

The Uses of Television in Teaching Citizenship

Joke Hermes, INHOLLAND University, The Netherlands
 Jeroen Onstenk, INHOLLAND University, The Netherlands

Contemporary ideals for teaching rely on a set of teacher competences on the one hand and notions of strong citizenship on the other (Onstenk 2005). Teaching and learning today needs to build responsibility, orientation on society, norms and values in students. Active citizenship has been set as a goal for all teaching in the European Union's Lisbon agreements (2000) for learning and development of the knowledge society. Popular television, this paper will argue, can be a strong ally in teaching citizenship. As viewers, pupils need to actively engage with the social world to accord meaning to the television they watch and thus to derive pleasure as well as knowledge from what they see. Processes of meaning making are often taken for granted but should be regarded as forms of social learning.

This paper will interrogate how television can be used as an aid in teaching and acquiring citizenship values. The learning effects of television are contested. John Hartley has argued in *Uses of television* (1999) that television itself is a 'transmodern' teacher. Its multitude of perspectives and the wide variety of cultural forms and persons portrayed, allow for unforced, informal forms of learning that benefit the coming into being of new modes of citizenship. They are based on the sense of neighbourliness that television may offer highly disparate groups and the respect for difference implied in such neighbourliness. Television's detractors argue that television is instrumental in breaking down standards of literacy (one of the great classical aims of education) and that it offers a uniform, undifferentiated mass product (Postman, *Amusing ourselves to death*, 1985). Such a view accords well with processes of distinction sought by cultural elites (Bourdieu, 1980) but is untenable in the face of actual broadcasting which can be shown to offer different types of content from highly different perspectives, admittedly of varying levels of quality.

This paper will focus on how a popular Dutch television series may be used to offer a learning experience. It illustrates

the possible use of popular television (as opposed to more traditional educational programming) in class room discussion. Its case study is one of the best-watched television programmes by young people (De Bruin 2005), a police series (*Baantjer*, 1995- present, RTL4). It will query how this series portrays the multicultural society. The central cast includes a non-white colleague and storylines repeatedly offer both victims and suspects from non-white groups in the Netherlands. By using stereotypical portrayal and arguments on purpose in a whodunit format, the series implicitly teaches distrust of stereotypes and everyday assumptions. It thus offers a means of reflecting on multicultural relations and stereotyping, while offering, however implicitly, a reflexive mode of citizenship.

Citizenship and culture

Formally, citizenship regards the rights and duties of those counted as belonging to the nation. It thus provides grounds for inclusion and for exclusion. Among these rights are political rights and these refer to the fact that democracies are ruled by and on behalf of the citizens. Such a system of governance requires competencies on the part of its citizens. Throughout the history of debate around citizenship, starting half a century before the French revolution, such competencies have been identified and fought over. In an overview of republican discussion of citizenship, Ido de Haan identifies courage, virtue and material independence (1750-1850). Well known political theorists, such as Paine and Sieyès refer to insight, wisdom and rhetorical capacities as necessary for a functioning public sphere in which the citizens would come to wise judgement (De Haan, 1993, 37). In the mid 19th century J.S. Mill felt that political activity should be restricted to those who had the intellectual capacity to judge others' and their own best interests (ibid. 45). Generally men were long felt to be the better candidates, as

were those of independent means. History however moved on and contemporary ideals for emancipation widened the circle of those who would be citizens. Neither means nor intellectual capacities were formerly required by the beginning of the early 20th century, though a certain amount of education had become compulsory for all, as had military duty for young men.

While citizen rights became more inclusive (from civic to political to social rights), and the right to vote came to extend to all adult citizens, fear of the huge groups of new citizens became institutionalized via the new social sciences. Mass psychologists in the late 19th and early 20th century (LeBon, Tarde), as well as the new sociologists (Durkheim, Weber) theorised the new mass society. Alongside emancipatory ideals, intellectuals sought to distinguish themselves. The mass was criticised with regard to its propensity to become emotional rather than be rational when it came to public affairs. It was felt to be in need of control, in terms of hygiene as well as in schooling. (Mass) education from the beginning had a civilizing as well as an elevating and rationalising purpose (Donzelot 1979).

John Hartley has argued that even before television existed (with the earliest working sets in the 1930s), conservative and progressive literary critics and intellectuals were fully geared up to denounce the medium. As teachers and journalists they held powerful positions of naming and defining what constituted good and bad reading, healthy and unhealthy cultural forms. Fear of threats to cultural standards equalled fears of democratization in Britain in the 1920s (Hartley 1999, 66). F.R. Leavis and others agitated against modern life and industrialization by invoking the need for a canon, for tradition, which was to restore the link to organic unity and commitment (ibid. 67). The immense influence of these thinkers and of this period on how both the arts, culture and citizen competences came to be part of school curricula is not the topic of this paper. Important though is Hartley's suggestion that television never had a chance to be evaluated positively. Even before its existence it was imprisoned in the realm of machine power and mechanical culture, of cheap and immediate gratification, of non-art and emotionality.

