Education for responsible citizenship

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There is an abundance of literature on citizenship education. This essay is an attempt to show how deliberation is used in university classroom pedagogy, to engender in students a commitment to becoming responsible citizens of a post-apartheid South Africa. Firstly, I show that controversy can be attended to through deliberation, with specific reference to three incidents in my country: alleged racist practices at a university; an instruction by the Minister of Education to introduce a pledge of allegiance in public schools; and xenophobic attacks on foreigners. Secondly, I show that deliberation alone cannot guarantee responsible citizenship. Students also need to be taught to have compassion for the vulnerable other. Finally, I argue that cultivating citizenship through deliberation offers much hope to counteract blindly patriotic sentiments and to engender cosmopolitan justice.

Introduction

At the beginning of each academic year I teach a module entitled ‘Theoretical perspectives on diversity and inclusivity’ to postgraduate students in their final year of a professional teaching qualification. The module aims to elucidate some of the constitutive meanings of democratic citizenship education such as teaching students — about to become high school teachers — to use aspects of democratic citizenship education in their classroom practices. The demographic composition of the class is overwhelmingly white (90%), whereas blacks constitute the minority. One of the reasons for this anomaly, in a country where the majority of the population is black, is the fact that many black people do not speak Afrikaans — considered to be the lingua franca at the institution where I work. This brings me to my first strategy in educating students to become deliberative inquirers.

Education as deliberation

Last year (2008) at the time when I commenced the teaching of deliberation, three issues surfaced dramatically in my country: racism, blind patriotism, and xenophobia. I introduced students to three video clips of incidents related to these phenomena. They were then asked to give an account of why racism, blind patriotism, and xenophobia are societal ills which should be eradicated. Working in groups, students had to justify to one another why racism, blind patriotism, and xenophobia are detrimental to the process of cultivating responsible citizens after decades of apartheid rule. Some students gave an account of their explanations of why these societal ills surfaced and others critically evaluated these explanations. After the evaluation these groups of students offered their arguments against racism, blind patriotism, and xenophobia to the entire class. Randomly, I asked students to respond to other students’ reasons, thus taking one another’s reasons into systematic controversy. Critically evaluating one another’s reasons was done through listening to what the other had to say before agreeing or disagreeing with the other, and this was followed by students giving an account of their own reasons. As the university teacher, I eventually considered the reasons offered by the students before giving an account of my own reasons, which students could evaluate. Sometimes students became annoyed with other students for what they perceived to have been an articulation of ill-conceived reasons. It was my task to emphasise that respect demands that we can disagree (even belligerently) with one another’s reasons and that we have to tell one another when we think the other is wrong. Thus, through listening, evaluating and re-evaluating one another’s reasons, deliberation was fostered in the university classroom.

The remark by a white student, that the racial prejudice and racist actions perpetrated by five white students against elderly, black workers at a university residence (this year) can be seen as a
response to the killing of some white farmers in the country, sparked much heated controversy in the class. One of the five white students urinated into a prepared meal for black workers to show how gullible and ignorant blacks in this country are. Of course, the humiliation of people should not be tolerated because their human dignity is undermined. Similarly, the brutal murder of some white farmers is an abhorrent and barbaric act. To argue, however, that racially degrading behaviour can be justified as a response to farm killings is not only an ill-conceived argument, but also the expression of an irresponsible view. It was at this point that even white students belligerently disagreed with the views of a fellow student. The most defensible argument raised against this ill-conceived view was the argument used by Amy Gutmann (2003), which recognises that freedom of expression should not be left unconstrained when an injustice is perpetrated against others. The white student who attempted to rationalise the racist incident suffered some kind of distress, which is not unusual for the kinds of deliberations we encourage in class. The debate became very heated and one might have expected students to leave the classroom. Yet, since conditions of deliberation had already been engendered in the class for some time, such an act was not necessary.

The point I am making is that even when deliberations are belligerent and distressful, students should continue to participate in such deliberations. Eamon Callan makes the point that the idea of deliberation does not entail an attempt “to achieve dialogical victory over our adversaries but rather the attempt to find and enact terms of political coexistence that we and they can reasonably endorse as morally acceptable” (Callan, 1997, 215). Through deliberation, university teachers and students disturb complacency or provoke doubts about the correctness of their moral beliefs or about the importance of the differences between what they and others believe (a matter of arousing distress), accompanied by a rough process of struggle and ethical confrontation — that is, belligerence (Callan, 1997, 211). If this happens, belligerence and distress eventually give way to moments of ethical conciliation, when the truth and error in rival positions have been made clear and a fitting synthesis of factional viewpoints — such as happened in the class under discussion — is achieved (Callan, 1997, 212). This is an idea of deliberation with which I agree — where no-one has the right to silence dissent and where participants can speak their minds. When university teachers and students can speak their minds, they are also prepared to take risks that will prepare them well to enhance justice in their society. University teachers and students who are prepared to challenge forms of injustice in their society, such as racism and barbaric murders, do so for the sake of achieving democratic justice — they act as responsible citizens willing to take the risk of speaking their minds.

