Information seeking, decision making, and action taking in social and political contexts – An Introduction to Psychological Aspects of Democratic Citizenship

Florian C. Feucht, Ph.D., Guest Editor

Assistant Professor for Educational Psychology

Department for Educational Foundations and Leadership

The University of Toledo, USA

A vital aspect of democracy is the ability of individual citizens to engage in knowledge creation and evaluation in a critical manner. In today's controversy - and information-rich society developing one's own beliefs and values, evaluating a constantly growing body of new knowledge, and having an understanding of current politics is becoming an increasingly complex and demanding challenge. In this context, education for citizenship is an important undertaking to provide individuals with skills, values, knowledge, and beliefs needed to successfully participate in democratic processes and to foster a culture of active civic engagement.

Under this conceptual umbrella, a call for contributions to a special issue went out to the fields of peace and democratic education seeking manuscripts from educators, practitioners, and researchers to explore questions, such as: What is the nature of the skills, values, and beliefs necessary for democratic participation, and in what situations do they occur and matter? What role does (citizenship) education play in addressing such skills, values, knowledge, and beliefs?

What pedagogical methods best develop these democratic capacities? Do current educational frameworks account for the demands of today's democratic citizenship? In response to this call, a large amount of quality manuscripts was received from a diversity of disciplines ranging from psychology to teacher training and development, to democracy, health and environmental education, and to philosophical foundations of education. Due to the quality and diversity of the submissions, the decision was made to publish not one special issue, but a sequence of three, a trilogy entitled "Skills, Values, and Beliefs for Today's Democratic Citizenship" – with the first issue subtitled "Psychological Competencies", the second "Teacher Training and Development", and the third "Philosophical Foundations of Education". Because these three categories are fairly broad, some articles roam in their overlaps. Furthermore, I would like to note that only the first issue entails discussions of its article contributions because it is much smaller in scope than the consecutive issues.

In the following sections of this introduction to the special issue on psychological competencies of today's democratic citizenship, I will first provide a very brief and limited chronological overview of how civic competencies were formulated and translated into specific learning objectives for civic education. Second, I develop a framework (Figure 1) on psychological aspects and civic competencies accounting for the everyday living and learning environments of citizens. The aim of this framework is to provide a more comprehensive and dynamic picture of the psychological competencies citizens need to successfully seek information, make decisions, and take action that are specific to, and dependent on, their social and political contexts. Third, the articles and their discussions will be introduced (see preview below).

Lori Olafson	*"Good" Americans and "Bad" Americans: Personal Epistemology, Moral Reasoning, and Citizenship.*
Claudia Ruitenberg	*Conflict, Affect and the Political: On Disagreement as Democratic Capacity.*
Michael Weinstock	*Epistemic Understanding and Sound Reasoning Skills that Underlie Effective Democratic Engagement.*
Gregory Schraw, Lori Olafson, Michelle Vander Veldt, & Jennifer Ponder	*Teachers' Epistemological Stances and Citizenship Education.*
Lisa Bendixen (Discussant)	*Argumentation, Anger, and Action: Citizenship Education In and Out of the Classroom.*
Dale Snauwaert (Discussant)	*Democracy as Public Deliberation and the Psychology of Epistemological World Views and Moral Reasoning: A Philosophical Reflection.*

The previously introduced framework will be used to contextualize the different contributions and to provide a joined platform for the audience to ask questions and draw conclusions within and across the different themes. Finally, the introduction will conclude with a note of appreciation for the support I received in completing this issue.

Psychological competencies for civic education – a look back

Knowledge, skills, values, and beliefs relevant to today's democracy are often identified as psychological competencies in curriculum standards for citizenship education. What exactly are the psychological competencies an individual needs to acquire to successfully participate in democratic processes and to appreciate a culture of active civic engagement? What competencies need to be taught and what can be entrusted to develop on their own? This section briefly describes the evolution of civic competencies as learning objectives of curriculum standards in civic education. Three cornerstones within the last 100 years were selected to illustrate how civic learning objectives grounded in philosophical thought shifted towards research-based strands of psychological competencies.

