A response to Ralph Leighton's Article - "Revisiting Postman and Weingartner's 'New Education' - is teaching Citizenship a Subversive Activity"

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Abstract
This article is written in response to Ralph Leighton’s “Revisiting Postman and Weingartner’s ‘New Education’ – is teaching Citizenship a Subversive Activity?” (Leighton, 2006), which appeared in Citizenship Teaching and Learning Volume 2, Number 1. Drawing on the radical late-60s writings of Postman and Weingartner, Leighton calls for citizenship education to avoid the perils of entropy, and to energise education with a spirit of creative subversion. This article has two halves. The first considers Leighton's criticism of education in general, and concern for citizenship education in particular, and questions whether the Postman/Weingartner critique is valid in the conditions of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The second seeks to identify the Postman/Weingartner critique as being part of a genesis of emerging orthodoxies in educational policy in the late twentieth century, policy that can be seen finding expression in the discourse of the Learning Society and Life-Long Learning. It is argued that these discourses emphasise the individual, and individual needs, to the extent that they have the potential to undermine citizenship education's ambition of promoting meaningful community involvement, respect for diversity and social cohesion.

Introduction
This essay is a response to Ralph Leighton’s engaging article in Citizenship Teaching and Learning 2.1, entitled “Revisiting Postman and Weingartner’s ‘New Education’ – is teaching Citizenship a Subversive Activity?” (Leighton, 2006). The article deserves attention as it covers many very important principles, and policy issues, relating to the current initiative to develop citizenship education in English secondary schools (QCA 1998, DfEE 1999a). The intention of the essay is to acknowledge the verity and importance of some of the concerns Leighton raises, and the criticisms he makes about current policy and practice. This will spring from a support for many of the aims he defines for citizenship education.

However, there are aspects of Leighton’s pessimism that are open to contention, display some potential contradictions, and could be unhelpful to the project we both support. This essay will attempt to identify and discuss these. Additionally, and
importantly, some of the principles that inform Leighton’s argument, drawn with reference to the work quoted in the title of his article, will also be discussed. Postman and Weingartner’s seminal radical writing, first published in 1969 (Postman and Weingartner, 1969), offered a powerful critique of concepts of education, schooling, teaching and learning, they considered prevalent at that time. Leighton’s article is presented as ‘homage’ to this work (Leighton 2006:79), and consequently this essay will regard the two works under discussion as positing much the same thesis. It will consider the value of Postman and Weingartner’s critique to the circumstances of the early years of the 21st century, in the light of some current writing relating to citizenship education. This essay is offered as a professional and academic colleague drawing on similar experiences, having similar responsibilities and sharing similar aims.

Leighton’s article is heartfelt, it is described in the editorial to the edition as ‘deliberately polemical’ (Davies, 2006). That it comes from the heart should be considered a virtue. There is a passionate commitment to citizenship education, and to the objectives of students learning relevant knowledge, critical skills and empowering them to question, and to engage in the project of an essential renewal of civic society. It might be described as idealistic; this too is a virtue. It is important that we engage in a discussion of ideals. This essay makes many points that could also be described as idealistic.

In favour of citizenship education: pessimism or optimism?

Leighton is rightly impatient with the faltering implementation of citizenship as a meaningful subject in many, if not most schools (Kerr et al, 2004, Calvert and Clemitshaw, 2003, Clemitshaw and Calvert, 2005), in the lip service paid to it in many policy documents, in the absence of sufficient initial teacher education in citizenship. He asserts that this is indicative of a continuing process of entropy, in a Postman and Weingartner sense, in much that passes for schooling in England in the first decade of the 21st century. Entropy is a word used ‘to denote a general and unmistakable tendency of all systems – natural and man-made – in the universe to ‘run down’, to reduce to chaos and uselessness’ (Postman and Weingartner, 1969:17).

I will first of all review Leighton’s article to establish the broad areas where issues are identified which, to me, are valid, and where general prescriptions should be supported. They lie in the areas of the preparation of specialist teachers committed to the new citizenship education project, education for critical citizenship, the application of democratic principles to school communities, and the need for belief and passion in education.

