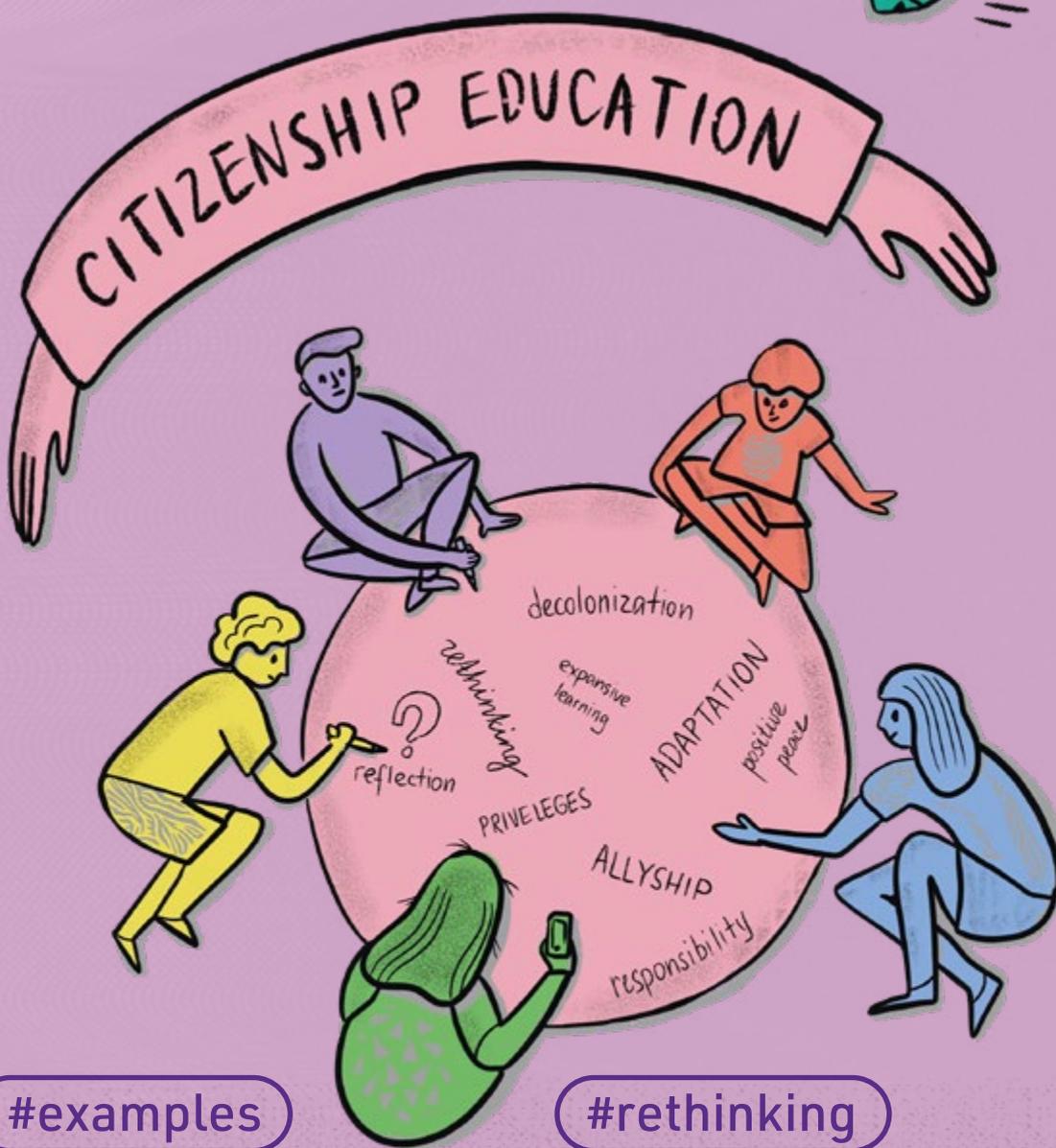


Rebekka Pfennig, Nataliya Trambovetska

RETHINKING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN TIMES OF WAR: INSIGHTS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS



#examples

#rethinking

#decolonization

#unlearning

#allyship

#adaptiveness

#experiences_from_war

About the authors:



Photo credit: Olga Zarko

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Photo credit: Stefanie Loos

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Note for the reader:

We are two experienced facilitators in the field of European citizenship education, peace education, and academia, living and working in Ukraine and Germany. Our participation in a transnational educational hackathon that resulted in the collaborative authorship of this article¹ generated many insights that led us to rethink citizenship education from both national perspectives and personal experience.

