

Consequences of the First Covid-19 Wave on Teaching Civic Education:

Results of an online-poll

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Introduction

When in March 2020, the German authorities decided to close the schools as part of the pandemic response, an experiment began for which no one was prepared: neither organizationally, nor technically, nor methodologically or didactically.

After a chaotic phase, the first forms of "distance learning" evolved - with all their limitations and shortcomings. How distance learning was realized in the subject of civic education will be the topic of our presentation. But first, please allow us a few introductory words about the subject of civic education in the German school system:

Civic Education in Germany

The subject of civic education exists in all federal states of Germany, although it differs from state to state in terms of content and weekly hours. Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus on certain didactic principles such as the principle of problem orientation, the principle of controversy to prevent one-sided (biased) perspectives on political debates and the principle of actuality, which means that core questions, problems and conflicts should – wherever possible – be addressed with real and actual examples.

The competences promoted in civic education are – among others – the teaching of basic political knowledge, argumentative skills and political judgment and skills necessary for political participation.

These competences are also reflected in what we call in Germany the different "levels of requirement". The first level encompasses the reproduction of knowledge, the second level means the capability to transfer and apply knowledge on other issues and the third level

refers to the level of political judgment and the ability to justify the position taken. These aspects are important as we come back to them later.

Current state of research and Key Questions

– What did we know when we started and what did we want to find out?

What we just mentioned is what civic education should usually look like. During time of the survey, little, not to say nothing, was known about the actual teaching in times of the Corona pandemic. Therefore, our study is exploratory.

In recent months, however, there have been many empirical studies on schools and teaching during the pandemic. Here, I would like to refer to a recently published systematic review that evaluates the results of about 100 quantitative studies on teaching during Corona times. Many interesting aspects were highlighted in these studies. However, it is also interesting to note what has not been investigated: didactic aspects seem to play hardly any role. At least, we do not know about any empirical study that analyses civic education during this time from a didactic point of view. This is exactly what we did. We were mainly interested in the question whether, how and why civic education changes its character under conditions of distance learning. Today we want to focus on three aspects:

- How are the didactic principles implemented?
- How are the relevant competences promoted?
- How does the importance/weight of the three mentioned levels of requirement change during the period of distance teaching?

Methodology

The following chapter focuses on the items and methods used in order to answer the aforementioned questions. The study was conducted among civic education teachers working in secondary schools. An online survey tool was used. Teachers were asked to participate via mailing lists and were also requested to distribute it among colleagues. The survey period lasted from June to end of August 2020. Thus, it was during a time when the complete school lockdowns were mostly over. A total of 766 teachers from all German federal states answered the full survey. This is important, because the federal style of government leads to a variety of education regimes among the German states. The largest group in the sample is that of *Gymnasium* teachers, which is the most common secondary school leading up to higher education entrance admission (Abitur).

The dependent variables in our analysis consist of three groups: Political competences, didactic principles and levels of requirement. We will now take a closer look at the survey items used to poll these variables. The importance of the political competences *basic political knowledge*, *skills for argumentation* and *political judgment*, *skill for political participation* and, likewise, the didactic principles of *problem orientation*, *controversy* and *actuality* were all asked with regard to classes in presence and classes during full school shutdown. We

used a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7 for each item, with 1 being no importance at all and 7 standing for a very high importance.

Likewise, the requirement levels were surveyed. For this variable, the participants were asked to assign a percentage to each level of requirement (or difficulty), indicating how often they cover it in their classes. Together, all three levels should add up to 100 percent.

Two kinds of models were used to identify factors that contributed to the differences in the importance of our dependent variables in class. For the first model, we used mostly structural variables defining the basic conditions under which the respondents taught their classes. They were the presence of senior high school grades (so-called secondary level 2) at the respondents' schools, whether the school provided vocational education and whether or not a teacher possesses a teaching degree for civic education. For those, a bivariate correlation with the differences in didactic principles, competences, and requirement levels between class in presence and during shutdown are computed. For multivariate regression models, more variables were added. These variables are specific to the individual teacher, such as experiences in digital teaching, job satisfaction and usage of certain teaching material.

Results

a) Mean value comparison

Comparing the mean values for the importance of the didactic principles of actuality and problem orientation/controversy (Table 1), the importance of both principles is, from the teachers' point of view, very high in face-to-face lessons. It is also still high in distance learning yet decreases significantly.

Didactic Principles	Face-to-face Lessons	Distance Learning
Actuality	6.06	5.30
Problem Orientation/ Controversy	6.25	4.89

Table 1

A similar change can be observed for the dimensions of competence (Table 2). It is noticeable here that the importance of imparting subject knowledge decreases significantly less than the importance of imparting argumentative skills and political judgment as well as skills necessary for political participation. If we look at the ranking of the dimensions in the different phases, the dimension of argumentative skills and political judgments is the most important in face-to-face lessons; during school closure, this changes: here, the teaching of subject knowledge becomes the most important dimension of competence.

Dimensions of Competence	Face-to-face Lessons	Distance Learning	Difference
Subject Knowledge	5.95	5.63	.32
Political Judgment	6.27	4.48	1.79
Political Participation	5.79	4.03	1.76

Table 2

In the case of the different levels of requirement (Table 3), the teachers were asked to indicate the proportion of these levels. The results shows that the percentage of level I in distance learning has increased significantly, while the percentage of level III has decreased.

