Understanding and action: Thinking with Arendt about democratic education

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Taking as its point of departure Ahier's location of the problem of citizenship in the context of the changes that globalisation and neo-liberalism have brought about in higher education, this article focuses on the conceptual preconditions that need to underpin the idea of 'teaching' citizenship through the university curriculum. The article takes the republican notion of citizenship and Hannah Arendt's contribution to thinking politics, citizenship and education to propose a political pedagogy that can help foster a citizenship identity that counters the individualist identities provided by the insidious influence of the market in higher education.

Keywords: Citizenship, Arendt, pedagogy, public sphere

> *The question that has to be asked is whether the very ways in which higher education has been extended to a greater percentage of the population, and re-structured to serve the economy, run contrary to earlier democratic and social hopes and aspirations. Do some current developments actually marginalise social understanding and foster only individual means of dealing with problems of society, inhibit connection and collective commitment, encourage despair and a general lack of concern for the fate of others? Such critical questioning may lead to one of two conclusions. Either one can see that other identities are being fostered by the extension of higher education, at the expense of that of 'citizen', or a new form of citizenship is being constructed as an alternative to that which the social democratic state tried to promote. (Ahier, Beck & Moore, 2003:63)*

Introduction

Ahier's quote sharply introduces the contradictory context within which tertiary institutions are expected to play a role in the development of citizenship. While processes of democratisation since the end of World War 2 have extended the right of citizenship to many more individuals, this citizenship, far from being conceived and practised as social, has been increasingly characterised by a preoccupation with the needs and aspirations of the individual almost to the exclusion of the social. The pre-eminence of the individual, coupled with the paramount role that market forces have played in determining the skills and competencies required by students in order to succeed in society, are not easily reconcilable with national and international higher education policy injunctions about the role of universities in educating for citizenship. In the UK, the *Robbins Report* (1963) indicated that "the transmission of a common culture and standards of citizenship" were among the goals of higher education (Ahier *et al*., 2003:1). More than a decade later, at the height of higher education reform in the UK, the *Dearing Report* (1997) confirmed higher education's role as a transmitter of citizenship and culture. In a very different context, the first democratic government of South Africa saw one of the fundamental aims of higher education as "to contribute to the socialisation of enlightened, responsible and constructively critical citizens" (Department of Education, 1997:1.3). What does this mean at a time when students are increasingly regarded as clients and when the market influences not only the programmes that universities offer, but also the identities fostered in university graduates? It seems to me that any attempt at giving serious expression in higher education teaching and learning to the notion of 'graduate citizens' has to start by grappling with the meaning of politics and citizenship and how these intersect.

The literature in the field of citizenship and education is vast, encompassing studies on the role of the university as citizen itself and its capacity for, and orientation to community engagement (GUNI, 2009);

studies on the contribution that extra-curricular programmes make to the development of civic attitudes in young people (Service Enquiry, 2003); studies on how institutions teach citizenship in specific curriculum (Gross & Dynneson, 1991; CHE, 2006b), and studies on the role that the curricular and the non-curricular can have in educating future citizens and democracy (Ahier *et al*., 2003; Bender, 2006; Dewey, 2004; Ehrlich, 2001; Giroux, 2008; Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997). In this article, I focus specifically on the conceptual preconditions that need to underpin the notion of 'teaching' citizenship through the university curriculum. I argue that the intellectual and moral habits that inform citizenship can be developed in the context of higher education. In doing this, I take as my point of departure the republican notion of citizenship and Hannah Arendt's contribution to thinking politics, citizenship and education to propose a political pedagogy that can help foster a citizenship identity that counters the individualist identities provided by the insidious influence of the market in higher education.

Defining citizenship

According to Ahier *et al.* (2003:11), citizenship is a source of structuration which is simultaneously legal in the sense of the obligations and rights derived from the status of citizen, and social in the sense of providing an identity derived from the belonging to an identifiable political community. Leydant (2009) adds to these components another aspect in the characterisation of citizenship. Citizens do not only have rights and obligations determined by their position in the political community, but they also have capacity for agency, that is, to act and, through action, influence the course of events in a given society. The extent to which citizenship is predicated on the exercise of agency and the specific nature of this agency differ across historical periods and the conceptual frame of reference within which citizenship is defined.