Education as compassion

In February 2008 the Ministry of Education released a revised pledge to be recited at schools, which reads as follows: “We the youth of South Africa, recognising the injustices of our past, honour those who suffered and sacrificed for justice and freedom. We will respect and protect the dignity of each person and stand up for justice. We sincerely declare that we shall uphold the rights and values of our Constitution, and promise to act in accordance with the duties and responsibilities that flow from these rights”. When I asked the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students to comment on the pledge, many white students argued that the pledge made them feel guilty for past apartheid injustices for which they had not been responsible. I agree that the present generation of white PGCE students were not responsible for South Africa’s apartheid past and should not be made to feel as if they had been the perpetrators of such injustice against human beings. Many of these students are in their early twenties and so when the first democratic government came to power, they were barely ten years old. Then the question should be asked whether their recognising the injustices of the past is in fact an assumption that they have themselves perpetrated a wrong. Some black students felt that recognising injustices of the apartheid past does not seem to be detrimental, while some white students argued that honouring those who suffered for justice and freedom actually means that they should honour erstwhile black liberation fighters — people who now serve in the
ANC-led government. Some white students raised the point that honouring those who suffered and sacrificed for justice and freedom in this way would be problematic, because the activities of some black activists actually violated human rights as well, specifically some of the bombings which killed innocent (including white) bystanders.

It seemed as if students did not want to be reminded of South Africa’s past, as that they did not want to bear the burden of [being responsible for] the previous racist government. Therefore all students agreed that respecting and protecting the dignity of each person (black and white) and up-holding the rule of law was vital. Neither black nor white students denied the fact that people should be respected on the basis of their humanity. These students were specifically concerned about every person in the country who suffers vulnerabilities such as poverty, unemployment, and prejudice (including sexism, racism, domestic violence, and stigmatisation as a result of HIV&AIDS). For these students, reducing and eradicating such vulnerabilities is tantamount to preserving the dignity of people.

During our deliberations about the revised pledge of allegiance to be implemented in public schools, students were introduced to the seminal thoughts of Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum (2001, 299) raises the question of the positive contribution that emotions such as compassion can make in guiding deliberation amongst students. Her main argument in defence of compassion is that it ought to be the emotion which should be most frequently cultivated when people embark upon deliberation and just action in public as well as private life. For her, deliberation ought to be impelled by the emotion moving one to treat others justly and humanely — with compassion. Certainly in South African schools, where diverse learners from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (black and white) are beginning to deliberate about matters of public concern — such as crime, victimisation, homelessness, job discrimination, unemployment, domestic violence and the abuse of women, poverty and lack of food, political alienation, alcoholism and drug abuse, and absence of good prospects — certain practical judgements have to be made by the learners about these variants of their public and personal lives. Judgements will invariably be based on students’ perceptions of others’ distress, undeserved misfortune, suffering, injustice, plight, disability, and disease. It is in this regard that compassion becomes a necessary condition in acting and deliberating about such matters. Why? Compassion not only prompts in people an awareness of the misfortune or suffering of others, but also “pushes the boundaries of the self outward by focusing on others’ suffering, which might be the result of no fault of their own” (Nussbaum, 2001, 299).

Nussbaum’s understanding of compassion as painful emotional judgement entails at least two cognitive requirements: firstly, a belief or appraisal that the suffering of others is serious and not trivial, and that they do not deserve the suffering; and secondly, the belief that the possibilities for the person who experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer. I shall now revisit these two requirements of compassion (Waghid, 2004) in relation to how students and teachers ought to deliberate rationally, yet also at the same time cultivate a concern to be just and humane towards others — to act compassionately.

