Procedural concepts and citizenship education: a small-scale study undertaken with PGCE students

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Abstract

Trainees following a one-year programme of History with Citizenship at the University of York were asked to consider the nature of citizenship education with special reference to what in this article are described as procedural concepts. The students produced materials for use in classrooms that emerged from that consideration. Data was gathered from the students who were asked for their perceptions of the purpose and usefulness of the task. Generally, a positive reaction was gained with classroom materials being produced that were of value. A number of issues, however, were raised that related to the nature of citizenship education, how it can be characterised, taught and assessed.
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Introduction

This article discusses issues arising from a project that aimed to further the work on the theme of procedural concepts and citizenship education undertaken at the University of York and funded by the Department for Education and Employment in 2001/2. That initial project identified three procedural concepts of citizenship education (explaining, tolerating, participating) and, following work with three subject teams of teachers (PSE, history and English), produced packs of classroom materials and a guide for teachers. The work described here suggests that it is possible to develop the early work on procedural concepts by encouraging trainees to write and use their own resources and to encourage them to reflect on that process.

A three-stage process was adopted:

- Explanation to students of the nature of procedural concepts.
- Students, with guidance, produced classroom materials education using one or more of the concepts.
- Students were asked to reflect on the process.

The project was developed with the intention to develop three principal benefits:

- Further illumination of the nature of procedural concepts for citizenship education
- Production of classroom materials that can be used by PGCE students and perhaps others.
- The provision of a practical example of the process of how PGCE tutors and students can work together in the achievement of professional standards.

**Characterising Procedural Concepts**

It has long been accepted that concepts characterise the heart of an educational process (Crick and Porter 1978; Crick 2000). And yet, there have been only very few sustained attempts to make clear the nature of understanding of procedural concepts that is necessary for achievement within citizenship education. In this project trainees investigated some of the procedural concepts that are central to the implementation of citizenship education. Three concepts were used: explaining, tolerating and participating.

Procedural (or second order) concepts are distinct from substantive concepts (such as government or war) that relate more narrowly to the study of particular issues. The principal intention in this project was to explore the meaning by which trainees could go beyond asking school students to memorise details of specific cases, and also to go further than to have school students consider the nature of the contexts and substantive concepts which may relate to a number of cases. The ambitious position would be to assert that by identifying procedural concepts it would be possible for trainees to invite school students not just to think about citizenship but to think as citizens. Trainees and others would be encouraged, when using procedural concepts, to move away from citizenship as ‘merely’ a goal and allow for the possibility of a clearer identification of what school students need to do and how they should think in order to demonstrate effective learning. The curriculum materials to be produced by
the trainees were to relate directly to the procedural concepts that had been identified through earlier work and discussed in seminars and workshops.

Work on procedural concepts has already taken place in other subjects. Our understanding of educational goals for students of history, for example, has been vastly improved by the clearer identification of what is needed for them to think as historians. Lee and Ashby (2000) have argued:

> Teaching that systematically builds on prior understandings and assessment that rewards their development are both central to achieving progression. Of course, algorithmic approaches are possible in many forms of teaching and experience in the United Kingdom unsurprisingly suggests that they are likely to be widespread where teachers do not themselves have a good grasp of the ideas they are attempting to teach. This may be the case even when entry standards are high (a first or upper second class in a degree). (p. 215).

Although the specific content and context of what is to be studied must always be emphasised, we are struck by the fact that it has now been possible in history to produce more valuable educational work by identifying the procedural concepts that characterise the field. This means both that students know what they have to learn and also allows them to focus on the levels of understanding that can and should be reached in relation to each concept. School students of history can now focus their
attention not just on learning information (e.g. names/dates), studying contexts (e.g. 
19th century) or learning about substantive concepts that are often tied to particular 
events (e.g. revolution). Rather, history teachers can concentrate on improving 
students’ understanding through a clearer appreciation of such procedural concepts as 
evidence, cause and change. These procedural concepts can be seen as the essential 
part of ‘doing’ the subject. A shift is made in that area from learning history to being a 
historian. The concepts can then be developed to show levels of performance which 
allow for more effective and precisely targeted teaching approaches. We now know, 
for example, that when we look at children’s conceptions of rational understanding in 
history that their thinking tends to conform to a pattern. Once something about these 
patterns are known then it may be easier to understand what pupils are thinking and to 
assist its development by more precisely formulated approaches to teaching. This 
combination of the knowledge of the procedural concepts and knowledge of pupils’ 
thinking may be a potent force for improvement. (Lee, Dickinson and Ashby 1994). 
This approach thus seeks to develop a way of knowing rather than presenting pupils 
with things to know. It is an approach which is seen as being “suited to the education 
of citizens in a liberal democracy” as it helps students “to develop the ability and the 
disposition to arrive at reasonable informed opinions” (Seixas 2000). It is more about 
understanding the processes of citizenship and being citizens as opposed to learning 
things about citizenship.

