



## STUDENT UNIONS AS THE WAY OF LEARNING DEMOCRACY SKILLS - SUCCESSFUL FINNISH UNIVERSITY STUDENT ACTIVISTS' PERCEPTIONS

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In today's society, organizational activity is a core element of active citizenship. It also provides many kinds of skills and non-formal learning experiences, one of which includes the learning of democracy skills. The purpose of this study is to analyze what kinds of democracy skills students learn through their work in student unions and how these skills are emphasized according to those most successful activists in student unions. The study leans on the theory of experiential learning and applied a narrative approach. The study participants were 12 chairpersons of the student union boards from Finnish universities. Their narratives showed how student activism provided communication skills, collaboration skills, decision-making skills, and knowledge about the political system. Based on the results, it seems reasoned to encourage universities to find ways to enhance students' participation in student unions, promote their democracy skills, and thus support their development into active citizens.

**Keywords:** Democracy skills, Experimental learning, Non-formal learning, Student activism, student unions, Narrative method.

### Introduction

Democracy and active citizenship are desired goals in today's society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; see also Barber, 2009). The concept of life-long learning is already an important part of higher education (Candy, 2000). However, knowledge society necessitates new tools and skills of active participation (Nijhof, 2005). It seems timely to ask whether life-long learning actually means learning about democracy because the development into an active citizen requires learning (Delanty, 2010; Martin, 2000). Actually, active citizenship itself increases learning (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007).

In this study, we are especially interested in active citizenship in higher education. It is clear that participation in organizational activities enhances active citizenship (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003). But the education system needs to meet better the new worldly challenges of maintaining democratic systems. One way is to educate people who can think autonomously, criticize, and be understanding toward others (FitzSimmons, 2014; Nussbaum, 2010). Already children should learn active citizenship skills and knowledge, but to merge these in education may need radical changes in curricula (see e.g., Holden, 2000).

Finland has 14 universities that have student unions as required by the Universities Act. Student unions are independent from universities, and they have certain tasks defined by law. This statutory position is based on the fact the law defines their public administration duties, basic organs, union dues,

and membership requirements (Mäenpää, 2009). As public corporations students unions have public administration duties, and therefore, every university student must belong to a student union (Mäenpää, 2009).

The section 46 of the Universities Act defines the operation of student unions as follows:

*“Among the students of the university there is a student union, which shall have self-government. The purpose of the student union is to act as a link between its members and to promote their societal, social and intellectual aspirations and their aspirations regarding studies and students' status in society. The student union shall participate in the performance of the educational mission of the university referred to in Section 2 by preparing students for an active, cognizant and critical citizenship.”*

The Universities Act defines that the special task of a student union is to name student members to the organs of the university administration and Finnish Study Grants Board, and to participate in the Finnish Students Health Services organization. General tasks include operation as the students' interest group and participation in the education task of universities (Mäenpää, 2009). Due to their autonomy and automated memberships, the representatives of each student union must be selected through election (Universities Act). The board prepares matters to discuss with the representatives and directs the operation of the student union (Mäenpää, 2009).

This study analyzes what kinds of democracy skills student unions as a form of university student activism teaches and how these skills are emphasized by those student activists who have been successful and became the chairpersons of student unions in Finnish universities. Their experiences and viewpoints are important if we want to find ways to develop active citizenship in the future, enhance democracy skills as a part of higher education and, perhaps, a part of formal education at universities. This article introduces a sub-study of a larger research on student activism narratives in Finland.

## **Theoretical Viewpoints to Learning in Organizational Activities**

### ***How Does Learning Happen through Organizational Activities?***

Learning through organizational activities can be viewed from various theoretical perspectives. First of all, it can be mainly seen as non-formal learning, which is goal-oriented but does not lead to graduation (Nieminen, 2010; Schugurensky, 2004; 2006). Still, non-formal education, such as having a hobby, can provide a certificate (Schugurensky, 2006). Informal learning takes place without any connection to education institutions and means learning that is not formal or non-formal (Nieminen, 2010; Schugurensky, 2004). The conceptual difference between non-formal and informal learning is ambiguous (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003), but still, it is necessary to study and understand the role of these forms of learning, because a large part of learning happens non- or informally (Schugurensky, 2004).