Firstly, insofar as one can become serious about the suffering of others, one believes them to be without blame for the kind of undeserved injustice they might have suffered, and one recognises that the person’s plight needs to be alleviated. Many learners and students, who are perhaps blameless for their current inability to pay school fees because their parents did not enjoy economic prosperity during decades of apartheid, require the compassion of others. In such circumstances, deliberation at school and university should rather take the form of ascertaining what could be done to ensure that learners and students, who do not have the finances to study, remain part of the education community, rather than finding ways to penalise or at times humiliate them. So compassion requires blamelessness on the part of learners/students who are unable to pay school fees; as well as ‘onlookers’ who can make judgements about the need to enhance the situation of the learners/students in question. Similarly, a teacher has compassion for learners who have had an impoverished schooling not necessarily through any fault of their own (parents could not afford to send children to more affluent and organised schools, or to pay for the services of extra-mural tutors,
as is the practice in South Africa) (see also Nussbaum, 2001). Such a teacher recognises the need to find creative ways to assist disadvantaged learners/students to come to grips with difficult concepts in their studies and at the same time acknowledges that s/he is not responsible for the unjust education system in which these students find themselves. One could argue that all learners/students should be treated equally and that none should receive preferential treatment in terms of additional pedagogical support, but this would then disregard the unequal education many, certainly in South Africa, have experienced or may still be subjected to undeservedly.

Secondly, compassion is best cultivated if one acknowledges some sort of community between oneself and the other, understanding what it might mean for one to encounter possibilities and vulnerabilities similar to those of the sufferer: “[One] will learn compassion best if he [she] begins by focusing on their sufferings” (Nussbaum, 2001, 317). Again, “in order for compassion to be present, the person must consider the suffering of another as a significant part of his or her own scheme of goals and ends. She must take that person’s ill as affecting her own flourishing. In effect, she must make herself vulnerable in the person of another” (Nussbaum, 2001, 317). What this recognition of one’s own related vulnerability means is that students, who may have a clear understanding of, say, concepts in a literature classroom and become impatient with their peers for not grasping such concepts, should imagine what it would mean for them to encounter similar difficulties with concepts. Likewise, a teacher of literary studies should become more aware of what it means for students to encounter epistemological difficulties.

In essence, our deliberations about the pledge of allegiance in relation to compassion brought to the fore the intellectual emotions of people in ethical deliberation. Students agreed that it is simply not sufficient to educate by just focusing on deliberation without also cultivating compassion. Deliberative argumentation prompts students and teachers to question meanings, imagine alternative possibilities, modify practical judgements, foster respect, and develop critical engagement. Yet, it seldom brings into play those emotions of people that are necessary to make it worthwhile to continue the dialogical interaction. If one is going to ignore the pedagogical vulnerabilities of the weak, very little will be achieved in the way of meaningful education, that is to say, action with unpredictable and unintended outcomes. What the ‘diversity and inclusivity’ classes clearly emphasised was that we need compassionate students and teachers in our universities and learners in our schools.

Education for cosmopolitan justice

Our deliberations in the ‘diversity and inclusivity’ classes were extended to reflections on cosmopolitan justice when the growing xenophobia in South Africa took a particularly ugly turn in May 2008. Not a single student made any approving comment on the xenophobic attacks on ‘foreign nationals’ (immigrants) that resulted (at the time of writing) in 62 people dead, 670 injured, about 47,000 displaced (28,682 displaced persons in 99 sites across Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape) (The Times, 10 June 2008), and led to many returning to their native countries. Areas most affected by the xenophobic attacks were mainly townships and some suburbs in Cape Town (Du Noon, Masiphumelele, Khayelitsa, Lwandle, Macassar, Mitchells Plain, Nyanga, Ocean View, and Soetwater) and Johannesburg (Alexandra — where the violence started, Diepsloot, Zandspruit, Primrose, Tembisa, Reiger Park, Thokoza, Hillbrow, Jeppes town, Tembisa, and Cleveland). Although the government claims that attempts to curb xenophobia have been successful, there is still a growing concern that immigrants may not be re-integrated into local communities.

The question addressed in the ‘diversity and inclusivity’ class was: how can cosmopolitanism combat xenophobia? Cosmopolitanism recognises the rights of others to ‘universal hospitality’. Simply put, others have the right to be treated hospitably. For Benhabib (2006, 22), hospitality, in a neo-Kantian sense, “is not to be understood as a virtue of sociability, as the kindness and generosity one may show to strangers who come to one’s land or who become dependent on one’s act of kindness through circumstances of nature or history; hospitality is a right that belongs to all human beings as far as we view them as potential participants in a world republic”. Such a right to
hospitality imposes an obligation on democratic states and their citizens not to deny refuge and asylum to those whose intentions are peaceful, particularly if refusing them would result in harming them (Benhabib, 2006, 25). So, if the intentions of Somali entrepreneurs are peaceful (and there are many of them in South Africa), it would be considered their right to be treated hospitably and all democratic citizens’ obligation to ensure that these immigrants enjoy such a right.