**Procedural Concepts of Citizenship Education used by Trainees**

It is now necessary to specify in more detail the procedural concepts that have been 
selected for the trainees to use. Given that the preference is for active engagement, the
expression of the procedural concepts discussed here is given in the form of active verbs. The three areas are: explaining; tolerating and participating. Expressed slightly more fully these areas would involve developing understanding dispositions and abilities associated with:

- Rationality grounded in a critical appreciation of social and political realities
- Toleration within the context of a pluralistic democracy
- Participation arising from an acceptance of one’s social and political responsibilities and appreciation of one’s own rights and entitlements

These concepts were selected following careful consideration arising from earlier work. It is, however, a very provisional list and it is hoped that it will be modified in the future as a result of this and other work. It is, of course, necessary to relate the procedural concepts to substantive concepts of citizenship otherwise it would be possible for school students to explain and tolerate and participate in any lesson or activity in the school or community. As such the materials produced by the trainees would need to be based around a key concept such as inequality or justice or identity. The trainees were asked to create materials and activities designed to encourage school students:

- to explain their views, their understandings and their arguments;
- to tolerate, accommodate and reflect upon opinions and views that may be different from their own;
- to participate in the consideration and debate of these ideas in the classroom and (ideally) use this experience and understanding in their life outside school.
Methods

The issues that are discussed above were the subjects of a number of seminars and workshops with the group of History with Citizenship trainees. Those sessions were informed by reference to the work of key academics and policy makers as well as a careful analysis of existing curriculum resources.

During the autumn term the trainees were required to produce a review of curriculum materials. That review was an important preparatory task for the production of their own materials later in the course. The rubric for the review task was as follows:

Review of curriculum materials

There exists a vast array of published materials designed to support every aspect of your teaching in schools and colleges. In addition, many departments have worked to develop their own materials to support aspects of their curriculum. You must take the opportunity to examine the curriculum materials available in the school in which you are placed during the autumn term.

You should select one set of curriculum materials on which to write an evaluative report of about 2000 words in length.

Your report is intended to be an analysis of the curriculum materials that you have selected to study. This means though you may well want to start with a brief summary of the materials you should also use what you have learned over the term in seminars, workshops and from school experience to produce
a critical analysis of the materials. This is likely to include discussion on the following aspects:

- presentation/attractiveness
- structure of the materials with comments made about organisation/accuracy of historical material and its appropriateness for the target audience
- language level
- nature and complexity of tasks with opportunities for discussion of differentiation and progression
- relation to knowledge skills and understanding highlighted in National Curriculum documents (if from years 7-9) or examination syllabuses
- assessment possibilities with reference to National Curriculum or examination syllabuses.

Students were issued with feedback sheets that were to be submitted at the same time as the assignment itself. They were asked to comment on:

- how the task relates to the Standards
- what you have learned from carrying out the task
- how well you feel you have carried out the task
- any difficulties you had when carrying out the task
- the usefulness and limitations of the task.

The production of their own materials that was the main feature of this investigation was to take place during their completion of a main (16 week) teaching placement.
The trainees were given the following general rubric with informal discussion about the significance of procedural concepts.

Production and evaluation of original teaching materials

This task is a close relation of the autumn term task on materials. During the autumn term you were asked to review some materials. For this task I would like to have the job of reviewing what you have written. I would like you to write materials, which I or another teacher could use with a class. I would like you to show the way in which your materials help pupils to learn.

Of course, there will always be a debate about the meaning of the word ‘original’ and we must keep the task within sensible limits. There should be room in the teachers’ guide to make comments which show an evaluation of ant experience you already have of using some or all of the materials.

What I am keen to avoid, however, is to ask you merely to produce a set of lessons plans for work already completed with a superficial explanation of the success or otherwise of that work.

