Environmental Education and Active Citizenship

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Abstract

Now at the 21st Century, education needs to be adapted to youth and children of our time. Learners are requesting active education into concrete situations of pedagogy. The model of «Action Research for the Community Problem Solving» (AR:CPS) responds to this need perfectly. As an example, in his last speech, former President of USA Barack Obama has raised the importance for active citizenship to engage people into the «problem solving process». This is what the Program in Environmental Education and Citizenship (PEEC) has developed as an expertise in the last 20 years. This approach can be applied in any situation, technical as educational. The program has been shown to build critical, reflective and empowering democratic skills and to inspire its participants to engage fully in problem-solving within their communities. Evaluation of the outcomes since 1993 suggest that this is a method that is considered beneficial by participants, by their communities as by educational institutions at all levels, and that it may provide a more effective mode of education for environmental citizenship.

1. Introduction

For the past ten years an environmental and citizenship education training program has been offered in Québec in fifteen or so school boards, two private schools, Dawson College, Day Care Centers, Université du Québec à Montréal, and seniors. This training program is designed for all groups of ages, starting at 4 years old. That includes elementary, secondary school teachers, education consultants and also for adult education and pre-school educators.

The program is called Program in Environmental Education and Citizenship (PEEC).

The PEEC is based on an educational model known as "Action Research for Community Problem Solving" (AR:CPS). This model leads students and learners to become actors in, for and with their communities. Program evaluations conducted thus far have shown that students, teachers, parents and school administrators are very satisfied with this model, its application and its outcomes.

The AR:CPS approach advocates a citizenship education learning strategy that leads actors of all ages to:

- Identify a problem of concern to them in their community.
- Analyze the problem by considering its different issues.
- Identify potential solutions.
- Select the one that best fits the situation.
- Develop and implement an action plan.
- Evaluate the process and its outcome.

This model opens up the community to the school. The immediate environment, as seen by the actors, becomes a source and tool for learning. The students select and develop projects based on a problem-solving approach. The students identify various problems in their school or neighborhood, such as vandalism, vacant lots, rundown buildings, bullying, waste of energy or drinking water, etc.

The model proposes thirteen steps for developing community projects linked to the social, physical or biophysical environment (see in the Box on the next page).

The teacher leads the first two steps. The students then become partners in the decision-making process and gradually take on all or part of the project management. The teacher now acts as a guide, a resource person. Throughout the process, the students log everything they experience in a journal. They record their findings, comments and even feelings (new knowledge, awareness, understanding, participation strategy, perseverance, state of mind, communication).

Developed in the United States by William B. Stapp in 1988 (Bull, J. et al., 1988) the AR:CPS model often aimed to change the conventional school environment and to improve teaching and learning conditions in schools. In fact, not only can this model lead young people to solve community problems, it can also offer solutions and avenues for thought about school-related teaching/learning problems.

AR:CPS Thirteen Steps

1.   Process planning by the teacher, in collaboration with all concerned partners: principal, colleagues, parents, community members, etc.

2.   Diagnosis evaluation of students' abilities in solving problems, in order to spot their "deficiencies". As the project goes along, the teacher will have to try to develop required abilities through appropriate teaching and exercises.

3.   Students' awareness of community problems. An exploratory visit of immediate environment is an excellent way to discover these problems and become sensitive to them.

4.   Listing of noticed problems. The brainstorming technique is then useful. Problems may be classified and their interrelations underscored.

5.   Identification of criteria for the selection of a problematic situation to be solved.

6.   Selection of problematic situation.

7.   Search for information on this problematic situation. It may be documentary researches, interviews, observations, etc. A lot of information comes from community environment itself.

8.   Clear definition of problem inherent to the analyzed situation.

9.   Search continuation on the problem now clearly defined.

10. Examination of possible solutions (again, brainstorming session).

11. Development of criteria for the selection of preferred solution.

12. Development and implementation of action plan.

13. Evaluation of action considering expected effects and follow-up.

2. Active participation in community life

In March 2005, the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) published the results of an online survey of ca. 200 young Canadian adults aged from 18 to 25 years. (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2005) The survey was designed to identify young adults' priorities in relation to six themes predetermined by an advisory committee made up of people of the same age. The survey results revealed that young people truly want to be active citizens (be involved in decisions). This was the second time that the CPRN confirmed Canadian citizens' desire to participate in bringing about the changes they want. In fact, another CPRN study in 1995 had revealed the same hunger for participation. (Peters, 1995)

As was mentioned previously, the AR:CPS model leads students to take concrete actions in their communities, given that the strategy is geared toward having them solve a real problem by developing and then implementing an action plan. It is also worth noting that students explicitly take part in decisions, since they themselves choose the local issue they will work on. Step by step, they make their way through a democratic process by remaining the leaders of their project.