In this article, we are especially interested in learning that happens through the sub-form of organizational activities, namely student activism. Active citizenship and political influence are both learned outside formal education (Schugurensky, 2004). Schugurensky (2006) argues that participatory democracy can fulfill these promises if there is a proper space to learn democracy by doing it (see also Schugurensky, 2004). Citizens learn about common good, criticism, and democratic decision-making in participatory democracy (Schugurensky, 2004). Participatory democracy complements representative democracy (Schugurensky, 2004).

According to the “Experiential learning theory” (ELT), experiences have an important role in learning (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 1999). The experiential learning theory differs from cognitive and behavioral learning theories. In his theory, Kolb (1984) considers learning as a process where experiences transform into knowledge. The four-phased theory of experiential learning illustrates also well learning that happens through student activism in student unions (Kolb et al., 1999).

In the ELT model, there are two ways of basing the gaining of experience: Concrete Experiences (CE) are relying on how we sense the surrounding world or Abstract Conceptualizations (AC) that represent our analyses of the symbolic representations of experiences. Then, learning proceeds to testing of experiences, observations, and conclusions. There are two ways of transforming the experience into learning: Reflective Observation (RO) which means observing the others perform or by doing things by oneself with Active Experimentation (AE) (Kolb et al., 1999). Depending on the person and his or her learning style, the learner makes a choice between CE and AC and between RO and AE (Kolb et al., 1999).

Experiential learning is not so much interested in learning results but the process (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). A learning process is successful when the learner's previous knowledge and skills are employed as a part of learning (Andersen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000) and when the learner's activity and participation are given space (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In addition, participation increases self-confidence, tolerance, patience, and communality (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007).

Experiential learning happens through reflection, action, feeling, and thinking (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Thus, the process involves the learner's whole personality (Andersen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000). Experiential learning also entails that the learner forms his or her thoughts individually through his or her own consciousness (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 1984; see also Jarvis, 2008). Learning can also happen through social interaction in an environment where "everybody knows your name" (see Schugurensky, 2004). Indeed, social interaction and learning are evident in student activism as students work together in student unions and therefore, learning is also collective in nature. According to Kilgore (1999), it is important to perceive this collective side of learning if we want to understand "how people and groups learn while engaged in collective social action for the purpose of defending and/or affirming a shared vision of social justice" (p. 192).

### ***What Is Learned through Organizational Activities?***

What kinds of skills and knowledge does one need in order to work in organizational activities? What do activists learn when they participate in these activities?

Student activism represents a field of active citizenship and organizational activities where university students can learn and practice forms of influencing and decision-making. Still, participation and activism are not the youth's basic or natural needs, specify Nousiainen and Piekari (2007; see also Cohen, 2006; Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Kirshner, 2007).

According to these researchers, students should be taught and guided to adopt and use active citizenship; in other words, *democracy skills*. Indeed, for example, Hamrick (1998) calls student activism as a hands-on citizenship education referring to the practical learning that takes place in student activism.

Learning of democracy skills should be emphasized in higher education where the future experts are being trained for various tasks in society (Newton, 2009). These skills promote the development of active citizenship. Actually, the objectives of active citizenship could be defined in curricula (see Birdwell, Scott, & Horley, 2013; Syed, 2013). Similarly, Jonathan Cohen (2006) points out how emotional, social, and ethical skills, and problem-solving skills related to active citizenship could be better included in the curriculum. Additionally, one important skill area is interaction skills (Battistoni, 1997).

Cohen (2006) divides democracy skills into two categories that are "essential skills" and "essential dispositions" as illustrated in Table 1. The essential skills cover ability to listen, be critical, and reflective, as well as problem-solving and decision-making skills, negotiation skills, and collaborative capacities. Essential disposition that are deeper characteristics include responsibility and courtesy, appreciation of existence, justice, and good will.

Democracy skills learned have been studied, for example, political activism (e.g., Hamrick, 1998), higher education (Newton, 2009), and volunteering (Duguid, Mündel, & Schugurensky, 2007). There are also some qualitative studies about student activists in colleges and universities (e.g., Broido, 2000; Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005).