About 100 years ago, John Dewey[1] provided broad ideas of competences relevant for individuals to participate in democracy. As a philosopher and functional psychologist, he emphasized civic competencies that concerned psychological principles of action and application relevant for individuals to successfully function in their living and learning environments.[2] More specifically, he described the ability of critical thinking and decision making in response to personal experiences and the social and political context of individuals as civic core competencies. For example, Dewey's idea of public journalism stressed the need for citizens to become active news users and contributors.[3] From an epistemological perspective, he questioned the (world) view that the news should be a static and certain source of knowledge that is provided by an elitist authority and passively read by citizen. Instead, he strongly believed that the news should be a dynamic stream of tentative knowledge informed by common citizens who contribute their own news, alternative views, and discussions of social conditions and political and consequences. Essentially, Dewey's democratic expectations require individual citizens to be competent in seeking information, making decisions, and taking action within their own social and political context.

---

[1] John Dewey, *How we think*. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1909); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (New York, New York: Macmillan, 1916).

[2] John Dewey (1896). "The reflex arc concept in psychology", *Psychological Review (1896): 3*, 357-370.

[3] John Dewey. *The Public and its Problems*. (New York: Holt, 1927).

About 50 years later, Edward Glaser[4] developed a psychological framework to describe critical thinking as a cognitive requirement and grounded it in Dewey's work [5] on good citizenship. Glaser described critical thinking as

> (…) a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends. It also generally requires ability to recognize problems, to find workable means for meeting those problems, to gather and marshal pertinent information, to recognize unstated assumptions and values, to comprehend and use language with accuracy, clarity, and discrimination, to interpret data, to appraise evidence and evaluate arguments, to recognize the existence (or non-existence) of logical relationships between propositions, to draw warranted conclusions and generalizations, to put to test the conclusions and generalizations at which one arrives, to reconstruct one's patterns of beliefs on the basis of wider experience, and to render accurate judgments about specific things and qualities in everyday life. (p. 5-6)

He summarized these competencies in three strands: " (1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experiences, (2) knowledge of the methods of logical inquiry and reasoning, and (3) some skill in applying those methods." (p. 5). Clearly, Glaser's critical thinking competencies are described on the basis of psychological constructs and terms. Furthermore, he emphasized attitudes, affect, motivation, and values as an important, dispositional strand of competencies in their own right.

Recently, Judith Torney-Purta and Susan Vermeer Lopez developed citizenship competencies for learners specifically in educational settings ranging from kindergarten to high school.[6] These competencies are informed by existing standards of different school systems and civic associations, like the Center for Civic Education,[7] and are based on different international

---

[4] Edward M. Glaser. *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking*. (Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1941).

[5] Alec Fisher. *Critical thinking: An introduction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

[6] Judith Torney-Purta and Susan Vermeer Lopez. *Developing citizenship competencies from kindergarten through Grade 12: A background paper for policymakers and educators*. (Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2006).

[7] Center for Civic Education. *National Standards for Civics and Government*. (Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 1994)

research studies that assessed the civic competencies of high school students[8] as well as identifying the best practices to effectively teach these competencies.[9] Similar to Glaser, these competencies are based on the three strands of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions and target the content areas of a) democracy and law, b) citizenship and human rights, and c) civil society. Interestingly, the strands of civic skill and civic disposition are divided into sub-strands focusing on internal competencies (i.e., civic thinking skills and core civic disposition) and participatory competencies (i.e., civic participation skills and participation-related dispositions). The explicit acknowledgement of the participatory sub-strands of civic competencies reflects Dewey's action and application driven understanding of good citizenship and, therein, reassures the philosophical grounding of the current, research-based competence model for citizenship education.

Information seeking, decision making, and action taking in a social and political context

While curriculum standards for civic education are crucial in pinpointing learning objectives for students in pre-k-12 classrooms, the described competencies appear often as fragmented and fail to portray a more holistic and dynamic picture of civic engagement as the overall learning outcome. In this section, I develop a conceptual framework with the purpose to better describe civic engagement as a whole (that is more than the sum of its parts). The framework is a synthesis of literature from the fields of cognitive psychology, action research, and ecological system theory.

Based on the previously reviewed literature, problem solving and critical thinking are based on philosophical principles and entail psychological competences of civic engagement. Dewey and Torney-Purta and Vermeer Lopez in particular speak to the ability of action taking as a civic competence of participatory citizenship, which is described in the field of civic education as the more advanced from of citizenship.[10] The knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to 'solve a civic problem by taking action' can be described as steps in a cyclical process of

---

[8] Judith Torney-Purta, Rainer Lehmann, Hand Oswald and Walter Schulz. *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age 14*. (Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2001); Judith Torney-Purta, John Schwille, and Jo-Ann Amadeo, J. (Eds.). *Civic education across countries: Twenty-four case studies from the IEA Civic Education Project*. (Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1999).

