

Conference on

THE FUTURE OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

at James Madison's Montpelier, Virginia

September 21 – September 26, 2008

Final Remarks at the End of the Conference

Our topic was the future of civic education in the 21st century. We are just in the beginning of this century, more than 90% still lies ahead of us, and this is a very long time even for a historian like myself. I doubt that there will be fixed and uniform characteristics that will be valid for the length of the whole period. Therefore it might be wise not to look, far less to plan, too far ahead.

It is always difficult to predict the future, indeed it is impossible – unless perhaps for Gunther, the cat belonging to Mark Lopez. Perhaps we should have asked Mark to bring him along in order to help us. But all Gunther probably could have done was to indicate 'yea' or 'nay.' *We* would have had to pose the questions, and as far as civic education is concerned, posing the questions and reflecting on them is more important than giving the answers – at least if an answer can just be 'yes' or 'no.' Posing important questions requires knowledge and sharpness and is hard intellectual work. Without questions there won't be any answers at all. And even if it turns out in the end that there is no answer which can be used as a safe and reliable guide-line, thinking about the question, considering carefully the pros and cons and thus trying to find a solution, can on its own be very valuable.

Thus, despite the fact that we cannot predict the future it was worthwhile for us to spend a whole week on the topic of civic education in the 21st century. I hope that nobody in the Center for Civic

Education (CCE) or in the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BpB), which sponsored and cosponsored this conference, expected us to come out with exact predictions or generally accepted practical proposals, not even with vague predictions or success-guaranteed recipes. For all we could do and, so I think, did do – at least to a great extent – was to reflect the challenges that we as political educators are confronted with and therefore will have to cope with in the future. Our reflections, hopefully, will help us to clear our mind and to give more room in it for new ideas that are necessary in order to find new approaches and the right ways to achieve our goals.

But before we can start making plans for the future we must find out where we stand. Have things changed basically or just gradually in the last few years? A lot will depend on the answer. In any case, most of us seemed to be convinced that there are new developments which make it impossible, or at least not advisable, to go on with civic education in the same way that we used to go in the last decades. We have to subject our modes and methods to a critical reassessment, particularly as these modes and methods were not always successful even in the past. Therefore they do not stand a great chance of being adequate and sufficient in the future. But how do we find a suitable concept for political/civic education? This was the question of our conference, and the papers and presentations offered quite a few workable answers. One of them was to go back to history, to reflect the ideas of former generations in order to find schemes that can help us to educate young people to become good, i.e. responsible and well-informed citizens.

Being here at Madison's Montpelier made it even more reasonable to go back to the founding fathers of the American constitution, especially, of course, to James Madison. And this was what Will Harris did in the opening session of our conference on Sunday night. He stressed the significance of constitutionalism, namely the notion of political imagination. For him as for the authors of "*We the People*," the textbook designed and published by the CCE, it is most important to reveal how and on what ideas the constitution was drafted. In Will Harris's understanding constitution-making is a work of imagination, seeking core knowledge about the nature of the well-ordered community, and he regards this to be the most important question on earth for human beings. Even if this may be an overstatement, we should teach students how to diagnose the political system. They should be enabled to rethink the constitution as if they had to make it or rather remake it. So it is not enough to explain the articles of the constitution, to show their relevance for us today, to point out how they work and to query whether they are respected. We must go deeper than that.

As our conference was an international one – to be precise it was a bi-national one – we were able to compare the American and the German approaches. I personally did not see fundamental discrepancies or even controversies, although in certain points the concepts and the methods are different. We have in common that we are based on western thinking. A conference with colleagues from Asia, the Middle East or Africa would have been less unanimous. Altogether we had six panels, each with an American and a German speaker, as you know. Naturally the two papers in each panel were not always coordinated, so very often a synthesis had to be framed in the discussions in order to find out parallels and/or to stress contrasts. Therefore it was good that sufficient time was allocated to the discussions either in the plenary session or in the two small groups.

I will not go into the details of the presentation and the discussions. Everybody here was present, and all of you have the written and thus detailed version of the papers. All I can do here in a few minutes this morning is to line out some major points which certainly will not cover more than just a very small fragment of what has been put forward. I will not discuss these points along the guideline which the themes of the six panels offer. Instead I shall try to put forward a different structure. I think one could roughly arrange the 13 papers and presentations in three groups. Of course, a classification is always unsatisfactory as it cannot take into account all aspects and as it puts up border lines where there are really transgressing zones. Still, let me try my scheme with the three groups nevertheless. I hope that we still will have the time to discuss whether this is a feasible method.

The three groups are:

1. Papers that stressed arguments that are based on the fundamentals of political theory and traditions.
2. Papers that analysed the present political, social and educational situation and described noticeable trends.
3. Papers that did not only stress the necessity of new approaches in civic education but proposed practical schemes.