The liberal and the republican conceptions of citizenship present two markedly different understandings of the nature, purpose and extent of citizens' political agency (Kymlicka & Norman, 1995; Norman & Kymlicka, 2005; Leydant, 2009). Within a liberal framework, citizenship is a legal status which guarantees the individual the protection of the law rather than his/her participation in the making of the law. This definition of citizenship allows individuals to exercise their freedom of association but does not require active political participation in the public sphere. In fact, the main characteristic of liberal citizenship is that it allows individuals their freedom to live their private lives. Citizenship thus understood is measured by the freedom not to act. Thus, freedom and agency within the liberal perspective are negative: freedom not to participate or the delegation of the direct agency to others (government). The fact that citizenship is exercised through individuals' right to live their private lives accentuates the individualistic character of liberal citizenship. It can, therefore, be said that the liberal citizen is, despite his/her right to free association, constituted privately in the exercise of freedom in the private sphere. Society plays no role in the constitution of the individual subject and, in turn, his/her main preoccupation is with the self. Politics, from this perspective, are about the running of public affairs so as to allow the maximum individual freedom for the self to develop and fulfil his/her needs.

It is illuminating that the preoccupation with citizen education in both the US and the UK emerged at a time when neoliberal political dispensations and their impact in the organisation of state and society (Harvey, 2007) had taken individual preoccupations with the self to the exclusion of the public to new and concerning heights. It appears that the points of departure and arrival in the 1990s and 2000s UK- and US-based studies on citizenship and education are similar: a concern about civic disengagement and low political participation and the will to put forward higher education's responsibility in the development of citizenship. Interestingly, in South Africa, the concern comes from almost the opposite angle (Jonathan, 2001; Singh, 2001). In this instance, the focus on the role of universities in the construction of democracy came at the time of the heightened political participation which followed the first democratic election in 1994 (Jonathan, 2006). However, in either case, the concern was about how to use education to (re)instate the social dimension of citizenship in young people.

The republican conception of citizenship operates almost in the opposite direction to the liberal frame. Citizenship is about the exercise of agency in the public sphere. The individual citizen is constituted through his/her participation in the public sphere. This participation requires a number of virtues, among

which the ability to think not of the self but of the common (public) good is pre-eminent. The social, the individual in community, is the space of politics and, therefore, citizenship within the republican framework is a social rather than an individual identity.

Hannah Arendt's thought on politics and the public sphere, as nearly every other issue about which she wrote, is open to interpretation. She has been regarded as a conservative, nostalgic thinker and as a progressive one (Benhabib, 1992:91). There is no agreement about the fit between her conception of politics and a republican framework (Villa, 1997). In this article, I followed those scholars (Benhabib, 1992; Canovan, 1998; Disch, 1994; Young-Bruelh, 1982) who view Arendt's thinkingon politics and the public sphere within a republican tradition.

This article uses four concepts, namely action, natality, judgement, and understanding, which Arendt developed and elaborated, not always consistently, from her study on the origins of totalitarianism to her last, incomplete, work on the *vita contemplativa*. I couple these concepts with her idea of the purpose of education in an attempt to take further the notion of a political pedagogy. In the next section, I grapple mostly with the notions of action, natality and judgement, leaving understanding and education as essential components of the last section of this article.

Arendt: Politics and the human condition

For Arendt, there are three modes of being in the world: labour, which is exercised in relation to the conservation and reproduction of human life; work, which refers to the ability to transform the material world, and action, which refers to the human freedom to change the world (Arendt, 1998:7). Out of these, action is the mode of existence where politics take place. Arendt characterises action through the categories of natality, plurality and, as Benhabib (1992:123) aptly put it, narrativity. Natality refers to the human capacity for change and activity which derives from the act of being born. For Arendt, natality defines the fact that human beings are themselves a beginning. On this she bases the possibility of both hope and change (Arendt, 2005:321). Plurality refers to the fact that human activity is action in concert in the presence of others. Therefore, political action is action with others that takes place through public deliberation. This is Arendt's associational understanding of the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992:93; Disch, 1994:71). The third category that defines action is narrativity, that is, "the identification of our intentions (as actors) in terms of a narrative of which we are the authors" and that reflects both knowledge of the past and aspirations for the future (Benhabib, 1992:129).