[9] Judith Torney-Purta and Britt Wilkenfeld. *Paths to 21st Century Competencies Through Civic Education Classrooms: An Analysis of Survey Results from Ninth-Graders*. (Chicago, IL: American Bar Association Division for Public Education: 2009).

[10] Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating For Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* (2004): 41(2), 237-269.

information seeking, decision making, and action taking (see Figure 1). Interestingly, a considerable overlap can be identified when comparing the cyclical nature of a problem solving script in the field of cognitive psychology with the action-reflection cycle in the field of action research.
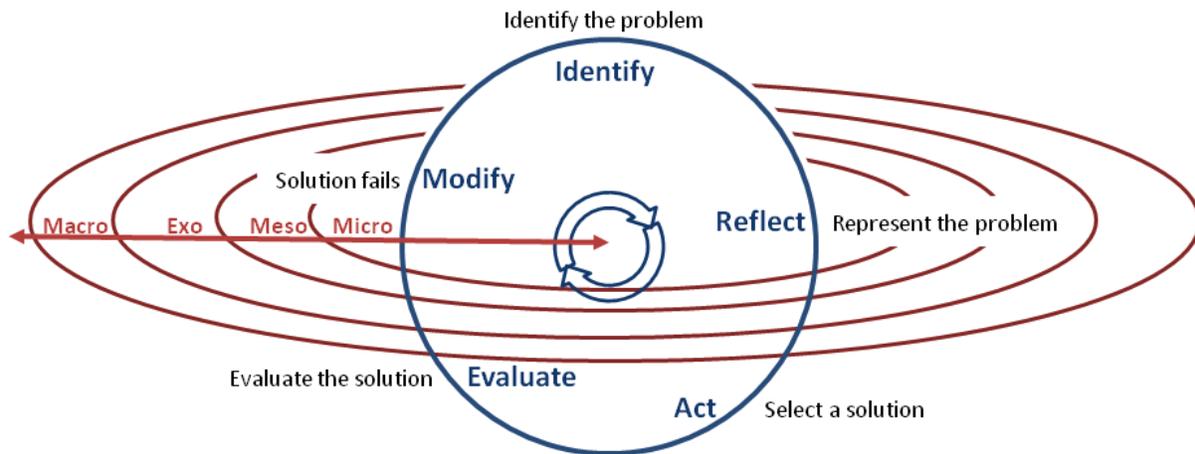

Figure 1: Processes of information seeking, decision making, and action taking in a social and political context

For example, a problem solving script is part of an individual's procedural knowledge and describes a sequence of logical steps to solve a problem.[11] These steps include: 1) Identify the problem, 2) present the problem, 3) select a solution, 4) evaluate the solution, and 5) if the solution fails, return to step 1 or 2 and continue with the script in a cyclical manner (see Figure 1; black labels). A problem solving script is an internal, cognitive process and reflects the internal competencies that Torney-Purta and Vermeer Lopez refer to as civic knowledge, civic thinking skills, and core civic dispositions.

Similarly, the action-reflection cycle in the literature on research methodologies describes steps a researcher typically follows when conducting an action research study.[12] These steps include: 1) Identify, 2) reflect, 3) act, 4) evaluate, and 5) modify, if the desired outcome is not achieved, by restarting a new cycle of action-reflection (see Figure 1; blue labels). Unlike in other research methodologies, action researchers (and their context) are the research objects

[11] Gregory Schraw "Knowledge: Structures and processes". In Patricia Alexander and Phill Winne (Eds.), Handbook of educational psychology, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum (2006): 245–263.

[12] Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead. *All You Need to Know About Action Research*. (London: Sage, 2006). Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff. *Action Research Living Theory*. (London: Sage, 2006).

themselves. In other words, action research means to pursue a self-study for the sake of self-improvement. This goal directed 'action taking' is often described as professional development, and political empowerment at best.

When comparing the general cognitive problem solving script with the action reflection cycle, it becomes evident that the procedural steps overlap, are cyclical in nature, and promote a person-centered approach to solving a problem by taking action. A closer look reveals that the action-reflection cycle, in comparison to the script, is more extroverted in its nature as it requires competencies that allow for interaction with the surrounding context. It is important to note that the internal and external cycle of information seeking, decision making, and action taking are intertwined and influenced by the individuals' surrounding social and political context.

