

“Better Citizens”: levels of citizenship and their significance for an adult education provider

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Background

In 1919 the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction published its final report with “the adult learning to become a citizen” as a major theme. Its survey of adult education included Fircroft College which had been founded by George Cadbury in 1909. The report variously describes Fircroft as “half college half settlement”, as a voluntary association and as “a college for working people”. It concludes that “Broadly, the aim of the College is to make better citizens”.

This paper examines the implications of making “better citizens”. Fircroft has done this throughout its history, from the first students helping with boys clubs and settlements, to a 1956 Birmingham Social Council “enquiry into the conditions and opportunities of employment for coloured workers”, through the student activism of the ‘60s and ‘70s to the delivery of Active Citizenship and Community Leadership projects from 2000. However the phrase “make better citizens” sounds problematic if it suggests that students are not yet good enough citizens and that there are higher levels of citizenship they can progress to.

This paper looks at citizenship in the current context. Fircroft is funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency as an Institute of Adult Learning and a Long-term Residential College. At George Cadbury’s own house in Bournville, Birmingham, it provides a second chance to adults 19+ who are educationally and socially excluded. The curriculum offer includes short “community learning” courses from Entry 3 which students put together to create their own unique programme, “adult skills” Level 2 pre-Access Certificate and Level 3 Access to Higher Education Diploma, and non-ESFA projects currently focused on ESOL students (English for Speakers of Other Languages).

Methodology and Literature

As a case study, this is “an empirical investigation within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Ashley, 2012). It builds on previous research into residential adult learning. It uses data from reports and Fircroft’s annual impact survey. It adds evaluations and a focus group with students who participated in parliamentary outreach. It shares the findings of workshops on citizenship run specifically for the purpose with ESOL and with short course learners; this adapted a worksheet from “Citizenship Materials for ESOL Learners” (NIACE, 2010) with 12 images depicting different understandings of citizenship. It is action research in so far as it reflects discussions with colleagues about citizenship curriculum and policy, and has influenced Fircroft’s offer for 2019/20. Davies and Peterson (2012) remind us that in researching citizenship education specifically “there is a need to accept the connection between academic knowledge and social purpose”, particularly when Fircroft’s mission is “to promote social justice”.

This paper is structured around a typology set out by Banks (2017) in his article “Failed Citizenship and Transformative Civic Education”. This consists of “(a) failed citizenship, (b) recognised citizenship, (c) participatory citizenship, and (d) transformative citizenship”. Banks says his typology is “fluid and complex”. However, it does imply a hierarchy which could perhaps help us understand how Fircroft could make citizens “better”: “schools can reduce failed citizenship by implementing transformative approaches to civic education that will enable marginalised and structurally excluded

groups to become recognised and participatory citizens”. Like Banks, I also refer to a similar framework by Westheimer and Khane (2004) who have the “personally responsible citizen”, “the participatory citizen” and “the justice oriented citizen”.

Failed Citizenship

The failure Banks sees is the failure of citizenship to cope with complex identities, when individuals “do not internalise the values and ethos of the nation-state, feel structurally excluded from it, and have highly ambivalent feeling toward it”. One policy response to this has been to require schools and colleges to embed so-called British Values. Under Ofsted’s new Education Inspection Framework (2019), providers receive a good grade for Personal Development if they satisfy this descriptor:

The provider prepares learners for life in modern Britain by: helping to equip them to be responsible, respectful, active citizens who contribute positively to society; developing their understanding of fundamental British values; developing their understanding and appreciation of diversity; celebrating what we have in common and promoting respect for the different protected characteristics as defined in law.

This is part of the UK government’s “Prevent” agenda, to prevent those whose ambivalence is extreme being drawn into terrorism. One of the ways Fircroft fulfils the Prevent duty is by running an exercise where students sort 15 scenarios into one of 4 categories. As an example, one scenario reads: “ A blog lists the names and addresses of local politicians who disagree with Brexit and says “They are the traitors – make their lives hell!”. The categories are: Radicalisation, Terrorism, Extremism or None of the Above (democratic, lawful and peaceful activities). However well the discussion is facilitated, this is what Biesta would call “pedagogy for the public”: “whenever the state instructs its citizens to be, for example, law abiding, tolerant, respectful or active”. This is the lowest level of Biesta’s own hierarchy of citizenship education, which then moves up to “pedagogy of the public” and “pedagogy becomes public”.

Fircroft also delivers an award-winning Talk English ESOL programme. This is project funded as a response to the Government’s 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper. The prospectus says “The Programme will be designed to help participants integrate into life in this country by making good use of local services, becoming part of community life and mixing and making friendships with people from different backgrounds”. So, as well as language teaching in the classroom, each cohort has to engage in a social or cultural activity.

