

Civics Education – The Safe Kind and the Subversive Kind

Edit

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[This is an expanded version of the published article, which was titled “How Should We Make Sure Our Kids Learn to Be Good Citizens?”]

Some years ago, a group of teachers from Florida traveled to what was then the U.S.S.R. to exchange information and ideas with their Russian-speaking counterparts. What the Soviet teachers most wanted from their guests was guidance on setting up and running democratic schools. Their questions on this topic were based on the assumption that a country like the United States, where the idea of democracy is constantly invoked, surely must involve children in meaningful decision-making from their earliest years.

The irony is enough to make us wince. As numerous empirical investigations have confirmed, students from kindergarten to college are rarely permitted to shape their own education. Indeed, most American schools employ an assortment of rewards and punishments to make sure they do exactly what they're

told.

That story about the Soviet teachers came to mind recently when I read that a federal lawsuit was filed charging the state of Rhode Island with failing to provide students “a meaningful opportunity to obtain an education adequate to prepare them to be capable citizens.” The obvious question: What exactly does that last phrase mean?

Joel Westheimer, a professor at the University of Ottawa who has written extensively on civics education, once proposed a thought experiment: You have been magically transported to a classroom somewhere in the world without knowing where you are. Can you tell from the teaching whether you are in a democratic or a totalitarian nation? If not, it would seem that schooling in that country doesn’t really prepare students for democracy. The phrase “good citizenship,” Westheimer adds, is typically employed in *our* country to mean nothing more than “listening to authority figures, dressing neatly, being nice to neighbors, and helping out at a soup kitchen.”

What it *should* mean – and what ought to define a democratic society’s approach to education – has more to do with asking inconvenient questions, organizing for collective action, insisting that people be able to participate in making decisions about matters that affect them, and confronting the systemic roots of problems (rather than reflexively blaming individuals for their troubles).

How do we get there? Well, civics education probably should include some basic knowledge about history and government. It is appalling, for example, that a majority of Americans believe that the Constitution established the U.S. as a Christian nation. Also, let’s teach students about the gap between rhetoric and reality where politics is concerned rather than promoting mindless boosterism. Help them to understand that, according to research by two political scientists, “economic elites and organized groups representing

business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.”

But if we're interested in preparing kids to be active participants in a democracy, we must focus not only on what they know but on what they're inclined to do. And the *desire* to participate depends on the *opportunity* afforded them while they're young. In plain language, the way children learn to make good decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions. And not by memorizing the names of the authors of the Federalist Papers.

It's odd, therefore, as educator Shelley Berman once observed, that “we teach reading, writing, and math by having students do them, but we teach democracy by lecture.” In fact, it's not only odd – it's counterproductive. Factual knowledge may or may not be necessary for meaningful citizenship, but it surely isn't sufficient.

Actually, Berman's wry remark isn't entirely accurate: Students are relegated to a passive role across subjects. A “bunch o' facts” approach to education predominates in our schools. Students are treated as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge and tested on what they're told, after which that information is usually forgotten. They're made to memorize facts about magnetism or mitosis rather than developing both the capability and the inclination to think like scientists (by actually designing experiments). Similarly, when “critical thinking” was popular in education circles awhile back, it usually consisted of instruction in a set of discrete analytical skills. Kids were taught the names of logical fallacies rather than encouraged to develop a critical, questioning sensibility.

Not surprisingly, current mandates for teaching civics lend themselves to just this pedagogical approach. Extending it to more states (as the Rhode Island lawsuit demands), or

intensifying existing requirements, is unlikely to have any meaningful impact on the kinds of citizens that students become.

To be fair, the lawsuit also mentions the importance of participating in “democratic deliberation,” but it attributes the absence of this from school curricula to inadequate teacher training. Here’s another hypothesis: Teachers are relentlessly pressured to raise standardized test scores and have little bandwidth left for anything else. Thus, when the lawsuit goes on to criticize current civics education by citing the percentage of eighth graders who didn’t reach the (arbitrary) threshold for proficiency on a national exam of civics facts, the effect is to reinforce a reliance on the very testing that undermines meaningful learning – of democracy or anything else.

I’ve visited scores of elementary and secondary classrooms throughout North America. Those that effectively foster a commitment to, and proficiency at, democratic deliberation – while simultaneously promoting moral growth and excitement about learning – do so by basing the curriculum on projects that the students themselves design (in small groups) to answer their own questions. That means the course of study for a given age level won’t be the same in two adjacent classrooms, just as it will vary from one year to the next. Top-down, one-size-fits-all education standards make it much harder to engage in such exemplary instruction.

Real civics education includes convening regular class meetings so students can discuss what kind of classroom they want to have and how to make that happen – rather than being handed a list of rules (with penalties for disobedience). They participate in deciding what to read next, how to decorate the bulletin boards and arrange the furniture, how to solve conflicts and act as a community to ensure that no one feels excluded or unsafe. And if everyone doesn’t agree on a solution, they learn how to forge a compromise or reach

consensus rather than just taking a vote and letting the majority win. Voting, as the late political theorist Benjamin Barber remarked, is “perhaps the least important act in a real democracy.”

But this kind of civics education, like the democratic goals that animate it, is subversive. By contrast, the traditional approach, in which students are instructed by lecture and textbook about, say, the Electoral College, is popular across the political spectrum* because it’s safe.

We’re left to wonder: Would most politicians and corporate executives who decry civic ignorance in the young really *want* a populace of committed democratic activists?

* It is particularly popular with conservatives. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), funded by the Koch brothers to pursue a wide-ranging right-wing agenda at the state level, has pushed for legislation that would deny a high school diploma to students who failed a mandatory multiple-choice test of civics facts. This is also the primary mission of a conservative organization called the Joe Foss Institute, which has succeeded in passing just such a law in several states with Republican legislative majorities. More broadly – and intriguingly – what I’ve called a “bunch o’ facts” approach to education (across the disciplines) has more commonly been the preference of political conservatives.

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