The article provides two different perspectives inspired by questions, thoughts, and examples from different European countries. It aims to provide the basis for a

deeper exchange and collective exploration of the status and the role of civic education in the European context.

As a starting point of this reflection process, we offer observations from our personal lives and our work in Ukraine and Germany. This is followed by our thoughts on what kind of role civic education can and should have in contemporary European democratic societies, on both the institutional and structural levels. We conclude with a few remarks on citizenship education, which should, in our view, undergo a process of rethinking.

¹ The Hackathon was the first event of the Project "Rethink citizenship education in times of change" implemented by MitOst, Insha Osvita and EcoVisio, which took place in August 2022, in Rîșcova, Moldova.

PERSPECTIVE 1: UNLEARNING AND ALLYSHIP IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Rebekka Pfennig

Non-formal education encourages learning and critical (self-) reflection processes. Citizenship education explores contemporary socio-political topics within our democracies. In these complex settings, we (as teachers and facilitators) are constantly encouraging learning processes that form important skills, such as listening to each other, sitting with uncomfortable emotions, and broadening one's horizons beyond one's personal experience to acknowledge different lived realities within Europe.

To tackle the multiple crises that we are facing, we need to rethink common practices in citizenship education and encourage new ways to learn and unlearn common approaches and methods. The following questions arise in rethinking common practices: What additional or new knowledge challenges and transforms one's established attitudes and positions, and how? What does learning more about the war in Ukraine (and elsewhere) mean for us on a personal level? How does it affect our educational practice? What does it mean for citizenship education programs in general and our practice as facilitators more precisely?

In the following section, I will briefly describe my learning journey to propose discovering and applying the concepts of unlearning and allyship as core elements of citizenship education in the future.

Learning about the invasion of Ukraine, and the ongoing events that ensued – through the news, public discourse, discussions at work, and talks among friends – I was confronted with horrific pictures and videos that caused unsettling feelings and prompted me to engage in deeper reflection.

Sorrow, rage, irritation, and powerlessness are some of the emotions I've experienced since the beginning of the war. By taking a closer look at where those feelings were coming from and why they were so ever-present, I noticed that experiencing the war so close and within my everyday life shattered some of my assumptions and opinions. This led me to an important realization – that I am in a very privileged position, having the choice to deal with the war or not. I can decide to read the news or not, engage in discussions or not, go to demonstrations or stay cozy at home, learn more about the history of Ukraine and its politics or spend an evening with friends in

a bar and not think about the war at all. This choice on its own is an enormous privilege. At the same time, however, I needed to find ways of dealing with these unsettling feelings I was experiencing in my daily life and my work as a civic education practitioner in Europe.

Ukraine is currently undergoing an intensive internal process of decolonization. While an overwhelming majority in Ukraine agrees on the reasons behind the invasion and the status of the aggressor, in other countries – partly due to perceptions formed by history, presented through a Soviet point of view as well as the influence of modern propaganda – a comfortable ambiguity lingers at times. Therefore, Ukrainian activists sometimes encounter a lack of understanding of the deeper causes of the war exhibited by representatives of civil society organizations from other countries.

It is time for us to challenge this comfortable ambiguity by challenging what we know and the assumptions we hold about Ukraine. From what point of view do we see the history of the country and its relations with Russia? Whose perspective did we learn and accept as the truth? Whom do we need to listen to instead? How can we gain a more realistic – and therefore more complex – picture of both historical and current events?

We need to question the knowledge and its (re)production and be open to listening, reading, and asking Ukrainians about their experiences and perspectives on history and the contextualization of current events. This is part of the challenging task of transforming the knowledge and narratives of history that date back to the Soviet-coined point of view, considering the current events and the intertwined relationship between the past and the present.

The concept of unlearning

The postcolonial and feminist literary scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, well known for analyzing power hierarchies, knowledge production, colonial relations, and the process of decolonization, examines in her

writing the notion of unlearning one's privilege as one's loss.² Unlearning one's privilege as one's loss means losing a one-sided picture (also referred to as "one's truth"), and easy explanations. Instead, it encompasses gaining a broader picture of the very complex societal and historical dynamics that we are currently living in, complicating in the process our assumptions and sensemaking of the world around us.

² Gayatri Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (Routledge, 1996).

This implies questioning our existing knowledge. Unlearning is a process of learning; it means reviewing and re-thinking what we take for granted, actively listening to the experiences of people around us, without rating or judging them, while reflecting on our own position and experiences in relation to theirs.

