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## Active Citizenship Learning in Higher Education

### Abstract

Citizenship participation has increasingly become a core concern for universities. The article will firstly present the task of a third mission. In addition, and as a comparison to the familiar concepts, *service learning* and *civic engagement*, the concept *active citizenship learning*, will be introduced. This is a higher education didactics concept in which academic learning and civic involvement complement one another. A change of perspective and a deeper awareness of democracy is being sought. Ideally, this can be achieved by becoming acquainted with and actively involved in, civil society.

### Keywords

Active Citizenship Learning, Service Learning, Civic Engagement, Higher Education

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## 1 Introduction

Higher education institutions and universities are involved in an ever-greater exchange with society. As seminal tertiary educational institutions, in addition to their traditional teaching and research, they also take on social responsibility as their third academic mission. This assumption of responsibility is shown in various ways, mostly in social activities between higher education institutions and the external environment, which primarily pursue a social (HENKE, PASTERNAK & SCHMID, 2016) or sometimes also an economic, benefit. Subsumed in the term *third mission*, activities can include cultural, social and political dimensions (DUONG, HACHMEISTER & ROESSLER, 2015), and are often tethered to the original task of teaching and research. This does not primarily concern the activities themselves but is rather a way of thinking and acting which pushes the social added value into centre stage. It can be described as “a way of doing, or a mindset for accomplishing, the first two” (E3M-PROJECT, 2012, p. 8).

The following text serves as a conceptual differentiation to familiar concepts of *service learning* and *civic engagement*, and as a practical report it shows the development and implementation of *active citizenship learning* at the Salzburg University of Teacher Education Stefan Zweig.

## 2 ‘Third Mission’ in Higher Education

The way in which universities and higher educational institutions regard their *third mission* task, depends on the individual institution. It is expressed in the way in which they fulfil the mission together with the answers and solutions they provide for society, in the form of “funding aid”. It is reflected in the educational institution’s corresponding development plans. The European Commission (E3M-PROJECT, 2011) is in favour of higher education institutions and universities having a great deal of autonomy and encourages them to find their own solutions, specific to the locality and region.

The field of university and higher education institutions is thus presented with a range of spaces and ways in which to fulfil a *third mission* task and become effective in direct contact with people and the environment. By working together in and with regional institutions, the social and human capital (DUONG, HACHMEISTER & ROESSLER, 2015), for example, as well as a mutual understanding for one another, can be increased. The spectrum of possible activities is therefore not only very broad but can also be variously located within the institution.

### **3 How can students be prepared for their role in society?**

Opening higher education institutions and universities to increased social and civil societal involvement, can strengthen the roles of those who are willing to do it, to support democracy and its associated values. Higher education institutions and universities are challenged to become involved in society through teaching and research and to contribute to a democratic society. This is done by reacting appropriately to society's needs and supporting the students. This enhances their democratic skills and enables them to act as socially responsible citizens.

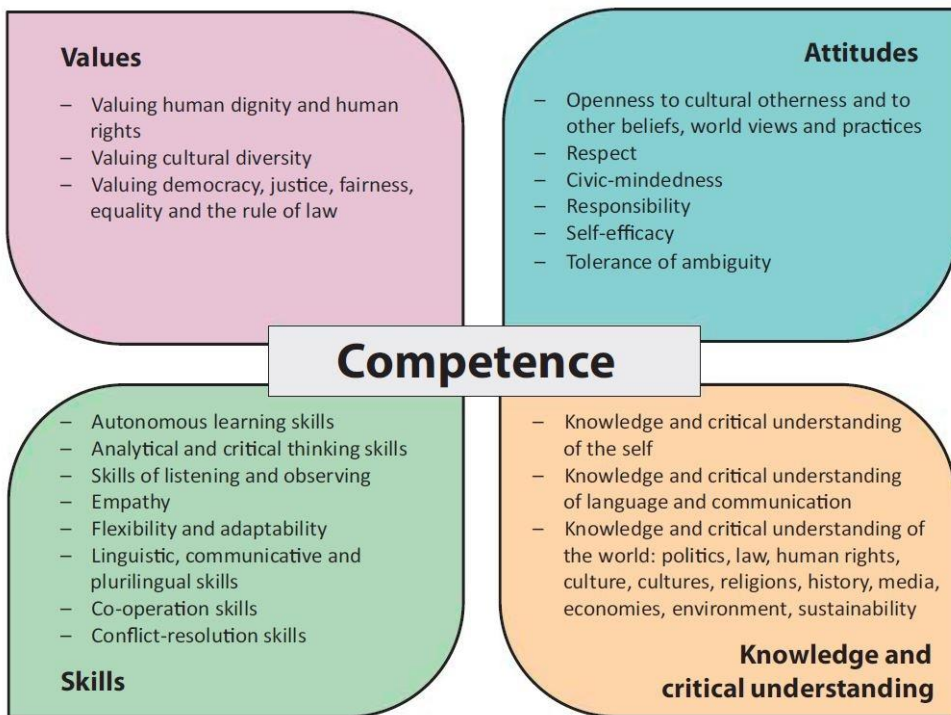
To prepare students for their role in society and to make participation in society viable, the concepts *service learning* and *civic engagement* are commonly offered.

THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (n.d.) defines *civic engagement*, referring to DELLI CARPINI (2000), as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern”, arising from civil society's needs or problems. Whereas *service learning*, as a concept, can be defined as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organised *service* activity which meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the *service* activity in such a way as to gain a further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (BRINGLE & HATCHER, 1995, p. 112). At the centre of this learning, students extend their higher educational sphere of learning into

society, collect experiences and develop skills from the problems of processing (civic) societal tasks and problems, which in turn become the subjects of teaching and research (BACKHAUS-MAUL & ROTH, 2013, p. 13). It is a relationship with resulting interdependencies, between educational goals as academic content and the understanding of civil society. In most cases, students earn course credits (e.g. ECTS) as part of their education and the *service* can be seen as a link to the academic discipline.

Both approaches particularly promote the students' educational skills and abilities and personal development which is achieved through hands-on teaching or through participation in society and acting for the common good as autonomous social players. Thus, the guiding question is, how to go beyond traditional volunteering and engagement and link this learning experience with political knowledge, skills and understanding (KHANE & WESTHEIMER, 2003; ANETTE, 2005)? It means to focus engagement as it is implemented in the two concepts of *service learning* and *civic engagement* as well as the development of values and a specific, democratic-political learning of the students. Therefore, it is to ask how can active citizenship be presented in educational institutions and which democratic structures are necessary for supporting learners? It is obvious, that it will require a form of *learning* which empowers students to develop democratic competences in order to fulfil their role as democratic citizens.

The competency model for a democratic culture, as described by the Council of Europe (see fig. 1), can serve as a basis for preparing students regarding their role in society (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2016, p. 11).



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Figure 1: 20 competences for a democratic culture  
(COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2016, p. 11)

The Council of Europe’s conceptual model of competences is intended to strengthen the democratic involvement of citizens and enable the individual to participate in a culture of democracy (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2016). In order for these competences to be reproducible and also implementable in higher education institutions and universities, and thus in the corresponding development plans, it is essential that lecturers have a common and clear understanding. The concept of *active citizenship learning* is based on these democratic principles; it focuses on strengthening students’ democratic awareness and related values.

## 4 Conceptualization of ‘Active Citizenship Learning’

The term *citizenship* was first broadly defined as “way of empowering citizens to have their voice heard within their communities, a sense of belonging and a stake in the society which they live, the value of democracy, equality and understanding different cultures and different opinions” (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2000, as cited in HOSKINS, 2007, pp. 1-2). If citizenship is extended by the *active* component and expanded by the capability “of also realising and practising the rights and obligations and taking responsibility for doing and acting” (AMANN, AMANN & DÜNSER, 2011, p. 12), this is referred to as *active citizenship*. It means “primarily active involvement of citizens as participation in the life of their communities, and thus in democracy, in terms of activity and decision-making” (CIVIL SOCIETY EUROPE, 2013, p. 17).