Ad 1: The fundamentals of political theory and traditions

The papers of this group mainly dealt with the basics of political education: e.g. political theory and tradition, the making of constitutions and elaborating them, and the indispensable components of a democracy. Of course Will Harris's basic presentation, which I have already mentioned, belonged to this group. Kevin Ryan stressed the importance of providing people with the knowledge, the skill

and the orientation in order to participate actively in the political realm, and he underlined this with arguments from political thinking and theories of the past and present, particularly elaborating the Madisonian constitution which is neither republican in the classic sense nor liberal in the Lockean understanding but a component of both. In the same way civic education must try to combine these two lines in order to cultivate citizens who see the constitution and the body politic it created as their property.

John Patrick pointed out that civic educators must make their students understand that there can be conflicts because of the government's power in relationship to the liberty of individuals and the order of their communities. In this context he also stressed the danger of a majority tyranny, and said that textbooks and teachers should emphasize both successes and failures in American history regarding the rights of minorities. His final judgement was that it is the fundamental principles of American constitutionalism, perpetuated by civic education, which can enable citizens of the 21st century to continue their heritage of liberty under law. Joachim Detjen followed the same line by taking the 24 core values of the German constitution, the Basic Law ("Grundgesetz") as the basis for civic education, and he discussed them in greater detail. In doing so his proposals were also firmly based on the historical tradition of political thinking; but at the same time they took into account the necessities and challenges of the 21st century.

Ad 2: Analysis of the present political, social and educational situation and their noticeable trends

These challenges I just referred to are enormous in both countries we looked at: in Germany and in the United States. For Germany Michael Wehner listed and discussed 15 challenges in his paper, illustrating them with pictures and statistical material. So he stressed for instance the alarming deficit of political knowledge, the low estimation of politicians, the lack of empirical research, the necessity of making proper use of the new media and the relation of national and European identity. Diana Owen investigated political socialization, and in doing so distinguished the macro from the micro level. She pointed out what Michael Wehner also stated for Germany: that young people in the United States are very often turned off by political scandals from engaging themselves in the traditional activities of politics. However, recent research has found out that they are willing to engage themselves in *civic* activities such as working on behalf of a cause or helping others. This may indeed also be a bridge to political participation. What Günter Behrmann observed in Potsdam confirms these results. He told us that although there is a widespread common opinion in Germany that in the new states (Bundesländer) that were formerly part of the GDR very many youngsters are

radical and not willing to integrate themselves into the civil society, his personal experiences tell the contrary. This instance underlines the necessity that a lot of research has to be done before we can really make reliable statements. It is this lack of research that Diana Owen also regrets. So far we are, for instance, unable to estimate the impact of globalization and the attitude of migrants towards integration into the civil society and towards democracy.

This aspect was also dealt with by Suzanne Soule. Among many other aspects in her paper she gave statistical evidence for the fact that non-white students or students with a migration background are on the whole discriminated against in respect of their education. The same applies to students who suffer from the increasing economic inequality. Something must be done about this, and civic education may be one factor to redress these deficiencies. That the new media and the technical development in general will have an impact, actually already have an impact, on civic education Suzanne Soule, Diana Owen and Michael Wehner equally stated. How far films influence political attitudes Thomas Goll studied by analysing the appearance of American presidents in Hollywood movies. The few short excerpts that we were able to see made it evident that these films certainly do not depict the real role the American presidents play in politics and in everyday life according to the Constitution. However, the influence of pictures, particularly of thrilling movies, is great, and I wonder whether civic educators are able to wipe out these wrong conceptions in the classroom, particularly as most students – and as it is also most adults – are highly visually oriented.

Carole Hahn, being convinced that comparative studies are of great value, analysed and compared the aspects of civic education in many countries all over the world. In doing so she stressed that this cross-national perspective shows that there are great differences. In quite a number of countries the political aspects of civic education are regarded as being far less important than social and ethical qualities. Thus she stated that in England and Australia, for instance, schools traditionally were not expected to prepare youth for citizenship, although this attitude is changing in Great Britain since 2002. Because of the vital differences, so Carole Hahn said, it is impossible to create international standards that could be the basis for civic education everywhere. Wolfgang Sander, on the other hand, whose paper was presented by Wolfgang Böge, is less skeptical about the possibility of creating international standards or at least of cooperating when developing national standards and even pleads for a greater globalization of civic education. It would be interesting to follow up these two different notions and to try to find out which core values of the constitution(s), for instance, could be the basis for at least minimum globalized standards.

