Exploring the Use of Asynchronous Online Discussion and Vicarious Learning in Citizenship Education: A Case Study of a Singapore School

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Abstract: This paper is part of a larger study investigating how teachers can foster positive student attitude toward their country. Specifically, in this paper presentation, we described the use of vicarious experience along with asynchronous online discussion forums at a Singapore primary school in an attempt to teach one major citizenship education messages – *Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong*. In an asynchronous online discussion environment, students have more time to make explicit their preexisting personal beliefs about Singapore, and reflect on them – one of the key prerequisites of promoting belief change. Vicarious experience is learning through the experience of others. In our case, it was students learning through the experience of other people such as teachers, and their peers of what Singapore meant to them by means of written narratives, pictures or video clips. We provide some preliminary findings about what students felt about this learning approach, as well as the challenges in conducting it.

Introduction

Citizenship education is one of the overarching objectives of public education in every country and society (Sim & Print, 2005). Citizenship education, in essence, involves the preparation of individuals to be a responsible and participative citizen of their own countries (Kerr, 2000). Although citizenship education can take many forms, there is a general agreement among many scholars that it focuses on the development of a democratic society, national identity, and geopolitical and civic knowledge (Barrett, 2007; Kerr, Lines, Blenkinshop, & Schagen, 2002; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001).

Traditionally, textbooks are the major resources underpinning the instruction and learning of citizenship education in most countries (Kerr, 2000). However, there is a growing move in some countries to increase the range of resources available to teachers to support citizenship education, particularly in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) (Kerr, 2000). In this paper, we described the use of an ICT tool – asynchronous online discussion forums, along with the vicarious learning approach to teach one major citizenship education messages – *Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong*. This paper is organized as follows. First, we present a brief overview of

citizenship education in Singapore, attitudes and beliefs, asynchronous online discussion, as well as vicarious learning. We then describe the citizenship education project in detail. This is followed by the findings, and conclusion of the project.

Background

Citizenship Education in Singapore

Citizenship education in Singapore has appeared in many forms throughout the years since Singapore attained self-government in 1959. Citizenship education was originally taught as Ethics between 1959 and 1966; it was later replaced by Civics in 1967, Education for Living in 1973, Being and Becoming and Good Citizens in the late 1970s, Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics in 1982, Civics and Moral Education in 1992, and National Education in 1997 (Sim & Print, 2005). Perhaps some of the most extensive changes to citizenship education have been related to National Education (Han, 2000). National Education is deliberately aimed at developing positive knowledge and attitudes of Singapore's young citizens (Sim & Print, 2005). There are in total six main National Education messages (Ministry of Education, 2007): (a) Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong, (b) We must preserve racial and religious harmony, (c) We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility, (d) No one owes Singapore a living, (e) We must ourselves defend Singapore, and (f) We have confidence in our future. In this paper, we focus on the first National Education message – Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Although many researchers use attitudes as a term which includes beliefs (Eleftherios & Theodosios, 2007), a clear distinction between these two terms would better serve our purpose in this paper. Attitudes can be defined as specific feelings that indicate whether a person likes or dislikes something (Havelka, 2003; Simpson, Koballa, Oliver, & Crawley, 1994). In the context of our citizenship education project, student attitudes toward Singapore may be conceptualized as students liking or disliking Singapore. Beliefs, on the other hand, can be defined as premises or suppositions about something that are felt to be true (Calderhead, 1996). Scholars posit that beliefs are largely *cognitive* in nature (McLeod, 1992); representing the information or knowledge that an individual has concerning an object (Havelka, 2003).

Beliefs can determine a person's attitude (Bodur, Brinberg, & Coupey, 2000; Havelka, 2003). Thus, having a certain set of beliefs toward Singapore (e.g., a belief that Singapore is a safer place to live compared to other cities or countries), an individual then forms a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the country (e.g., liking or disliking Singapore), which can ultimately lead to a particular behavior being performed (e.g., staying in Singapore or leaving it). If, as Bodur et al. (2000) and Havelka (2003) suggested, beliefs are foundational to attitudes, then students' beliefs toward Singapore must first be fostered or changed before a positive attitude toward the country can be expected. How, then, is belief change most likely to occur?