Citizen competences in education today

There is growing attention for citizenship in education (Education Council 2003). Education is supposed to stimulate willingness and capacity to be part of a community and contribute to its development. Education should contribute to social, moral and civic development of students. Citizenship competencies are required for managing yourself in many areas of society. Knowledge, skills and dispositions are deemed necessary to function properly in social and societal transactions.

In response to the growing discussion on norms, values, civic integration and examination (inburgering) the Dutch minister of Education recently proposed a law which sets citizenship education as an educational objective for schools. This means an explicit emphasizing and sharpening of objectives that were in educational curricula for a long time. Citizenship competency focuses on the ability to take responsibility for your own life career and social participation. In our discussion here we take our cue from several leading institutions and authors to outline our position on what is at stake in teaching citizenship values.

The IPP (Institute for the Public and Politics 2000) pleads for a broad orientation in citizenship education, including all groups and interests and both formal and informal aspects. It should be process rather than content oriented. It should

include values, and not just knowledge and it should use interactive educational and learning methods. Citizenship education should not focus only on the political domain, but also on social, economical and cultural processes. Such a broad view on citizenship education is the best preparation on our individualised, market oriented and multicultural society. Not only knowledge, but also emotional, experiential and normative issues are represented. There is space for creativity as well as developing opinions and action perspectives of ones own.

Citizenship competencies need to get a recognizable place in the school curriculum, both in the scheduled and in the actual one (Education Council 2003). Development of citizenship competencies should be connected to practical learning experiences in and outside school (Onstenk 2002). The individual has to rely on his own competencies and the ability to develop them continuously as well as her or his willingness to use them in a changing, demanding and ambivalent environment. Core problem of critical citizenship is how to handle the tensions between independence and commitment, between individualism and social participation, between self centeredness and social responsibility (De Winter 2005), while acting in the multilayered public domain. Essential components are:

- The ability to self reflectivity and self steering
- The ability to find and develop one's own identity as participant in different social relationships;
- The ability to make critical judgements between personal and communal interests;
- The ability to develop and learn;
- The willingness to contribute constructively to the development of the community and the broader society

Self steering does not imply that you always have to follow your own wishes or to act independently of outside influences, but refers to the ability to self determination and controlled self development taking into account demands and possibilities of society, culture, labour market or public space. It implies being able to give direction to your personal development in a challenged and changing environment. Continuous individualisation and flexibilisation force individuals to develop an ability to enact independence and make choices, but at the same time ask for specific attention for social commitment and responsibility, both for social cohesion and for feelings of safety, belonging and development. Self steering must be combined with the ability and motivation to identify and with and commit to (parts of) society as a basis for effective acting in society (Wardekker, Meijers and Wijers 1999).

Teaching citizenship competencies

Ongoing socialization of educational practice itself is the best guarantee that pupils will be prepared well for their citizenship role (Ten Dam en Volman 1999, Dieleman en Van der Lans 1999). In actual fact, pupils are of course already participating as citizens: schools are part of society, students act in the school as (apprentice) citizens on a micro level (Education Council 2003). Important here is to 'teach what you preach'. Students can only be trained to adequately negotiate the tension between autonomy and commitment if they are taken seriously and treated with respect in the school environment. Organizing small scale school units, in small and large school organisations, e.g. contributes to citizenship education by producing feelings of belonging and responsibility. Establishing activating forms of education and more attention to skills in reasoning, communication and analysis is another strong strategy (RMO

2000). Citizenship competences do not only challenge content in the school curriculum or educational practice, but also benefit from rebuilding the pedagogical climate and other characteristics of the school as life environment.

With regard to content and didactic activating strategies, there are many ways citizenship competency can be promoted in school. The Netherlands has witnessed a recurring discussion of the need to introduce both literary and a historical canon over the years. National pride, for one thing, is thought to benefit from this. A more promising way, however, to promote citizenship competencies, rather than embed such training in traditional school subjects, is to connect it to concrete subjects and themes and see those as exemplary cases to develop responsible autonomy. Themes should be relevant and challenging for students and be connected to their world. School learning should be seen as building on and intensifying learning outside school. It is essential in citizenship education to build on broader learning experiences, relevant for citizenship, which students had earlier or elsewhere in relevant parts of their life, such as at home, among partners or friends, in their leisure time, or during sports activities. Citizenship training, we will argue here, might well start from the experience of watching popular television series such as *Baantjer* in the Netherlands.