Level of Requirement	Face-to-face Lessons	Distance Learning
Level I	32.80 % ↗	43.35 %
Level II	38,88%	36,54%
Level III	28.32 % ↘	20.11 %

Table 3

b) Regression models

I will skip the bivariate correlations and go straight to the multivariate regression models that were used to test which factors influence changes in instruction. For the models we used a large number of potentially significant independent variables. Because there have been no empirical results on our research question to date, a broad focus in variable selection was appropriate. The variables considered are shown in Table 4. The order in the effect size of the significant independent variables is symbolized by the numbers in brackets. The direction of influence is indicated by + or -. The adjusted R^2 is shown at the bottom of each column.ⁱ

Therefore, the following applies to the didactic principle of actuality: The more frequently a textbook is used, the larger the decrease in the importance of actuality from the teachers' point of view. In contrast, actuality decreases to a lesser extent if films are used more frequently, if the teacher's job satisfaction is higher in times of the Coronavirus pandemic or if podcasts or learning platforms are used frequently.

c) Summarizing interpretation

Overall, we were able to show that throughout the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic, distance learning in the subject of civic education resulted in quite large differences from the teachers' points of view. The changes were consistently significant at a very high level. Our multivariate regression models do not explain the variances very well. However, it is interesting to note that some variables are quite consistently influential in explaining the differences between face-to-face and distance learning.

For example, textbook use has a relatively strong influence, proving important for 4 of the 7 dependent variables.

It is also interesting to note that when the perceived workload is high, the changes between face-to-face and distance teaching are smaller - this was the case for four dependent variables. Here we assume that a constant teaching quality could only be maintained by high commitment.

	Actuality	Problem Orienta- tion/ Contro- versy	Subject Knowledge	Political Judg- ment	Political Participa- tion	Require- ment Level III	Require- ment Level I
Presence of Senior High School Grades						+ (1)	
General/Vocational Education							
Teacher with Teaching Degree for Civic Education		+ (2)	- (2)				
Gender							
Experiences in Teaching							
Digital Affinity							
Experiences in Digital Teaching							
Self-image: Teacher as Learning Companion			+ (5)				
General Job Satisfaction				- (1)	- (2)		
Job Satisfaction during Coronavirus Pandemic	+ (3)	+ (1)		+ (2)	+ (1)	+ (2)	- (1)
Usage of a Learning Platform	+ (5)						
Synchronous Online Learning							
Inquiries from Students				+ (4)		+ (3)	
Workload during School Closure				+ (3)	+ (3)	+ (4)	- (2)
Frequency of Use of Text-books	- (1)	- (2)	+ (3)				+ (3)
Frequency of Use of Other Material			+ (4)				
Frequency of Use of Online Learning Opportunities							
Frequency of Use of Podcasts	+ (4)						
Frequency of Use of Films	+ (2)		+ (1)				
adjusted R ²	.12	.10	.08	.13	.11	.06	.09

Table 4

Job satisfaction during the corona pandemic proved to be the most important factor: 6 out of 7 dependent variables show a correlation between high job satisfaction throughout the first wave of the pandemic and less changes in teaching. We assume that the causality could be the other way round, i.e. that job satisfaction is higher if the quality of teaching can be maintained.

Overall, we see relevant correlations more in individual than in structural factors - the type of school and education of the teachers do not play a major role in the multivariate models. It is possible, however, that the influences of structural factors are only mediated by individual factors. This is indicated by individual correlations that we have looked at: for example, teachers at schools with Senior High School Grades are more satisfied – perhaps because, on

average, the students' conditions at home are better, leading to fewer challenges for distance learning. Here, the regression model shows a greater causal proximity of satisfaction compared to the type of school.

Outlook

As you can see, we had a number of interesting findings in our study. Unfortunately, we weren't able to present everything today. In order to finish our presentation, I would like to throw a few spotlights on aspects that may be interesting for our discussion:

First, we can state that the character of civic education has indeed changed during the first lockdown. Teaching tended to become more fact-oriented and instructional. What can be done? In such situations, it seems advisable to rather decrease quantity than the quality, that means rather a decrease in the level of content, than of the depth of the debate. It would be alarming if students felt confirmed in their assumption that knowledge is, after all, the most important thing in civic education.

We found out, that the textbook seems to play a crucial role: The more the textbook is used, the more positivistic the teaching becomes. But this does not have to be the case: In the sense of a flipped classroom, the book can certainly also be used profitably in distance learning. Controversy and the promotion of competences would then be transferred to the digital forms of synchronous work. Here - and in everything we've said so far - it's important to remember that our results relate to the first lockdown. It would be interesting to do a follow-up survey. I'm sure that many teachers acquired digital teaching skills during the past few months. Likewise, technology has improved - slowly, but nonetheless. Video conferencing is now more widespread today than it was a year ago.

But our study has also shown that - in line with Hattie's ideas – It all depends on the teacher and his or her motivation and satisfaction with their own professional activity. The central question remains, therefore, how teachers can be empowered to maintain a high level of job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation and are able to face new challenges creatively, even in crisis situations.

As you can see, we know more today than we did a year ago, but we also do know more about what we don't know. With this in mind, we look forward to a lively debate!

ⁱ While the R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable explained by the model, the Adj. R^2 corrects for the number of variables, making the model goodness-of-fit measure more robust.