The task should be forward looking insofar as you should be able to use the materials with pupils in your current or next school. It may be possible for the task to have very immediate relevance by agreeing to work on a set of materials that are needed now by a particular school or other educational institution (e.g. a museum). There are no very firm guidelines that can be set about the amount of materials to be developed but as a rough estimate I suggest that work sufficient to occupy a pupil for a whole day (if for a working visit) or full a full week (if for normal lessons and homework).
Your teachers’ guide will cover two important aspects:

i) a description of the aims, structure/sequence of the tasks, guidance for teachers on how to manage the activities, answers for questions/tasks, Guidance (possibly including mark schemes) on assessment arrangements etc.

ii) your evaluation of your aims and, if possible, reflections on the use of the resources with pupils.

If you have been able to use the resources in class your evaluation will include: the extent to which the evidence you collected about pupil learning suggested that your key learning outcomes have been successfully realised; which additional factors (lesson characteristics, teacher actions, pupil tasks, pupil behaviours etc) contributed to the success or otherwise of your teaching of the topic; how you might revise your materials and approaches to the teaching of the topic if you were to teach it again. Whether or not you have been able to use the resources with pupils you should discuss your work with teachers and include appropriate comments in your evaluation as a result.

Again, trainees were asked to submit a feedback sheet at the same time as submitting their assignment. The feedback sheet covered the same ground as that for the ‘review of curriculum materials’. The written feedback comments and work was read and discussions were held with individuals and with the trainee group as a whole in order to understand emerging issues.

Students produced the following materials (extracts from their assignments are used to describe the work):
• Looking at the concept of ‘toleration’ through the issue of asylum seekers in the UK

“3 one hour lessons.

These lessons will be examining year 9 students’ attitudes to asylum seekers through the concept of toleration. The aim of the lessons will be to educate the pupils as to the reasons behind the need asylum seekers have for seeking a safe haven as well as encouraging the students to empathise with the different types of situations that occur causing people to become refugees. The lessons will also consider what role Britain should be expected to play in granting asylum seekers permission to stay in this country. The lessons will also consider the part the media plays in framing people’s attitudes to asylum seekers. Assessment will be achieved by monitoring the level of understanding of key words and also through a written piece of work. The piece of written work is a group task and an empathy piece. Progression is also carried out by monitoring the students’ responses to their level of understanding the concept of toleration and how it relates to them”.

• Human rights: rights and responsibilities and the rights of the child

“This scheme of work concentrates on rights and responsibilities and on a seminal document, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959). Through an introductory lesson on rights students are introduced to how rights are allied to responsibilities by considering what they would want a Class Declaration of Rights to look like. They are then introduced to a simplified form of the UN Declaration and asked to interpret situations where rights are violated in the turbulent environments of Angola and Cambodia.

The procedural concept involved will be learning to participate. Students must listen to others in order to have their opinions heard in return. They all have a role to play in
the Human Rights forum and must justify themselves orally. They are all expected to vote on the Class Declaration of Rights and make decisions that affect them”.

- **Racism and the Roma**

“7 activities for key stage 4.

Aims for this unit: to make pupils aware of the discrimination that the Roma have faced in both history and in the modern say; to make pupils more racially tolerant; to make students aware that people are prejudiced often without even realising it”.

- **Slavery.**

“The materials are designed to fit in with the procedural concept of toleration, The lessons aim to show that toleration is not always a virtue and that tolerating certain things such as the continued use of child slaves in the cocoa industry is wrong.

Activities and questions challenge the pupils’ tolerance levels and them question what is and is not acceptable to them. The materials also encourage the pupils to participate both in the lessons themselves and within the wider context of the school and community.

Guide to the 3 one-hour lessons:

‘opposition to slavery’ is primarily a history lesson. Questions allow the pupils to focus on the information provided and new words are explained. Pupils are encouraged to use role play to investigate the problem of abolition and try to understand why some people preferred to tolerate slavery whilst others vehemently opposed it.

‘slavery doesn’t exist anymore’ aims to show pupils that the problems of slavery are far from over. By using a product with which pupils are easily able to identify the problems of modern day child slaves are introduced. Questions allow the pupils to see the reasons why these children are forced into slavery and give them some chances to
provide some solutions to the problem. Activities encourage the pupils to consolidate their knowledge. The action plan allows pupils to participate in making a stance against the big chocolate companies in an easily accessible manner.

‘Wambi’s story’ encourages the pupils to look at the problems of child slaves within the context of human rights. The UN Convention is introduced in an accessible format and questions and activities make the convention more relevant to the pupils. Wambi’s story is effective and short through a drama activity and structured questions, pupils have the chance to try to understand and empathise with his situation”.