The development of citizenship competency is a broad, personalised and long term development process. There is no need – or possibility – to strive for a programme that fully covers it. Rather, teachers should aim for continuation and reinforcement of the citizenship competencies students are in the process of acquiring anyway. Of course, such informal learning can, and nowadays often will be, a problematic and contradictory learning experience. This may lead to feelings of fear, to a lack of self-confidence or social involvement or to prejudices about other cultures or life styles. Building on the extracurricular informal learning of students therefore will neither be easy nor self evident.

It is clear that while a functioning democratic mass society requires sets of codes for conduct and competencies, these can only function when held in regard by all. Regard is difficult to force. Teaching has to rely on a mixture of discipline and seduction to persuade pupils to make these codes their own. As teachers we are all used to such strategies as appealing to elements in the life worlds of those we teach. Mass media materials thus have been used in teaching successfully. Obvious examples are teaching in the arts (Richards) or in social studies. Such a practice might be extended outside the immediate realm of art and culture.

Learning by *Baantjer*

We are not used to recognising that mass media such as television engage in a highly similar practice to our own. Hartley's suggestion for cultural critics to rethink the 'uses' of television, makes good sense. Popular culture, whatever we may think of it, is a fact of life for many. Literacy programmes in the United States for example have made good use of young girls' fascination with (heterosexual) romance in literacy programmes. Although the cultural value of short romantic novels may be doubted, it must also be clear that they may make the difference between learning or not learning to read it all for certain groups (Christian-Smith, year).

Goals may be set a little higher though. Recent research has shown how important popular television fiction is for teenagers. American research pointed to series such as *Beverly Hills 90210*, recent Dutch research suggests that a highly formulaic and conventional crime drama show reached impressive numbers of young people (De Bruin 2005). As we

are fortunate in the case of *Baantjer* to have access to both original reception analysis among young people and textual analysis of the intercultural values put forward by the series, we have made it our example here.

Baantjer (RTL4, 1995-) is a hugely popular television series, broadcast on prime-time on Friday night. It draws a larger audience than other drama series and it easily outdoes the 8 o'clock news. *Baantjer* presents an interesting case study for two main reasons. It is at face value a highly conventional police series. This is signified for example by the fatherly charisma of De Cook, and the customary end of each episode that has the team in Mrs' de Cook's kitchen having an after dinner drink and discussing the case while De Cook explains all. The image presented is that of a traditional (nuclear) family. Far removed from typical young people's television genres (such as music television), *Baantjer* would not seem to be their obvious choice. Secondly, *Baantjer* has an intriguing way of dealing with intercultural relations. The cast includes a non-white police officer. Its many incidental characters, victims, family, perpetrators and bystanders, come from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For use in the classroom *Baantjer* thus offers a good many examples of cultural difference, the need for respect and so on. The series does this all the more so because it tends to use stereotypes to lead viewers astray. Often non-white suspects are not the ones who committed the crime. This subtly reminds us as viewers of our stereotypical and possibly discriminating views of others. Whether this is indeed how the series works with young viewers will be discussed after introducing its characters and a short example of its narrative conventions and structure.

Baantjer's characters

The ethnic other in the *Baantjer* detective team is called Keizer (Emperor), a somewhat misplaced joke, given Keizer's subordinate role in the team. *Baantjer's* Keizer is well assimilated and, in everything but his skin colour, white. The main characters are De Cook and his side-kick Vledder (the younger white guy). They are featured in most scenes. They visit the suspects in their homes and interrogate them in the police station. De Cook will solve the murder case in the final scenes of the episode. The other two officers, Vera Prins and Indonesian-looking Appie Keizer have minor roles. They do most of the desk research, they check alibis, look for information about the suspects. Keizer is the resident computer wizz. When they venture from their desks it is to bring crime-related objects to the lab. Prins sometimes plays a part in storylines in which women are victims. This mechanism does not apply to Keizer. It took 10 seasons of *Baantjer* to see his ethnic background used incidentally in the storylines. Whereas Prins is occasionally empowered as a woman by reference to her implicit knowledge of women and femininity, Keizer is not suggested to have access to other cultural knowledges. His 'otherness' is only visible in his appearance. *Baantjer's* Appie Keizer is a well-adjusted 'white' figure. Keizer talks, dresses and behaves like the average white Dutch person.

Baantjer's favourite strategy is to situate murders in interesting and slightly 'suspect' places: sex clubs, gay bars and student dorms for instance. When allowed by the setting, non-whites are likewise introduced. Because the *Baantjer* format is cast in iron, incidental characters are usually dealt with one-dimensionally. As a rule, the charge of racist stereotyping as a rule is deftly avoided by introducing not just one but several Turkish, Moroccan or Surinamese characters in such stories, who are all slightly different in their one-dimensionality. Of course this particular script-writing strategy of avoiding a charge of racism when more extreme characters are introduced, implicitly suggests that non-whites live in groups or clans and hardly need to be seen as individuals. Another favourite

ploy is to have a different ethnic background as problem in a secondary story line, which again lessens the devil-and-the-deep-blue-sea burden of (obvious) political correctness versus the charge of racism.