**Table 1.** Skills and dispositions required for participation in democracy (Cohen, 2006, p. 204)

Essential Skills	Essential Dispositions
Ability to listen to ourselves and others.	Responsibility or the inclination to respond to others in appropriate ways.
Ability to be critical and reflective.	Appreciation of our existence as social creatures that need others to survive and thrive.
Ability to be flexible problem-solvers and decision-makers, including the ability to resolve conflict in creative, nonviolent ways.	Appreciation of and inclination toward involvement with social justice.
Communicative abilities, e.g., being able to participate in discussions and argue thoughtfully.	Inclination to serve others and participate in acts of good will.
Collaborative capacities, e.g., learning to compromise and work together toward a common goal.	

Quaye (2007) emphasizes that student activism teaches three especially important learning goals that are appreciation of differences, cultivation of students' voices, and connection to global society. But most of all, he speaks for the attitude he calls "critical hope" that can inspire university students to work to improve their circumstances and those of their peers. In Jihyun Kim's (2011) study on the characteristics of learning in social movement, the skills and knowledge learned by the participants could be categorized into three: knowledge about the movement and developmental skills, understanding about the nature of the operation, and awareness of the importance of participation in the operation. In Kim's study, the learning processes were described as self-directed, self-controlled, and more rewarding than learning processes in formal learning environments, such as in schools. Teaching of democracy and its principles manifest a democratic choice that has political consequences as well (Westheimer & Kahne, 2002). Kirshner (2007) emphasizes youth activism as a positive learning environment providing a chance for adolescent identity development and authentic learning experiences.

Participating in the operation of student unions is a very special form of student activism. This study is apparently the first one about the learning of democracy skills through student activism in statutory student unions in Finnish universities.

## Method

This study analyzes university student activists' narratives of democracy skills learned through student activism. How do these young students describe these non-formal learning results when they participate actively in student unions? Which democracy skills and how do they manifest themselves in narratives of the successful student activists, the chairpersons of student unions? In this study, the purpose is to discuss those skills the students realize they have learned. This is extremely important if we want to know more about the learning of democracy skills. The following research questions were set for this study:

What kinds of democracy skills are learned through student activism in Finnish student unions?

Which democracy skills do the chairpersons of Finnish student unions emphasize the most as the foundation of their success?

To answer these questions, this study employed the narrative research approach that allows the research participants to construct their own narratives and stories, and to interpret their own experiences. Narrative research has a constructivist nature: narratives are not actual events but personal illustrations about them (Bruner, 1987; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The narrative approach formed the basic element of this research as the data would be based on research participants' experiences and their own stories: the aim was to collect university students' narratives about learning through student activism.

This study took place in Finland that has 14 universities; thus, the student activists in these universities form the target group of the study. In this study, the chairperson of each student union in Finnish universities were recruited (N=14, one chairperson in each student union). The chairpersons were selected as the target group because they can be considered successful student activists since they have been selected through election in their positions. The research participants were approached with an email including a request to participate in a personal interview. Of 14 chairpersons, 12 participated in there interview. The two remaining chairpersons rejected the invitation due to busyness and lack of interest in the research.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face (N=2) or via Skype (N=10) in April-June 2014. The interviews lasted about one hour each. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed afterwards.

The participants were born in 1984-1991, so at the time of the interview, they were approximately 23-30 years old. Eight of the participants were men and four women. They represented 12 different Universities in Finland. Four of the participants were from the capital city, Helsinki, and others evenly from other parts of Finland.

The data were analyzed by using the analysis of narratives (see Polkinghorne, 1995). The analysis of narratives aimed at categorizing the narratives by themes or categories emerging from the contents (see also Mayring, 2000). Although the analysis was mostly data-driven, the concepts of democracy skills (Cohen, 2006; Kim, 2011; Nousiainen & Piekkari, 2007) were used for specifying the categories during the analysis.

In all, when analyzing autobiographies, it is evident that people have various ways of producing narratives. Their stories differ from each other when it comes, for example, how much one reveals about a certain phase in life or an event. The thematic density is shown in written essays or stories as well. Some themes can be described quite superficially while others may be discussed in a very detailed or profound manner (Goodson, 2013). Although every person is different, everyone's stories tend to have somewhat similar plots that can be divided into various constructs (Goodson, 2013).