"It involves confronting the often-painful process of self-questioning – an unlearning that is dialectically related to learning."³ Reflecting on one's (social) position in terms of privilege, power, guilt (through the lens of historic-political education), and ensuing legacies is an emotional and intense process.⁴

Allyship as an active practice

How can this process be initiated? How can we deal with painful emotions and the process of unlearning? Facilitators of civic education and non-formal learning are exceptionally well suited to serve as allies, using their position to support others' (un)learning.

Creating a space of non-formal citizenship education for the exchange of experiences involves nurturing the practice of active listening. This listening style may evoke unsettling feelings, and it is important to acknowledge them in all their complexity – as markers of irritation, as a small vibration or agitation, or the painful shattering of one's own assumptions. Accepting the "positive uncertainty" that may result from active listening offers the opportunity

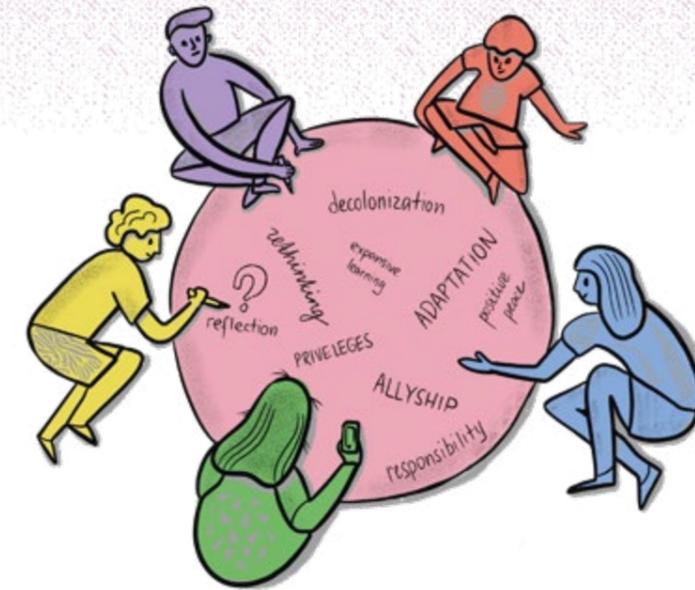
for important insights about one's positioning. Using one's privileged position to support others can be considered a form of allyship. Allyship is "an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group."⁵ Solidarity in this sense doesn't mean that you necessarily share the same opinion as the person you are in solidarity with, but that you can accept and acknowledge their position and experience. Solidarity can have the form of a feeling, an expression, or an act.

The manifestation of allyship and solidarity requires proactive efforts – to learn, to unlearn positions and established interpretations, to listen, to question, and to stay informed. Moreover, it is a process that needs time in programs and learning

³ Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, "Breaking the Rules. Education and Post-Colonialism," in *Documenta 12 Education*, ed. Carmen Mörsch, vol. 2 (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 317-332.

⁴ For more on social positionalities, see: Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges and the Persistence of Vision," in *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader*, ed. Patrick Grzanka, 1st ed. (Westview Press, 2014), 41-48.

⁵ "Allyship," The Anti-Oppression Network, September 22, 2021, <https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/allyship/>.



environments, as well as resources, to be able to engage in reflecting on one's own emotions. This process is something that allies consciously choose over and over again as a commitment to an active practice of lifelong learning. Allyship is also choosing to be vocal about crimes, horrific realities, and forced experiences of war, staying actively informed and offering support to people in need, to the extent that you are willing and able to offer it – according to your own financial, emotional, and skill-based resources.

In activism, allyship can mean standing in solidarity not only with weaker parties or groups in need, but also with equal or even stronger communities. It also requires seeing one's agency, and a willingness to treat others as equal interlocutors and not as victims when it comes to the creation of new projects and programs in citizenship education.

In citizenship education, unlearning is a very personal practice, reflecting on one's privilege and social position within a learning group... But it can also be a collective and open process, facilitating these reflections about the social positions and power relations of participants within a learning group.

→ See the article "What is horizontal learning?" by Marta Gawinek-Dagargulia and Maria Tymoshchuk

This open process may affect how experiences are shared among the participants and might lead to individual and collective learning and unlearning. Allyship and unlearning in this regard are mutually beneficial processes. While complex and difficult endeavors, they hold a powerful self-reinforcing potential. The practice of allyship or solidarity challenges the role of the facilitator within the interplay of both acting as an advocate or activist and assuming a "neutral" moderator or facilitator position.