Ethnic representation in a metaphorical sense is used as the proverbial red herring: not only as a decoy in the narrative puzzle that police series are, but also as a strategy of containment rather than transgression in an ideological sense. *Baantjer's* offer of interactive participation to viewers, illustrates this. During the commercial breaks viewers can at a fixed cost send text messages by mobile phone and point out their suspect for the murder. *Baantjer* thus openly plays with our prejudices and preconceptions by setting up ethnic others as suspects – while rarely offering them as the actual perpetrators.

It would seem to be the case that especially in crime drama, we have a study in repressive tolerance. At a price, we have black police officers, villains and victims, as well as unjustly suspected individuals, who are solely discriminated against on the basis of their skin colour. And yet ...the vantage point chosen in the episodes do not confirm white middle-class experience all of the time. The Dutch police series is not an incorrigible assimilationist exercise. There are also implicit structuring metaphors that suggest that police series can reflect on issues of multiculturalism and make them acceptable rather than a complex social danger zone. Despite television's conservative image and the police series' pleasure in always restoring law and order, this can be a space of social change, starting perhaps from its consistent 'blackening' of mainstream white masculinity, in *Baantjer* (in the case of the villains).

On average non-white characters do not play major parts in either series. On the contrary, the usual state of affairs is the occasional appearance of a non-white 'red herring' character amongst the suspects. The perpetrators, however, are often respectable, not-too-young, well-off men. They have families, money, jobs and on the face of things an honourable and worthwhile goal in life. Jealousy, greed, boundless ambition or lust are their downfall. More often than not, *Baantjer* as much as other Dutch police series takes pleasure in presenting white masculinity as a wolf in sheep's clothes. White men in the police series do not have it all: they cannot remain secure in their invisibility and their embodiment of the norm (as police officers), or harbour the darkest of sentiments and lusts (as murderers, rapists and extortionists). As viewers we are offered reflection not just on racist stereotypes we hold but we are also offered masculinity as performance. The 'fun' in watching masculinity-at-work is in its unpredictability, in its capacity to dissimulate emotions, in its duplicity which may gratify our suspicious minds. Although no woman or non-white man could enjoy such representational space, neither does masculinity remain the implicit norm nor pillar of western rationality and society (extract from Hermes and De Bruin 2005).

Television and citizenship education in the class room

Bringing our two lines of reasoning together, we propose new ways of citizenship education by using popular television, inside and outside of classrooms. New learning and modern uses of television offer new opportunities for dealing with citizenship competencies inside and outside of school. It opens up new connections between learning inside and outside of schools (Education Council 2003).

The aim of using *Baantjer* in the classroom would be to help young people explicitize and thus reflect on the norms and values they hold in regard of multiculturalism. Everyday life offers many an example of the convoluted reasoning many

young people hold. In the wake of the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh (2 November 2005 in Amsterdam), young people started wearing rubber bands that had 'respect' printed on them, to express their revolt against increasing racism and exclusion of non-white groups. Respect however is also in street lingo a threat: you respect me, or else (De Winter 2005). To claim respect in a naïve sense hardly benefits citizenship competence. Series such as *Baantjer* may help, first, to address such double meanings, stereotypes and counterstereotypes. Secondly, they can make an issue such as multiculturalism, which otherwise is seen as very uncool and boring (Volkskrant, 2-7-2005), more palatable and even fun to discuss.

De Bruin's (2005) reception analysis shows young people as a mixture of highly television literate and incredibly naïve television viewers. A third important ingredient in this mix, is the wish on behalf especially of young non-white viewers to have recognizable and credible non-white characters. Especially the stereotypes offered by *Baantjer* are much appreciated in this regard. The *Baantjer* production team should also be credited with doing their research well. In *The murdered bride*, for Turkish viewers, it was immediately clear who the real murderer was, because one of the Turkish-Dutch actors hired exclaimed as much.... in Turkish, much to these viewers' delights. The lesson to be learnt here is that using *Baantjer* to teach citizenship competence is not necessarily part of teaching these pupils media literacy (which would be highly opposed to stereotyping and flattening of characters). Rather a new type of teaching involving media use as well as other forms of everyday learning is what we would be in favour of.

As we are fortunate in the case of *Baantjer* to have access to both original reception analysis among young people and textual analysis of the intercultural values put forward by the series, we have made it our example here. Needless to say, teachers looking for popular television examples to use in class, may need to go to the trouble of making contact with those doing research in this area, as indeed, we have done here. Such practice is not uncommon, and part, amongst other things, of master classes and other forms of teacher education offered by universities.

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