Within this conceptualisation, the political is a constantly created space of appearance (manifestation) in which human beings reveal to each other who they are through speech and deeds and, very importantly, through the exercise of judgement, the other concept in Arendt's theorisation that connects thinking with acting. In this context, judging is the process of ascertaining the intersubjective validity of propositions arrived at, or discussed in the public sphere. Benhabib has argued persuasively that, in her search for a connection between thinking and morality, Arendt found a way of moving Kant's concept of reflective judgement from the aesthetic domain to the terrain of politics. Thus, for Arendt:

> *(t)he identification of morally correct actions requires … the exercise of imagination in the articulation of possible narratives and act-descriptions under which our deeds might fall; finally the interpretations of one's actions and maxims entail the understanding of the narrative history of the self and of others. (Benhabib, 1992:132)*

The domain of action and human capacity to connect thinking and judgement is exercised not only on the public sphere, but also in relation to what Arendt calls the "common world", a shared set of institutions and artefacts that constitute the context of human activity and represents the current knowledge of the world (Arendt, 1998; d'Entreves, 2008; Kohn, 2006).[1]

Taking all of this into account, it can be said that, from Arendt's perspective, citizenship is the enacting of human freedom (action) exercised in relation to two interrelated spheres: the public sphere, where citizens act in concert through deliberation, and the common world. Natality, plurality and narrativity as the constitutive elements of action produce an understanding of politics and citizenship that leads not to

disconnection, isolation and despair as laid out by Ahier in the quote that opened this article, but to the opposite, to a web of interrelationships and to hope in the power of concerted action to change the world.

This apparent connectedness in Arendt, however, has some limitations and contradictions that need to be pointed out. A fundamental one is Arendt's separation of the public and the private and her "depoliticisation" of the social. In both instances, Arendt obviates the asymmetrical relations governing the private and the social, and how making these asymmetries public and, especially, correcting them is itself a matter of politics and citizenship (Benhabib, 1992:93). I will return to the implications of this limit in Arendt's understanding of politics in the next section when I discuss her characterisation of education.

Whatever the historical limits of Arendt's understanding of the social, the principles intrinsic to political life in her thought, freedom, equality, justice and solidarity, invite a retracing of our steps to re-imagine politics along a different axis from the one proposed and still entrenched by neo-liberalism. This, however, is not a call for a return to an idealised past that privileged 'republican politics' or a call for a utopian public sphere. Arendt's conceptualisation of (political) action as a mode of existence makes it possible to think about ways to rescue human ability to act politically. It is in Arendt's characterisation of the purpose of human action as to change and to conserve the world that her thinking about politics and the human condition intersects with her views on education and where theorists of education have found fruitful ground for a pedagogical elaboration of Arendt's thought. In the next section of this article, I will engage with the meaning of Arendt's political thinking for a reflection of the role of higher education in the development of citizenship.

Education and politics: A political pedagogy?

Arendt's conceptualisation of education takes as its point of departure the concept of natality, that is, human capacity for renewal, which, as noted earlier, is itself intrinsic to the act of being born. Thus, natality is both a condition to political action and the essence of education in that every new generation needs to be introduced to the world over which they will have to act. The whole of Arendt's reflection on education is predicated on her theorisation of the human condition and politics.

Education specialists, who have sought in Arendt's thinking elements to reflect on pedagogy, focus on three aspects of her conceptualisation of politics and education: the social nature of education, its role in conserving and changing the world, and its importance in the development of the capacity to judge. In this section, I would like to elaborate on these three themes and then introduce Arendt's notion of understanding as a link between action and judgement.

The aim of education is the introduction of the young to the world, preparing them to change the world without prescribing the direction or the manner of its transformation (Levinson, 2001:18). Arendt's most cited quote on education,

