried out citizenship actions with their student groups.

- Respondents gave high scores to citizenship learning through student groups.

- Out of the three elements of the Social Education Model, the one that scored as providing the most opportunities to develop citizenship skills was Citizenship Social Service (75%), followed by student groups (17%), and the Social and Political Perspectives course in third place (8%).

- Regarding the role of the faculty and administration, the respondents said that 78% of them support citizenship skills development, while 22% said they don't or did not have enough information to answer the question.
- Respondents said that some faculty members genuinely embrace citizenship skills development or that they lead by example. Some of the respondents said they didn't have enough information to express an opinion regarding the administrators. Respondents noted that high school teachers are enthusiastic role models in this kind of activities.

Faculty questionnaires

- Faculty respondents believe that citizenship involves the participation of the individual in the social and political processes. This belief aligns with the concept that has been developed by the institution: citizenship means a change from awareness to active involvement.
- Respondents believe that citizenship education fundamentally belongs to the family (more than 85%), followed by basic education, higher education, communication means, and finally other types of institutions.
- Most of the professors (over 80%) believe that citizenship mainly involves participating towards the solution of shared problems.
- Most of the respondents were able to identify the two citizenship skills that the institution has defined.
- Faculty members, whether delivering transversal citizenship courses or not, are able to identify the two citizenship skills defined by the institution.
- Faculty's role in the development of citizenship skills among students fundamentally involves:
- Developing projects in which the course's objectives are applied to meet the needs of vulnerable sectors.
- Promoting strategies to raise student awareness of the country's needs, especially those of the less privileged sectors.
- Promoting student reflection regarding their duties and rights as citizens.

- Over 50% of the faculty members believe that citizenship skills are mainly developed in students by participating in projects about the Citizenship Social Service program.
- Faculty agrees that learning activities are the most crucial element in the courses they teach which contribute to the development of citizenship skills, followed by the instructional method, class discussions, and course content. These responses lead to think that the faculty favors learning activities in which students learn about and experiment the reality by using specific instructional methods and then use discussion as a tool for skill development.
- Respondents agree that their favorite community service projects are those that originate from the abilities and interests of their students and that they prefer to do an initial diagnostic or contact.
- Faculty members said that analysis of social issues is the most critical learning strategy that supports citizenship skills development in their courses, followed by project development, dialogue with social actors, case studies and dilemma discussions, and lead by their own example as individuals and professionals.
- Faculty agrees that the most effective strategy for citizenship skills assessment is project tracking, followed by achievement of project objectives, and learning evidence. Half of the respondents assertively assess citizenship skills.

Administration interviews

- Administrators agree with other participants on citizenship being a type of civic participation in which the individual contributes to social improvement.
- Similarly, administrators believe that family is fundamentally responsible for citizenship education followed by primary education institutions, but added that higher education institutions play a vital role in solidifying citizenship skills.
- Regarding the Social Education Model, it is evident for the administrators that in order to facilitate the development of the two citizenship skills, the three elements of the program must be in place. The academic courses: which provide the students with the necessary knowledge about the social issues and enable them to critically analyze such reality. The community service projects: which give the students opportunities to put knowledge and social awareness

into action and with guided practice on how to contribute to solving social issues. And finally, the participation in student groups and volunteering activities: which allow students who have reached citizenship maturity to become personally and altruistically involved in specific issues.

Relationships between participants

- This investigation collected the perceptions of different participants — undergraduate students, faculty members, and administrators— regarding the institution's citizenship education program. An interesting finding is that all the stakeholders share a similar notion of citizenship and identify the same entities —family and basic education institutions— as mainly responsible for providing citizenship education.
- A positive finding is that all participants recognize the citizenship skills that the institution has stated, as well as the different strategies that are in place to achieve its citizenship education goals. Each of the participants, of course, contributes elements that in their opinion should be adjusted to make the model more efficient.

CONCLUSIONS

Citizenship education should start in the family and continue through basic education, but this does not exempt higher education institutions from continuing offering opportunities for the development of skills that are fundamental in the life of democratic or aspiring democratic societies.

It is in this context that the institution has designed an educational model to achieve such development, in the first place by stating two institutional citizenship skills. The model includes an academic component through courses in the study program, the participation in social service projects that culminate in a written reflection that allows students to reflect upon their individual role as active citizens, and finally the opportunity to participate in student groups that include voluntary work in their agendas.

The findings include a shared notion of citizenship among undergraduate students, faculty members, and administrators, as well as some elements leading to the improvement of the institution's citizenship education model.

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