→ See the article "Between neutrality and activism: The role of facilitators" by Sebastian Wehrsig

Allyship and solidarity are acts and practices that should become a more prominent part of citizenship education, to promote mutual understanding, tolerance of ambiguity, and to acknowledge multiple perspectives within learning groups in non-formal citizenship education and in a horizontal learning environment. Unlearning, therefore, provides insights that help us understand, practice, and live allyship and, as such, should become a foundation and a tool for citizenship education to strengthen communities and build resilience across Europe in times of war and transformation.

PERSPECTIVE 2: RETHINKING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN TIMES OF WAR

Nataliya Trambovetska

The following section showcases my own experience, as well as those of my colleagues from the NGO Insha Osvita, who continued to implement civic education programs even within the context of a full-scale invasion.

Facilitating groups through crisis: Observations

Two important disclaimers need to be made when speaking about civic education in Ukraine. Firstly, even though some of the practices about to be described have been taking place during military operations, each country's context, as well as the field of civic education, has its peculiarities. We believe that looking deeper into Ukraine's experience can help other educators and facilitators to be better prepared for other crises. Secondly, at the time of writing, the war is still ongoing and the situation is too dynamic to draw conclusions. We are thus sharing our observations and intermediate conclusions in the form of questions about

trends in non-formal citizenship education. We are aware that these observations refer to the Ukrainian context and may not be relevant to other countries. At the same time, it is an opportunity to observe the experiences that are formed in unique conditions and often happen in an accelerated mode. Examining them can shed light on or trigger other change processes that were long in the making.

One of the constants in the design of educational processes is the focus on the goals and learning outcomes one wants to achieve. At the same time, the effectiveness of certain formats is influenced by the general context and environment within which the learning takes place.

We want to share the following general observations about the peculiarities of group learning, drawing on our practical work with groups in times of war. Facilitators working in similar contexts are advised to consider the following factors:

- In times of crisis, facilitators should review priorities, topics addressed and the time dedicated to them.
- Both participants and facilitators

need to maintain social contacts and their belonging to specific communities, especially if they are refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

- There is a basic human need to be useful and to help others, both of which are important tools for self-help and well-being.
- For most affected individuals, key concerns will revolve around the provision of basic needs, logistical and organizational issues in a new place of residence, and search for new sources of income.
- People may be experiencing difficulties in planning, especially with a long-term perspective.
- Some might experience cognitive difficulties, such as trouble with concentration.
- Most people might experience high levels of tension, and as a result, more acute reactions to different points of view.

The situation in times of war changes dynamically; people move, settling or traveling further; their access to technology and infrastructure may change and priorities change accordingly. It is therefore even more important to keep in touch with target audiences, generate and test one's hypotheses, and be ready to adapt to shifting, current needs. Long-term projects in which

there is no space for change and adaptation no longer work in such contexts. Therefore, it makes sense to look more broadly at different formats of citizenship education, stay in tune with social trends and be quick to assess or capture the creative potential of innovative methods. For example, opinion leaders and influencers are increasingly impactful, especially among young people. The field of marketing has been responding to this for a long time, and perhaps citizenship education should consider this as well. Furthermore, even though entertainment content recedes into the background in times of crisis, people's habit of consuming information through social networks persists. Many media outlets and influencers in Ukraine started posting more content on cultural and socio-historical topics, telling stories about cause-and-effect relationships as precursors to modern events. An example in point is the topic of the decolonization of Ukraine. Before the full-scale invasion, the discussion on decolonization remained confined to narrow circles of researchers and activists, while now it is becoming a popular topic for Instagram and TikTok users.⁶

Opinion leaders and the media (both mainstream and niche outlets) are quick to grasp the public demand for certain topics and present information in an easy-to-understand and sometimes over-simplified format. This, in turn, presents a particular double-edged sword dilemma: while the simplified format enables access to

⁶ With this example, we do not mean to imply that all projects should now also take place on social networks. We simply want to emphasize that it is worth looking more broadly at possible and sometimes unexpected ways of getting civic education messages across to our intended audiences.

information for a larger audience who possibly have not had prior contact with certain topics, there is at the same time the danger of one-sided oversimplification.

To conclude, opinion leaders, influencers, and the media are readily adapting to new technologies and demands. This in turn changes the newsfeeds and the topics that are in the spotlight. This represents a substantial potential for civic education, especially for young people, to raise important topics, encourage their further research and discussion, and ultimately implement civic education not only as distinct activities and events, but to integrate it into their everyday practices and media diet.