According to Posner, Strike, Hewson, and Gertzog (1982), belief change can happen if an individual is dissatisfied

with his or her existing beliefs. This is most likely to occur when existing beliefs are challenged or when new beliefs cannot be incorporated into existing ideas (Ertmer, 2005). However, in order to do that, any educational program or project that aims to foster belief change among students must first require students "to make their preexisting personal beliefs explicit; it must challenge the adequacy of those beliefs; and it must give novices extended opportunities to examine, elaborate, and integrate new information into their existing belief systems" (Kagan, 1992, p. 77).

Asynchronous Online Discussion

Asynchronous online discussion refers to "the exchange of messages via computer networks where participants need not be online simultaneously" (Cheung & Hew, 2006, p. 2). Every participant in an asynchronous online discussion environment can choose to post and respond to messages at any time or from any geographical location, and views the messages many times and long after the messages have been posted. Because the discourse that occurs within the forum is not real time, students thus have more time to reflect, and think about new information before contributing to the discussion (Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004). This is unlike a face-to-face classroom environment where students are constrained by time to respond (e.g., 30 minutes for a typical lesson period in Singapore), and where the face-to-face discussion is usually dominated by a few vocal or outspoken students; hence leaving the shy students as well as those who wish to have more time to think little or no opportunity to participate in the discussion. In addition, since many of the current asynchronous online discussion forums are text-based, students have little choice but to express themselves in writing. The very process of writing in itself encourages students to make explicit their beliefs and assumptions – one of the key prerequisites of promoting belief change as previously mentioned (Kagan, 1992).

Vicarious Learning

Vicarious learning is learning by observing other people or reading the experiences of others. It may also refer to individuals learning by observing materials or resources such as video clips and pictures (Askew & Field, 2007). In our project, it was students learning by reading or observing the experiences of other people such as teachers, and their peers of what Singapore meant to them by means of materials such as written narratives, pictures or video clips. Vicarious learning provides a unique opportunity for students to reflect and consider their own preconceptions, or preexisting beliefs and assumptions (Muller, Sharma, Eklund, & Reimann, 2007). Such reflection could lead to students modifying their belief systems. Empirical research conducted in other disciplines has provided evidence supporting the notion that using vicarious learning can help develop beliefs. For example, Askew and Field (2007), examined the use of vicarious learning (e.g., pictures of novel animals paired with pictures of either scared, happy, or no facial expressions) to see the impact of such materials on children's fear beliefs. The results of two experiments indicated that children developed fear beliefs towards animals they had previously seen paired with scared faces, and that these beliefs persisted up to three months after the experiments ended.

Method

The citizenship education project at Primary School A, an elementary school in Singapore, started in June 2009 and was completed about four months later. School A was a mixed gender (boys and girls) school with more than 1,500

pupils. A majority of the pupils in the school were Chinese Singaporean and came from families of middle to high social economic status. Two primary five classes, each with 30 pupils between the ages of 10 and 11, along with their form teachers took part in the project. There were three main phases of the project: (a) pre-implementation, (b) actual implementation, and (c) reflection.

During the pre-implementation phase, teachers were introduced to the potential benefits, and challenges of using asynchronous online discussions. They were trained on how to engage pupils in the discussions. Following the teacher training session, a training session for the primary five pupils was carried out. Pupils were taught the meaning of discussion, and were introduced to a set of ground rules and guidelines for the discussion. These include the following: (a) no rude posting, (b) one idea per message posting, (c) pupils to respond within 48 hours, and (d) pupils to support opinions with facts or personal experiences. Pupils were introduced to the BlackBoard™ online discussion platform. Essential features of the platform (e.g., creation of discussion threads and messages) were demonstrated. Pupils were also given the opportunity to try out the platform, guided by the teachers.