> *Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing the common world (Arendt, 2006a:193).*

indicates the moral and emotional forces at play in the educational process: love of the world and love of the child, as well as the 'social' nature of its object: the common world. The introduction of the young to the world implies not only a sense of responsibility on the part of the adults for both the continuance of the world and the young's process of familiarisation with a world that is new to them, but also a process of progressive taking responsibility for the world on the part of the young. In other words, education is about preparing the young for acting in and on the world. In this sense, the aim of education is twofold: preservation and change or, as Arendt (2006a:189) put it, the preservation of the social world by allowing the possibility to change it. Nothing could be further from "the marginalisation of social understanding" pointed out by Ahier. In the task of renewing the common world, tradition - the existing understanding of the world together with all its institutions - is handed over to the young as part of the historical process

of continuity and change. This process allows the young to enter into the web of relations that Benhabib calls narrativity, thus being able to express herself as subject and to use the historical knowledge and the social knowledge to (ultimately) communicate and act in the public sphere.[2] In this instance, the social, as noted in the previous section, refers to the inter-subjective; the relationship between the I and the others, particularly in the context of the intellectual and moral process of thinking. Within the context of Arendt's analysis of the human condition, the pedagogical space is a preparation for action in the public space. At the heart of Arendt's pedagogy is the development of active personhood which is intrinsically social (Walker, 2002:48-49).

The will to act and to change the world presupposes judgement as to the goodness or suitability of the common world and its tradition and the direction of change. Being able to make judgements is, in Arendt's (2006b:120) own view, a fundamental characteristic of the political being. Her preoccupation, particularly in her writings between 1950s and the 1960s, was to understand the failure of thought and judgement that allowed the rise of Nazism. Arendt's "moral politics" has led to scholars in the field of education to argue that cultivating judgement in the young is a necessary aspect of educating them for democratic participation in the public sphere. For Smith (2001:80), education has a role in allowing the young to practise judgement. This is done by teaching how to think representatively (Smith, 2001:80-83) or, as Arendt (2006b:217) herself put it, to achieve enlarged mentalities, which entails the ability to view the world from many different perspectives, and by providing opportunities to practise judgement through extra-curricular pedagogies (Smith, 2001:85).

Most specialists in education who have sought in Arendt the elements of a theorised approach to education as part of a progressive politics have stopped short of incorporating the notion of understanding into the construction of an Arendtian pedagogy. In the remaining part of this section, I will present Arendt's notion of understanding and draw the implications that such a concept has for the possibility of an education for democracy.

Arendt's preoccupation with understanding developed in the early 1950s in the context of her continued reflections on totalitarian regimes after the publication in 1948 of her book on the origins of totalitarianism, and came to the fore again after her work on Eichmann's trial in 1966.

Arendt (2005:308) distinguishes knowledge (having the correct information about something) from understanding (the capacity to provide meaning to knowledge). Understanding, for Arendt, is a "specifically human way of being alive" which as such never ends and, therefore, cannot produce conclusive results. Understanding then is a defining existential condition of the human being which allows us to reconcile ourselves with the world in which we live.

The relation between knowledge and understanding in Arendt is particularly interesting from a pedagogical point of view. For her, understanding precedes knowledge in that human beings have a preliminary understanding of the world that serves as a point of departure for the generation and acquisition of knowledge. Both preliminary understanding and understanding that succeeds knowledge produce meaning of the world (Arendt, 2005:310-311). Thus, understanding is not simply an intellectual operation, but a complex intellectual and moral process that results in judgement (Arendt, 2005:313). Understanding and its consequence, judgement, are at the origin of political action. According to Arendt (2005:321), action is the other side of understanding, and it is associated with imagination as the ability to penetrate the darkness of the human condition (Arendt, 2005:322). Understanding, which implies and often in Arendt's text equates imagination in the sense of being able to put oneself in the other's situation, then becomes the key for action, even in times of crisis when common categories of judgement have been lost, as happened in the context of totalitarian regimes. Why does this matter for education and for citizenship?

For Arendt, the need and the justification of education, as indicated earlier, is natality, the origin of action. Thus, the introduction of the young to the world, which is one of the purposes of education, requires that they be taught the tradition of the common world. But this knowledge is not sufficient; education has to provide/facilitate the development of understanding for students to make sense of knowledge, of themselves and eventually of their place in the world. From an Arendtian perspective,

no judgement, no action can take place without understanding. Otherwise there is an abdication of our humanity that results, among other things, in "thoughtlessness" and the cog-theory that she discusses à propos of Eichmann's trial (Arendt 2003a). Arendt associates understanding with our ability to penetrate the darkness of the world and our condition not only in the sense of its sombreness but also, especially, in terms of its impenetrability. Thus, imagination, the other name that Arendt gives to understanding, becomes an essential emotional and intellectual faculty because, as she puts it:

> *(I)f we wish to translate the biblical language into terms that are closer to our speech ... we may call the faculty of imagination the gift of the 'understanding heart'. In distinction from fantasy, which dreams something, imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real. (Arendt, 2005:322)*

The faculty of understanding/imagination needs development to access the past but also to envisage the future and, therefore, to fulfil the transformative purpose of education.

