The Foundations of an Excellent Civic Education

What is the purpose of civic education? The most common answer is probably understanding the principles of our republic. I would agree that students should study the founding documents of the American republic, their origins, and the great principles found in them. Citizens will not protect these ideas unless they understand them, and, like other classic texts, the founding documents are worthy of understanding and exploration.

But understanding perennial principles is not enough. Students must also deliberate with fellow citizens about current controversies. That is a skill human beings have to learn; our media and national politicians certainly do not model it. And ordinary adults do not have everyday opportunities to practice deliberation. Membership on juries, school boards, and other deliberative bodies plummeted during the last fifty years. Thus, schools must help students learn how to talk with others who disagree with them about controversial issues.

And deliberation is not sufficient. After all, one can say most anything without learning from the results or affecting the world. Students should at least be a part of groups that talk about what they should do, then actually do what they have talked about doing, and then reflect on the experience, holding themselves accountable for the results.

Like deliberation, collaboration is something we must learn from experience, with guidance from teachers and other adults—it does not come naturally.

Students will need those skills for public life—for service on juries and participation in communities. They will also need them to succeed in the 21st century workplace, which often requires employees to define and address problems in teams.

I am not necessarily talking about service-learning projects as the opportunities for students to plan projects and then act as citizens. Students can act in many other ways, as well: for example, when they manage school clubs and groups, produce collaborative reports and presentations, or even play roles in fictional simulations.

These three concepts—the fundamental principles and structure of the republic, actual deliberation, and collaboration—can go together beautifully because the constitutional principles underlie the deliberation and work. The work informs the discussion and the discussion guides the work.
Excellence in Civics Education: Making It Happen in the Classroom

Many social studies teachers know how to bring the three foundational concepts together—certainly not every day, but over the course of a semester or a school year. But a lot of things stand in the way. In October 2013, CIRCLE released the report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, entitled All Together Now: Innovation and Collaboration for Youth Engagement. It is based on exhaustive research, including surveys or interviews with more than 6,000 youths, students, and stakeholders.1

We found that most civics and government teachers are committed to educating students to be competent and responsible citizens. One teacher said, “It’s why I get up at 5:30 a.m. every morning. … My passion for voting and engagement make every class seem vital.” But teachers face state standards that are just long lists of facts to cover. Whenever political leaders or interest groups consider a topic important, they demand that it be included in social studies standards, leading to massive and incoherent documents. Another teacher told us, “Students do not ‘debate’—they argue and have no support for their opinions. Should [fixing] that be a priority? Well, of course, but I don’t have time to teach it. I am bound by a set of state guidelines as to what I am to teach even though there is no high-stakes testing for government classes.”

Also, most states don’t test in civics, and those that do ask exclusively multiple-choice questions that have nothing to do with deliberation or collaboration. Our research finds that whether a state has a test makes no difference to what students know, perhaps because the existing tests are not much good.

Opportunities for civic learning are deeply unequal and are most widely available to students in wealthy communities who are on course to attend college. White, wealthy students are four to six times as likely as Hispanic or black students who come from low-income households to exceed the “proficient” cut-off on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics—and a major reason for this is that the advantaged students are more likely to experience discussion, debate, and role-playing simulations in their schools.

Teachers get very little education or support for interactive civic education. Facilitating discussions and supporting action are challenging roles for teachers, who face subtle questions about political neutrality, civility, evidence, and other norms. But most civics teachers recall never having received relevant professional development once they are in the classroom. Only 10 states require instructors who teach civics or government classes to have certification in civics or government.

Finally, teachers can get in hot water for even trying to encourage deliberation. A quarter of the teachers we surveyed thought that

Selected Forms of Civic Engagement, 1975–2005

![Graph showing selected forms of civic engagement from 1975 to 2005](attachment:graph.png)

Source: General Social Survey (GSS) and DDB Needham Life Style Survey (DDB). Age range of survey population is 18 years and older. Analysis by the author. Data from DDB 1975–98 by DDB Worldwide.
parents would object if political issues came into their classrooms. Remember that these were teachers of civics or American government. One civics teacher said:

My personal feelings are that students should be informed about what is going on with politics in this country. However, after the election in 2008, I had many parents upset with me for discussing and showing the election results and the inauguration in class. So, since then I have not talked about most issues and especially the differences between the Democrats and Republicans.

In September, the National Council for the Social Studies released a new outline for state social studies standards called the C3 Framework: College, Career, and Citizenship. Connecticut and Kentucky are already using it to revise their state standards. All the themes mentioned earlier are included: foundational principles and texts, deliberation, and action.

Implementing the C3 Framework would be one good step. But civic education completely depends on quality. Our analysis for the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge found that the existing state standards, tests, course requirements, and teacher certification mandates bear no relation to students’ knowledge or civic engagement. Standards mean little without supportive materials, teacher education, and assessments. A test for students or a teacher certification requirement can be valuable if it is well designed, aligned with the curriculum, and if the people who face the assessment have opportunities to learn what they need to know. If not, the assessment can hurt. The same is true for school or teacher assessments.

There are no simple solutions. A test, a mandatory course, an easier voting system—none of those reforms will make much difference just by itself. Engaging our young people will require the dedicated efforts of many people, in many contexts, over time.

None of that should surprise us. These are the same truths we teach—or ought to teach—our young people about politics in general. They will face serious public problems all their lives: the problems that we inherited or created and are leaving to them. No serious problem will yield unless people work together to define and address it—each contributing his or her own assets and ideas. Working together on public causes is not just a chore or burden: it is also a satisfying aspect of the good life.

These are the lessons we should be sharing with our young people, and they apply to us, as well, if we are serious about improving civic education.

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