The actual implementation phase ran for about four months. During this duration, we focused on the theme *Appreciating Singapore*. A teacher presented cases or narratives (e.g., real-life stories of people concerning what they appreciated about Singapore) in mass lectures. The teacher also shared about what he or she appreciated Singapore. Pupils, after the lectures, proceeded to participate in an online discussion about the things they appreciated or liked about the country. Pupils were told to comment on one another's online postings. Pupils also visited the *Singapore My Home* website (www.singaporemyhome.sg.ndp_gallery.cfm) and viewed the competition photographs posted on the web page. They then participated in a separated online discussion thread on what they liked about the photographs, as well as what the photographs meant to them. In addition, pupils re-visited the *Singapore pledge* and commented about what the pledge actually meant to them in a separate discussion thread.

At the end of the project, 54 pupils wrote individual reflection on what they had learned from the online discussions, and materials (photographs, narratives of other people). Pupils also wrote whether they had changed their feelings or attitudes toward Singapore and the reason for it. In addition, pupils wrote about the experience of using online discussion, and the use of the various resources (narratives, photographs) in learning about the National Education message and what they felt about them.

Results

Overall, 92.6% of 54 pupils reported positive benefits related to appreciating the country more and learning technical knowledge/skills on using online discussions. For example:
- I feel proud to be a Singaporean.
- I learned that Singapore has a variety of things to enjoy and it is a very peaceful country.
- I feel happy that I am a Singaporean.
- I learned about the Singapore identity and I also learned how to use the discussion forums.
- I felt a great sense of belonging as I learnt that Singapore accepts any religion or race.

In addition, a majority of the pupils (80%) reported that they enjoyed the citizenship project more, compared to the traditional teacher didactic lessons. For example:

- It was very interesting and exciting. I hope we have another project like this.
- I felt that it was meaningful and I learnt a lot.
- I felt happy but it was too short.
- I feel that we should have more time for the project.
- I feel happy. It is more interesting than normal lessons.

Eighty percent of the pupils reported that they found the use of asynchronous online discussion forums useful and beneficial to them. For example:

- The use of online discussion forums helped me make my beliefs and ideas explicit. It also helped me question or challenge the beliefs or ideas of my classmates.
- It [the asynchronous online discussion] was very useful. We can look at the postings over and over again.
- I feel that it is better to discuss online because it gives people like me who are shy to speak up in class, to voice out our beliefs.
- The online discussion enabled my classmates to question my opinions in order to challenge or improve it. I can think more in-depth.
- I felt that it is convenient because we can participate in the discussion at any place we like.
- I can see [clearly] what other pupils are thinking or feeling.
- I am able to express more about how I feel and it is easier for me to type out some things instead of saying it directly. We can see other classmates' beliefs clearly and express our beliefs freely too.

However, some pupils reported negative statements regarding the use of AOD. For example:

- Discussion forums appear to be boring and colourless. Nothing like facebook.
- Though I was able to share my feeling and ideas, not everybody in my class responded to it.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, this paper is part of our larger study investigating how teachers can foster positive student attitude toward their country. Our preliminary results suggested that, on the whole, the primary five pupils enjoyed the citizenship education project very much. It was also evident from the pupils' reflections that some change of belief toward the country had occurred. Pupils reported that they learned to appreciate their country more. We also found the use of asynchronous online discussion a useful technology to help pupils make explicit their pre-existing beliefs and assumptions about their country. This in turn enabled the pupils to examine, question and challenge these different beliefs, as well as to assimilate new information into their existing belief systems. Our current study was limited to two primary five classes. In the next phase of our study, we will expand this project onto an entire primary school level, such as the whole primary six cohort of School A. We also intend to create a questionnaire survey to measure the pupils' pre- and post-project sense of belonging to the country. By comparing the pupils' pre- and post-project scores, we would be able to measure the efficacy of the citizenship education project.

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