Towards a citizenship literacy?
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Contribution to the symposium Literacies across the school subjects within Network 27 Didactics – Learning and Teaching at the ECER-conference in Helsinki, Finland August 2010.

“The literacy practices we have today, the schooling we have today, the technologies we have today all result from active human decisions based on people’s values. Related to this, all literacy activities have a purpose for people. People do things for a reason, people have purposes”.
(Barton 2007 p. 47 with italics borrowed from my doctorate student Ingela Korsell 2009 p.7 who will analyse literacy intentions among class teachers in grade 4-6)

Introduction /Abstract / Summary

Is it possible to qualitatively distinguish a citizenship literacy from a mere amalgamation of the different school subject literacies (historical literacy, scientific literacy etc.), and what would such a distinction look like? Is it also possible to distinguish citizenship literacy from the DeSeCo project and its links to three kinds of literacy: reading, mathematical and scientific and how should the proposal made by DeSeCo of competencies be evaluated? I will draw on the distinction made by Douglas Roberts (2007) concerning scientific literacy, between what he calls vision I and vision II, where vision I “looks inward at science itself”, while vision II should “enable students to approach and think about situations as a citizen well informed about science would”. From that starting point I will ask the question whether there is a tension that implies vision I to be more related to narrower, more one-dimensional, test-based school knowledge and vision II to have as its aim a citizenship literacy offering scope for open communication between different perspectives. And, if that is the case, in what way could different literacy intentions be investigated and distinguished from each other?
Literacies and competencies – an inbuilt tension?

The use of the concept of literacy has expanded hugely over the last years. It is used both within educational policy and within educational research and its former meaning closely related to reading and writing has been overruled. Among educational policy instances OECD and the closely related PISA (Programme for International Students Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study) have internalised and developed the literacy concept. Within the so called DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies)-project also run by OECD, aiming at giving the assessments programs mentioned a theoretical frame, three key competencies have been developed: 1) Using tools interactively, 2) Interact in heterogeneous groups and 3) Act autonomously. These three competencies have been related to the need of developing literacy, but at the same time the DeSeCo-project stresses that literacy is not about individuals developing a long list of disconnected, individually based skills as e.g. the enumeration also made by DeSeCO: a) reading literacy, b) mathematical literacy and c) scientific literacy. A broader kind of literacy, or competence, is rather about developing a deliberate mix of literacy, competencies, capacities of both individual and relational dimensions creating a kind of human and social capital and this can be theoretically and conceptually defined in many ways.

I think one can possibly see the three competencies as a way of exceeding the limits of the three literacies. I find the three key competencies rather ambitious and abstract, but still I think that they can function as important directions implying tendencies that in many ways are crossing the restructuration movement, the renaissance of the traditional school during the last decades (a restructuration that in some instances tend to be in accordance with many parts of the test movement implying a rather narrow concept of knowledge). The first two competencies – Using tools interactively and Interact in heterogenous groups – include very important and desirable aspects transgressing a narrow knowledge concept, but at the same time they are easily forced aside in line with the selective tradition of schools, now enforced by the individually based assessment tests supported by the restructuration movement. The two competencies mentioned, interaction and communication in heterogeneous groups and using artefacts interactively, can be seen as forward-looking and keeping pace with the current developments within both youth culture and working life. But how accepted and strong are these activities in the classrooms of today? In the testing situations used by PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS it is almost exclusively the knowledge and abilities of the individual student in rather isolated situations that are assessed. The test situations do very seldom imply the interaction and communication mentioned.
Towards a necessary widening of the literacy concept

It is also hard to find a clear relationship between the three literacies (reading, mathematical and scientific) and the three competencies. The three literacies proposed can also be questioned as being too narrow while limited to the three aspects mentioned- reading, scientific and mathematical - in relation to what could be seen as coupled to working life but not to human life in a broader way. If one should talk about and try to develop different necessary literacies one could e.g. add an esthetic literacy and the need of a historical literacy, historical consciousness and many more aspects might be enumerated, and I would say that these two, and perhaps also other literacy aspects are parts of a necessary more human literacy competence. And these two literacy fields can also be stressed as necessary in relation to the key competencies (even if they are very abstract and can be applied to many different areas).

Implications of the democratic goals of schools and a normative statement

But neither the different literacies enumerated nor the competencies mentioned are enough in relation to a vision of schools as creative for democracy. If these kinds of goals shall be taken seriously – and there are (still) these kinds of goals in the international documents mentioned and in the Swedish curricula as well as in the other Nordic countries – and if we shall try to develop a ‘literacy competence’ in line with a strengthening of democracy, we will need new perspectives.