The head researcher of this study has participated for seven years, which covers the years of her university studies, in various organizations at the university. Her personal experiences influenced the selection of the study theme and her wish to be able to develop active citizenship. Her experience might have directed analysis of the data, but on the other hand, her profound familiarity with the practice has also made it possible to do correct interpretations from the data. However, to guarantee the objectivity of the study, the results and study processes have been reported as explicitly as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Profound understanding also creates a sense of familiarity with the theme (see Cetrez, 2005). Cetrez (2005) points out that there is no such thing as a neutral researcher. Instead, it is merely a question of finding the right dimensions between proximity and distance with the subject. Careful reflection on the researcher's relationship with the theme is crucial (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011). In addition, collaboration with a research group that consists of the authors of the article was to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Results**

According to the data analysis, the chairpersons of student unions described four skill categories that describe the skills and knowledge learned through student activism. They also include those skills the chairpersons considered especially important for their success in student activism. These skills are communication skills, collaboration skills, decision-making skills, and knowledge about political participation. The learning experiences of each skill are described as the findings of the study.

### ***Communication Skills***

Communication skills refer to abilities to interact and communicate with others. They also cover negotiation and argumentation skills, as well as the ability to perform and listen to others. In the interview



data, almost all these communication skills were mentioned. Four of the chairpersons described how they had learned communication skills through their active participation in student unions. For example, public performing and argumentation skills were learned through successes and failures in abundant occasions where the chairpersons had been appearing:

“At least, I have probably understood that, somehow, especially public performing and confidence are one [skill], and then, talking and clear articulation and argumentation skill - -” (Student Activist no 6)

The interviewees described also how they had learned about proper ways of communicate in different situations. As the abilities develop, they could adjust their style of communicating according to the situation. As chairpersons of students unions they had learned to appear in the media, as the following data excerpt illustrates:

“And then again, I have not been used to make statements in public or to be diplomatic - - my skill of speaking gibberish has improved, too, so that I can talk about anything and sound smart but do not really say anything, but still the one I am talking with is content, such as some reporter. So, I have learned all kinds of things.” (Student Activist no 10)

The theory of democracy skills included the ability to listen within communicative capacities (Cohen, 2006). However, this skill was not mentioned in interviews. It does not mean that the chairpersons did not consider this skill important or did not recognize the skill in themselves, but it may be that they just did not happen to think about this particular skill as a part of communication skills in the interview situation.

### ***Collaboration Skills***

Collaboration skills refer to ability to work together with others, including negotiation and making compromises. Nine interviewees described how they had learned collaboration skills through student activism. They emphasized the importance of learning collaboration skills but also recognized the challenges of learning. Working with others is not equally pleasing or easy to everyone, but by doing it can be learned. As the following data excerpt shows, student unions provide an arena where one inevitably has to work with others and collaborate as a member of a group:

“I guess that working together with truly different kinds of people. It is an eternal empty phrase that you have to get along with various people. But that is perhaps something that you have to take yourself to the limits, you have to learn to tolerate and adjust to collaborate with different kinds of people. This [student activism] is certainly the best way to learn this skill - - and negotiation skills is surely one that I have developed pretty much in this work.” (Student Activist no 4)

Collaboration skills necessitates that, in some situations, a person has to give up goals that are important to himself or herself in order to progress with joint decision-making. One of the chairpersons describe how he had learned the ability of compromising:

“Probably [I have learned] many smaller things but also bigger ones such as compromising and knowledge of human nature. Certainly, if I think the kind of person I was before university studies, I was quite uncompromising, so I would say that this surely has provided me with compromising skills.” (Student Activist no 7)

In addition to collaboration skills, social relationships and networking were mentioned relatively frequently (by five of the chairpersons) in the interview data. Many chairpersons emphasized the importance of social relationships in their lives now and later too, in the future, but referred to them merely as a competence than learning. The role of social relationships was also an important reason for participating in student activism in the first place (see Ansala, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2015). Indeed, social relationships appeared as the outcome of doing, being active, and participating:

“- - contacts; I have become to know crazy lot of people across Finland, and probably, they are people that will be in significant positions in the future, too, and they can be my future employers and everything.” (Student Activist no. 12)

### ***Decision-Making Skills***

Decision-making skills mean concrete abilities to make a decision in a situation. One may need problem-solving skills and ability to solve conflicts. These skills also need critical reflection and perspective. Four of the interviewees described how they had learned decision-making skills through student activism.

