Towards an expansive and aesthetic understanding of political literacy

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‘Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his “natural” purpose by the power of words.’

Jacques Rancière (2004, p.39)

Writing on the relationship between politics and aesthetics, Rancière’s (2004) revision of the Aristotelian characterization of the human condition above makes a compelling case for the vital power of the imagination, and particularly the literary imagination, in the development and performance of political agency and subjectivity. Without the ability to imagine things (and one’s self) differently, the possibility of really being and acting politically, and of affecting real political change, recedes. This is a point that has been well made within the literature from critical pedagogy (see for example, Greene, 1995; Giroux, 2002), where the power of the arts and the imagination for a meaningful, emancipatory education has been stressed. Such insights have rarely been applied in mainstream educational policy however, where concerns about political literacy and political agency have most often focused on ensuring that young people have the rights kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes to participate fully in democratic society.

The introduction of citizenship education as a statutory subject for schools in England and Wales in 2002 is perhaps the most obvious example of this, whilst parallel developments in Scotland have seen the inclusion of citizenship as one of the key capacities of the ‘Curriculum for Excellence’, and more recently, the ring-fencing of resources to support teachers in promoting political literacy in the run up to the referendum on independence (Education Scotland, 2013). Within such approaches, political literacy has been framed primarily in terms of developing the knowledge and skills necessary for democratic participation. From the outset, citizenship education aimed to equip young people with the ‘knowledge, skills and attitudes’ necessary for democratic participation (Crick, 1998), and this focus looks set to continue following the recent curriculum review, with learning about the political, civic and legal structures of society forming a key part of the revised statutory guidance for key stages three and four (DfE, 2013). Recent initiatives informal democratic education have also adopted an explicitly, ‘knowledge and skills’ based conception of political literacy. This is aptly captured in the literature of the Democracy Matters movement, in its claim that, ‘for an effective democracy, political literacy is just as important as the ability to read and write.’ (Democracy Matters, 2014)

These approaches imply a Kantian understanding of the relationship between education and democracy, in which education is tasked with producing citizens capable of rational and responsible exercise of their democratic rights. This is not without its problems. Quite apart from the issue of whether young people are actually as ignorant and apathetic as is often assumed in public debate (see for example O’Toole et al., 2002; Weller, 2007), it implies a deficit view of young people (as ‘not-yet’ citizens), as well as an instrumentalist approach to education (as a tool for bringing about political ends) and an individualistic view of democracy (as something that resides in the readiness of individuals for democratic life, rather than in collective action) (Biesta and Lawy, 2006). Biesta (2006) has outlined other important understandings of the relationship between education and democracy, including those that emphasise learning through and from democracy rather than only for it, and has argued for a focus on democratic subjectivity within a critical approach to democratic education (2010).

Such a focus on subjectivity opens up new possibilities for reconceptualising political literacy via an engagement with important work from both the sociology of education and the field of aesthetics. Performative understandings of subjectivity, in which identity is framed as malleable, fluid, contextual and acquired through a process of subjectification (see for example Hey, 2006; Youdell, 2006) can serve as a useful way of drawing attention away from the production of good or ‘active’ citizens towards a focus on where and how democratic subjectivity emerges. In addition, the work of Rancière (2004; 2007) and Mouffe
(2007) on politics and aesthetics alerts us the possibility that such subjectivity also has an aesthetic dimension and is deeply related to the arts (McDonnell, 2014). Rancière’s work in particular, with his focus on how fiction and narrative contribute to the creation of ‘channels for political subjectivism’ (2004, p. 38) is particularly helpful in thinking through the literary dimensions of political literacy.

Given recent theoretical developments in a variety of educational fields, knowledge-driven formulations of political literacy also appear somewhat limited and outdated. More expansive and embodied conceptualisations of literacy have challenged the assumption that this is primarily a cerebral capacity, confined to knowledge and understanding. They have also emphasised the social and situated practices that shape communication and expression. Examples include Whitehead’s (2001) work on physical literacy, and theories in higher education, which have emphasised how ways of knowing, thinking and writing are embedded within disciplinary communities and practices (see, for example, Street, 1995; Lea and Street, 1998; Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001). This ‘new literacies’ literature suggests that a new understanding of ‘literacy’ is needed; one that acknowledges the multiplicity of ‘literacies’ that exist and the culturally and socially embedded nature of these.

This workshop seeks to draw together insights from these fields of literature, and to bring them into dialogue, to consider whether a concern for literature, narrative and the aesthetic might help to rethink the concept of political literacy in education and reinvigorate it with a sense of agency and imagination.

**Key questions:**

- What can we learn from the literature on academic literacies when considering the nature of political literacy and its centrality in democratic education?
- What can be learned from performative understandings of subjectivity within democratic education?
- How might the connection between literature and literacy be helpful in rethinking political literacy and what role might imagination and the narrative arts play in political awareness and activity?

**References**


