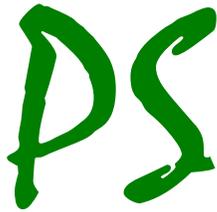


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Introduction—The Politics of Civic Education

“Democracy is not a silent business.”
—Anthony D. Romero, American Civil
Liberties Union

In a lecture on citizenship in the 21st century, Harry Boyte, co-director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship, argued that politics is the way people with different values and from different backgrounds can “work together to solve problems and create common things of value” (2002, 11). Politics, in this view, is the process by which citizens with varied interests and opinions can negotiate differences and clarify places where values conflict. He cited Bernard Crick’s work *In Defense of Politics* in calling politics “a great and civilizing activity.” For Boyte then, to recognize

politics is to strive for deliberation and a plurality of views rather than a unified perspective on history, foreign policy, or domestic affairs. It is precisely this aspect of politics, however, with

which civic education advocates wrestle. While many, like Boyte, define civic education as a means to teach the critical and deliberative skills necessary to participate effectively in contentious public debates, others are uncomfortable with approaches to civic education that encourage dissent and critique of current policies. The events of the Iraq war, for example, and ongoing “reconstruction” have led policymakers and educators comprising this latter group to shun the notion of bringing “politics” into our classrooms, preferring instead an emphasis on patriotism and the celebration of what President George W. Bush has repeatedly called “the rightness of our cause.”

Indeed a year after September 11, 2001 and six months before the Iraq war, President Bush announced a new set of history and civic education initiatives that he hoped will “improve students’ knowledge of American history, increase their civic involvement, and deepen their love for our great country” (Bush 2002, 1). We must, he emphasized,

teach our children that “America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people” (2). Related legislation soon followed. On March 4, 2003, Senator Lamar Alexander (former U.S. secretary of education under President Ronald Reagan) introduced the American History and Civics Education Act to teach “key persons, the key events, the key ideas, and the key documents that shape [our] democratic heritage” (National Coalition for History 2003). According to Alexander, this legislation puts civics back in its “rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American” (Alexander 2003a). For proponents of this view of history and civic education, “what it means to be an American” is more answer than question.

But, as noted above, for many educators current events have had the opposite effect. Terrorism, war, and the threat of fundamentalist intolerance have renewed their commitments to teaching for democratic citizenship, the kind of citizenship that recognizes ambiguity and conflict, that sees human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and that embraces debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democratic societies. For these educators, “being political” is a good thing. It is about embracing the kind of controversy and ideological sparring that is the engine of progress in a democracy and that gives education social meaning.

Politics On Trial

The efforts of the Bush administration have been applauded by those who view civic education as primarily a means of conveying knowledge of important historical facts and a sense of civic unity, duty, and national pride to the Nation’s youth and young adults. Reaching back to a 1950s understanding of the American past and the workings of American society,

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Alexander and likeminded politicians suggest that Americans, while representing diverse backgrounds and cultures, are all part of a unified American creed or a common set of beliefs, and that these beliefs are easily identifiable. Explicitly borrowing from consensus historian Richard Hofstadter, Senator Alexander believes that “it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one” (Hofstadter quoted in Alexander 2003b).

However, many educators view civic education differently. As E. Wayne Ross points out in this symposium, many others view civic education as an opportunity to teach critical thinking, social analysis, and skills of deliberation. Not surprisingly, politicians and educators on both sides of the debate argue that their understanding is better suited for preparing students to be responsible, civically engaged members of a democratic society. But while both sides proclaim their support for civic education, classroom dramas that merit careful attention are rapidly unfolding in schools across the country. Regardless of one’s views on the goals of civic education, these incidents highlight both the inevitability and the challenge of engaging the politics of teaching about democracy and political participation.

In New Mexico, five teachers were recently suspended or disciplined for promoting discussion among students about the Iraq war and for expressing antiwar views. Two of the teachers, Rio Grande High School’s Carmelita Royal and Albuquerque High School’s Ken Tabish, posted signs that were in opposition to the war. A teacher at Highland Hills School was placed on administrative leave because she refused to remove a flyer from her wall advertising a peace rally. A fourth teacher refused to remove art posters created by students that reflected the students’ views on the war and was suspended without pay. And Albuquerque teacher Alan Cooper was suspended for refusing to remove student-designed posters that his principal labeled “not sufficiently pro-war.” Each of these schools posts military recruitment posters and photographs of soldiers in Iraq. At least two of the schools have had students write letters to soldiers (see American Civil Liberties Union 2003; Irwin 2003; Manzo 2003).

In West Virginia, high school student Katie Sierra was suspended for distributing leaflets inviting students to join an anti-war club. In Maryland, a ninth-grade student was suspended for joining an anti-war march during school time. And in Broomfield, Colorado, 17-year old David Dial was suspended for posting flyers advertising an “International Student Anti-War Day of Action.” “It’s just a peaceful protest against the war in Iraq,” Dial noted, adding that his suspension is hypocritical given a great deal of fanfare at the school around new curricula that promote student civic and political involvement (Student Press Law Center 2002; Frates 2003; Sartwell 2003).