One of the interviewees had learned decision-making through reflection and listening to others' perspectives and opinions. The chairperson had realized how her opinions and decisions formed in interaction with others. Developed decision-making skills helped in situations that necessitated quick decisions:

"Maybe when you are a chairperson, one thing that I have probably learned that has been very useful is that sometimes you have to make decisions really fast. So, analyzing the situation quickly and then saying 'now we will go there'. And maybe that too that sometimes you can admit that you have been wrong. So, it has become easier and easier all the time. You learn to say sorry and can change your opinion. It is totally fine. And that is a feature that I like in myself that I do not stubbornly stick to something but if I learn something new about it, I can reconsider my opinion." (Student Activist no. 2)

Yet, an important skill influencing decision-making is to be critical. This too can be learned through student activism as the following excerpt illustrates:

"--- and perhaps from there [refers to an organization she were before the chairperson's task] I learned this some kind of criticality. That is something that might not be this developed as it is now." (Student Activist no. 2)

Decision-making skills are important when one works as a chairperson of a student union. Indeed, decision-making is a salient part of leadership. Student unions seemed to provide a good opportunity to learn leadership in practice all the way from minor daily chores to coordination of other's action:

"As I said, time management, scheduling; it is something that you cannot learn otherwise than when you are doing this and meetings and tasks starts to accumulate, things that have to be done - - " (Student Activist no. 11)

### ***Knowledge about the Political System***

One of the central learning experiences in student activism is related to knowledge about politics, societal activity, and operation of organizations. It is important to notice that one part of democracy skills would be this kind of know-how on participation. It provides concrete information about and skills to work in organizations, universities, and society. Skills related to this category enhance full participation, promote changes within the field of one's own organization, and adopt a critical and developmental attitude toward one's own action as well. This knowledge means understanding about the importance of participation in general, finding the work the person and his or her organization does meaningful, and awareness of the nature of organizational activity.

Learning about the political system was described by eight chairpersons. For example, they had obtained knowledge about the operation of society in wider sense, such as about legislation:

"Well, I have learned this university student's viewpoint. I had not known about any Universities Act or how the bureaucracy at the university works. So I understand better all this kind of decision-making. - - I learn new all the time, really, that whether this will go like this and this decision made in 1983, whether that still influences this, and if that decision would have been different, things would be different." (Student Activist no 10)

One of the student activists described having learned about the meaning of this work in the student union. Not only beneficial skills that the student had obtained but also action in the wider sense made the student union work feel meaningful:

"- - Maybe even greater is that I have learned spontaneously and more widely beneficial skills and ability to cope with various situations, and how to take things, how you understand what you are doing, and then also what you have accomplished and the value your doing has is pretty important. - - Quite

major thing is that it makes you do your best when you know the societal influence it has.” (Student Activist no 2)

In addition to the understanding of the political big picture, the interviewees also recognized how they had learned practical skills. Nine of the interviewees described this learning. However small an organization is it still has statutory obligations to take care of. Jurisprudence is its own world that the chairpersons had to learn, as emphasized by three interviewees. Likewise, three student activists highlighted how they had learned about economy and accounting, for example as follows:

“- [learned about] budgeting, quite a lot about finances. I have not ever studies these and they have not interested me much earlier - -” (Student Activist no 1)

Presiding over meetings or participating in them is not at all a self-evident skill among students. Four students emphasized how they had learned about meeting practices. This kind of learning was very practical as the following excerpt illustrates:

“I would not know how to act in meetings, I would not know when I am allowed to speak. And as I am very talkative, I surely would not know when I should ask for the floor.” (Student Activist no 10)

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe how student activists learn democracy skills through student activism in student unions. Active citizenship is learned in formal, non-formal, and informal environments (see Akhtar, 2008). The study showed that learning was quite wide-ranging and multidimensional, and the only way to acquire democracy skills. Indeed, Schugurensky (2006) states that:

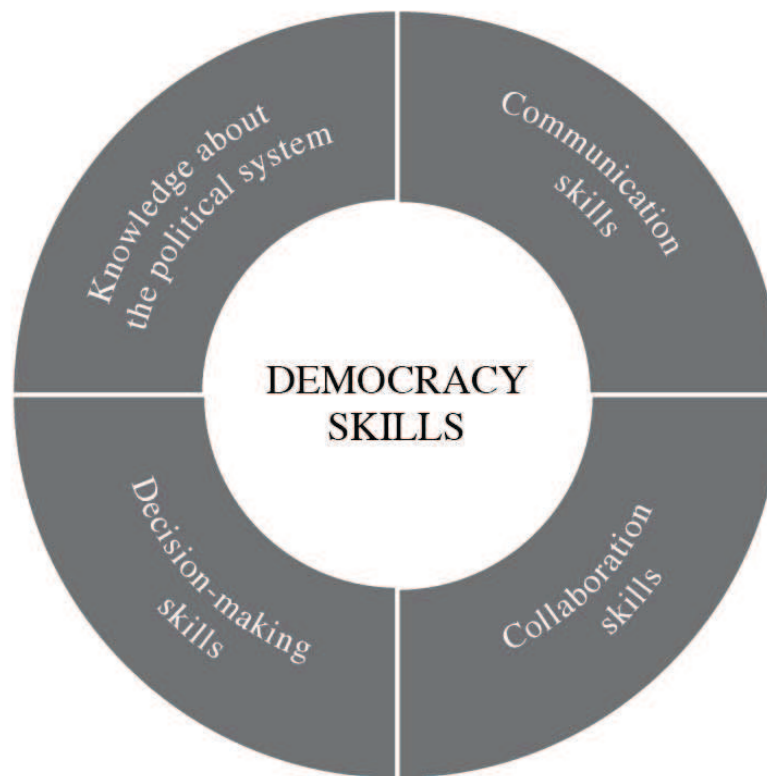
*“We are not born democrats, and often we are not raised to be active democratic citizens. So, democracy is something that we can learn every day, and the more democratic the enabling structures that nurture the deliberation process, the more significant the democratic learning will be.”*

Therefore, it seems extremely important that the learning of active, democratic citizenship skills is paid attention. Based on the findings, learning through student activism can be illustrated through four elements (see Figure 1). Democracy skills are placed at the core of the learning cycle. The outer circles illustrate the competences learned. The cycle is divided into to four sectors implicating the results of this research. The learning cycle describes the wholeness of learning for democracy skills.

When comparing to Kolb’s experiential learning theory, these skills are learned through experiences, conceptualization, observation, and experimentation. The skills can be divided into four sections but when they merge (as shown in the middle of Figure 1), they form a set of skills that can be called democracy skills. It is important to notice that the student activists in this study were able to describe a wide range of skills and how they had learned and how they perceived themselves as the users of the skills. This also tells about the nature and profoundness of their experiential learning that took place by participating in student activism.

In this study, university student activists’ learning was discussed in the light of the concept of democracy skills. Their narratives showed that student activism provided quite a rich learning environment for them (see also Kirshner, 2007). Furthermore, the skills emphasized by the chairpersons are highly applicable after university studies, too, according to the principles of life-long learning (Mayhew, Wolniak, & Pascarella, 2007). Namely, Mayhew, Wolniak, and Pascarella’s (2007) study showed how opportunities for reflection, active learning, and perspective-taking and that provided students with opportunities for positively interacting with diverse peers enhanced their life-long learning orientation. The findings of this study are also in line with Lerner and Schugurensky’s (2007) study on the democracy skills. In their study, the participants learned through an intervention to use active citizenship skills and knowledge. The conclusion was that participatory democracy makes more knowledgeable, skilled, democratic, engaged, and caring citizens—better citizens in Lerner and Schugurensky’s (2007) words.





**Figure 1.** Skills learned through student activism in student unions

However, it is worth remembering that student activism is not just sunshine, but includes hard work, conflicts, and disagreements. In the light of the experiential learning theory, learning is assumedly efficient, even in times of adversities and conflicts (cf. Kolb & Kolb, 2005), but relatively random. The problem of learning in this activity is that it lacks the element of efficient learning, because learning through student activism is not generally considered from the point of view of learning processes or learning results. The theory of experiential learning notices the learner's earlier experiences and preconceptions, and considers them as a part of learning new skills and knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Another important part of an efficient learning process is feedback, which is, in a systematic form, missing from learning through student activism (see Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Jordi, 2011).

Learning through student activism is not currently based on careful planning and is only loosely tied to curriculum. For example, in the author's affiliation university students can gather up to ten credits by participating in student activism. The description of this study unit includes the afore-mentioned democracy skills and, in order to get the credits, students write an essay which is a so-called learning diary describing what and how they have learned. The method is a good start but lack systematical planning and operationalization of learning objectives into practical organizational activity. Already participation in decision-making at the university (e.g., in faculty council meetings in departments) teaches democracy skills (see also Dundar, 2013).