The general picture relating to the training of specialist teachers dedicated to the teaching of citizenship is presented in the article as lamentable. By the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year, 800 specialist teachers had qualified through the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education, enough to offer a specialist citizenship teacher to only 15% of secondary schools in England (Leighton, 2006:82). Pointedly, this lack of supply is matched by a lack of demand, with few schools advertising to recruit a specialist citizenship teacher. This is indicative of a faltering curriculum
development project, illustrative of schools adopting a minimalist approach to
developing citizenship as a new curriculum subject, giving, sometimes foisting,
citizenship subject responsibility to existing non-specialist staff, placing it alongside,
at best, a discreet Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE) programme, at
worst a fragmented, low-status PHSE curriculum, or relying on cross-curricular
token gestures to citizenship education, which are beyond meaningful management,
monitoring or evaluation. Additionally, in the main, little progress has been made in
developing a sense of the civic implications of subjects across the curriculum.

If schooling is a process designed to produce ‘unquestioning loyalty and cannon
fodder’, if ‘pupils are still largely expected to be passive recipients of their place in
society’ (Leighton, 2006:80) then criticism of and opposition to this is undoubtedly
right. If schools actively generate alienation from, and rejection of, education and
society, then urgent concern is essential. The potential, and essential need, for
citizenship education to promote social and civic engagement, dispositions to
question, and scrutinise established institutions, their policy and purpose, is also to
be concurred with. One might question whether the two short quotes from Leighton
above are a fair criticism of all that goes on in our schools, but that it happens at all
is a cause for concern, and remedial action.

Leighton’s worry that the democratic principles that should lie at the heart of
citizenship education might find difficulty being translated into democratic values
and processes in schools is valid.

These activities (school councils) are controlled by teachers who either
set their own restrictions or follow guidelines laid down by school
managers or school governors. It is exceptional for a school to
devolve any budget to a school council, although some do; it is rare for
schools to have pupil representation on governing bodies, although
there is legislated provision for such representation. It is almost
unheard of, in the state sector, for pupils to have any formal say in the
structure of their day, their lessons, or their curriculum.(Leighton,
2006:85)

Seeking out and empowering the student voice, establishing school councils with
a meaningful role in the school community, a budget, real representative and
decision-making functions, is essential to a citizenship education project. However
schools are traditionally authoritarian institutions. A mis-match between the
espousal of democratic values in citizenship teaching, and the absence of democratic
values in the school community, is something that students will detect very easily.
Nevertheless, there are some examples of good practice in these areas, as Leighton
acknowledges, and perhaps these can be a basis for more optimism than is generally
conveyed by him. However we might acknowledge the paradox that positive
development in this area will be dependent on determined and dynamic head
teachers. There needs to be a commitment to spreading good practice from teachers,
school leaders and policy makers.

Leighton calls for belief, commitment and passion in education (Leighton,
2006:79), and these qualities are conveyed in the pace of the prose throughout the
Is citizenship a Subversive Activity

They are qualities that can energise, and make meaningful, the whole project of education, not only citizenship education. If visible in students, teachers, school leaders, administrators and policy makers, they may be signs that something important, and good, is going on. But, to sound another note of caution, such qualities might exist in an educational project that one might not want to aspire to at all.

A case of over pessimism?

Building on some of the qualifying comments in the section above, I now want to argue further that there is a degree of over pessimism, and over criticism, in some of the points that Leighton makes, and that aspects of good practice in what good citizenship education is can be defined, identified and spread, given the political and managerial will to embrace these issues. I will look at some of the ways in which school and classroom practice is characterised by Leighton in ways that are over critical; for example, ‘questioning’.

Leighton offers a critique of what he characterises as classroom cultures and processes. He decries teacher questioning that is based on guesswork,

... guess how apparently disparate strands are interconnected, guess what answer the teacher wants, guess what is RIGHT and TRUE – but with the valued questions, values behind the questions, and arbitration on validity of guesses, being the sole remit of teachers. (Leighton, 2006:83).