The ecological system theory[13] provides a framework that can be applied to categorize the political and social context of citizens in different systems and to explain the reciprocal influences among citizens and their environment.[14] The framework describes four nested systems: 1) Micro system (i.e., internal environment; e.g., family, sorority student chapter, regular customers in a coffee house), 2) meso system (i.e., the overlap and interaction of two or more micro systems), 3) exo system (i.e., external environment; e.g., work place of spouse, neighborhood community, local politics), and 4) macro system (i.e., larger socio-cultural environment; e.g., national politics, recession, war, cultural values). All four levels are reciprocally connected, and, therefore, changes in one system cause changes in other systems, like a stone creates circles when it falls into water (see Figure 1, red labels). Finally, the crono system describes how systems change over time (e.g., the historical differences of protesting and campaigning strategies between 1968 and 2009).

In accordance with the ecological system theory, the cyclical process of information seeking, decision making, and action taking differs from citizen to citizen, system to system, and time to time. For example, different parenting styles at the micro level can foster different civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions in children.[15] Children who are not part of decision making and are subjects to strict rules and punishments without knowing their rationales behind them (i.e., authoritarian parenting style) are less likely to engage in democratic process than students who are part of family decisions, receive explanations for rules, and understand the reasons for

---

[13] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The ecology of human development*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[14] Florian Haerle (Feucht) and Lisa Bendixen, "Personal epistemology in elementary classrooms: A conceptual comparison of Germany and the United States and a guide for future cross-cultural research". In *Knowing, knowledge and beliefs: Epistemological studies across diverse cultures*. Edited by Myint Khine (Ed.). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer (2008): 165-190.

[15] Carol Sigelman and Elizabeth Rider. *Life-span human development*. (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009).

the encouragement and punishment of their behavior (i.e., authoritative parenting style). A second example is the democratic election of representatives at different system levels of the environment, such as the president of a sorority student chapter (i.e., micro level) and the president of the federal government (i.e., macro level). In both cases, it can be assumed that individuals follow the same democratic principle, but would apply somewhat different strategies and sources to identify information (e.g., sorority bulletin boards and news paper vs. national news papers, TV, and election campaigns), apply different criteria when making a decision for whom to vote (i.e., student life vs. national security, health care, and economic revitalization), and take different actions in the election process (e.g., using a hat as ballot box vs. electronic voting system). In essence, participating in democracy requires citizens to have different civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes that work together in a cyclical process and that differ based on the nature and system level of their social and political context.

Introducing and contextualizing contributions of the current issue

The first issue of the trilogy on Skills, Values, and Beliefs for Today's Democratic Citizenship focuses on psychological competencies, such as processes of deliberation, informal reasoning in a variety of context, moral development, anger and conflict as an affective drive to identify and engage with political entities, and beliefs about the nature of knowledge and processes of knowing. Each of these aspects can be linked back to previously discussed civic competences (i.e., knowledge, skills, and dispositions) and identified in the framework of information seeking, decision making, and action taking in a social and political context (see Figure 1).

Lori Olafson investigated in her article entitled ***"Good" Americans and "Bad" Americans: Personal Epistemology, Moral Reasoning, and Citizenship***" the reasoning of war resisters and veterans about the choices they made to participate in, or to refuse military service involving armed combat in the Vietnam war. Using a mixed method approach, Olafson examined the moral development, beliefs about knowledge and knowing (i.e., personal epistemology), and civic engagement of her participants. She identified overlapping matters that were typical to war resisters and veteran, respectively; war resisters holding more advanced levels of personal epistemology and moral development. When looking at the introductory framework (Figure 1), both war resisters and veterans sought information at the national personal and national level (micro and macro system), but came to different conclusions and followed through with contrary actions. Veterans chose to serve their country (exo and macro level) by going into combat invading all levels of the Vietnam eco system (i.e., families, neighborhoods country, etc.) and to return to the US eco system after their deployment ended. War resisters, in contrast, left their original ecosystem because they felt that their values and beliefs at the micro level were not compatible with the values and beliefs hold at the exo and macro level of the US society and decided to permanently 'transplant' their own micro system into the eco system of a foreign country, Canada, where their beliefs and values were accepted by the Canadian society and government (exo and macro level).

Claudia Ruitenberg in her article on ***"Conflict, Affect and the Political: On Disagreement as Democratic Capacity"*** develops a conceptual argument grounded in political-

philosophy with a psychoanalytical perspective of the importance for citizens to form an affective attachment to political parties and initiatives and not only to seek out a rational, emotion-free process of decision making and action taking in a political context. Ruitenberger makes the case that the opportunity to have feelings of solidarity, anger, excitement is a crucial competencies for citizens to imagine alternative political perspectives, identities, and forms of civic engagement. When looking at the introductory framework (Figure 1), Ruitenberg's contribution focuses on the affective, dispositional side of the problem-solving and action reflection cycle. The affective attachment or identification with a political entity can occur at within all four eco system levels.