If student activism is not included in the curriculum, it will not turn into an organized learning experience with a possibility for reflection (see Boud & Walker, 1998). A topical question is whether learning through student activism should be systematic and goal-oriented or is it enough if learning is random and scattered. Another question is whether it is more important to enhance individual learning or communal learning. Does student activism at universities have room for the theory of collective learning (see Delanty, 2010; Kilgore, 1999)?

Westheimer and Kahne (2002) further state that learning can have also political goals. For example, the Universities Act entail that the task of university is to raise students toward active citizenship. We conclude that this objective is still valid. In addition, university education must pay attention to the demands of work life and the surrounding society in general. Today's rapidly changing work necessitates generic skills, such as problem-solving skills and collaboration skills (Nijhof, 2005; see also Twenge & Campbell, 2013). According to the chairperson's narratives, these are the very skills they had learned through student activism. It can be that the world of work would benefit from more systematic education of organizational activities at universities. This kind of experiential learning during studies helps future employees face the demands and changing situations at work.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study implies that student activism in student unions provide students with many beneficial skills and knowledge that enhance their active citizenships. These skills are democracy skills. In this concluding chapter, we will discuss how to, based on the findings, promote the learning of these skills and the development into active citizenship?

First, the current model does not make the best use of student activism—not from an individual student's perspective nor the society's perspective. Learning through student activism should be understood and specified better so that the beneficial elements of it could be better noticed as a part of education and work. The chairpersons said that they could mention their activity in their curriculum vitae. However, the spectrum of learning should be understood wider than that: in order to benefit students in their future lives, just a mark of acting in a position of trust does not tell about what they really can do and what they actually know.

This study makes a good start to identify the skills learned through student activism. We hope that the model of learning democracy skills based on the theory of experiential learning will help developing student activism and concretizing the skills and knowledge activism provides. Furthermore, it would be important to recognize the understanding the new student activists who are joining organizations have and to provide feedback about their learning during their participation in the operation.

Second, in Finland and abroad, education is facing increasing demands of efficiency. The latest Government Program of the Government of Finland, published on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2015 requires shorter study times and cuts the student allowances that have already been limited several times (see Ratkaisujen Suomi, 2015). The limitations already include a requirement of minimum number of credits per study month. It is possible that these pressures will influence or already influence students' willingness to participate in time-consuming organizational activities. However, when noticing how meaningful learning experiences activism provides students, it would be even more important to recognize this learning as a part of university education. This thought was well summed up by one chairperson:

"In sum, although I could be enhancing my studies in a great speed and earn money by working, I rather spend my days as the activist of the student union. I gather experiences that cannot be bought with money." (Student activist no 18)

Curriculum planning in universities should better respond to the efficiency demands by increasing students' opportunities to learn about active citizenship and well-being. For example Quaye (2007) encourages educators closely observe student-initiated efforts in order to see how to transform institutional structures to support students in achieving specific learning outcomes and benefitting from them. Based on this study, discussion about the objectives and practical measures of active citizenship within university education is welcome.

Third, learning that happens through participating in the operation of student unions can become a good way of developing its operation as well. The study at hand showed how the students benefitted from student activism. This advantage should also be articulated and made visible to those students who never participate in student activism. This would be crucial because students' interest in student activism is decreasing—partly because of issues mentioned in the second recommendation.

Indeed, also Guérin, van der Ploeg, and Sins (2013) call for action because “the decline of participation in political and social life jeopardizing democracy” (p. 427). While Quaye (2007) points out that “student activism allows students to see themselves as citizens of a world outside campus” (p. 6). Indeed, education should implement a participative approach while fostering a certain kind of political literacy, critical thinking and analyzing skills, democratic values, attitudes and behaviors that would expand in many areas of life and toward the future of these students (Guérin, van der Ploeg, & Sins, 2013; Quaye, 2007).

Therefore, the task of universities to raise students toward active citizenship should not expand only to those who already are active and participating, but more attention should be paid on those who are not. Therefore, it is more topical and important than ever to bring out how manifold and beneficial the learning through student activism can be in addition to the objective of active citizenship and participation in society.

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