This point descends directly from the Postman and Weingartner thesis,

Now, what is it that students do in the classroom? Well, mostly they sit and listen to the teacher. ... They are rarely encouraged to ask substantive questions ... It is practically unheard of for students to play any role in determining what problems are worth studying ... Examine the types of questions teachers ask in classrooms ... most of them are ‘convergent questions’, but which might be more simply be called ‘Guess what I’m thinking questions.(Postman and Weingartner, 1969:30-31)

There are grounds for criticising, in a technical sense, what passes for teacher questioning in some classrooms, perhaps because it is too shallow, too closed, too undemanding, lacking the challenge of focused rational complex thinking in those being questioned, even falling into the blind ‘guess what I am thinking’ field, a characterisation of the nature of questions in education much favoured by Postman and Weingartner; a field which literally leaves students unclear and confused, unable to make any new, rational connections. Anyone who has the privilege of observing lessons as a teacher trainer can identify this limited practice in beginning teachers. It is no doubt found in the work of experienced teachers too. Nevertheless it is surely not possible to deny that questioning is an important aspect of a teaching technique, one that, if done well, can enrich teaching and learning. The recent initiative in England to identify and spread good classroom practice identifies ‘questioning’ as a
key teaching technique and offers valid guidance on ensuring it is done in a meaningful way. It draws on definitions of high level thinking that should be the target for questioning challenges. Leaving aside any criticisms that the National Strategy for Key Stage 3 is yet another element of centralised ‘control’ of what goes on in schools and classrooms, this is surely an indication of a technique that is valid, and essential professional practice.

Leighton calls for a spirit of inquiry in education and asserts that this spirit is embodied in the ambitions of the citizenship education project. The National Curriculum programme of study for citizenship (DfEE 1999a) calls for such enquiry skills to be fore-fronted in citizenship teaching. However his article talks of a ‘fear of enquiry’ in schools, a conspiracy that fears an ‘uncovering of inadequacy amongst decision makers and commentators, a preference for their own feelings of security and superiority rather than looking to develop and enhance the prospects of future generations’ (Leighton, 2006:83). This is again in danger of caricaturing educational policy and practice, and of being over pessimistic. In many subject areas the principle of enquiry-led teaching and learning, with questions, pupil generated questions as well as teacher-determined questions, being the organising principle for learning focus is well established (see, within the area of history education, Riley, 2000). A list of questions that Postman and Weingartner set out as indicative of the pointless nature of questioning include, ‘How many sets of chromosomes do human beings have?’, ‘What is the real meaning of this poem?’, ‘Why did Brutus betray Caesar?’ (Postman and Weingartner, 1969:31). I would first of all argue that these are questions of very different natures, but all possessing some validity. If these are questions that students have only been equipped to guess an answer to, they are indeed pointless, but if they are questions that are formulated in a spirit of enquiry, that enables teachers and supports students to offer speculation and posit tentative exploration of their implications, reflecting on their significance, in human and in civic terms, then I assert their value.

Postman and Weingartner: A message for our times?

All this, of course, begs the point, strongly argued by Leighton, and by Postman and Weingartner, that schools and schooling, and the whole educational establishment, are so crippled by entropy that they have lost any validity.

... we believe that the way schools are currently conducted does very little, and quite probably nothing, to enhance our chances of mutual survival.

... our present educational system is not viable, and is certainly not capable of generating enough energy to lead to its own revitalization.

... there are so few men (sic) currently working as professional educators who have anything germane to say about changing our
They also criticise the school curriculum’s structure based on subjects, subjects that are ‘content’ based.

There are thousands of teachers who teach ‘subjects’ such as Shakespeare, or the Industrial Revolution, or geometry, because they are inclined to enjoy talking about such matters. In fact that is why they became teachers. It is also why their students fail to become competent learners. (Postman and Weingartner, 1969:50)

To our knowledge, all schools of education and teacher training institutions in the United States are organized around the idea that content and method are separate …

Content … exists independently of and prior to the student, and is indifferent to the manner in which it is ‘transmitted’.

