

Citizenship education in a liminal space in higher education

Piers von Berg

University of Plymouth, piers.vonberg@plymouth.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the conceptual issues arising from an action research project using critical and transformative exercises in citizenship education at a UK university. It develops the idea that liminal spaces for learning enable academics and students to establish critical distance and reflexivity as citizens in higher education.

The space was liminal in several senses: within the institution it existed between classes and extracurricular activities; within the classroom participatory theatre was used that allowed participants to step back from everyday reality; and, in the university's community students spent time in the margins of the city in safe spaces for homeless persons and refugees. All of these spaces are liminal in that they enabled participants to identify and address barriers to participation, nurture political subjectivation and create new identities. A crucial component was a focus on citizenship of the learner as opposed to citizenship in the abstract sense.

The advantages of the liminal space were strongly indicated in the data. Several themes that emerged showed how both teacher and student participants questioned and cultivated their senses of belonging and agency as citizens. This appeared firmly linked to the nature of the experiences and their immediate context as well as the personal emphasis. Participants' experiences are understood as incipient changes or 'becomings' in civic identity and agency that engendered solidarity and shared sense of purpose. These forms of knowledge can be conceptualised as transformational and as foundations for transformative education.

This study contributes to debates over the transformational nature of higher education and the contribution of higher education to transformative social change. It suggests that by using liminal settings one can conceptualise a form citizenship education at university on a personal level. This form of citizenship education provides fora for teachers and students to find shared values and devise interests in action within the various contexts of the institution and its community. It is suggested that this is distinct to concepts of service learning and civic engagement because it utilises different forms of liminality to insulate participants to some degree from the demands of study and interests of the institution.

A range of further questions are posed by the study. Of particular interest for conceptualising this form of activity, is the role of the teacher/researcher as a civic agent conducting pedagogical research.

Keywords

Citizenship, citizenship education, liminality, identity and agency.