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New Approaches to Citizenship Education: an example of discussion classes from China

In this article **Daibo Chen** and **Ian Davies** share some teaching and learning innovations being developed in China, and illustrate how some common concerns are being addressed.



China's huge population of more than 1,300 million people (made up of 56 ethnic groups) is undergoing dramatic social and economic changes. In this context the nature of citizenship education is obviously of great significance. How does such a rapidly changing society explain itself to its own citizens? How do educators help people to understand and take part in society? Given the challenge of achieving and maintaining a common Chinese identity attuned simultaneously to an ancient traditional culture, a socialist political system and an enterprising economy, the Chinese national and local governments, together with many universities and schools are developing new types of ideological and political education. In this brief article we draw attention to the ways in which Chinese citizenship education is organized prior to discussing one innovative discussion method. In a spirit of common commitment to good practice in education we suggest that citizenship educators around the world will want to know more about what is happening in China.

Chinese approaches to citizenship education (i.e. attempts to help people understand contemporary society and to develop the skills to take part in it) encompass ideological education, political education and moral education. In primary schools all students take a course titled *Morality and Society*; in the middle school students must complete a course, *Ideology and Morality* (including morality, rights, duties, and the understanding of society). In secondary schools there is one required course named *Politics* (as

with the Middle school curriculum this overlaps to some extent with the English form of citizenship education). In universities undergraduates undertake four required courses: *Morality training* and *basic law* (similar to citizenship education); *Chinese Modern History*; *Basic Principles of Marxism*; and *An introduction to the thought of Mao Zedong* and the theory of the characteristics of Chinese socialism. The lecture is often the most commonly used teaching method but it is becoming apparent that, although students think that it is important to learn about society, these rather traditional teaching methods are becoming increasingly unpopular.

In light of a rapidly changing society in the context of an established commitment to forms of educating about society there are various experiments taking place. One of those innovations has been developed by colleagues at the East China University of Political Science and Law (ECUPL). This new teaching approach has been called the 'Multilateral Discussion Class'. The key feature of this new approach is to emphasise interaction between students and teachers around a challenging issue. An example from the Multilateral Discussion class approach focuses on the question: 'Does a Chinese citizen love his country if he won't come back after studying abroad?' The class has been developed in six stages:

- Students are given some details about how the class will work, they are given the key question and asked to prepare for a discussion
- The teacher invites to the class people who have a range of relevant experience. Some of those who are invited have already been students in foreign



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universities, some are preparing to travel and others are considering the possibility of study abroad.

- Individual students with different viewpoints are asked to express their opinion about whether a student could be said to love his or her country if that person decided not to return to China. Students are encouraged to ask questions of each other.
- The guests (who have experience of study abroad or who will or may travel abroad) are then asked to comment on the students' viewpoints. A range of ideas and issues are explored including the reasons for travelling abroad, the rights and duties of a Chinese citizen, how the choices of others should be regarded and what (if anything) should be expected of a Chinese person living abroad.
- The students then discuss with the class guests.
- And, finally, the course teacher summarizes the discussion.



The example given above is just one of many different scenarios that are presented to students. One of the most significant issues emerging from this new approach is that it has proved to be extremely popular with students. The opportunity to discuss a real issue has been welcomed by students. These issues are highly relevant to their lives, and obviously important, in the connections that are made with morality, national identity and law, for the whole country. The opportunity to interact with the class guests who have interesting experience is highly prized. Indeed it seems that the impact of the guests may be greater than that usually achieved by the class teacher. A range of voices has been allowed into the Chinese classroom and the nature of a diverse and changing society may be made real as people contemplate the new forms of citizenship that are becoming possible.

There has been so far only a limited amount of research into this new approach. An investigation of 78 Multilateral Discussion classes involving approximately 3000 university students in 2 years showed that 97.5% expressed their satisfaction, 61.8% agreed the teaching is more interesting than that of the traditional class, and only 5.1% thought the new approach to teaching is less interesting

than that of the traditional class. There has been some official recognition of the value of this new approach with the award in May 2014 of the second grade prize in education in Shanghai to those who have led the work.

The initiative described here is, of course, just one example of new approaches developing across China. There are significant questions that are still to be investigated. The alignment of new pedagogical approaches within current social and political trends within the larger Chinese society will always be fascinating. The legal framework that characterises citizenship as well as the traditional Confucian-inspired values that are vitally important in China today will inform what happens in schools and universities. In October 2014 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party decided to incorporate legal education into the national education system. The justification for this new approach is to help young people to become law abiding citizens protecting their rights with legal knowledge. The nature of what Chinese students learn from these new approaches will need to be explored further. There is wide ranging discussion in China and elsewhere about the extent to which law-related education allows for explorations of justice as well as law. There are debates across the world about the extent to which national as well as local and global perspectives are emphasised. The focus on moral and character education as opposed to more obviously political approaches is contested in many locations. The particular approach to citizenship education discussed in this article – the Multilateral Discussion Class – is in effect a variant on issue-based approaches which have been investigated in various contexts. In fast changing national and global contexts it would be good to compare what is being achieved in different locations. A comparative study of developments in China and the UK would provide very interesting and highly valuable research and professional development opportunities. What seems to us beyond doubt is the value of a continuing dialogue with Chinese citizenship educators. We have much to learn from each other.

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