The professors of the liberal arts have, so far, escaped the censure and ridicule they deserve for not having noticed that a ‘discipline’ or a ‘subject’ is a way of knowing something – in other words, a method – and that, therefore, their courses are methods courses. (Postman and Weingartner, 1969:29-30)

In these passages the authors are arguing against content, and for method. They are privileging method over content, pitching method as a field of educational practice that stresses the centrality of the learner, her active engagement in learning, and the development of the ability to learn to learn, against a subject content that is simply transmitted to a passive learner.

If this caricature of a binary had credence in the 1960s, I would argue that it does not have credence today. Subjects have, as part of their identity, a method, and in the last extract quoted above, Postman and Weingartner acknowledge this, seemingly exposing a contradiction in their argument. For example, History, as a subject, has concepts that are central to its identity; a ‘way of knowing’, they would include chronology, causation, evidence, interpretation. These ways of knowing are organising principles that a history teacher would lead students into an understanding of, through the exploration of some aspects of the content of history. They, alongside the creation of learning environments and tasks, involving degrees of student autonomy, would be the terrain of meaningful history teaching and learning. What is more, the History National Curriculum for England emphasises and promotes these very qualities (DfEE 1999b). It is worth suggesting that one of the difficulties in the development of citizenship education is the absence of such ‘ways of knowing’. Currently we are called upon to teach citizenship knowledge
through the acquisition of skills, and through active participation (DfEE 1999a); whilst of value, and laying down a very important challenge to build up experience of what this education might look like in practice, they are not organising concepts as such, in the way that chronology, causation, and evidence are in history.

Postman and Weingartner’s criticism of ‘subjects’ as an organising principle in the curriculum goes against the validity of subjects as a map of the field of human experience, thought and endeavour. These subjects should be taught sensitively, with a sense of humility to the human experience, and the human imagination, that they embody. As subjects they have proved capable of acknowledging and criticising their nationalist and imperialist origins and limitations, and transcended them. They should be ways of knowing that students actively engage with, rather than be passive recipients of. Furthermore they should all, history, geography, science, literature, mathematics, be held to account for the civic significance of their pursuit, a consideration that should be central to all this teaching and learning that is going on. Citizenship teachers might play a catalyst role in developing this aspect of subject teaching across the curriculum.

This brings us to Postman’s and Weingartner’s distrust of the teacher as expert. It seems to me that to wish away the nature of the teacher’s subject expertise, is to set out on a programme of absurdity. A teacher is inevitably a subject expert, and the role she embraces is one of developing greater understandings in her students. If that is a responsibility that is carried out badly, with no reference to supporting the student, engaging the student, creating a sense of belonging between the student and the subject, encouraging their sense of exploration of the subject, then indeed there is a cause for concern. If it is teaching that is pompous and sterile then it will contribute little to fostering an understanding of the human and civic importance of the subject.

If, however, it is teaching that does support and engage, inspire commitment and the desire to understand, then subject teaching, and subject expertise, is valid and essential. If a teacher can acknowledge and convey to students the sense that, although they, as teacher, may know more, their humility towards the human and civic significance of what they know grows all the more greater; that the more they know, the less they know, then perhaps we have teaching that means something.

