

Toward enhanced democratic learning spaces: A case study from the Republic of Ireland

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This paper explores the potential of the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry (OSDE) as a methodological approach for the promotion of participants' independent thinking skills (ITS) as well as enhancing their active citizenship capacities. The approach was pioneered by Vanessa Andreotti and her colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham (see www.osdemethodology.org.uk). It offers a set of procedures and ground rules to structure safe spaces for dialogue and enquiry about global issues and perspectives focusing on interdependence.

Before progressing to explore the potential of OSDE for the development of ITS and active citizenship, it might be helpful to consider some of the essential facets of the approach. It is important to recognise that it is premised on the concept of a safe space, which is also considered a prerequisite for the enactment of real dialogue; such dialogue engenders respect for the learner and this is regarded as another essential component of OSDE. It is claimed that a learning context that is characterised by respect and openness facilitates the practice of 'problem-posing' education which Freire (1997) equates with "the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (p. 64). He refers to it as 'conscientization' which equates with Greene's (1995) concept of "wide-awakeness" as "a mode of opening up the world to critical judgments and to their imaginative projections and in time, to their transformative actions" (Greene, 1995, p. 56). This process of conscientization is central to the OSDE approach. The Department for Education and Skills (Dfes; 2007) acknowledges this when it refers to it as "a methodology that has a central focus of developing critical literacy and independent thinking" (p. 47).

It is reasonable to enquire however why these skills might be considered necessary for successful engagement with present-day society. It might be helpful here to consider Barnett's (1999) contention that we live in an era of 'supercomplexity' which is characterised by uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability and contestability and that the capacity for independent thinking provides resources for navigating through this complexity. He outlines this in more detail when he describes what he refers to as "pedagogies for an age of uncertainty" (p. 136). Such pedagogies, in his view, affirm the humanity of each individual student; allow each student his or her authenticity-in-the-making; and offer space to each student to forge his or her own becoming (Barnett, 2007, p. 137).

More specifically, it might also be reasonable to inquire as to why the capacity for independent thinking has relevance for the teaching and learning context in the Republic of Ireland at this time. The Taskforce on Active Citizenship Report (2007) confirmed its relevance when it stated that, "schools and colleges are places where people learn about behaviour, dialogue, decision-making as well as a range of skills, knowledge and attributes that enable people to act as thinking, critical, responsible and caring citizens in a democratic society" (p. 21).

Irish schools however do not always provide fertile ground for the propagation of independent thinking skills. This is partly due to the fact that the schooling system in the Republic of Ireland is beholden to

an over-arching economic agenda. The 2004 OECD Report on Higher Education in Ireland, for example, acknowledges that the primary purpose of higher education is linked to prioritising national prosperity. Collins (2005) points out that in the said report wider concepts of higher education as a critical presence in society merit hardly a mention.

There are also some promising developments on the horizon that have the potential to embed the skills for independent thinking for future generations of learners. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland is conscious of the impact of globalisation. It appreciates that with it the skills “of critical discernment and information handling become increasingly important” (NCCA, 2006, p. 11). It is no surprise then that in its re-vamp of the senior cycle, the NCCA have given a central place for the development of a learner’s critical and creative thinking capacities (NCCA, 2007).

I drew on the principles underpinning the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry approach both to develop and to deliver a core Masters in Education module on the ‘Theory and Practice of Education’ in the academic year 2006-2007 for Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. In particular, the module was informed by OSDE’s acknowledgement that every individual brings valid and legitimate knowledge which is constructed in their own contexts. The module was also informed by its perception that all knowledge is partial and incomplete, as well as by the acknowledgement that all knowledge can be questioned.

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed and forwarded to each of the participants in the module to invite them to comment on particular aspects of the OSDE approach that underpinned it. On the question as to whether the module recognised and validated the knowledge that each of the learners brought to the learning context, one participant commented that:

We certainly recognised that we’re all coming from different experiences and backgrounds within the one education system but that this added to the group—listening to and hearing other angles widened our perspective and therefore our understanding of our context and the influencing factors that resulted in how we experienced and viewed the education system.
L1(MIC06)

The same learner also acknowledges the partiality and incompleteness of knowledge, especially in her recognition that “some of the theories were acceptable in theory but in practice there were too many variables and so you could say that the theories were incomplete and partial”. Equally, she perceives that:

Our own knowledge was certainly partial also in the sense that we only experienced certain parts of the education system. Our own attitudes and experiences coloured our views on the theories we discussed. L1(MIC06)

And, on the question of whether all knowledge can be questioned, she responds that “knowledge when discussed is subjective in the sense that we all understand it in context of our experience, attitudes and what we want the knowledge to mean”. She goes on to contend that “if we didn’t have the freedom to question knowledge we would have to question what freedom we actually had at all”.

