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Social Science Education Instead of Particular Disciplinary Interests

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The discussion about the relationship between civic and economic education is stirred up by particular interests on both sides. Civic education / political science and economic education / economic science fight for time, posts, money, reputation, power of interpretation and dominance at schools, at Studienseminare (teachers’ training colleges), at universities and in public discourse. In these lobbystic conflicts similarities of social sciences disappear. Therefore I advocate a model of a personality educated in social sciences in which both civic and economic education can be found. Here is my first suggestion.

After the 6th form (12th/13th grade) every student (both male and female) should have basic skills regarding eleven general social science competences. In principle they are thought to be universal, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, that is social competences. Here I use the term *social* as a generic term for economic, political and society-related phenomena. *Social sciences* is a generic term for economics, political science and sociology. In this way a debate that is geared to educational objectives of social sciences can come to the fore without giving up specific disciplinary (economic or political) aims.

**Competences of social sciences**

Using examples, students can

- present a social phenomenon / problem as socially constructed and show that this could possibly be different and therefore it can in principle be shaped and changed; students consider this in their own judgements and actions (*social construction*);
- trace back a social problem or a phenomenon as it exists and appears to that knowledge and those values in a society which are attached to this social problem / phenomenon by communication and recognition (*communicative constitution*);
- describe and explain a social problem / phenomenon by means of basically different social ways of thinking; they can also compare and estimate social, individual and personal consequences (*alternative ways of thinking*);
- classify a social problem or a phenomenon as individual or collective; the students can also trace back collective phenomena and problems to individual ones; they can show the collective consequences of individual actions and the other way round (*Micro-Macro-Links*);
- associate a social problem / phenomenon with the social institutions that frame it; they can describe these institutions as changing and changeable and they can explain their effect on both individual action in general and their own action in particular (institutional framing);

- analyse a social problem for its collective and individual interests and perspectives of social actors, and describe them and their effect; they can assume and assess them tentatively and reflect on their own interests and perspectives (interest bias and perspectivity);

- relate a social problem to basic values and norms; the students can assess this social problem from the perspective of different norms and values, and they can take their own normative position on this problem and justify it (plural normativity);

- present and explain a social phenomenon / problem in its social, economic and political framework; they can explain the interdependency of this framework and account for it while assessing the political or economic governance attempts (societal interdependencies).

Using examples the students can

- distinguish factual statements about social phenomena from non-factual ones ('should' statements) and keep these apart in their judgements (distinction between description and normativity);

- describe norms and mindsets necessary for emergence, enforcement and consolidation of institutions that both open and restrict current possibilities of action (evolution and historicity);

- differentiate between and explain different types of governance, their effects and unintended side effects; they can also assess them with respect to norms and values (types of governance and side effects);

The first two competences describe the two central aspects of social-constructivistic thinking. The ability to tackle social construction means deconstructing real economic, political or social structures and institutions.

Criminality is a classical example on which the ability to trace back the constitution of social phenomena and problems to communication can be acquired and tested. Public discourse usually focuses only on forms of criminality that are committed by outside perpetrators (e.g. burglary, robbery, assault). The communication in society overestimates their scale and the personal risk of becoming a victim. At the same time the risk of becoming a victim of crimes committed by family members and friends is underestimated. Political measures oriented towards these biased ways of communication increase the feeling of safety, but not the safety itself – this can, however, be sufficient.

**Applying alternative ways of thinking**

The ability to apply alternative ways of thinking and to analyse them for their effects can, on the one hand, be applied to disciplinary ways of thinking and mindsets. The institutions of the economic system can, for example, be discussed from the perspectives of both political science and economic history, and in this way the political dispute about the social market economy from its origin till today can be followed. Then it can be learned that and how this apparently economic category
serves as a political code which expresses the economic-social promise (“Prosperity for all”) in order to integrate social groups into the political system and to legitimise it (a combined approach of economic history and political science).

On the other hand, this ability can be related to cross-disciplinary ways of thinking, for example to the theory of rational action (also called the theory of economic behaviour). This theory can be found in sociology, political science and in economic sciences, but also in everyday theories. This mindset explains collective phenomena (macro-phenomena) by tracing them back to the motives and actions of individuals (micro-phenomena). It is based on the conviction that every human interaction can be understood as an exchange. With this mindset, the students can try out what can be seen and what changes when, for instance, this mindset is applied to personal friendship, religious convictions or to party programmes.

Finally, it is about the ability to analyse mindsets for their societal effects by means of examples. Illustrated by the example of social welfare you can see what alternative mindsets can bring about. One mindset basically assumes neediness of the recipients of social welfare. Another mindset supposes rational calculus of a homo oeconomicus unwilling to work. Dependent on which mindset you choose, you can see different problems and reasons and thus draw different political conclusions.

