

# Engaging contexts and citizenship skills: Steps towards an 'engagement paradigm'

**Domenico Simeone, Michele Aglieri, Monica Amadini, Livia Cadei, Rita Locatelli, Dalila Raccagni, Emanuele Serrelli, Luca Solesin**

UNESCO Chair on Education for Human Development and Solidarity among Peoples  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

**Stefano Bonometti**

Università dell'Insubria, Varese, Italy

The authors propose that education is instrumental in developing citizenship skills, which will in turn foster meaningful community engagement and build democratic cultures for societies of the future.

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Today, rapid changes characterize social and political contexts all around the world, bringing into question fundamental notions, such as citizenship and public engagement. There is an erosion of trust in institutions, leading to civic disengagement, individualism and social fragmentation. More broadly, people are detached from and dissatisfied with, public life. The concept of national citizenship is also changing, impacted by multiple processes related to globalization – i.e. growing access to information and knowledge through digital media; increasing migration and cross-border mobility; and urgent environmental issues related to climate change. Social relationships currently expand well beyond any national border while connections and interdependence intensify between local and global levels (UNESCO, 2018; Tawil, 2013).

At the same time, the space and time of citizenship and public engagement are being called into question due to the disruptive changes brought about by the exploding use of new technologies, which has created a proliferation of identities and virtual communities. New forms of association and participation thus emerge – although they are mainly “unorganized organizations” that have yet to generate proper collective acknowledgement and identification. These experiences allow people to ‘take part’ but offer little in the way of ‘being part of’ a collective. This is crucial as ‘being part of’ is indeed the fundamental goal of citizenship. In this context, citizenship skills are a pressing necessity that needs to be strengthened.

## A new engagement paradigm

Citizenship skills allow citizens to actively and critically take part in society while feeling like they are an integral part of it. Social bonds become increasingly important in a context marked by growing fragmentation, loneliness and uncertainty. Human and existential sustainability should thus become priorities on equal footing with environmental and social sustainability. Empowering factors and strategies should be sought, studies and experimented on in this domain. Essentially, we need citizens to engage in shaping society.

What do we mean by 'engagement'? Answering this question is a challenge in a fast-changing social world – a challenge which must be addressed through education. Education is the key to adopting and promoting an engagement paradigm capable of realizing social inclusion and community building. How can democratic participation be favoured, and what goals will drive it? Again, we turn to education to develop citizenship skills in formal and non-formal contexts as not only a necessary precondition, but also necessary to the realization of the paradigm. This emphasis on education, learning and training – combined with analysis of the contemporary globalized and techno-connected world – points to the idea of new 'engaging contexts' with structures and boundaries that are very different from those found in traditional learning contexts (e.g. the class, course, task).

How can the new engaging contexts be conceived and generated? Some reflection is needed on this point. Engagement is generally defined through a set of actions that attest that an individual is indeed taking part in a community. Stepping inside a school, sitting on a bench and executing a task allows a student to take part in a school community. Signing up to a social network, uploading files and writing comments allows an individual to take part in a digital community. While this notion of engagement appears simple and clear, it runs the risk of conveying an atomized, utilitarian and partial view of it as the mere sum of various actions an individual performs while community is correspondingly defined as the number of people acting in it. Moreover, the above cited yet narrow vision of engagement is insensitive to the goals that inform engagement itself. A different view of engagement is therefore necessary – one which frames it as an 'enabling condition' rather than a mere set of actions and processes (SDSN, 2016).

## Expanding the definition of 'engagement'

'Engagement' in the context of building citizenship skills is better defined as a 'feeling of belonging,' a condition that enables mutual recognition, responsibility and freedom. As a constitutive dimension of community, engagement leaves room for individuals to experiment with their capacity to improve their own lives along with the lives of others. Conversely, community cannot exist without engagement. Hence, engagement in this sense constitutes a culture, imbuing actions and processes; behaviours and social rules; contexts; environments where communities take shape, and the very goals of learning. This new engagement paradigm emphasizes certain capabilities, including dialogue; tolerance (i.e., living with others who think differently from me); listening, turn taking; the ability to win, lose, forgive, respect others and the self; accepting other people's motives, inclinations, goals and feelings; knowing how to share goals; and mastering decision making as well as taking on the responsibility for the ensuing collective effects of said decisions.

Within these preconditions, individuals can learn to live together with others. In turn, such preconditions turn into engagement and citizenship skills. A new engagement paradigm allows for a new look at the Delors' pillars of education: "learning to be" and "learning to live together" (Delors et al., 1996). These two pillars are often recognized as founding the very concepts of global citizenship education and sustainable development education. In fact, feeling that we are part of the human community and inhabiting the same planet enables us to pay greater attention to and take more ownership of global problems and challenges. Interestingly, engagement and citizenship skills developed in real life can be transferred and extended to digital communities. The latter – when conceived and lived within a new engagement paradigm – can undergo processes of democratization based on the sense of belonging of their members. Pioneering open source projects, such as Wikipedia, founded on community-based service improvement, while not immune from the persistent issue of free-riders show how engagement can produce a sense of shared responsibility for the common good.

## Development of a democratic culture

To ingrain this engagement paradigm and make it systemic, greater attention must be paid to contexts rather than to specific actions. The creation of these engagement contexts, where the 'us' perspective – instead of the 'me' one – is treated as a building block, fosters a democratic culture and the development of different engagement practices and actions. In the field of education, some directions to take a participatory approach and attitude can be related to the work done on latent pedagogies and implicit curricula (including parameters, such as spaces, time, routine and materials). Only with an attention to these aspects can the entire school life be oriented towards participatory democracy, responsibility and continuous sharing. This educational shift could precipitate a move from rules to objectives; from learning processes to relationships; and from organizational choices to building relationships with families.

The emerging Italian network of Didactics for Learning Spaces or DADA (Didattica per Ambienti di Apprendimento) Schools serves as a concrete example of an organic strategy to build engaging contexts. DADA Schools experiment with alternative models of organization for school spaces and time with the goal of fostering the active learning of students as the 'makers' of their knowledge. In terms of educational governance, opening up the school as a physical space to the wider community and citizenship during extracurricular time promotes a positive permeability between the school and the community. This expedient is in line with the principle of collective engagement in education based on the paradigm of "education as a common good" (UNESCO, 2015; Locatelli, 2018). Among the many experimental examples in Italy, the Open Schools Project, originally promoted by the city of Milan, aims at capitalizing on the willingness of schools to serve as a focal point for the citizens of a community. Indeed, a city could be a dispersive environment, yet each school can and should become a centre of aggregation for the whole neighbourhood – essentially, a structure at the service of citizenship. This is what we mean when we describe schools as 'cultural garrisons.'

Whatever the different approaches and tools used, positive examples in the adult population should be the distinctive mark of any community linked to formal and non-formal education. A learning environment is ultimately cultivated by people and nothing is more capable

of positively shaping future generations than the world created by women and men capable of relationships, dialogue and collaborative behaviour with a healthy respect for differences. This approach can help young people learn beyond just prescribed subjects as the example of the adults around them and the quality of their exchanges breeds hope for peace and progress. From the perspectives of educational trainers as well as of public authorities and educational organizations, arenas for dialogue, co-design and the sharing of experiences among adults should be promoted to enable the problematization of practices and behaviours as well as the quest for coherence among different points of view, cultures and values. This plural, collaborative and dialogical environment is necessary for younger generations to flourish, one which holds an invitation to build the communities of tomorrow.

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