Ad 3: Proposed practical schemes for new approaches in civic education

All papers – in one way or the other – touched on the importance of civic education and also of the need to find new approaches. But there were very few that presented actual reports of new ways and methods. Dan Prinzing gave a report of what is and what should be in schools in Idaho concerning civic education; his focus was not on theory but on practise. He argued that the question must not only be *what* has to be learnt (important as this may be), but *how* it can be learned. Therefore knowledge, skills and dispositions have to be combined. In the appendix to his paper he included the text of the Idaho Content Standards. It would be worthwhile to discuss them in greater detail and to measure them on the more theoretical standards that have been put forward in so many papers, presentations and discussions during this conference. Perhaps this could be done in the next conference, and it would be good for this purpose if a German counterpart could be developed by then. For only in doing this we can find out whether and to what extent our in many ways rather academic ideas and proposals can work in practice.

Quite a different approach was taken by Andreas Petrik. He, too, wants to close the gap between mere programs and practice. His starting point was a real classroom scene from which he deduced theoretical and practical didactic answers, taking into account the triad of teacher, student and content. He pleaded for the development of teaching units that really awaken the students' interest in the process of democratic negotiations. In doing so civic education could help them to foster their judgement and conflict resolution skills.

Altogether it was of great importance for the atmosphere of the conference that we were not confined to the lecture room and discussion groups but had most interesting – and also enjoyable – outings. They certainly stimulated our intent to work hard and broadened the outlook particularly of the German participants. Or course, the *genius loci* of Montpelier was a great experience. The mansion of James Madison so near by and the beautiful setting of the former plantation (and later Dupont estate) which allowed us to work undisturbed and without distractions was to a great deal responsible for the success of the conference. It had a positive influence on the way and direction of our tackling the problems of civic education. Being at Madison's Montpelier, seeing the State Capitol at Richmond and visiting Jefferson's Monticello and the University of Virginia at Charlottesville constantly reminded us of the past. But it did not only remind us of bygone centuries as any historic building or document does, it also directed our attention to many political ideas and ideals of the past that are still valid. It made us understand in what way former generations

succeeded in achieving their goals or – at least from our modern point of view – also failed, if you think, for instance, of slavery and its incompatibility with the principles of the constitution.

The basic ideals are still the same although things have changed considerably since the late 18th century. In comparison to the Americans in the time of Jefferson and Madison we are confronted with quite new and different challenges nowadays. Still, these new and serious challenges that we discussed in the last few days need not be a barrier for civic education. On the contrary, they should be a stimulus for us. And our visit to Maggie Walker Governor's School was a good experience in this respect. It gave us an optimistic perspective. So we should not despair but should go on with our efforts. But I suppose we will have to work even harder in the future to achieve our goals.

Let me end with a few remarks that concern more or less the technical side of our conference. As I have mentioned already, it was very positive for the results we achieved that we were not confined to the lecture room and to the small discussion groups. Important as papers and formal presentations are for increasing our knowledge and for broadening our perspective, for opening new ways of thinking and for developing new ideas, one could also just *read* the papers. The discussions, however, are indispensable. Speakers were asked just to present the highlights of their papers and to do this in 10 or 15 minutes. Well, we all experienced that this really did not work very well. That most speakers needed far more than the allotted 10 to 15 minutes was not the only reason for this failure. For in a way it was necessary that they went into greater detail as most of us had not read the papers beforehand. This was not only our fault. We only got the papers after we had arrived here, to be more precise: on Monday morning. Because of the very dense program there was not sufficient time to read them, unless we used the evenings when many of us were either jet lagged or just sat together in small informal but in most cases very fruitful discussion groups. There we either followed up the formal presentations and discussions in the lecture room or just had friendly conversations that to my understanding are not only relaxing but ultimately important for the success of a conference.

I wonder whether it is feasible and possible to send a one-page, at the most a two-page, outline of each paper to every participant at least one week before the conference. This could easily be done by e-mail as we all have e-mail addresses. Actually those who are presenting a paper could send this short version to all the other participants of the conference themselves. This would make things much easier for the office-staffs of the CCE and the BpB. Of course, these short outlines of the paper would not contain much more than the theme or topics of the paper (which this year, by the

way, we did not get to know before we came here and got the copies with the full text of the paper on Monday morning. We were just informed beforehand about the general themes of the panels). Besides the theme this short version could state the main thesis or theses of the paper, headlines with a few short comments. This one- or two-page outline or summary should *always* be in English, also when the conference takes place in Germany where the German speakers deliver their paper orally and in the written form in the German language which most of the American participants do not understand. I think we are all very grateful for the fact that the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* is so generous to have all the German presentations translated simultaneously into English by highly qualified – and as far as I know also highly paid – proficient interpreters. I have always admired what a good job they do. But particularly since the speakers have been asked not to read their written text but just to present some highlights, translating has become even more difficult for the interpreters, and sometimes they cannot catch up with the speed. Also because of this difficulty it would be helpful for the English-speaking participants, therefore, to know beforehand at least a little bit about the papers. And as I am just mentioning language problems let me add that for the Germans it would be a great help if *all* the American colleagues would speak more slowly; so far some of them have just promised to do so. After all, English is and will remain a foreign language for the Germans.