3. Accountability and community belonging

In an article addressing the changing boundaries of citizenship, Jane Jenson, Director of CPRN's Family Network, defined citizenship as both a status and a relationship (between state and citizens). (Jenson, 2001) According to Jenson, the boundaries of citizenship involve three dimensions: rights and responsibilities, access and belonging. She also questions how citizens' formal equality can be turned into real participation.

So far, the evaluations of AR:CPS projects have demonstrated that student participation in community problem solving strongly promotes the development of their sense of accountability and community belonging because these young people are the leaders of the projects they create in collaboration with a guide (teacher or other person). This methodology thus contributes to developing students' sense of responsibility toward their communities.

4. Partnership development

New research studies led by the CPRN have taken up the challenge of redefining Canada's social model. Mary Pat MacKinnon, Director of CPRN's Public Involvement Network, addresses this issue in her article Citizens' Values and the Canadian Social Architecture: Evidence from Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future. (MacKinnon, 2004) According to MacKinnon, citizens want to play a larger role in the democratic process and would like greater concrete opportunities to engage with decision makers on issues that affect their collective quality of life.

The AR:CPS approach gets students to work in partnership with the members of their communities, which leads them to improve their quality of life by solving real issues through local engagement. "Collaboration, team work and coordination are the new buzzwords. Nowadays, no actor can act alone," stated Denis Saint-Martin, Research Associate with CPRN's Family Network and professor of political science at the Université de Montréal. (Saint-Martin, 2004)

5. Democratic daily life

To confirm the importance and need for our society to involve citizens in decision making within, for and with their communities, the CPRN launched its Focus on Youth program in August 2004 to mark its tenth anniversary. Naturally, one of the core goals of the program was to identify effective approaches for engaging youth in their community's democratic process. One of the effective methods suggested was the AR:CPS model.

In the same vein, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation du Québec stated that no citizenship education program can yield tangible results if the students do not have concrete opportunities to apply the values, rights, responsibilities and civic involvement they are taught in class. (Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation, 1998) The link between teaching and practical experience in school is therefore crucial for successful citizenship education. Moreover, an environment most conducive to citizenship education is one that offers students frequent opportunities to exercise their citizenship.

The AR:CPS model does just that: it creates multiple opportunities for students to apply their citizenship education skills because it spans the entire school year. This strategy also helps students develop aspects that are key to active participation in democratic society, such as critical thinking, communication, persistence and collaboration.

6. Community roots and social responsibility

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation du Québec also stated that citizenship goes hand in hand with the development of community roots. From that perspective, we must create a dynamic that stimulates interaction and participation and that teaches individuals to be actors. (Conseil Supérieur de l'Éducation, 1998)

The AR:CPS approach follows those guidelines because it engages students to serve their community and encourages them to take an active part in democratic society and to develop their sense of social responsibility. Giving meaning to school learning, developing critical thinking skills and creativity, and giving students the chance to learn and acquire experience outside the conventional framework are clear messages that emerged from a report published by the Canadian Education Association on the importance of fostering the minds of young Canadians. (Canadian Education Association, 2004) This report also mentioned that parents want their children to fully participate in the life of the community. From that viewpoint, the AR:CPS model seems to meet the needs of Canadian society, that is, to involve citizens, regardless of age, in decisions that concern them. In doing so, they will be able to contribute to improving their quality of life and that of others not only by building the foundations of their knowledge but also, and above all, by developing the behaviours and attitudes that are key to citizenship education.

7. Summary

The benefits for learners (no matter the group of age), teachers, principals, parents, community members and stakeholders are clearly showed by the Research Center in Education and Ecocitizenship (Sauvé, 1992, Université du Quebec à Montréal-UQAM). Moreover, the PEEC is the only program in Environmental Education and citizenship recognized by the Ministry of

Education in Quebec. Educational organizations in different countries have requested the expertise of PEEC (USA, Mexico, South Korea, China, France, Finland…).

Also, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) has produced a documentary called « Hope Builders ». http://films.nfb.ca/hope-builders/. This film shows how young students of 11-12 years old apply the AR:CPS model for solving the problem of vandalism in their community.

To facilitate the work of the « guide » who leads a group of learners into the 13 steps of AR:CPS (ex: professors, teachers, educators, community workers) the PEEC provides tools to the « guides » and learners as logbooks, each one corresponding to the group of age of learners.

Even if it's becoming a stereotype, as educators, our dream is still to bring the learners to express and apply their ideas for a better place to live.

Again, the AR:CPS model contributes to achieve that dream.

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