

Thinking Civically

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The way civics is usually taught in public schools begins and ends with the structure and function of government, emphasizing the acquisition of factual knowledge like “how a bill becomes a law.” And while many state standards documents have strong rationales for the importance of training students for democratic participation, most focus on discrete knowledge that students are instructed to “describe,” “identify,” and “recognize.” The word “practice” barely outpaces the word “obey” in some standards documents.

If that’s civics education, then criticism of it is rightly leveled. After all, it’s almost impossible to find an American history course that doesn’t cover key moments in constitutional history, landmark national legislation, the extent of presidential power, social movements, and voting. A single unit on the Johnson administration could cover all of that.

But the problem with civics instruction isn’t just a matter of inefficiency in content delivery. It’s also a matter of missed opportunities. NAEP results, for instance, show that students are far more likely to memorize material than to do anything resembling civic participation. And in a nation where low levels of civic engagement are perpetually lamented, it’s surprising that people haven’t turned to another favorite American pastime: school-bashing.

So where are the calls to reform civics education? They’re out there, certainly, and some of them are quite thoughtful. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, for instance, proposes a curriculum that includes not just formal instruction in government, history, law and democracy, but also guided discussions, active learning experiences, participation in school governance, and simulations. But there is hardly consensus about what civics education might look like, and the apprenticeship of observation is a powerful force of con-

tinuity in teaching. Unless instructional leaders, teacher educators, and teacher mentors present a coherent vision of what civic education might look like, traditional practices will likely persist.

Still, there are models for such a coherent vision. In history education, for instance, the idea of “historical thinking” as a unique mode of thought is shaping the way educators think about teaching the past. And this kind of focus—on identifying the practices of experts in the field and translating them for the K-12 environment—is not unique to history education. From the English/Language Arts classroom to the science laboratory, more and more educators are conceiving of their work as connected to the work of historians, literary critics, chemists, and biologists.

If this model is to shape civic education, it begs the question “what, exactly, do expert citizens do?” They vote, certainly. But far too often, votes are cast on the basis of ignorance, misinformation, or shortsighted impulse. Expert citizens do far more, and they do so as a product of their ability to engage meaningfully with perspectives and values different from their own.

That kind of imagination and social responsiveness is developed through the long-term development of distinctive social, emotional, and reflective dispositions. And that isn’t a product of

accumulating stores of factual information. Instead, it’s the result of ongoing exposure to a diversity of moral dilemmas, social circumstances, and ideological perspectives. Great moments of moral progress in our civic history, after all, have not been brought about solely through the careful evaluation of facts, but also through the awakening of sympathy, repugnance, outrage, and solidarity. The capacity for such responses cannot be cultivated solely by reading textbooks.

That isn’t to say that learning about government doesn’t matter. It does. But civics education motivated by the aim of thoughtful citizenship must be anchored somewhere else: in moral and deliberative experiences. What this means is that the civics classroom must draw on emotionally engaging resources that are rarely included. Thus, students should study the Constitution, but they must also have the opportunity to draw on the unique perspective of individuals with situated knowledge—individuals whose varied personal experiences are relevant to political questions. Students should figure out where they currently stand on particular issues, but they must also be challenged to understand and empathize with alternative points of view.

If we take this experiential component of civic capacity seriously, we need to begin to think more imaginatively about curricular resources. First person narratives, works of art, theater, film, and perhaps most importantly of all, interaction with real live people, are powerful sources of information that are all too often ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. These, as much as any knowledge of the structure and function of government,

are the sources of civic expertise.

This kind of approach would turn the civics classroom into a laboratory of sorts—a place where students learned by trial and error to think “civically” about all kinds of issues. Should we raise taxes or cut services when trying to balance the budget? Should the federal government guarantee health care to all citizens? Should the state intervene in a woman’s decision to terminate a pregnancy? Winner-take-all voting can decide these critical and divisive issues. But it can’t resolve them.

A class oriented around the development of civic thinking skills might take a number of different forms. But it would also be shaped by a core of key activities. Students, for instance, would regularly take on perspectives other than their own—perspectives that they had learned about through texts, videos, audio recordings, and visits from

people in the community. They would work together, across differences, to address real-world problems that lack straightforward solutions. And after inhabiting different viewpoints, they would be asked not only to put together a plan attending to the needs of all stakeholders, but also to articulate the concerns of even those they disagreed with. In terms of final products, students might be challenged to produce a consensus through deliberation, or they might represent various perspectives through the creation of dramatic dialogue, visual art, or narrative fiction.

This vision, obviously, is an ambitious one; and putting together such a class would require a great deal of instructor creativity. But a civics class that engaged student capacities for both critical thinking and empathy would be a place as unique as it was valuable. And by responding to the kinds of social

challenges that made the subject seem important in the first place, we just might give civics education the kind of purpose and meaning that it so often seems to lack. ●

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