Much of the rationale behind these cases rests on the idea that civic education can remain above partisan politics. Dissent,

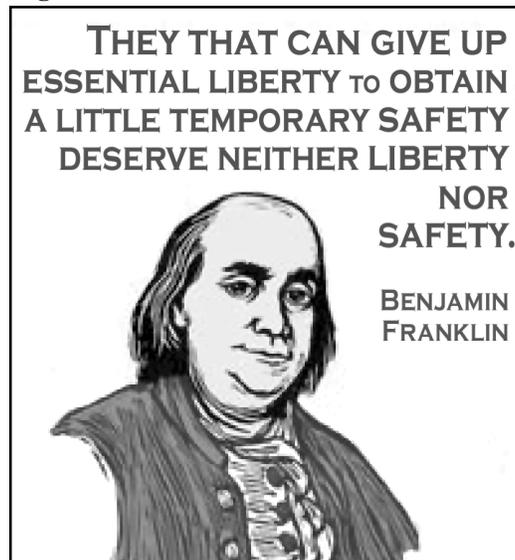
rather than being an essential component of democratic deliberation, is seen as a threat to patriotism. Indeed, “politics,” in this view, is something unseemly and best left to mud-slinging candidates for public office: being political is tantamount to devaluing the public good for personal or party gain. Education, in this way if thinking, should not advance “politics” but rather some unified notion of truth that supports—without dissent—officially accepted positions. Teaching patriotism, therefore, especially in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, is rarely viewed as being political. “Being political” is an accusation most often reserved for exploring views that are unpopular. In many schools throughout the United States, this tendency to cast patriotism and politics as opposites runs especially deep. So strong are the anti-politics politics of schooling that even mundane efforts at civic education which aim to encourage discussion around controversial topics are often deemed indoctrination. After a teacher allowed students to recite an anti-war poem they had written during a school assembly, one parent argued in a

parents’ forum that “We live in the USA, so singing a patriotic song isn’t inappropriate. But politics has no place in the school” (Southern Maryland Online 2003). Similarly, after the National Education Association developed lessons plans about the events of September 11, politicians, policymakers, and some parents worried that the curriculum, titled “Tolerance in Times of Trial” did not paint a positive enough picture of United States involvement in world affairs. Conservative political commentator and talk show host Laura Ingraham attacked the curriculum as indoctrination, warning that the lessons encourage students to “discuss instances of American intolerance.” Curricular materials developed by the Los Angelesbased Center for Civic Education that included

discussion of controversial issues in multiculturalism, diversity, and protection of the environment drew similar criticism.

But perhaps two of the most interesting cases involve the recently enacted Patriot Act. In the first case, a Florida teacher handed out to his students copies of a quotation: “They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” He asked students to interpret this statement in light of current events. (The class had previously studied the circumstances surrounding the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.) After discussing the implications of this quotation, the teacher asked the class whether anyone knew who wrote the quotation. When no student guessed correctly, he showed the class an overhead slide that included the name and a drawing of its author (see Figure 1). They then discussed the intentions of the Nation’s founders, constitutional protections, and so on. This teacher was supported by parents, but was disciplined by the principal for straying from the mandated civics curriculum standards.

Figure 1



The second case has proven difficult to verify. Perhaps apocryphal, perhaps real, this story (and many others like it) have, in the wake of more heavily documented cases, circulated among teachers, professors of education, and concerned parents. I have been unable to find adequate documentation to vouch for the truth of this particular case, but I include it here to demonstrate the degree to which these stories invoke teachers' and the public's sense that, in the current climate of intimidation, dissent in the context of civic education is subject to repression and regulation. The story is roughly thus: A New York state high school teacher was reprimanded for raising with students historical comparisons of crisis times in United States history. He introduced students to the Alien and Sedition acts of 1798 and the Sedition Act of 1918. The former two acts allowed President John Adams to arrest, imprison, and deport "dangerous" immigrants on suspicion of "treasonable or secret machinations against the government" and to suppress freedom of the press. The latter act restricted criticism of the government, the Constitution, and the military. Pairing these acts with the text of the Patriot Act, this teacher asked students to assess the three different time periods and argue for the justice or injustice of each law. Several parents complained that the teacher was not encouraging patriotism, and the principal instructed the teacher to discontinue the lesson.

Engaging Politics in Civic Education

At the same time that the above examples illustrate the intensity with which battles against controversial issues in the classroom can be waged, there are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of curricular efforts that deliberately engage "politics" as a healthy embodiment of the diversity of opinions, motivations, and goals that comprise a democratic society. Many valuable debates in civic education do not take as their starting point the question "Should civic education be apolitical or political, patriotic or critical?" but rather begin with "Whose politics do civic education programs reflect and why?" It is to this latter question that the articles in this special section of PS attend.