There is much in the Leighton/Postman and Weingartner thesis that makes a moral argument for a type of school, classroom, curriculum, that is valid and valuable. (I would personally recommend the chapter entitled ‘So what do you do now?’ (Postman and Weingartner, 1969:183-194) to any teacher with an open mind, and a willingness to reflect on their day-to-day teaching.) A dead weight of conservative entropy in education may have provided the impulse for Postman and Weingartner’s polemical tour-de-force in 1960’s USA. The well-documented fractures in American society of the late 1960s are also a context in which their work should be read. I would argue, however, that these aspects of society and education are not characteristics of England today. If vestiges of entropy remain, they sit alongside a great deal of educational theory and practice that is very different. On a positive side, there is a prevalence of educational practice that emphasises challenge, questioning, enquiry, thinking skills, active learning, interactive classrooms and the integration of content and method. This is a realisation of much of the progressive agenda called for by Postman and Weingartner. Whilst acknowledging varied and

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uneven practice in the complex reality of day-to-day schooling, in many ways this realisation is a new orthodoxy. This new orthodoxy is supported by reams of training materials that have gone into schools in the early years of the new century. It has been promoted by new posts of curriculum development leadership in local authorities responsible for education provision, in the creation of the status of Advanced Skills Teacher to identify teachers who exemplify good practice and can promote it across a community of schools. It is perhaps best exemplified in the prevalence of the terms ‘learning to learn’ and ‘the Learning Society’. It is a development that Leighton either does not acknowledge, or perhaps implies that it is policy without practice.

Leighton asserts that students are still largely expected to be passive recipients of learning about their place in society. Can this point be sustained? Much of the moral impulse in education comes from an ambition to support students to see beyond their place in society, to counter parochialism, promote achievement. It may not always succeed, and the reasons for the limitations of success are complex, and relate to circumstances of inequality and interests of privilege. Nevertheless, in the decades of the 20th century since the publication of Postman and Weingartner’s work, English education, as a ‘mass’ project, has seen rising achievement, largely through community-based schooling, and a vast expansion of access to higher education. This is not to be complacent about the persistence of low attainment and educational deprivation, nor of impoverished classroom practice. Importantly, for the rest of this essay, neither is it a blanket approval of current educational policy and practice, which, it will be argued, present challenges for education, particularly citizenship education, but challenges that are very different from those defined by Postman and Weingartner in the 1960s.

From Postman and Weingartner to Masschelein and Simons

What I want to explore in the latter part of this essay is the way in which some of the language employed in the Postman and Weingartner thesis, reappears in the current policy discourse around what education is, or should be, in an English, and broader European context today. In doing this I want to consider a tension which I think exists in the conceptions and objectives of a civic education, between, on the one hand, an emphasis on the individual, and, on the other, a concern with issues of identity, community and social cohesion. I want to draw primarily on the idea of current educational discourse as ‘immunisation against being together’ (Masschelein and Simons, 2002). I will argue that we, as a citizenship education community in England, and internationally, need to consider what kind of citizens are proposed by educational policy and practice as currently conceived. I will argue that there are implications for citizenship in current educational policy that run a risk of impoverishing, and even curtailing, any sense of being together as communities.

I have argued above that in many ways the emphasis on method, as opposed to content, made by Postman and Weingartner can be seen as present in much official material which attempts to identify and spread good practice in pedagogy today; a new orthodoxy. There are other aspects of language that echo across the decades. In the quote below, having claimed a disjuncture between the technical developments of media and communication, and the entropic practices of education in the 1960s, they set out their clarion call for action to prevent the end of western civilisation;
We suggest that this is the stage we have now reached environmentally, and so we must now work to reach this stage educationally. The only thing that is at stake is our survival. (Postman and Weingartner, 1969:95)

As I have argued above, the type of education argued for by Postman and Weingartner, rather than being now needed, as argued by Leighton, has actually come into existence in modern conditions. It is present in the concept of the Learning Society, a term that is central to much current educational discourse. In this society the production and management of knowledge and information is the critical purpose that will secure society’s survival and renewal. There has to be a capacity to react to continual change, and to learn how to survive and renew in these conditions. Individuals have to become permanent learners and be active in defining their learning needs, educational institutions have to become flexible facilitators of the meeting of self-defined learning needs, and all organisations have to become ‘learning organisations’. Furthermore we must develop ‘a learning market’, ‘a learning city’, ‘a learning nation’, a ‘learning democracy’ (see, for example, Ranson, 1998).