### 4.1 Definition

As a concept for teaching and learning, as it is understood and practiced at the University of Teacher Education Salzburg Stefan Zweig, it is at the interface between university and non-academic learning, can include a wide range of society’s institutions and can provide the answer to the central question. In the current literature, *Active Citizenship Learning* links participative, democratic learning with being active in the community. It can be defined as “learning and becoming effective by means of social responsibility. This learning recognises participation as the active involvement in social, cultural or ecological fields of society and community and intends a deeper understanding of democracy in accordance with human rights, in the sense of democratic civil society” (GEIER, SCHOBBER & NIEDERREITER, in press).

In contrast to the term *service learning*, *active citizenship learning* focuses much more on deepening the understanding of democracy in the sense of a democratic, citizenship-based society, in accordance with human rights. It also has the target of

assuming responsibility for serving the common good and acquiring competences. This refers to a structured learning experience that takes place not only when students voluntarily engage in society or demonstrate civic engagement, but most importantly, also when they take on social responsibility as active citizens and reflect this experience in a structured way. As reflection is closely related to the concept of a professional habitus and understanding of a teacher's role (CERNY, 2015, p. 21), students are strengthened in their capacity to act.

Main aspects of *active citizenship learning*:

- learning and becoming effective by taking on social responsibility
- active participation in social, cultural or ecological fields of society
- deeper understanding of democracy in the sense of a democratic civil society and in accordance with human rights
- learning through structured and guided (self-)reflection (GEIER, SCHÖBER & NIEDERREITER, in press)

## 4.2 Teaching and Learning Concept

As a result of a three-year evaluation of the test study program ABC3plus<sup>2</sup>, *active citizenship learning* is included in the new primary school curriculum of the Salzburg University of Education Stefan Zweig, so that the concept of social responsibility can be lived out. The evaluation was based on group discussions, according to BOHNSACK (2000), which focused on the central question, of how learning processes aimed at self-regulation, are perceived and reconstructed by participating teachers and students (CERNY, 2015, pp. 20-26). The curriculum (CURRICULUM FOR PRIMARY LEVEL, 2015, pp. 11-12) which was established in 2015 considers the results of the evaluation, emphasizing a new teaching and learning

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<sup>2</sup> A for Allgemeinbildung in German, or general education, B for Berufsbildung in German, or vocational education and training, and C for Citizenship

concept<sup>3</sup> which addresses (1) self-regulated learning (e.g. WINNE & PERRY, 2000) based on theories of motivation, (2) system-constructivist perspectives (e.g. LUHMANN, 1984; PARSONS, 1967), to enable students to reconstruct and understand paradoxical situations and (3) orientation to profession theories (e.g. OEVERMANN, 2002; SCHÜTZE, 1992) (CERNY, 2015, pp. 20-26).

*Active citizenship learning* fully reflects this new teaching and learning concept. Furthermore, it shows a democratic tenor and awareness of civil society while doing justice to that responsibility which forms a respectful handling of human diversity and its needs. Responsibility for society and learning through social responsibility, is thus an integral part of the curriculum.

### 4.3 Purpose and process

According to the 2015 curriculum, all students becoming primary school teachers are supported being self-responsible and are challenged to design a project idea. They are prepared and supported by various courses, such as *developing one's potential*, *active citizenship studies* and a *reflection seminar*. These courses encourage students to undertake a reflexive examination of their own developmental potential, in order to shape themselves to be reflective, active participants in the interface between formal and informal education. Individually or in a team, students formulate project goals for themselves as well as for society, organize their projects largely independently and introduce them into a socially relevant context. The initiated project, which covers a period of 60–80 hours in the field, is intended to represent a personal challenge. It aims to strengthen students' individual responsibility, focus on the public good and enable a change of perspective, through getting to know other living environments. The overall objective is to empower students in terms of their individual and collective capacity to act (autonomy, maturity, ability to reflect, critical faculty, powers of decision-making) (CURRICULUM FOR PRIMARY LEVEL, 2015, p. 8) and to live out the concept of social responsibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Curriculum Primary Level: <https://bit.ly/2HpcAq9>



Main ideas of the concept:

- Getting to know approaches (e.g. cultural, social or ecological) to engagement from an international and interdisciplinary perspective.
- Familiarization with different practical examples of civic engagement through co-operation with non-profit organisations and practiced inclusion,<sup>4</sup> according to the principle “participation means learning with and from another”.
- Becoming familiar with opportunities for and the success patterns of, innovative links between university and civil society. Links between personal civil engagement and professional activity.
- Encouraging social responsibility and strengthening civil society awareness in accordance with human rights. Developing an awareness of active citizenship and of values (e.g. democracy, equality, cultural differences and diversity), by organizing and implementing a project largely independently and introducing it into a socially relevant context.
- Promoting pedagogical competence in the field of civic engagement. Developing an awareness of the effects for the community by making their own pedagogical competence available to society.
- Supporting a cultural shift which fosters engagement in teaching. Students bring acceptance and tolerance into play and constructively introduce it into discussion.
- Intensifying the quality of teaching and learning through directly linking theory and practice, to obtain a deeper and better level of understanding.
- Expressing oneself in a differentiated manner in respect of socio-political issues and suggesting a change of perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> Teacher training with assistance and the course BLuE (B for Bildung in German, or education, L for Lebenskompetenzen in German or life skills, and E for empowerment) for people with disabilities, are offered at University of Teacher Education Salzburg.

- Obtaining a deeper and better level of understanding of links between personal civil engagement and professional activity, in their own professional role as teacher and thus as a multiplier.

Many of the competencies identified in the European model<sup>5</sup> are reflected in the *active citizenship learning* concept, for example, *values* when learners experience a positive encounter with cultural diversity and consciously deal with democracy, human dignity and human rights. Likewise, *attitudes* (responsibility, self-efficacy, or tolerance) are involved when students initiate a project and bring their pedagogical *skills* to society. These skills are needed when students learn in a self-regulated manner, when they try to assess people and situations correctly, also when they demonstrate their ability to work as a team or provide solutions. There will be continuous documentation throughout the entire process, as a basis for presentation, structured reflection (key questions) and evaluation. Therefore, *knowledge* and *critical understanding* are also in the foreground, in order to critically reflect own convictions. The reflection is supposed to be a vital and ongoing process throughout all the project stages (from goal setting to evaluation).

## 5 Conclusion

Through active involvement in social, cultural or ecological fields, *third mission* is becoming a key issue in higher education institutions. As an alternative to *service-learning* or *civic engagement*, *active citizenship learning* is a promising concept for prioritising social participation, social innovation and, above all, added value for civil society. Unlike the two concepts, *service learning* or *civic engagement*, the focus is not on the *service* or a combination of objectives with community service, but on awareness of democratic and related values (e.g. human rights), through structured and guided (self-)reflection.

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<sup>5</sup> 20 competences for a democratic culture see fig. 1 (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2016, p. 11)

The European competence model cited (E3M-PROJECT, 2012, p. 35), can be seen as a basis for education for democratic citizenship and human rights, and supports students in becoming competent democratic citizens (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2016, p. 11). The concept *active citizenship learning* takes this idea and supports students' familiarisation with various different approaches to societal involvement. This takes place through application-oriented teaching and the adoption of social responsibility, the acquisition of educational skills and abilities in the field of civic involvement and by experiencing a strengthening of their civil societal awareness. Taking up civil societal issues in multiple contexts, also promotes a cultural shift – culture of involvement, willingness to become involved (E3M-PROJECT, 2012). Students can apply the knowledge which they have acquired in their studies by working with civil society's needs and problems of. They cooperate with public service institutions and apply their strengths usefully in society. By *learning through social responsibility*, they take a reflective stance concerning their own role and that of a diverse society.

The structured reflection allows a deeper insight and better understanding of the relationship between personal civil involvement and the future, professional occupation. *Active citizenship learning* expands the students' own competences and potential to act as a multiplier, by supporting learners in their future professional field, and to reflect this in their development as critical citizens (CERNY, 2015). The combination of theory and practice takes place through accompanying reflective processes, which follow on through the work on a portfolio as documentation of the learning process and makes the personal added value, as well as the value for society, transparent.

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