Is there, at this moment, a need to and ought we as educational researchers, more clearly, put the normative question of how to create the preconditions for a political socialization of all citizens aiming at a citizenship literacy that enable humans / pupils / students to make meaning of a pluralist universe, a pluralist world in which different groups look on the world in different ways? Developing an open communication between different perspectives (worldviews) implies developing a communicative competence in its widest sense: having opportunities to make use of one’s citizenship rights by developing one´s communicative abilities, and being recognized and listened to in different settings. Aiming at citizenship literacy also implies a certain civic responsibility on the part of professionals such as teachers and others who are in charge of teaching situations and are leading communicative interactions. Partly, and perhaps even more but of course not entirely, such an ambition is contradictory to a heavy test-based school or school activities that are dominated to prepare for tests of detailed knowledge of different kinds.
At the societal level and in a long sight perspective of a living and sustainable democracy, it is fundamental that the socializing institutions of society, like the schools, create predispositions for public deliberation over important, moral and political questions (which we might call a Habermasian perspective on schools, Habermas 1996, Englund 2000, 2006, 2010). And as far as developing a deliberative attitude and competence is concerned, citizenship literacy can be seen as a predisposition for this public deliberation. But how might this kind of literacy be developed? In different ways of course, and I will come back to that.

The central idea of what I here call the development of a citizenship literacy is that pupils/students should have the opportunities to expand their competence (-cies) and literacy (-cies) to understand and to deliberate upon plural ideas and arguments in communication; a communication which is about sharing as well as contesting different ways of apprehending the world and ideas from different standpoints. The specific view of education (p)referred here is thus what could be characterized as a Deweyan-inspired (Dewey 1985, 1988) ‘education as communication as deliberation’ (Englund 2008), where the communication practice is about creating both consensus and contestation, a kind of (developing) sharing common references and at the same time giving room for contestation, for pluralism with respect for different ways of apprehending problems of all kinds.

However, there can never be one precise and specific kind of citizenship literacy, but perhaps it might be possible to characterize a kind of criteria that it has to meet.\(^1\) Citizenship literacy may also, with Gee 1989, be characterized as one kind of secondary discourse (of literacy) in relation to what might be called different primary discourses (of literacy) developed in different families, home settings, peer cultures etc.\(^2\)

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1. Perhaps the abilities (understood broadly) for “public deliberation over important, moral and political questions” might work as pointing out the criteria of citizenship literacy if we, as said, see citizenship literacy as a kind of predisposition for practicing this public deliberation. The model for deliberative communication that I have developed (Englund 2006) might be seen as one possible starting point. The idea of deliberative communication is consisting of five components: different views are confronted with one another and arguments for these different views are given time and space and are articulated and presented; there is tolerance and respect for the concrete other and participants learn to listen to the other person’s argument; elements of collective will formation are present, i.e. an endeavour to reach consensus or at least temporary agreements and/or to draw attention to differences; authorities/traditional views (represented, for example, by parents and tradition) can be questioned and there are opportunities to challenge one’s own tradition; there is scope for students to communicate and deliberate without teacher control, i.e. for argumentative discussions between students with the aim of solving problems orsheding light on them from different points of view.

2. James Paul Gee (1989) is distinguishing between primary and secondary discourses and defining literacy as “the mastery of or a fluent control over a secondary discourse” (Gee 1989 p. 9). I am not sure of how fruitful it is to make
Different possible literacies

To (try to) develop a *citizenship literacy* (within the educational system) of the kind referred to in the introductory paragraphs is of course just one way among many others of understanding literacy and a central starting point in every discussion of literacy today might be first, that there are many different understandings of this concept and second, that there is not self-evident that schools should develop a citizenship literacy among students.\(^3\)

The growing understanding of the concept of 'literacy' is thus, in Western modern contexts, that it is a question of not just the decontextualized ability to read and write but more that that without saying that citizenship literacy would be the overall goal. However, we might not forget that it 'out there’, not least within dominant educational policy circles (like e.g. the Swedish minister for education) and perhaps among many others (mass media), is a vast understanding of literacy as just a more or less decontextualized, technical ability of reading and writing. This kind of understanding literacy more or less imprints dominant activities in schools around the world pursuing to develop activities responding to tests etc. At the same time, schools and literacy practices in schools are not simple reflections of educational policy documents, but more or less embedded in different, historically created literacy traditions practiced by teachers and the daily activities in schools are of course also influenced by the ongoing debates on literacy. So, besides the (perhaps still dominating) technological (test-related) or what me might call narrow and/or decontextualized conception of literacy, we might find many different literacy traditions in schools related to different school subjects and different literacy intentions among teachers.