In some ways, as educationalists, we might consider this emphasis on ‘learning’ as a good thing, one that supports and promotes our belief in the importance of education for society, and promotes the concept of the socially participating citizen. Also, one might evaluate its emphasis on adapting to changing environments, putting the student at the centre of the purpose of education, and striving to ensure the renewal and survival of society, as being, at least in some ways, a welcome realisation of the changes demanded by Postman and Weingartner. When we consider the type of citizen implied by current educational policy, it is reasonable to suggest that echoes of Postman and Weingartner can be detected, arguing that, in some important ways, they exist as progenitors of current policy. However, this turn in educational discourse raises real challenges for a conception of a civic, or citizenship, education in our time.

In a critique of the Learning Society, Jan Masschelein questions the conceptions of life and the citizen implied by this discourse (Masschelein, 2001), in particular its implication for the citizen’s relationship with the other. This essay will attempt to identify and summarise the implications of the discourse of the Learning Society for the tension between the individual and community in citizenship education, implications which risk undermining the potential of education to consider community. The discourse of the Learning Society reduces the relationship between the individual and community to an over-individualist position. The emphasis placed, in the discourse of the Learning Society, on the meeting of needs and survival, means that any notion of success and happiness are tied to the self-centred satisfaction of all our life’s needs. It reduces life to a zoological level, and defines social relations, quoting Masschelein, as such; ‘as a living being in this sense the individual cannot have a relationship with something or someone else in their particularity, but only in their functionality’ (Masschelein 2001:7). He posits the environment and the citizen, as defined by the discourse of the Learning Society, against another, preferable, conceptualisation of the world and the citizen:

(where) … things do not appear only as instruments or means for goals or objects of choice. They do not only serve the maintenance of life
and the satisfaction of needs. Therefore they do not build an environment (for life), but they build a world where human beings can exist: a world being the public space between human beings who appear to each other as unique and who act and speak together. The world is understood here as a durable habitat of human beings … not there in order to be consumed, but in order to endure … (and) in order for life to be the life of someone, there is need not only for a world of artefacts, but also (for) a world as a network of meanings and embodied relationships among a plurality of beings who are at the same time equal and absolutely different and unique. (Masschelein, 2001:9)

Here is a call for an alternative conceptualisation of human beings to the one offered by the Learning Society, a conceptualisation of human beings in a society, as citizens in a community, as people with life stories, not just needs.

In a later work, Masschelein and Simons (2002) discuss the implications of current educational policy, as exemplified by The European Higher Education Area, a joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education, convened in Bologna in June 1999. They ask, given the way this declaration speaks of education, and the people who inhabit education, what are its implications for the type of citizen it expects to live in the globalised world it seeks to prepare them for? They draw attention to what they call the discursive horizon of the declaration, and what it invites the inhabitants of education to become. I will set out some of the key concepts that compose this discursive horizon.

The Bologna Declaration invites us to be autonomous individuals, identifying our learning needs, negotiating the satisfaction of those needs through flexible, competitive educational provision, doing this as an entrepreneurial self, engaging in lifelong learning, pursuing a life as an enterprise. As such we will compose a ‘learning’ or ‘knowledge society’. Inhabitants of the learning society are referred to as stakeholders, with self-directed learning needs, requiring a number of competing education environments to be available to match provision to individual needs. This maximises the individual’s potential for success. It implies new skills of self-appraisal, self-evaluation, self-criticism, and new forms of self, and peer assessment.