- **Sustainable development and recycling**

  “In this unit pupils will take responsibility for planning and implementing a class based recycling scheme for one week with the aim of introducing pupils to the need for recycling and demonstrating through active participation how individuals make a difference. The second week’s lesson will focus more specifically on why it is important to recycle the three materials chosen in the previous lesson. The work provided is intended to last for two one hour lessons and one half hour homework.”

- **Toleration: a case study of Northern Ireland.**

  At this end of this unit pupils will have gained a greater understanding of the nature and importance of toleration. They will have concrete examples of what can happen when toleration breaks down in a society and will also through the medium of the Northern Ireland case study have increased their understanding of how toleration can decrease or collapse. They will be able to use their knowledge and ideas to identify and analyse trends in other areas and in contemporary society.
Issues

The trainees all produced high quality work that revealed high levels of subject knowledge, the ability to frame complex concepts within a pedagogical structure, and a satisfyingly high professional commitment. They were also generally positive about the opportunity to develop resources and to reflect upon them.

Students’ comments include:

This task helped to improve my subject knowledge.

The task certainly focuses on the planning of lessons and selection and preparation of resources in a more practical and immediate way than other university work has done. It gave me the opportunity to spend longer on a limited number of resources and lessons than I would otherwise do, promoting more reflection on the suitability of the resources I prepare.

The task was particularly useful for developing my thinking about the creation of learning resources and consideration of how effective they will be. This is, of course, particularly important in developing skills of reflection in teaching.

I found this task to be very useful in improving my ICT skills and in helping to make my teaching materials more presentable.
I found the task to be challenging and enjoyable and enjoyed wrestling with the procedural concepts.

However a number of issues emerged that will require continuing consideration if we are to help trainees become skilful, reflective practitioners. Three issues will be briefly explored: issues about the nature of procedural concepts, teaching and learning methods, and, subject knowledge.

• Fundamental issues about procedural concepts

Responses from the trainees and others with whom I have discussed this work are broadly in favour of an approach that highlights learning outcomes in the form of what is essential about citizenship and which requires proper attention to ways of teaching and learning. However, it is only sensible to recognise that issues have arisen that require further attention. A debate has been developing through ittcitized about the nature of procedural concepts. Peter Brett and Liz West (www.ittcitized.info) have written to express reservations about the development of this approach drawing as it does so heavily from history education. At the very least we certainly need to know much more about the relationships that need to be established between the substantive and procedural.

• Issues about teaching and learning methods

There are many issues relating to teaching and learning in the context of procedural concepts that need to be explored. Some trainees were uncertain about the extent to
which the procedural concept needed to be ‘foregrounded’. There is a well-established pedagogical debate concerning the extent to which school students need to have learning outcomes explained to them and to be able to reflect upon them. The Key Stage 3 Strategy has made a strong claim for the value of highlighting learning outcomes. If we deal with procedural concepts we may have to be very careful about the potential for confusing students. The issues are complex and there may well be a tendency to resort to the sort of language that may be meaningful for specialist teachers but be off-putting for school students. Further, if in the fledgling area of citizenship education we need to admit honestly that the nature of learning outcomes (as explained above in relation to participation) are not yet clear to anyone then this issue becomes even more problematic.

Related to this point is uncertainty regarding what could be described as ‘hook’ and ‘substance’. For the student who produced materials on slavery in order to illuminate the nature of toleration there was a desire to relate matters to the contemporary situation. The role of chocolate manufacturers in low-income countries was explored and in some ways this had particular local resonance in York where so much depends on that industry. And yet, is it possible that the conflation of slavery, chocolate, past present, and jobs here and abroad becomes simply too much? There is something rather uncomfortably difficult in attempting so many ‘hooks’ and so much substance with minor and major issues running together. For one of the trainees one way of achieving motivation and focussing attention was to relate issues to everyday experiences but this may in practice only have led to a seeming attempt to present on an equal footing minor clashes with authority as experienced in schools and major transgressions of human rights experienced as a result of massive exploitation.
Further, for some students any task to produce written materials for the classroom might not appear to be consistent with the pedagogy of citizenship education. One student commented that the nature of work in citizenship lessons was less dependent on written resources than those for other subjects. The students had not been restricted in the rubric to the production of a text but it is understandable and interesting that certain limitations were seen to be in place. That trainee commented:

I had some reservations about the task as it was primarily about creating your own original resources. I was worried how this could be done for citizenship – as the subject does not involve as much written work as history and I decided not to create a textbook style resource. Therefore about 50% of my planned activities do not involve the need for any written resources, leaving my teaching materials feeling a little lightweight.