But how then shall we distinguish a *citizenship literacy* from the different school subject literacies, e.g. history literacy, scientific literacy etc. which of course are not univocal but related to different selective traditions with variations on that and challenges to it. Perhaps the distinction made by Douglas Roberts (2007) might help us to create a starting point. He makes, concerning scientific literacy, a distinction between vision I and vision II.

> Vision I looks inward at science itself – its products such as laws and theories, and its processes such as hypothesizing and experimenting. According to this

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\(^3\) This is of course dependent of how we define citizenship literacy, but also without defining it more explicitly we may find groups saying that this is not the main task of schools.
vision, goals for school science should be based on the knowledge and skill that enable students to approach and think about situations as a professional scientist would. Vision II on the other hand, looks outward at situations in which science has a role, such as decision-making about socio-scientific issues. In Vision II thinking, goals for school science should be based on the knowledge and skill sets that enable students to approach and think about situations as a citizen well informed about science would (Roberts 2007 p. 9).

Of course, also this kind of distinction is not precise, but it tends to point out how school knowledge of vision I is mostly ‘inward’ partly being a preparation for tests of different kinds, while vision II is aiming at a citizenship literacy.

Of course, or at least that is how I think about it, knowledge of vision I is to some extent necessary for the development of knowledge of vision II. But there is always a question of balancing between vision I and II and to develop routes from vision I to vision II if the goal is to create preconditions for developing a citizenship literacy (vision II). In all school subjects this tension between vision I and II is existing, a tension that implies vision I to be more related to a narrow, test-based school knowledge and vision II aiming at a citizenship literacy with “knowledge and skill sets that enable students to approach and think about situations as a citizen well informed”.

One obvious example from another area recently debated in Sweden may be illustrative. This is about a kind of history query of what Swedish teachers and pupils knew about the Holocaust. After a usual media storm telling that teachers did not know the basic facts about Holocaust (and a very planned follow up was made of the need of more history in teacher education and history lessons in schools), it was revealed that the questions put were very specific and detailed concerning different sorts of concentration camps and places, questions quite clearly of vision I and very detailed while the more general questions of vision II-type were few.

I think this is a rather telling example of how subject teachers and schools often too much concentrate on vision I-literacies and are weaker on vision II / citizenship literacy where the kind of knowledge also is more of an argumentative and valuebased type, a kind of knowledge where there also are different kinds of facts to be understood in relation to different contexts, but where there also are different perspectives encountering each other and different contexts in which knowledge of these different perspectives is embedded.
Different literacy intentions and their consequences

With the starting points now sketched out, I think it might be important to examine what I would call literacy intentions on different levels. With the concept of literacy intentions there is of course primarily room for analysing authoritative documents of different kinds like the mentioned ones from OECD, national curricula etc. However, there is also a question of how concrete communicative interactions take place and develop in classrooms. From a communicative research approach we may understand literacies as continually changing discourses, all the time socially constructed in different situations and contexts, where the communication in which the individual is already involved, and with the potential to widen his or her civic attitude to different phenomena and participation in society. To what extent can e.g. the different conditions of vision I and II be analysed through different learning spaces / education and life-long learning in different informal settings and formal institutions like pre-school, primary and secondary school, higher education and adult education?

From a literacy perspective there might be clear differences between teachers concerning what I would like to call their literacy intentions even if they on the surface tend to ‘do the same thing’. But how, in what way would different literacy intentions be investigated and distinguished from each other? Some of what has been said up to now would do as a starting point, but I think that to understand different literacy intentions is also very much a question of understanding relations, the pedagogy of relation and the insights of that perspective (cf. Bingham & Sidorkin 2004 and Englund ed. 2004). “The first of these insights is about the intersubjective and communicative character of the encounter between teachers and students and between students. The second insight is about the potentially different meanings through the choices (primarily by the teacher) of the teaching content as an offer of meaning. The third insight is about teaching and its always present and possible relationship with the political and moral dimensions and to the aspect of democracy. The field taking form is about the experiences (in a wider sense) that teachers and students have a possibility to live through in schools and the importance of democracy as norm within that field“ (Englund 2004, p. 14 my tr., cf. Englund 1998).

As evident from what said, this is just a starting point and there is of course no linear process from different literacy intentions to different consequences. Even though I would like to start a discussion of the potential value of literacy intentions to understand the formation of different literacies.
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