Michael Weinstock addresses in his article entitled *"Epistemic Understanding and Sound Reasoning Skills that Underlie Effective Democratic Engagement"* the importance of deliberation skills as a core competence for civic engagement. He reviews research on people's ability to perform informal reasoning, evaluate knowledge sources and arguments, and identify fallacies. Weinstock in particular focuses on these reasoning skills in jurors. He found that jurors who have more advanced epistemic understanding (i.e., knowledge is made up of objective facts and subjective opinions, are more sophisticated in their reasoning skills than jurors who hold a more naïve epistemic understanding (i.e. knowledge is objective and certain). When looking at the introductory framework (Figure 1), juries made up of several jurors constitute micro systems that reach verdicts on the defendants' decision making and action taking. Interestingly, the juries' micro systems represent the socio-cultural values and beliefs of their countries exo and macro systems.

Gregory Schraw, Lori Olafson, Michelle Vander Veldt, and Jennifer Ponder who contributed an intervention study entitled *"Teachers' Epistemological Stances and Citizenship Education"* were interested if the beliefs of social studies teachers about knowledge, knowing, and teaching as well as about civic knowledge and education change during the duration of a graduate study course in elementary social studies. Schraw et al. measured these psychological and civic competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes) before and after the 15 week course. They found that the course promoted teachers' learning about civic knowledge and education and increased their awareness of their beliefs about knowledge, knowing, and teaching. However, these beliefs did not change. When looking at the introductory framework (Figure 1), Schraw and colleagues used a graduate course (micro system) to improve the civic competencies of teachers in elementary social study classrooms. The underlying assumptions of the teacher training was that the participating teachers would apply and teach their new acquired civic competencies to the students in their own classrooms (micro systems). This would be a multiplicative effect of one micros system (graduate course) into many new micro systems (elementary classrooms) on behalf of society and its education system (exo and macro system).

Two discussants volunteered to provide carefully deliberated thought pieces to round up this special issue. **Lisa Bendixen** contributed a discussion entitled "*Argumentation, Anger, and Action: Citizenship Education In and Out of the Classroom"* and focused on the importance and development of civic skills and disposition as two competencies of civic education. From an educational psychology perspective, Bendixen discusses four themes which she identified across

the four different articles. The themes are: "1) argumentation and deliberation, 2) affect and anger, 3) civic action (or a lack thereof), and 4) imagining a 'good citizen'"[16]. **Dale Snauwaert**, in contrast, provides a philosophical reflection from a peace educator perspective, entitled ***"Democracy as Public Deliberation and the Psychology of Epistemological World Views and Moral Reasoning"***. Snauwaert introduces three fundamental elements of democracy – equality, fairness, and deliberation – and contemplates their meaning for, and relationship to, the different psychological competences put forth in the four articles. Under the umbrella of public deliberation, he speaks about freedom and political self-determination, ethics and peace, and the need for sociability, emotional sentiment, and empathy. Furthermore, he calls for research to illicit links between these democratic principles and psychological competencies for good citizenship and civic education.

Overall, all contributions in this issue, articles and discussions alike, address important implications as they pertain to civic education in formal and informal learning settings. It is hoped that the introductory framework (Figure 1) will provide a useful platform for the readers to ask questions and draw conclusions within and across the different contributions and themes.

A note of thank you

I would like to thank Dale Snauwaert, the editor of *In Factis Pax,* for entrusting me with the opportunity to be the guest editor of this special issue and for collaborating with me on completing the review process after we decided to publish not one, but a sequence of three special issues. Furthermore, my gratitude goes out to over 50 reviewers who volunteered their time and efforts in providing critical and constructive feedback in a double blind peer review process to improve the quality of individual articles and, therein, of the trilogy as a whole. With respect to the current issue, I would like to also express my sincere appreciation for the discussion pieces that Lisa Bendixen and Dale Snauwaert contributed as they further expand its educational value, practical application, and empirical insight.

Florian C. Feucht, Ph.D.

The University of Toledo, USA

October 2010

---

[16] Lisa Bendixen, "Argumentation, Anger, and Action:Citizenship Education In and Out of the Classroom. *In Factis Pax* 4(1) (2010): 108-119.