From this perspective, education is a guided process of development of understanding ("a specifically human way of being alive", (Arendt, 2003 a: 308)) as the young are introduced as social beings to the common world. The coupling of understanding/action in Arendt's thinking and her conceptualisation of politics as the epitome of human action suggest that education (an activity that takes place in public, as opposed to the privacy of the home) is education for the public sphere. Yet, interestingly, she did not follow her own reasoning in her analysis of the events at Little Rock, when she argued for the right of parents to decide among whom their children should be educated as a social and not a political issue (cf. endnote 2).

If this is the case, then higher education pedagogies need not only introduce students to the common world, but also replicate the public sphere for them to progressively disclose their self in deed and speech, to learn to act together, to learn how fair and unconstrained deliberation can lead to common conviction, and to be prepared to do the unanticipated.

This approach to education does not necessarily have to find expression in an especially dedicated curriculum to teach citizenship, although curriculum in the sense of the organisation and selection of knowledge offered to students is crucial for this purpose. Citizenship, from an Arendtian perspective, can and should be a pedagogy shaping mainstream curriculum as far as the knowledge taught is open (Jansen, 2009). Put differently, a knowledge base that is open to critique, that is ready to consider different perspectives, and imagine the position of the other is a necessary condition for the exercise of citizenship as pedagogy. In fact, a pedagogy of citizenship can only take place within contrasting knowledge, where students are taught but also invited to imagine/understand and act together.

Conclusion

It is nearly a decade since Ahier and his colleagues published *Graduate citizen?* During this time, several events in the world have questioned the viability of the economic and political organisation of society proposed by neo-liberalism, which gave origin to Ahier's reflection: the global financial crisis, unprecedented social protest in places where it seldom happened previously, and political uprisings accompanied by what seems to be the creation of public spheres with direct citizenship participation. This suggests that, although the primacy of the individual consumer over the social citizen has not been substantially altered, it might be possible to push it further back and develop connection, collective commitment, encourage hope, and develop solidarity. Higher education can and should play a part in this process. In South Africa, the tensions between the neo-liberal and the social model of higher education are not yet totally tilted. Much around us suggests that public deliberation and love for the common world and for the new generation are not paramount concerns in the *res publica*, and worse still, there is a certain acquiescence or defeat among us, who like onlookers, comment in despair on public happenings without engaging.

I have argued in this article that (republican) citizenship requires intellectual and moral habits that need to be taught, and that higher education can and should take up the task of doing this. In order to do so, I have proposed the politicisation of education, not as party politics but as education for the public sphere.

I have argued that Hannah Arendt's notion of understanding and action, coupled with her view of the purpose of education, provide a fruitful starting point for the conceptualisation of citizenship as pedagogy. This pedagogy, to be true to Arendt's thinking, has to be permanently reviewed, cannot present itself as conclusive truth and, at the same time, cannot propose a "view from nowhere" (Disch, 1996:1-19) that is, a seemingly neutral perspective not fully committed with a particular purpose. It cannot result either in a new sound byte in the higher education vocabulary without depths of knowledge and meaning. It has to test and stretch us and our students in our different roles to take responsibility for the common world.

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Endnotes

1. The 'location' of the common world is not obvious. It clearly does not belong in 'society' which Arendt regarded as the institutional differentiation between a progressively narrower political world and the market and the family. In many respects, the common world seems to arise from the historical depth of the 'web of interactions' that Benhabib re-interprets as narrativity. See Arendt (1998:38-49) and Benhabib (1992:90-93).

2. Yet, if education was a preparation for entering the public sphere, Arendt did not believe that education was political or could be used for political purposes. Her controversial position in relation to the events in Little Rock shows how Arendt's notion of politics excluded the social and the private. It is interesting that in relation to this particular issue, she retracted her position. See Arendt (2003 b:193-213) and Young-Breuhl (1982:316).

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