- Issues about subject knowledge

Some of the issues that were raised concerning the nature of subject knowledge can be dealt with in a relatively straightforward manner. One student questioned the usefulness of producing original resources as a poor indicator of her subject knowledge. Perhaps this was mainly to do with an inappropriate feeling that the task was principally designed to assess trainees’ competence as opposed to allowing them to explore issues and develop expertise. She commented:
Surely our ability to plan lessons/know about the National Curriculum/assess etc has been demonstrated on our teaching practice?

Another cause for concern, that is slightly more challenging, was expressed by 1 trainee. She focused on the practical business of getting hold of the right kinds of resources. The assignment was seen as time consuming and demanding in very practical ways. At this embryonic stage of citizenship education there is clearly much to be done in ensuring the ready availability of high quality resources on the very many issues and topics that could form the basis of lessons.

More importantly, there were uncertainties revealed about the nature of what could be achieved. Trainees are clearly not expected to become experts in political science, sociology, law and all the very many other academic disciplines that contribute to an understanding and practise of citizenship (as Bernard Crick argued in his recent presentation to the ittcitizen conference 4 June 2003). Nevertheless a move towards procedural concepts advocated in the way described in this article has not been accepted by all. There is a need to know something of the substantive knowledge of a very wide range of issues. Unsurprisingly, some of the work that was submitted needed slightly more careful proof reading to avoid minor errors in presentation or factual inaccuracies. Perhaps even more challenging was the need for students to have a reasonably clear idea of what would count as a reasonable illustration of knowledge, understanding and skill in a substantive area that was strongly related to one or more procedural concepts.
Once procedural concepts are targeted explicitly there is a need for clear subject knowledge. However, for example, the procedural concept of participation was discussed there was a need for greater clarity about the amount and type of activity that was being targeted. This should not be overstated. Trainees did supply interesting and useful indications of intended learning outcomes that related to the procedural concepts. However, there is little that is available for trainees to draw from about what sort of participation, for example, can be achieved within and beyond classrooms. It is possible to point trainees to work by, for example, Hart (1992) and the work that had been undertaken previously on the DfEE sponsored project mentioned. There is also some interesting work emerging from the Association for Citizenship Teaching that discusses participation and organisations such as CSV have long advocated and demonstrated the achievement of effective involvement. However, there is still the sense in which trainees (and others) need to know much more about what can count as useful activity. I am certainly not arguing for some sort of bureaucratic framework that demands the display only of specific types of engagement and suggests how they can be assessed. That would somehow seem to defeat the purpose of promoting active participation. But unless there is some greater awareness of what we are willing to argue for then we may remain with rather unhelpful and vague notions about there being a ‘good buzz’ in the room or ‘everyone seemed to be getting involved’. We need slightly more rigour than that. In arguing for this greater sense of rigour I am suggesting that both school students’ understanding and capacity for action would be enhanced as well as heightening the trainees’ capacity for knowledgeable, critical professional self evaluation. I have explored elsewhere with others (see Davies, Hatch, Martin and Thorpe 2002) some of the issues involved in moving to sophisticated levels of professional understanding and practice. The nature of the principal focus of
a lesson will always be hard to classify. Should we mainly be concerned to help someone act tolerantly – and by whose definition - and/or to encourage them to understand the nature of tolerance? The indicators of such action or understanding will be equally hard to classify (the provision of information or the ‘right’ tone of voice?)

We risk a good deal when saying that, for example, we want children to do more than understand toleration but rather that we wish them to be tolerant. We can imagine that some people will begin to accuse us of being keen to indoctrinate children into the existing norms of a liberal society. Being liberal may not be a problem but there are of course huge debates about the nature of liberalism and the routes to its achievement.

Conclusion

Issues about procedural concepts cannot easily be solved. I do want to argue, however, that trainees who can help school students to tolerate and consider the meaning of toleration, to explain and to understand explanations about society and to participate and to know what that means are better placed than many to enjoy a fully rounded sense of citizenship. Trainees have in their provision of focussed valuable classroom resources have shown that good work can be produced. They have demonstrated that there are many issues still left to explore but that is a helpful step on the road to the implementation of citizenship education. Continued work in this area may help to move beyond the initial starting points that have been presented here.
List of references

Brett, P. and West, E. (2003) What subject knowledge is needed to teach citizenship education and how can it be promoted? A response to the discussion document addressed to initial teacher education tutors by Ian Davies (www.ittcitized.info)


