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COMPETENCES FOR DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Sjur Bergan

Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe

Why democratic culture, and why competences?

Public discourse often focuses on the economic role of higher education, in particular in preparing students for the labor market. The economic role of higher education is obvious but focusing on this role alone betrays too narrow a view. Higher education – and by extension education as a whole – has at least four major purposes:

- Preparation for the labor market
- Preparation for life as an active citizen in democratic society
- Personal development
- The development of a broad and advanced knowledge base (Bergan 2005, Council of Europe 2007).

It is not only our view of the purposes of education that is too narrow. The same can be said of our view of democracy, which tends to focus on institutions, procedures and laws – or, if one prefers, parliaments, elections, and constitutions. All of them are essential to democracy but they will only function if our societies are imbued by a culture of democracy. At the risk of a circular definition, democratic culture is understood as the set of attitudes and behaviors that make democracy work in practice. These include a commitment to resolving conflicts peacefully through deliberation, accepting that while the majority rules, the minority also has inalienable rights, and seeing plurality and diversity as a value and as something natural rather than as a threat.

If we want to make preparation for democratic citizenship an integral part of the mission of education, we need to be able to say something about what students should know, understand and be able to do that relates specifically to the democratic mission of education. That is the classical definition of learning outcomes. There is, however, a good argument that this definition is incomplete. We may be able to do something and nevertheless be convinced that we should not do it, for ethical, moral, or other reasons. Our education would be incomplete if ethical considerations were absent from it. Therefore, a fourth element needs to be added to the definition of learning outcomes: attitudes, translated as the willingness to do or to abstain from doing something.

Building on work that comprises education for democratic citizenship and human rights education (Council of Europe 2010) and reflections on quality education (Council of Europe 2012) as well as exploring the democratic mission of universities (Huber and Harkavy 2007; Bergan and Damian 2010; Bergan, Harkavy and van't Land 2013; Bergan, Gallagher and Harkavy 2015), the Council



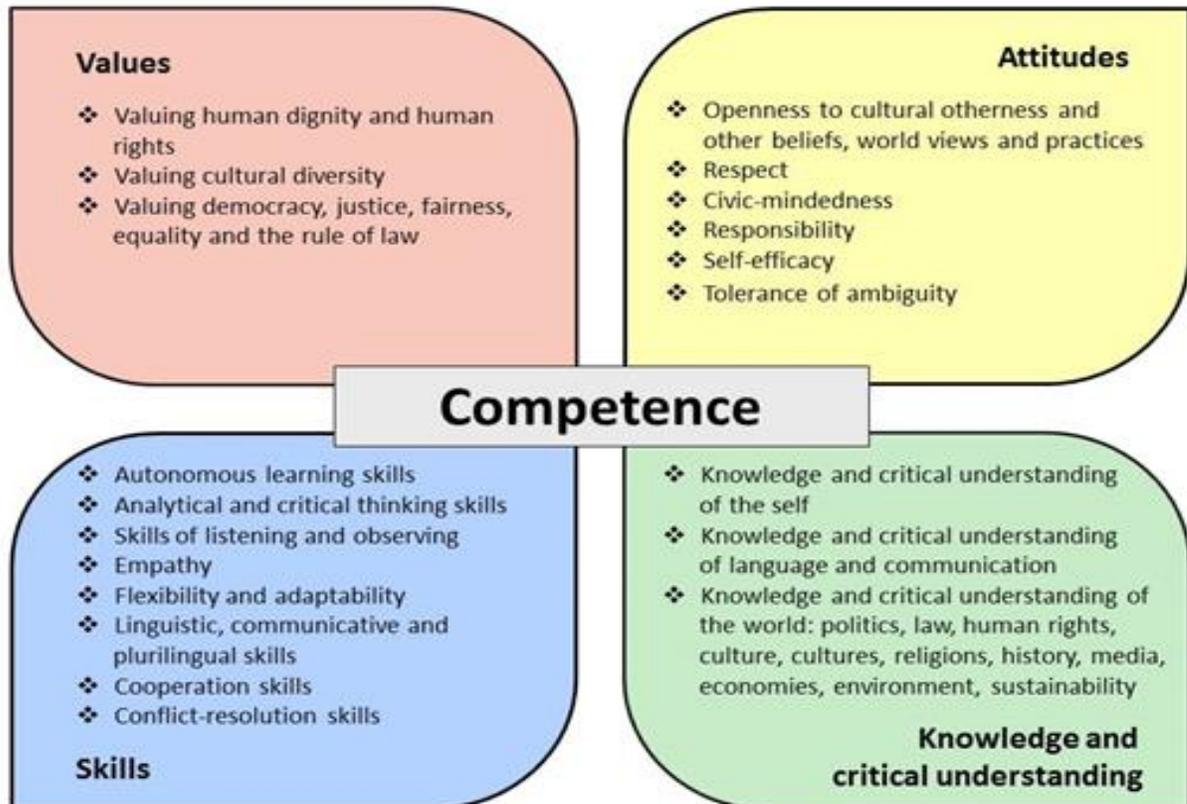
of Europe is developing a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, which will be made up of three main components:

- The Model of Competences
- A range of descriptors
- Supporting documents.

The Model has been completed (Council of Europe 2016) and was welcomed by the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education on April 11 - 12, 2016¹. The descriptors were tested with educators in summer and fall 2015 and are now being tested more broadly in actual teaching and learning contexts. The development of supporting documents as well as the training of trainers has been launched.

The model in brief

The Framework identifies twenty competences that may be summarized in four categories (Council of Europe 2016):



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¹ <http://www.coe.int/en/web/education-minister-conference>, accessed June 16, 2016.



As indicated above, each competence is spelled out through descriptors, and a large scale testing in the last half of 2016 will refine these. No exhaustive list of descriptors can therefore be given, but a few examples may illustrate what is meant:

▶ **Openness**

- Uses opportunities to meet new people
- Expresses interest in working with people from different cultural backgrounds

▶ **Civic-mindedness**

- Takes action to stay informed about civic issues
- Collaborates with other people for common interest causes

▶ **Knowledge and critical understanding of culture and cultures**

- Can explain the dangers of generalising from individual behaviours to an entire culture
- Can describe several different cultures, especially the values, customs and practices which are common in those cultures

The descriptors can be adapted to fit precise settings and requirements, including taking account of the age and academic level of students. A third grader will demonstrate knowledge and critical understanding of the self differently than, say, a secondary school graduate.

What the framework is not

The Framework is not “one size fits all”. Individual teachers will not use every descriptor for every competence. National and local circumstances vary, and descriptors may be best suited for certain levels of education. The Framework is neither a curriculum nor a standardized test. Rather, it is a model that the competent national authorities can either adopt as it is or adapt to their own national education system. Schools and teachers may also adapt the framework within guidelines given by national authorities.

Democratic culture is not a new school subject or academic discipline. It is not something students and teachers should think about two hours a week and forget about the rest of the time. Democratic culture cannot be learned unless it is practiced any more than we can learn a foreign language just by reading a dictionary and a grammar. It must be supported by the culture of the school or institutions, and teachers in all subjects and disciplines must act accordingly, adapted to the age of the students.



Above all, the Framework is not an instrument for distinguishing “good” citizens from “bad” ones. Quite apart from the fact that the term “good citizen” has connotations that are far from democratic, neither schools nor education systems should seek to certify the democratic credentials of citizens. Democracy builds on the equal dignity and rights of all. Rather, education should seek to develop the kind of competences that enable citizens to make democracy work in practice.

Some challenges

In the course of our work, we have expectedly faced many challenges, not the least of which was time. This kind of challenge may give rise to good anecdotes, but other challenges are more consequential.

One of the main aims of this project is to make preparation for democratic citizenship a main mission of education, not just in rhetoric but in practice. The expert group decided early on that to achieve this, competences included in the Framework must be teachable, learnable, and assessable. The first two elements seem obvious, but should the competences be assessable? Are we in danger of turning the whole Framework into a framework for testing rather than learning? The extent to which teaching adapts to exams, rather than the other way around, is of course a broader issue. Our view is nevertheless that if competences for democratic culture are to be integrated in the teaching and curricula of schools, we also need to be able to assess the extent to which students acquire these competences.