The previously mentioned unlearning is an approach that is needed not only for practicing allyship but also as a tool for coping with one's inferiority complex and strengthening personal agency. When talking about Ukraine, conditions are conducive to an unlearning approach: There is public demand, as well as already developed practices and methodology of non-formal civic education. At the same time, the process of unlearning requires personal resources, and people in a country at war (as well as those who have been forced to leave and adapt to a new context) have significantly limited resources. Finally, the framing of unlearning processes requires a thorough self-reflection for educators and providers of educational programs.

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An example of a format of civic education that was quickly reoriented during the war is Rozumiyu, the media literacy program for teachers and youth workers implemented by the NGO Insha Osvita and the Deutsche Welle Akademie. A new part of the program, which was supposed to include regular online training sessions, began just weeks before the full-scale invasion.

After a break of several weeks, participants were sent assignments, fact-checking notes, and examples based directly on the current situation. In this way, the participants could join forces to provide information and acquire knowledge in practice. The program eventually resumed regular meetings, but in a shorter format that accommodated regular air raid warnings

and curfews, retaining an emphasis on the practical application of knowledge and real-life connections. Moreover, it can be an example of reclaiming normality in a

constructive way, as it supports people and gives them the possibility of being active and practicing their usual forms of interaction with others.

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Another example of a program that continued its implementation and adapted its content is the **Ukrainian Academy of Leadership** (UAL) and its youth training program. Besides thematic lectures, the Academy's program included studies, hikes, and survival skills training, including first aid. For many alumni of the program, this knowledge and experience became critically important during the war. We can assume that they will remain just as important in the years ahead. Another mandatory

element of the program is promoting youth volunteering as a way of caring for the community in both social and business spheres. Nowadays, the Academy engages in community organizing and looks more broadly at the intersection of different fields to find solutions to the consequences of war. In 2022, the youth training program introduced the topic of safety, both psychological and physical, as well as a component of stability and endurance, including the ability to look into the future.

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In addition to rethinking the formats of civic education, attention should be given to **initiatives that propose dialogue between the citizens of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus.** Even though, from the beginning of the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian community of mediators and dialogue facilitators indicated the impossibility of such encounters during the current phase of the war⁷, dialogue-seeking initiatives

continue to be initiated by different organizations. It needs to be noted that such encounters can lead to the retraumatization of Ukrainian participants, as genuine dialogue may be an impossibility due to power asymmetries entailed in the context where hostilities and war crimes take place on the territory of only one country. Instead of fostering peace, these exchanges may in turn increase tensions.

7 "7 Points on the War and Dialogue from Ukrainian Mediators and Dialogue Facilitators," Peaceful Change Initiative, May 10, 2022, https://peacefulchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Public_Statement_War_and_Dialogue_Ukraine_ENG.pdf.

Final remarks

With this article, we attempted to provide some insights into our discussions and the ongoing challenges we face in our work. As authors within this initiative, we brought two different perspectives. The first was a personal perspective outlining the concepts of unlearning, allyship, and solidarity as key concepts for citizenship education that acknowledges multiple perspectives of experiences and facilitators' positionality. The second perspective presented the organizational, community level experience of working in non-formal citizenship education in Ukraine.

For us, this article is the result of many discussions and a valuable exchange of experiences, thoughts, and concepts as well as insights we gained through participating in this project. We are grateful for the opportunity to get to know each other and to share with you these insights, which we find thought-provoking and helpful in rethinking citizenship education in times of war and other crises.

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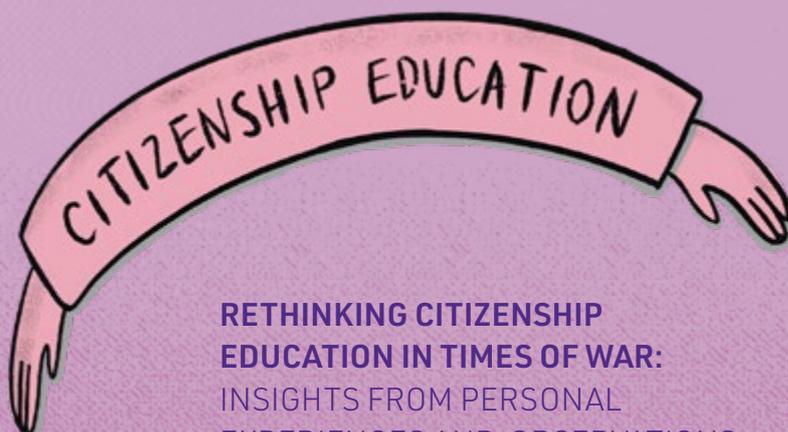
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