Educating Competencies for Democracy

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Citizens of Konstanz as Beneficients of the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion

Abstract: Democracy, Lind claims, is an ambitious idea on how people can, and should, design and regulate their social life, an idea that touches both the realms of the theory of the state and of individual morality on a high level. And the core problem lies precisely at the point between ability and obligation because many people in this country have grown accustomed to a democratic government. People get the impression that democracy and its moral foundations are granted. The question of how we can enable people to live in a democratic way is one of the most important questions today.

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When Georg Lind (1984, 2000, 2002, 2009) began to develop what he calls his Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion 35 years ago, neither he nor anyone else could have imagined the international success he would gain as a teacher of moral and democratic competencies. Lind himself most likely sensed this development, because he set out his work on the basis of an already-existing yet controversial theory; that of Lawrence Kohlberg, even though this theory was much disputed in the scientific world and in the political sphere since its establishment in the 1960s. Lind nonetheless understood its importance right from the very start, and he almost directly tied his own theory up to it.
Georg Lind became a widely acknowledged and globally renowned psychologist and teacher of democracy. He represents, in both research and lecture, the respective fields of experimental, educational and developmental psychology, with passion and emphasis. This volume presents and discusses research methods and findings that relate to Lind’s conception of moral and democratic competencies.

When Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory was imported to Europe at the end of the 1960’s, coming from the United States, another psychological theory was highly controversial. This was the cognitive-developmental approach given by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget who stated that mental developmental history of individuals proceeds in certain phases crucial to the formation of cognitive structures. High quality education is needed to prevent devastating mistakes when young people intensively develop. Regarding young people as our personal and societal offspring, one will immediately acknowledge the importance of a developmental-cognitive approach in both familiar and public pedagogics. Piaget himself solely trusted empirical work, leaving aside the concrete social and political situation of his times. Nevertheless, teachers, school psychologists and educational theoreticians allude to his theory as a theoretical quarry to legitimate their respective plans for radically changing the various existing educational systems according to the zeitgeist of that time. Most of these plans were at least dubious, some even dangerous, in terms of democratic social policy.

The “judgements” of Piaget’s and especially Kohlberg’s theory by politicians and scientists ranged from “socialist” to “conservative to the extreme,” depending on the respective political aims to which his critics were inclined. But there was one brave researcher standing firmly on Kohlberg’s side: his European disciple and associate Lind was not impressed by these attacks. From the very start, he had rejected the ideological trend of the critique on his teacher and friend and kept to their common line.

Consequently, he was called as guest professor to universities in Germany, the USA, and Mexico. The government of Colombia, a country that had been severely plagued by the criminal civil war in connection with the international drug market, nominated him as the
trainer and supervisor for a programme he had to first design and implement himself: he held classes for already established teachers in order to foster their moral and democratic skills and to enable them to install these within their pupils. As a result, the vast number of crimes committed could be reduced by almost 40% over the following years.

But, more concretely, let us ask: what exactly was it that made Georg Lind so influential? Which of his decisions had the most profound impact on moral education in general, and which on how to teach and learn about democracy specifically?

After working at Konstanz University since 1973, Lind finally became professor of educational psychology in 2001. In 2010, when he – most regrettably, one is forced to say – retired and retreated from his chair, he could look back upon a rather vivid and stirring career. Nevertheless, during all those long years, he followed his mission: further developing a theory for how to learn and teach morals and democracy.

Democracy, Lind claims, is an ambitious idea on how people can, and should, design and regulate their social life, an idea that touches on the theories of democratic constitution and individual morality. And exactly at the point between ability and obligation, the core problem lies, because many people in this country have grown accustomed to a democratic government. People get the impression that democracy and its moral foundations can be taken for granted. In a democracy, power does not lie in the hands of a single or a few people, as was the case in former stages of political practice, when a king ruled his kingdom by himself or like a tyrant in a dictatorship. Nowadays, democracy is modulated by certain moral principles and procedures that were implemented in order to be instructive about how to cope with conflict. Politicians and judges, for example, are delegated and ordered to care for the interpretation and adherence to these principles. But they have to be legitimated for their task, e.g., by way of direct or indirect elections. They could not appropriate this power themselves or be assigned by a religious institution. There is no such thing as a “duty by the will of God” anymore. This primarily means that law and order are designed on the basis of universal moral principles by a free discourse of all members of a democratic society. They no longer rely on arbitrary decisions by a self-
Horst Frank proclaimed bearer of power. Conflicts are not solved by means of might and brute force but with the help of democratically defined acts and by a discourse of free citizens.

