



Knowledge citizenship for active informed citizenship

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Introduction

With the spate of elections and electioneering happening around the world, specifically the USA elections in November 2008 and the upcoming South African elections, the reality of being a citizen of a country and being able to cast a vote makes one's citizenship status decidedly more significant. A case in point is the recent lobbying of South Africans living overseas to be eligible to cast a vote in the April 2009 elections.

However, voting is only one component of being an upstanding citizen. To actively participate and exercise one's right of citizenship, one presupposes that all citizens have the knowledge and know-how of what is required to be an active contributing citizen of a country. Yet, the writer stumbled upon the following two interesting comments:

'Most Canadians know so little about their own country that they would flunk the basic test that new immigrants are required to take before becoming citizens'

And

'We live in a country where most people know more about the Simpson's than the constitution' (Paus 2002)

Countries and governments need an active and informed citizenry. They require people to understand their place in society, recognize their responsibilities towards their community and be prepared to take action on that basis.

This discussion explores the characteristics of 'knowledge citizenship' and whether it can provide principles and guidelines that will encourage active and informed citizenship.

Citizenship clarified

Citizenship can be defined as membership in a socio-political community that comprises four dimensions, namely legal status, rights, identify and participation (Bloemraad cited in Guo 2003). Stability of the modern democracy depends not only on the justice of its institutions, but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens.

Having citizenship of a country not only means a passport and having the right to live, work and vote there, it implies actively participating in the life of that community (Atchia 2002). This includes obeying laws, respecting the rights of others, caring for the well-being of the community and protecting the resource base on which the wealth of the country depends.

There are generally four ways of obtaining citizenship in a country:

- By right of birth, that is if you are born in a country you are granted citizenship in that country automatically
- Right of blood citizenship, that is if your parents and sometimes grandparents are citizens of a country, you are granted citizenship
- By naturalization – by complying with certain laws in a country to become a naturalized citizen
- By marriage – some countries grant citizenship if one marries a citizen from that country.

Learning to be a citizen

In a globalized and interdependent world, citizenship and human rights have become more topical and are recognized as increasingly relevant. The development of an authentic democracy depends largely upon the education of competent citizens.

Citizenship is often treated as static, as something to be acquired rather than a process of continuous growth in attitudes, skills and knowledge. Guo (2003) states that, in some countries, citizenship instruction has become a passive learning process to memorize a set of unconnected facts, for example 'What is the capital of Canada?'

Participatory citizenship means preparing citizens to become active and well informed of their community and larger society including knowledge about social, economic and political systems, social programmes and services available to newcomers and rights and responsibilities as new citizens (Guo 2003).

The main objectives of citizenship education should be to prepare citizens to become active and well informed of their community and larger society. In addition, it should inculcate a value system that fosters a feeling of unity within diversity and make a person a critical and active citizen who can participate fully in a democratic society (Arko-Cobbah 2005). It includes both formal and informal methods by which citizens are enabled to understand and contribute to the effective working of the society in which they belong. Citizenship is more than a matter of legal status or political identity. It involves a set of value and commitments. Knowledge, skills and character are essential for citizens living in a knowledge economy.

Knowledge citizenship as an overall principle

Knowledge citizenship is an attitude and behaviour one adopts towards knowledge where one actively displays knowledge sharing behaviour, personal knowledge management and a responsibility to engage in life-long learning. The overarching principles of what it means to be a knowledge citizen implies that the citizen takes personal ownership, responsibility and accountability for sharing, knowledge and learning.

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing behaviour is one where people share openly, there is a willingness to teach and mentor others, where ideas can be freely challenged and where knowledge gained from other sources is used. Knowledge-sharing can occur through many different media: conversations, meetings, processes, best practices, data bases and questioning. A culture of knowledge-sharing goes deeper than superficial individual behaviours and captures the hearts and minds of the people in a community (Smith and McKeen 2003).

Personal knowledge management

Personal knowledge management revolves around a set of core issues: managing and

supporting personal knowledge and information so that it is accessible, meaningful and valuable to the individual; maintaining networks, contacts and communities; making life easier and more enjoyable; and exploiting personal capital. It is about knowing what knowledge we have and how we can organize it, mobilize it and use it to accomplish our goals and how we can continue to create knowledge. Personal knowledge includes knowledge gained from formal and informal instruction, memories, stories we have been told or have told, personal contacts and relationships, books we have read or written, notes, documents, photographs of us or by us, our intuitions and what we have learned from others. It focuses on how individuals apply knowledge processes to support their day-to-day work activities (Martin 2006).

Life-long learning

Life-long learning is the concept of continuous personal development through personal (self-actualized) learning. The process involves changing one's perceptions and practice to meet the rapidly changing demands of the knowledge society, by moving away from learning as preparation for life and work, to learning as an integral part of life and work (Sutton 2005).

The most important component in life-long learning is the motivation, which drives the learner to engage in either self-directed learning, learning on demand, informal learning and collaborative and/or organizational learning. The desire for life-long learning must come from the person. It requires discipline and initiative and it requires a person to assume responsibility for his or her continued learning. Life-long learning is more than training, as people need to learn by themselves in order to adapt to new environments after training (Sutton 2005).

Life-long learning is crucial for citizens to be able to compete in the global economy, but it is important for other reasons as well. By improving a person's ability to function as a member of his or her community, education and training increases social cohesion, reduces crime and improves income distribution. Life-long learning impacts learners' lives and changes their mindsets. New technologies also offer new possibilities for people to learn during their lifespan (Sutton 2005).

Identity of an active and informed citizenry

Countries and their governments require citizens who are informed and engaged in activities that benefit the country's economic, social and political performance. Promoting the principles of knowledge citizenship would significantly impact the behaviour of an average citizen in terms of his or her involvement in the country's governing and being informed of his or her rights and responsibility.

An active and informed citizen would:

- Be sufficiently equipped with knowledge and understanding of the constitution of the country and the workings of institutions that strengthen democratic governance
- Continually upskill and participate in life-long learning, that is engage in learning activities so as to be informed and to develop critical thinking skills
- Be empowered to influence public policy decisions and to uphold the principle of transparency and accountability
- Hold representatives in government accountable for decisions
- Enjoy the rights they are entitled to as citizens
- Willingly perform the duties expected of them
- Take personal responsibility for civic duty including self-discipline, civility, compassion and tolerance.

Conclusion

While citizenship is often accounted for (both personally and by governments) only during periods of concentric activity, such as national elections and the tax filing season, it is important to be conscious of one's responsibility as well as rights that one is entitled to. By adopting knowledge citizen behaviours, which by virtue implies self-ownership of sharing and learning, a nation can transform general apathetic behaviour into an energetic culture of ownership, responsibility and activity.

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