Larry Cuban's "Making Public Schools Business-Like . . . Again" begins the section by demonstrating recent declines in commitments to civic education as a legitimate goal for public schooling. Although the rhetoric supporting civic education abounds, educating democratic citizens remains a low priority in relation to other educational concerns. (For example, federal expenditures by the Department of Education on civic education in 2003 totaled less than half of one percent of the overall department budget [U.S. Department of Education 2004]). Where has all the commitment gone? Business-inspired reforms, Cuban argues, fueled by a strong belief in connections between schooling and a strong economy have resulted in the constricting of public school goals from broadly democratic to narrowly economic. Traditional public school goals of building literate citizens able to participate in democratic affairs of the community and the state have been supplanted by near exclusive concern for producing workers for the labor market. Cuban asserts that linking test scores to worker productivity or the national economy is a flawed calculus of school goals. Yet historically and today, business leaders, politicians, and policymakers concur with the recent statement by Deputy can schools need to improve so that workers can compete for jobs in

a globalized economy." Cuban's article calls for educators to ensure that democratic civic education remains a goal for public schools.

Where civic education is practiced, there is little agreement as to its intended outcomes. In "Educating the 'Good' Citizen," my colleague Joe Kahne and I call attention to the spectrum of ideas represented in civic education programs about what good citizenship is and what good citizens do. Our arguments derive from an analysis of both democratic theory and a two-year study of civic education programs that aim to promote democracy. We detail three conceptions of the "good" citizen—personally responsible, participatory, and justiceoriented—that underscore political implications of education for democracy. This article suggests that the narrow and often ideologically conservative conception of citizenship embedded in many current efforts at teaching for democracy reflects not arbitrary choices but rather political choices with political consequences.

Next, E. Wayne Ross examines long-standing debates between those proponents of civic education and social studies who hope to reproduce the dominant society by emphasizing its cultural heritage and those who emphasize critical thought and social reconstruction. Careful not to dichotomize the various ideological positions in the social studies and civic education debates, Ross explores the belief structures that influence advocates of particular curriculum reforms on a continuum. He argues for deliberation as an important unifying goal among those educators who value a plurality of views. Deliberation, Ross asserts, allows pluralism to be beneficial and not divisive and destructive.

In "Diversity, Immigration, and the Politics of Civic Education" Jane Junn addresses how in increasingly diverse classrooms it makes little sense to expect uniform outcomes from civic education programs among diverse groups of students. Multiculturalism challenges the notion that some "true" narrative of American democracy will resonate equally with all citizens. Conflating political efficacy measures with program success, Junn argues, makes some groups of minority students look like less desirable citizens because they—quite legitimately—do not trust civic institutions in the same way as their white counterparts. Political institutions respond more readily to the concerns of advantaged citizens than to those of the resource-poor, leading Junn to observe that "In politics as in economy, the rich get richer." She suggests that developing civic education programs that will enhance equality requires educators to explicitly acknowledge the "extent to which American democracy in its current state may be part of the problem."

Building further on these notions of plurality, politics, and contested notions of the "good," Diana Hess explores "Controversies About Controversial Issues in Democratic Education." The ability to discuss controversial political issues, Hess suggests, is fundamental to living an active civic life in a democratic society. Yet schools so often run from controversy like cats from water. Hess reports on studies of middle and high school social studies teachers and offers a typology of approaches these teachers take in incorporating controversial political issues into their lessons: denial, privilege, avoidance, and balance. It is foolish to expect students to be well-versed in the democratic skills of deliberation and debate if they do not gain experience in these activities in school.

Closing the section, William Galston, in “Civic Education and Political Participation,” acknowledges the substantial evidence of declining levels of civic engagement among youth and young adults. But he remains optimistic about the promise and possibilities of civic education to reverse this trend. Although conventional wisdom for decades has been that civic education is largely ineffective, recent studies show promising results. And despite all the controversies expounded in the articles that precede, Galston argues that “we are not obliged to agree on a single conception of civic education.” The decentralized nature of education policy in the United States provides sufficient flexibility to implement a range of programs.

Together, these articles explore the multitude of values and ideologies that underlie various civic education policies, trends, and curricular goals. The authors share an affection for education that embraces rather than denies controversy.

Progressive era educator Harold Rugg conveyed this view eloquently:

To guarantee maximum understanding, the very foundation of education must be the study of the actual problems and controversial issues of our people. There is no way by which the democratic principle of consent can be carried on other than that of the parliamentary discussion of issues. But consent based upon knowledge of only one aspect or side of a problem, upon the avoidance of controversy, is a travesty of both knowledge and democracy. To keep issues out of the school, therefore, is to keep thought out of it; it is to keep life out of it (Rugg, 1941).

The articles contained in this PS symposium on the politics of civic education aim to ensure that, in the classrooms and corridors of school, thought and life are kept in.

Note

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