Our main task in the ‘diversity and inclusivity’ class was to answer the question as to what such a cosmopolitan approach to education would entail? Firstly, considering that cosmopolitanism involves the right to temporary residence on the part of the “stranger who comes to our land” (Benhabib, 2006, 22), it follows that public schools in South Africa cannot deny access to children of immigrant communities. While they are in most cases admitted, some children are excluded in subtle ways, considering that the language of instruction, for instance, is not in mother tongue of these immigrant children. In fact, in the black township of Kayamandi (in Stellenbosch, South Africa) African children find it difficult to cope with non-mother tongue instruction in public schools, e.g. three Belgian teachers once requested a mediator to assist them in teaching children in Kayamandi to participate in art and cultural activities. Taking into account that even local school children find it difficult to cope with a different language, it would be extremely challenging for immigrant (say Somali) children to adapt to the public school life in their country of temporary sojourn. What cosmopolitanism therefore demands is that immigrant children be taught in their mother tongue initially, before they are assimilated into the broader public school life. Or, alternatively, they should simultaneously learn the language of instruction and be supported in doing so.

The point I am making is that one should not take for granted that people with immigrant status would fit naturally into the public structures of their adopted countries or countries of temporary residence. They have to be initiated gradually into social and public life on the basis of a sense of obligation on the part of democratic states. Failing to do so — for example, denying immigrant children gradual access into public schools and thus depriving them of developing and exercising their capacities — would amount to treating them (“others”) unjustly. The upshot of this view is that if my Malawian student’s children, who are attending the local Kayamandi school, are not treated hospitably by, for example, being initiated gradually into public school life by South African teachers and other learners, then the teachers and learners are not abiding by their obligation to treat others humanely — that is to say, justly. This unfavourable attitude towards immigrant others would not only retard interaction and co-operation among different people, but also impede the ‘education for social justice’ project that the Department of Education so dearly wants to implement in public schools. This is because the consequence would be that these immigrant children and their parents will invariably develop a mistrust (as is seemingly the case with my Malawian student and his children) of the public school sector — a situation which in turn increases their suffering (discomfort) and perpetuates what Iris Marion Young (2006, 159) refers to as “structural social injustice”.

Secondly, ‘the right to have rights’ prohibits states from denying individuals citizenship rights and state protection against murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts such as persecution (whether political, cultural, or religious) (Benhabib, 2006, 25). So, if Somali immigrant children wish to wear their head scarves in South African public schools, following ‘the right to have rights’ notion, these children cannot be discriminated against if they wish to do so. Asking these children to remove their scarves, which they might consider as important to their religious and cultural identity, would be a matter of treating them unjustly on the grounds that their right to be different would be undermined. Similarly, for the South African government to have deported a Pakistani national on the grounds of unreasonable suspicion that he might have been a terrorist suspect caused much humiliation and insult to his family (including his children at school), especially since the Department of Foreign Affairs has after more than six months not yet produced any evidence on this person’s alleged Al-Qaeda connections. In this case, the political — more specifically, cosmopolitan — rights of a human being have been seriously compromised.

Thirdly, one of the main arguments which emanated from our classroom deliberations is that ‘hospitality’ can manifest itself only if South African local communities can begin to offer a wel-
Coming hand to beleaguered immigrants by supporting their integration into our society and by providing protection from possible criminal attacks.

In essence, cosmopolitanism and its concomitant agenda of hospitality, which ought to be afforded other human beings (especially from immigrant communities), in many ways complement the duties and responsibilities associated with the activities of democratic citizens. Unless countries (such as South Africa) and their peoples recognise the rights of others to be treated with dignity and respect, and do not suppress their rights, the achievement of justice will remain remote from the minds and hearts of people. I have argued that South African public schools can do much to promote these norms, which would inevitably consolidate and extend the just actions linked to the implementation of a democratic citizenship agenda.

Note
1. An estimated 1,900 people from Malawi have already returned to their home country and they are being accommodated at an interim shelter, the Kwacha Conference Centre, in Blantyre. Mozambique has received a total of 36,000 returnees, who are currently sheltered at a temporary transit camp at Beluluane centre. Some immigrants are not going back to their home countries, for example, a number of Zimbabweans are going to Zambia.

References

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