The module’s intended learning outcomes in respect of the underlying OSDE principles mentioned above were also succinctly captured in the following participant’s comments:

The overbidding memory of the module was that it opened up the senses to view education from a positive critical manner and not as a bleary eyed 'educationalist'.... It helped to develop a lighthouse effect on all aspects of education and its possible implications whether good or bad. L2(MI06)

It occurred to me that practitioners of the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry approach might also have a valuable perspective to offer on its potential for the development of independent thinking skills. Accordingly, I developed a questionnaire and distributed it to the OSDE Network. On the question of whether engagement with OSDE helps learners to develop their critical thinking skills, one of the respondents commented that:

Yes, but it only works with certain students who are already engaged in the learning process and open to new perspectives. Decidedly, a smaller group would yield better results, as the teacher would be able to address individual issues more closely. (OSDE2)

In a similar vein, another practitioner suggested that:

The strengths of the methodology, from my point of view, were its transparency and inclusiveness, flexibility, adaptability (across disciplines, age groups, cultures, social groups, etc.) and its contribution towards the development or enhancement of critical literacy skills. (OSDE3)

Previously, I acknowledged that there are serious impediments in the Irish teaching and learning context which discourage the development of critical thinking skills. In that connection, it might be helpful at this juncture to make reference to the General Secretary of the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland's comment about the impact of League Tables on Irish education. He contends that such tables "did not recognise the role of education in developing key competencies, which would be needed for society in the future" (White, 2007). He identifies these as learning to learn; social and civic competence; initiative taking and entrepreneurship; and, cultural awareness and expression. Here, he makes reference to another very important aspect of the Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry approach, which is its capacity for promoting a learner's capacity for active citizenship.

Education's capacity for active citizenship is succinctly articulated by Greene (1995) where she acknowledges the pivotal role that it can make for "the intentional bringing into being of norm-governed situations, situations in which students discover what it is to experience a sense of obligation and responsibility" (p. 66). The present Chancellor of the National University of Ireland also acknowledged the pivotal role that schools can play in this area. In his keynote address for the Community Knowledge Initiative at the National University of Ireland Galway he stated that:

Unless firm ethical foundations can be laid in our schools for what I would describe as a new "civic republicanism", the prospect of improving, or even maintaining, the quality of Irish society as we move further into the 21st century seems pretty grim. We could eventually find that we had created an ethical waste-land. (Fitzgerald, 2006)

As mentioned earlier, the economic under-tow in Irish education does not provide a favourable context for the development of independent thinking skills; in a similar manner, that same under-tow also

inhibits schools from realizing their civic remit. Ryan and Stritch (2009) acknowledge this in their contention that:

It is important that we do not let our discourse emphasise the economic role of higher education at the expense of the critically important social contribution that higher education makes to our society. (p. 36)

Given the reality of the Irish teaching and learning context, is it reasonable to inquire if there still might be a place for OSDE to encourage learners to develop their capacities for active citizenship? The feedback from OSDE Practitioners would appear to indicate that there is. One of the respondents, for example, claimed that the approach produces in learners

a sense of agency, a feeling that they can promote changes in society, and mostly it creates in them the responsibility for implementing this change. They feel that they can change society because they can change themselves—and from here to participating actively in society there is only a very short distance. (OSDE1)

I am reminded here of Greene's (1995) comment that "our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive" (p. 43). And despite the real obstacles that can inhibit Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry from realizing its full potential in terms of developing a learner's independent thinking skills and capacity for active citizenship, it may be helpful to remind ourselves of Szyborska's comment that "there is, there has been, there will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and to do their job with love and imagination" (cited in Greene, 1998, p. 256). Accordingly, it might be possible to reaffirm our conviction in the belief that it is "on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we decide that these are unbearable" (Sartre, 1956, p. 435).

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