A part of the challenge may be that when we hear “assess”, we tend to think of tests and grades. Tests and grades are important but there are also other forms of assessment. A part of the discussion on assessment has focused on values. Can you really assess values? Can students flunk the test on democratic values? An offhand response may be that our history books are full of examples of people who did. More to the point, if a student in your class through his or her behavior shows contempt for students from other cultural backgrounds, who profess other beliefs, or who are disabled, or otherwise stand out from other students in the class, would you do your job as a teacher if you did not try to correct that behavior? Would you do your job as a teacher if you just tried to correct the superficial manifestations of the underlying attitudes rather than try to address the root causes? In other words, would you not try to convince the student that someone who is disabled, practices another faith or looks different has the same human value and dignity rather than just persuade the student to keep his contempt to himself or herself because otherwise (s)he will get in trouble? And if you do, are you not also assessing the student’s behavior and the values that lead to that behavior?



A second challenge was that the Framework could potentially be very comprehensive. The fact that many competences are relevant to several purposes of education is of course a good thing but it does present a challenge when you try to define competences that are particularly relevant to democracy. By defining twenty competences that fall more or less neatly into four categories, we believe we have managed to steer a course between the Scylla of over-specialization and the Charybdis of over-generalization. We do not pretend that each of the twenty competences is pertinent to democratic culture only, nor would that have been a good thing.

A third challenge was the question of whether schools and universities should teach competences for democratic culture only in theory or whether they should also play a role in encouraging their students to put them into practice, including in the school or university setting. It seems easy enough to brush this concern aside and say they should. That is also the view we have taken. Democratic engagement cannot be learned unless it is practiced. At the same time, it is important to understand that some countries have traumatic experiences of political activism in schools and on campus from a previous political system and it is important to be clear that what we propose is not “political education with a new face”.

Developing critical thinking is key in any education. Research would be impossible without it, and society requires the will and ability to question received truths in order to progress. Yet, to some, “critical thinking” has a destructive sound to it: the association is solely with negative criticism and with tearing down. That is, of course, not the sense in which the term is used in the Framework or in education policy generally. Identifying problems is just the first and probably also the easier part. Critical thinking, in education terms, means not only identifying problems but solving them, developing alternatives to the present imperfect. Even if alternative solutions may not be welcomed by undemocratic regimes, they are essential in any democracy.

And now?

A validated set of descriptors should be made available by mid-2017. These will be descriptors that have been found useful in actual practice, but teachers may develop the ones they find pertinent to their own situation further in their own practice and also come up with other indicators. The first set of supporting documents should be available in the course of fall 2017, and more educators will be trained.

Nevertheless, the success of the Framework will be decided at national level, in each of the 50 States party to the European Cultural Convention. Ultimately, the test will be the extent to which the Framework is used in curriculum development and in classrooms, the extent to which democratic culture becomes a feature of school and university life and the extent to which students and former students engage as citizens in public space.



As societies, we need more people highly competent in their field of specialization, and that part of the challenges I believe we have met fairly well. We are probably better at *training* more highly qualified subject specialists than we have ever been before. I am less sure whether we are good enough at *educating* graduates who are not only excellent in their individual academic fields but who can put their own field and their won specialist competence into a broader context, who can ask the key critical questions and find sensible answers to them.

Competences for democratic culture are essential in overcoming the biggest challenge we face as human beings and as societies: ignorance.

Sjur Bergan is Head of the Education Department of the Council of Europe and represents the Council of Europe in the Bologna Follow Up Group. He chaired three successive working groups on structural reform 2007 - 15. Sjur leads the current Council of Europe project on Competences for Democratic Culture. He was a member of the editorial group for the Council's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue and was a main author of the Lisbon Recognition Convention as well as of recommendations on the public responsibility for higher education; academic freedom and institutional autonomy; and ensuring quality education. Sjur is series editor of the Council of Europe Higher Education Series and the author of *Qualifications: Introduction to a Concept* and *Not by Bread Alone* as well as of numerous book chapters and articles on education and higher education policy. He was one of the editors of the *Raabe Handbook on Leadership and Governance in Higher Education* (2009 - 15).

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