Seemingly, by and large the same is true for Germany as for other democracies. It appears that 65 years after overcoming the Nazi dictatorship and 20 years after the self-dissolution of the socialist states, we do not have to worry about the establishment of a soundly based democracy in Europe.

A morally ideal democracy has universal acceptance, it appears. Very few people wish for an almighty monarch or tyrant as an alternative, a scientific fact established by the empirical research in democracy carried out by Lind. Additionally, as is shown by many more social analyses frequently cited in the media, there seems to be a high degree of consent, common in all cultures, in regard to the moral core principles of a democracy, including justice and respect toward human rights.

But alas, we have to pay attention to the large gap between moral ideals on the one hand and morally founded action on the other. A person on their own often cannot judge how to apply the principles he or she relies on in certain situations. People tend to “forget” their principles, especially whenever they are in situations of emotional or temporal stress. They can be completely lost as soon as these principles seem to contradict themselves. The latter often is the case when, for example, a problem can only be solved by choosing one of two mutually exclusive paths of action. Here, the actor faces a dilemma: how can I make a decision that adheres to all of my personal and moral principles?

They wish and will always wish to act morally, which indeed requires more than just moral ideals and values. They require the ability to apply these ideals and values even in, and especially in, situations alien to them, to apply their ideals and values consistently, but nonetheless adapt according to the respective situation. We are dealing here with the overall duty to enable ourselves to reconsider our moral principles, as well as the need to deeply consider how a dilemma of this kind can be solved in general and how to counsel, and possibly argue with, others on the solutions. We call such abilities moral-democratic abilities or faculties. If democracy shall succeed, these
faculties are of elementary importance for all those who participate in it.

To participate in democracy means to take part in it actively. That is, to be a democratic actor oneself and to publicly live and represent democracy according to one’s own interpretation of it. By doing so, one makes oneself vulnerable, for it should be clear right from the beginning to every individual that one’s own judgments and opinions are not necessarily those of all other democrats. Consequently, our task as self-defined democrats is to try to democratically cope with this situation. Hence, the principle demand on us is the capability to criticise as well as to indulge criticism, in other words, to be able to utter criticism and to take criticism in a serious way.

By each individual utterance we actively criticise all those who would never dare make such remarks. Utterances in any given circumstance could include many aspects: language usage, verbal behavior, clothing, appearance and body language, but, in particular, public behavior.

The world today is indeed considerably tolerant, accepting a lot of things that were absolutely inconceivable 30 years ago. While that is not an achievement that emerged directly from the work of Kohlberg and Lind, nowadays most of us know how to handle difficult societal situations that emerge from contradiction without using brute force or even involving official institutions. The establishment of this fact in our society is one of the biggest achievements of Lind.

To develop the faculties required for the solution of conflicts in a democratic way, one does not necessarily need to study with Lind in person. If not we ourselves (who partly had to learn the lesson in hostile circumstances) then at least our children and grandchildren have learned or will learn such abilities at school, as well as in their family lives. If this is the case, then they will have taken it from teachers and parents who themselves had learned it either from Lind or through his publications or through the media. And one must admit that this imparting really works.

At this stage I would like to discuss the developments that can be noticed during the last years in Konstanz and which I personally think not only stand in for a certain understanding of democracy but – if only indirectly – are related to the research and teaching of Pro-
Horst Frank

Professor Lind over the last 30 years. I am talking specifically about the “citizens’ participation” in the political processes in Konstanz.

For a number of years now, we have been applying the principle of a citizen-inclined community. ‘Citizen inclination’ in itself means a lot more than just ‘citizen participation’. In its modern sense, it refers to the fact that a constitutional democracy, social justice, and a sustainable future development can only be realized through the participation of all related parties. Superior and authoritarian thinking and acting do not lead to solutions anymore. Rather, they enforce potential conflicts.

The challenges that we will be facing in connection with the plans for the future of our community demand strictly democratic attitudes and mutual respect toward the opinions of the respective others of all these parties, be they administration, politicians or the civil community. In Konstanz, we succeeded in getting many people engaged for the town and the common welfare. They deliver important contributions in support of the local administration when dealing with local and regional challenges. In Baden-Württemberg, at least 42% of all citizens are actively involved in public affairs, be it in a club or society, in occupying an honorary post or as a member of a political party. This figure is also represented in Constance, a fact of which we are very proud. To enhance and enlarge this commitment is our aim. In order to reach this goal, democratic mentors like Professor Lind are appreciated and necessary. Additionally, we want to follow his example in our political practice, with both his ideal and his practical intentions. I am convinced that this will lead to very positive results to the benefit of every citizen on the local, federal and European levels.

References