The competence of relating micro- and macro-levels to each other systematically while avoiding false micro-macro-conclusions can be acquired through political, social and economic examples. Examples are false conclusions from the family to the state, from individual values to societal values, and from private households to the economy as a whole. Tracing back macro-phenomena to micro-reasons, that is to the average behaviour of average actors, can be learned on topics such as unemployment, aggregation of the demand of consumer goods, migration or racism. The micro-macro relations can be explained with the help of the mindsets of, for example, the theory of rational action or the cultural theory.

**Analysing institutional frameworks**

The competence of thinking in relation to *institutions* can be demonstrated with the income tax duty – and it can be combined with the competence of systematically thinking in alternatives. Tax duty as an institution restricts individual action because you have to pay money and cannot completely dispose of your gross salary. At the same time, tax duty enables action because you can rely on tax rates and ceilings and you can use the rest of your gross salary as you wish. From the perspective of the theory of rational action (institution understood as a system of rules and sanctions for its enforcement, and rationally calculating actors) it is essential that you behave according to the rules if the individual costs that arise due to the institutional rule “paying taxes” are still acceptable from the subjective point of view. If they go above this level, many people try to evade taxes. If politics wanted to ensure tax revenue, it would need to increase punishments and controls.

From a cultural theory perspective you consider, for example, the institution of tax compliance or the institution of performance of duty. According to this theory it is due to the generally accepted und internalised norms in a society that many actors more or less carry out their tax duty.

The competence to relate phenomena and problems to different interests and perspectives and to assume alternative perspectives belongs to the core
competences in civic and economic education. A role-play, a business game and a change of perspective are methods that go with this competence. Since the pluralism of interests and perspectives is inherent in political, economic and societal problems, you can acquire the given competence by using the example of any societal (latent or manifest) controversy.

You can learn to identify and assess plural normativity, which is a constituent of every social phenomenon or problem, by using nearly every classical topic of economic and civic education. Institutions and systems of institutions such as a contract of employment and employment relationship, family and parent law, market economy and competition or democracy and election are based on norms and values, e.g. liberty, justice, reciprocity, efficiency, participation, solidarity or individuality.

The competence of identifying social interdependencies and considering them in one’s own judgements also belongs to the classical core of civic education; it is also related to the sensitivity for unintended side effects. You can acquire this competence, for example, by practising the appropriate dimensioning of problems in a society (political, economic, social, ...), their alternative solutions and their consequent effects. Possible ranges of topics are unemployment or equality of opportunities.

Keeping “ought” and “is” statements apart

The ability to differentiate between descriptive and normative statements and to recognise and to avoid naturalistic false conclusions from factual statements (“what is?”) to normative statements (“what ought to be?”) is a transdisciplinary social science competence. An institutionalistic mindset here offers an important application area. It assumes that institutions, due to their enduring existence (e.g. a hierarchically structured company or office, representative democracy), are superior to other alternative forms (e.g. participatively structured organisations, direct democracy); they are, for example, more efficient. Therefore these institutions should be politically preferred and promoted. An education that is fostering the basic attitude of political acceptance is often linked to this mindset.

Treating social phenomena as evolutionary and historically created is another important competence; it is closely related to social constructivism. As examples you can take the development of the social market economy and related phenomena like corporatism and social statehood.

Posing the question of the governance type (e.g. market, hierarchy, network) and of its effects and unintended side effects for every political, economic or social measure is an important social science competence. One example is the commuter tax relief which leads to rampant building activity and to heightened traffic volume. It reduces the costs that arise due to longer distances between home and workplace. Another example are protective provisions for special groups of employees, which strongly reduce their chances of becoming employed.

Common and differentiated

These eleven universal social science competences can be acquired in several individual disciplines and subjects and in a transdisciplinary way. The disciplinary contents which are used to acquire these competences are interchangeable if they
are functionally equivalent. The curriculum on-site decides which social science competences the students should acquire in which way, and where they should apply them.

The social science competences presented here should be exhaustively and critically discussed. An interdisciplinary consensus about the general competences that students should acquire in the field of social sciences should be aspired; this strengthens this field in matters of educational policy! Then the different didactics of different subjects can determine suitable disciplinary competences and certainly other additional competences. In comparison to this perspective the predominant lobbying for disciplinary interests (e.g. economics, political science) and single school subjects (e.g. economics, business education, civic education, social studies) is academically and pedagogically illegitimate and dull.

References