First, it becomes clear that we are dealing with an individual who is confronted, on the one hand, with needs (her own and those of others) and, on the other, with potential and capital; she is someone who is obliged to do something with her capital or potential in order to meet those needs; and this means … that the individual subject is expected to develop a productive and entrepreneurial relationship towards itself. (Masschelein and Simons 2002:593-594)

This is a process of the capitalisation of education, and furthermore, the capitalisation of life itself, enabling education to be defined as investment, and defining many aspects of life; marriage, divorce, procreation, as investment, with outcomes measured as profit or loss, with an emphasis on the exploitation of preference and choice to maximise the satisfaction of needs.
People are responsible for their own well-being, and therefore a specific kind of self-knowledge and self-mastery is required – opening the way for the ‘experts of the self’ (the therapists) to sell their expertise. The entrepreneurial self is an active, counting and calculating self. It counts with itself, it keeps its own account and is accountable. (Masschelein and Simons, 2002:595)

This is a discursive horizon of education that puts the learner at the centre of the process, places an emphasis on skills, and the importance of individuality, echoing Postman and Weingartner. Even though the analysis is focused on the space of higher education, its implications are just as relevant to schools. Anyone who has worked in schools in recent years will be able to detect this discourse as informing the way the institution defines itself and its students. Individualised learning routes, competitive schools with diverse specialisms, to support consumer choice, learning to learn, self-assessment, individual learning targets, professional portfolios for teachers expected to cross a quality threshold to secure higher salary rewards, are just some of the current terms that are prevalent in English schools. It echoes with the emphasis put on the learner, the individual, the elevation of method and skills over content, present in Postman and Weingartner’s prescription for the entropic condition they defined in their time. But it does so in a way that has implications that we might want to consider anew.

Going back to the critique offered by Masschelein and Simons; they explore the implications for social relations implied by the discursive horizon they analyse. They identify it as not anti-social; defining relations towards friends and loved-ones as crucial for personal happiness, social effectiveness and a healthy society, but, that these personal/social relations start from an identification of individual self-needs, requiring for their meeting the conscious development of inter-personal skills, to make social relations transparent and to manage the meeting of needs. These are ‘calculable and calculating relations’ (Masschelein and Simons, 2002:597).

The success of these entrepreneurial projects also requires a permanent obsession with quality, performativity and standardisation. Competing institutions, and entrepreneurial learners, have to be compared and measured against quality indicators. Again, anyone with experience of schools in England in recent years will readily testify to the growth of quality measurement in the professional and learning life of the school; regular (if not obsessive) assessment of learning against defined levels, individual targets for learners and teachers, frequent monitoring and evaluation of teaching, measurements of ‘value-added’ in learning, performance management regimes, publicised inspection reports and school league tables.

To conclude this section, and reassert the way that Postman and Weingartner’s prescriptions can be found to echo in this discourse, as described by Masschelein and Simons, I offer this next quote,

… a human life … required to be so conducted – is a life not so much in a world as in an environment. The proliferation of the word ‘environment’ is striking indeed. … Reality is not allowed to appear as a world, and as such has nothing to say to the … entrepreneurial self; it does not speak to her. Things (only) receive their meaning from
Conceptions of community

The message of this critique should be clear. This discourse embodies the creation of a market environment, not only of education, but also of life as lived. In doing so it centralises the autonomous individual, and their individual needs. This centralisation of the reflective, autonomous individual accords with much of the liberal tradition’s emphasis on the individual, and the emphasis which is present, in some ways legitimately, in the liberal conception of the citizen, and in the objectives of citizenship education. Nevertheless it presents a paradox; the appeal to the entrepreneurial self

appears (politically, institutionally) with an authority that knows what is good for those to whom it is addressed. On the other (hand) it feeds a distrust towards this authority since it resounds with the message: be yourself, become the entrepreneur of yourse’ (Masschelein and Simons 2002:601).

For the purposes of this essay’s argument, it closes down other possible conceptions of life, education and community. In emphasising the individual it somehow closes down diversity and any sense of the ‘other’. Postman and Weingartner may not themselves have taken us to this, but their reaction to the conditions of their time, is, I assert, a genesis to this discourse.

Others have also expressed this concern with the development of a strident individualism in modern conditions, creating a precarious individual identity based on consumerism, and diminishing a necessity for individuals to consider the moral demands that come from outside ourselves, a necessity which requires the fostering of a stronger sense of moral responsibility to the significant other, based on an understanding of a complex, authentic, more deeply founded sense of diverse identity (see Mason 2001).