23 Talk English students took part in a citizenship workshop. They came from 16 different countries. 3 had been in the UK less than 6 months, while 3 others had been in the UK more than 10 years. They were very positive about the UK. For example, they appreciated being allowed to wear a scarf in public and charitable activity in the UK like Red Nose Day. Most of them used the words “law” and “respect” when asked to complete the sentence “ A good citizen...” In other words, they had no problem with British Values. Although the class had been running 12 weeks at that point, it probably can’t be credited with “reducing failed citizenship”. Presumably Talk English attracts people already keen to integrate and to work, and 6 of the 23 had had a university education in their home country.

Although Banks analyses failed citizenship in terms of structural exclusion, it is still difficult to get away from the implication that it is the students themselves who have failed and need to become “better citizens”. As the 1919 report recognised, Fircroft is in the Folk High School tradition. Those schools have been described as “a place for displaced and abnormal citizens to gain temporary

stability enabling them to be moulded into desirable subjects” (Sandberg, Fejes, Dahlsted and Olson, 2016).

Fircroft might prefer to talk about “complex needs” and “chaotic lives”, “those in recovery” and “furthest from employment”. The fact remains that the college still needs to use “the statistical data” which Sandberg et al say can “objectify participants in terms of unemployment, immigration, social benefits, incomes, disabilities, and so on”. The college says it is meeting its mission because 85% of students are unemployed, 65% have a disability or learning difficulty and 60% come from the most deprived wards. West Midlands Combined Authority need to see that the college is reaching specific postcodes where participation in education and training is lowest. Ofsted (2019) say “Inspectors will judge how effectively leaders, managers and governors focus public funding on people who are disadvantaged”.

Even when students have the agency to tell their own story in their own words, they tend to emphasise the difficulties they previously faced in order to show the distance they have travelled at Fircroft. As Scott puts it in one of Fircroft’s #adulthoodeducation100 videos: “No more isolation and degradation, I am going on to graduation”.

Recognized Citizenship

By “recognised citizenship” Banks refers to “a status that is publicly sanctioned and acknowledged by the state”. This is citizenship as something people have. Field (2000) links the 1919 report to “the active debate over the extension of citizenship rights to women and working class men”. In 2019, in a Level 2 class at Fircroft, images defining citizenship in terms of status and rights were popular. Most chose the ballot box and the passport, including those who don’t vote and don’t have a passport. One student recognised that even being on a publically funded course, “being given a chance despite past experiences”, was about status and entitlement. Of the 300 paragraphs in the ESFA’s funding rules for the Adult Education Budget, 49 paragraphs relate to who is eligible based on citizenship, nationality, immigration status and residency.

The 1919 report balances these rights with duties, saying ‘the goal of all education must be citizenship – that is, the rights and duties of each individual as a member of the community’. Westheimer and Kahne’s typology (2004) uses the descriptor “personally responsible”. Their vision of a “good citizen” includes obeying the law, staying out of debt and character education. As one of the Level 2 Fircroft students put it, “A good citizen...is somebody who takes responsibility for their own actions. They respect the views and opinions of fellow citizens and adhere to the laws of the land.” As we have seen, the Ofsted judgment includes citizens being “responsible, respectful”.

In 2015/16 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills supported the Learning and Work Institute to further develop a Citizens’ Curriculum. Five of the six capabilities L&WI identify are actually functional skills: Literacy, Numeracy, Digital, Health and Financial. Presumably they are part of a Citizens’ Curriculum because they enable citizens to be “personally responsible”. These five capabilities make up 30% of Fircroft’s offer and in the light of this research might now be seen as a way to make “better citizens”. To focus on Digital as an example, the college runs free digital evenings to help people get on-line, set up an email account and stay safe. In 2020 the Digital Skills entitlement will make publically funded basic digital skills training free to adults, in the same way as English and Maths. The UK government’s Digital Skills Strategy (DMCS, 2017) explicitly links this to “maintaining the UK government as a world leader in serving its citizens online”.

Participatory Citizenship

Banks says that individuals who have state-recognised citizenship status participate at very different levels. Some do not exercise their rights and privileges at all. Some “minimal citizens” just vote. Westheimer reserves “participatory citizen” for “an individual who actively participates in the civic affairs and social life of the community at the local, state, or national level” (2004). This is citizenship as something people do.

Fircroft has a range of enhancement activity to encourage voting. Students get to practice democracy when they elect their own representatives to the Student Union and to Fircroft’s Governing Body. An ex-student did a live broadcast of her weekly politics show from the college. A mock-election on an Introduction to Politics short course anticipated the result of the Brexit referendum. Heater (2004) says “a balanced sense of citizenship requires an unbalanced programme of teaching...to counteract the social and political forces of disequilibrium”. At Fircroft this has been provided by the Artist Taxi Driver, Black Lives Matters campaigners and an expert on Trump. In the annual impact survey, 17% of students say they are more likely to vote as a result of coming to Fircroft.

Evaluations by a Parliamentary outreach officer of her workshop at Fircroft found that it had increased their understanding of the UK parliament, in particular how it “holds the UK government to account”, is “essential to democracy” and “makes decisions on issues that matter to me”. Feedback from Access to HE students who had visited Westminster suggested they mostly learnt about parliamentary procedure : “it’s not really fit for purpose for normal citizens, it’s only fit for Parliament”.

The same Access students then took part in a focus group about citizenship run by their peers. Their definitions of a good citizen covered all of Banks’s levels: “the norms and values”, “integrates well”, “not breaking the law”, “anyone who contributes effectively”, “more personally involved in my community” and “more appreciative of disadvantage”. Students included their own progression: “we’re getting a degree so we’re putting back into the system; if you pay your taxes that will make you a better citizen”. Being a good citizen didn’t hinge on voting. The reasons students didn’t vote had less to do with a lack of understanding and more to do with the first past the post system, their own chaotic lifestyle, populism and cynicism about MPs. “Visiting parliament makes you feel you have some control when you really don’t”.

The sixth capability in L&WI’s Citizens’ Curriculum is Civic capability. This has three dimensions: Personal, Community and Engagement. Mapping Fircroft’s curriculum against these has been instructive. The Personal dimension is well covered (Goals and action planning, Communication Skills, Time management, Assertiveness) and makes up another 40% of the college’s offer. Some of the Community dimension is covered (Equality and Diversity, Volunteering, Team Skills), but very little of the Engagement dimension. One outcome of this action research project has been to develop a new programme, re-introducing Political engagement, Building communities, Protest and activism, as well as Rights and responsibilities. Rather than accredit it, we are badging the first run #AdultEducation100.

Fircroft’s impact survey shows that 28% of students already volunteer. Having made progress in their own recovery, students say they want to “put something back”. The college supports this through a programme of mentoring and advocacy skills, with capacity building for the organisations that deploy them and with volunteering opportunities of its own. In a more recent article, Sandberg

et al (2018) describe what is going on here in these terms: “adult education could be understood as a societal site where certain processes of citizen formation are made possible for the students ... the students’ will formation, the formation of the students as willing subjects, stands out as a vibrant part”. This is citizenship as something people become.

Transformative Citizenship

Banks says that “failed, recognised and participatory citizens engage in transformative citizen action when they work to promote policies, actions and changes that promote values such as human rights, social justice and equality”. He links this to Westheimer and Khane’s justice-oriented citizen who “critically assesses social, political and economic structures”, “seeks out and addresses areas of injustice” and “knows about democratic social movements” (2004).

The college is calling its new #adulthoodeducation100 programme a Social Justice programme rather than a Citizenship programme. This is partly because tutors thought citizenship education was too closely identified with school and 2nd chance students don’t want to be taken back there, and partly to reflect Fircroft’s social justice mission. Each cohort will focus on a specific issue, such as homelessness or asylum, building their understanding of the experience, structural causes and politics of the issue with each short course, to the point that they can engage with existing campaigns and action on that issue.

Banks and Heater (2004) both highlight the importance of social studies teaching “to actualise transformative citizenship education”. The college’s Access to HE Diploma and pre-Access programme both major on the Social Sciences. In their citizenship workshop, every single student in a class on Identity chose the image of a globe in a recycling box which they took to represent global citizenship. The Access students leading their focus group on citizenship turned the tables to ask “How do you think politicians could be better citizens?”

In their 2017 report “How residential adult education transforms learning and lives”, Clancy and Holford put residential learning at Fircroft, Ruskin, Hillcroft and Northern colleges in the context of citizenship. Some of the hallmarks they identify at the four colleges seem particularly relevant to citizenship education: “on-going discussion and debate after class and in informal interactions”, “understandings of politics and society which challenge mainstream and establishment views”, staying in a historic building confers value and feels “restorative”, “inter-cultural and inter-generational tolerance and understanding”, “emotional and intellectual resilience”, an “ethic of service” and the contribution of “emotional labour” to community and solidarity.

The college itself used Mezirow to research the difference that Fircroft makes (Lenahan 2017), then developed this into a Transformative Teaching and Learning Framework. Much of the framework and the classroom practice observed at Fircroft fits citizenship education pedagogy, particularly encouraging critical thinking and discourse. Mezirow (1997) uses the word “better” when he talks about being “better able to recognise frames of reference and paradigms and to imagine alternatives”. So 100 years on, “making better citizens” could be about helping students replace “problematic” or failed frames of reference with beliefs and ways of thinking that work better for them and for society.

Conclusion

Using Banks and other typologies has been helpful and made the phrase “to make better citizens” less problematic. Whether we characterise citizenship as something we have, or something we do or something we become, we have seen that adult education has a valid role to play at each of those levels. We can also see that adult education policy promotes citizenship up to the point where citizens participate and enable society to function. As a piece of action research, this is helping Fircroft develop a curriculum more focused on the civic capability required for engagement and transformation. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that functional skills, personal development and residency are all relevant to citizenship in a way which isn’t immediately obvious. That gives these core programmes an additional “curriculum intent”. It relates them more clearly to the college’s social justice mission and its 1919 aim “to make better citizens”.

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