It is essential that a civic, or citizenship education, has as its objective, not just the creation of informed, critical, active individuals, but citizens with a sense of, and obligation to, community. This objective requires more than is present in the current English citizenship programme of study. It makes statements such as ‘use their imagination to consider other people’s experiences and be able to think about, express and explain views that are not their own’ (DfEE 1999a) though well meaning, seem inadequate. Within the educational discursive horizon analysed by Masschelein and Simons, this is an inadequate counter-balancing prescription for the need to educate citizens for an understanding of the relationship between the subject of the individual, and the ‘other’ of the community.

To develop this essay, I want to draw further on the discussion of the meaning of community presented by Masschelein and Simons, which, I argue, poses a fundamental challenge to the neo-liberal discursive horizon of the European Higher Education Area, and to education more generally, requiring more than a counter-
balancing, but a serious re-thinking, by those committed to civic education. They
refer to the effects of the discursive horizon as ‘immunisation’, not in the Postman
and Weingartner sense of injecting students with pointless doses of entropic teaching
(Postman and Weingartner, 1969:32), but as an ‘immunisation against being-
together’. The discursive horizon immunises individuals from a possible threat to
their individuality and subjectivity, whereas, in reality, the very notion of
community includes an infringement of individuality. The discursive horizon,
whilst stressing the importance of ‘interaction with the environment and others in
this environment, individuals are (nonetheless) addressed in the first place as
separated and isolated from each other’ (Masschelein and Simons 2002 p. 602). The
discursive horizon negates the reality that we are always captured in relations of
dependency and obligation, which are beyond transparency and beyond calculation;
parent to child, teacher to student, speaker to listener, individual to community.
They are the crucial reality of a life lived. The meanings implicit in the derivation of
the word community draw on cum, meaning ‘with’, and munus, meaning ‘void, debt,
gift’, implying the debt we owe to others which cannot be measured, as its
calculation would imply that it could be dispensed with, paid off. These notions of
belonging, and the void of the debt we owe to the ‘other’ are critical realities of life
as lived, of meaningful identity, and of the nature of meaningful civic discourse and
social cohesion.

It is important that civic education begins to embrace these principles. There
should be a recognition of the ‘other’, in more than a contractual sense of tolerance,
and readiness to listen and to empathise with views other than our own, but rather
with an acknowledgement of the incalculable debt we always owe. This is not to
negate the complexities of community, its pluralistic nature, the different community
experiences and narratives that comprise a complex society, the conflicts inherent in
a complex society (see Mouffe 2005), indeed it reminds us of these complexities,
complexities that I think are also inadequately acknowledged in the current English
conception of citizenship education (Clemitshaw 2007). However we should negate
the overwhelming emphasis placed on the subject as individual in much educational
and political discourse of our time.

Conclusion

This essay has been a response to Ralph Leighton’s homage to the writing of
Postman and Weingartner about the nature of education in the late 1960s, re-visited
as a recipe for a meaningful citizenship education. Whilst sharing many of
Leighton’s concerns about the progress of citizenship education project in England
today, I have questioned some of Postman and Weingartner’s conceptions of
pedagogy and the role of teachers. More fundamentally, and contrary to Leighton, I
have argued that whilst Postman and Weingartner may have had much to say,
particularly about education in the USA at the time, and that read in conjunction
with an understanding of US society in their time, it is indeed powerful, it has only
limited relevance to education, and to civic education in particular, in England
today. I have also suggested that there can be read in the reaction of Postman and
Weingartner to features of their time, at least a genesis of the neo-liberal politics,
particularly relating to education, that are prevalent today. These policies, with their
stress on survival, individualism, the centrality of skills, learning to learn,
performance measurement, and an overwhelmingly marketised version of
educational relevancy, are seriously absent of the notion of community, and its
importance for social cohesion. Liberal democratic citizenship needs more than a focus on critical autonomous individuals if it is to reflect the importance of community, and affiliations of identity and belonging, that are essential components of life as lived.

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