

SPECIAL ISSUE

Perspectives on Citizenship Education

Introduction: educating today's democratic citizen

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What are we in higher education to make of the recent calls for citizenship education to play a larger role in the academy? As Matt Hartley's paper in this issue of *Learning and Teaching* suggests, colleges and universities in the United States have been paying increased attention to educating for citizenship in recent decades; Bob Simpson's concluding commentary makes similar arguments about increased expectations for citizenship education in Europe. As our institutions of higher learning confront economic pressures, increased competition (including from for-profit entities) and calls for accountability through meaningful assessments of student learning, they will also face increased pressure to graduate not just educated individuals, but also individuals who are connected, as citizens, to the local, national and transnational world in which they live.¹

The collection of papers presented in this issue of *Learning and Teaching* offers an eclectic mix of perspectives on the process of educating today's college and university students as citizens. While there are many ways to read these essays, one cross-cutting theme on which I will focus in this Introduction is the need to understand the context in which today's students are being formed as citizens. This requires awareness of the orientations these students bring to the political system – for example, today's students view citizenship more as an exercise in civic and community engagement (such as volunteering) and less as political activity (see, for example, Dalton 2008; Zukin et al. 2006). The authors in this issue show a keen appreciation of this trend and a strong desire to help students connect their civic engagement activities to a greater understanding of the political realm. Moreover, the articles in this issue bring



to mind the need for students and all of us to engage in political discussion: deliberative democracy is just one example of how this can be done. Effective citizenship, these articles show us, cannot be practised by one individual acting alone; it requires making connections across individuals, groups, cultures and nations. Finally, effective citizenship education also requires an appreciation of how citizens learn; many of the articles in this issue reveal how innovative pedagogical techniques can enhance citizenship education.

Linking civic engagement and politics

My own understanding of citizenship education has been informed, not surprisingly, by my students. In two recent semesters, I taught a course entitled 'Public Opinion and Political Learning' at Eastern Michigan University, a large state university (serving a diverse population of students) in the Midwestern United States. In the first iteration (winter 2008), I used Martin Wattenberg's (2008) book *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* as a course text. Wattenberg's argument, that declining levels of voter turnout (and the increasing tilt of voter participation towards older voters) was imperilling democracy, was problematic to my students for two reasons.² First, they saw little value in participating in the political system – it moved too slowly, was controlled too much by organised interests opposed to change, and was consistently plagued by scandal; in the words of one of my students, the political system is 'beneath us'.³ Second, these students saw themselves as engaged and involved in society – their generation's rates of volunteering, for example, were higher than previous generations. Understandably, they resented being made the villain in this account.

By the second time I taught the course, I supplemented the Wattenberg text with Russell Dalton's *The Good Citizen* (2008).⁴ Dalton (see also Zukin et al. 2006) suggests that old models of citizenship, focusing on the responsibilities and duties of citizens, do not speak to today's youth. Instead, they are more likely follow Dalton's model of 'engaged citizenship'. They see more utility in volunteering to serve homeless people in a soup kitchen than they do in writing a letter to



their senator. Engagement through non-political means, such as volunteer work, has taken precedence over the political.

The distinction painted above is an important one. Educating for citizenship will be a hopeless endeavour if we continue to focus on the shortcomings of our students and their generation. When our students volunteer at a homeless shelter, or participate in community meetings, they are engaging in commendable activity. However, when they fail to connect these activities to larger issues in the political world, we must help them do this. Working in a homeless shelter is a noble act of citizenship. Even better, from the standpoint of citizenship, is to understand how the problem came about in the first place: how structural forces contribute to the issue of homelessness, how government policies could either worsen or alleviate this problem, and how forces at work in the political arena can encourage or impede solutions. As Hartley and others suggest in this issue, our role as citizenship educators should be to validate both political and civic engagement, and to help students better see the connection between the two.

The lost art of political civility

A related theme across these chapters has been the role of deliberative democracy and dialogue in the citizenship education process. Years ago, we worried that politics was the domain of the very few, practised by an unaccountable elite working behind closed doors (the proverbial smoke-filled rooms). The coming of the information age, and the proliferation of radio, television and internet broadcast options, produced democratisation in governing power as well as an explosion in the amount of political information. This greater quantity of information, however, has not been accompanied by greater quality; political consumers face challenges in sorting accurate, non-biased information from inaccurate, biased polemics.⁵ Previous quality controls on information dissemination have come crashing down as anyone can set up a website or blog that 'looks' like a reputable source of news.

With this greater volume of information has come greater competition among news sources for readership and influence: each seeks

to stand out and not be lost in the cacophony that is today's political information universe. The moderate, sober, well-reasoned voice continues to have a devoted audience but it is small (and often not composed of the demographic that advertisers covet). To extend their reach, television broadcasters must be louder and more provocative, websites more controversial and books more explosive. Most consumers of political information do not want to read new ideas or reconsider old positions; they seek information that confirms their pre-existing biases. For entertainment value, they prefer confrontational and titillating stories.⁶

As a consequence of all of this, civility is on a dramatic decline in the political universe, as well as in society at large (Carter 1998; Putnam 2000). For students, the consequences can be severe. Few examples of civil discourse exist for students to use as models for their own behaviour. Students struggle to express disagreement in a productive manner: my opponent all too readily morphs into 'my enemy'. Those charged with educating the next generation of citizens need to understand this fact and to act accordingly. One of the skills we must teach future citizens is the ability to talk with others about issues on which we disagree in a civil tone.⁷ This is the central focus of Nancy Thomas's article in this issue, but it is also a theme in the Smith and Starkey/Savvides articles. Effective citizenship education must offer students skills and practice in civil discourse.

Students as active learners

For citizenship education or for that matter any form of education to work, it has to hit students where they are as learners. If there is one thing we know from the literature on teaching and learning in higher education, it is that active learning works: pedagogy that obliges students to actively participate in the teaching and learning process produces greater engagement and deeper understanding than do pedagogies in which students passively receive knowledge from others (McKeachie 2002; Weimer 2002). Bain's (2004) central conclusion in his study of effective college teachers is that the best teachers enable



students to create their own knowledge of the subject matter. Given the necessarily applied nature of work in civic education, understanding this fact about how today's college students prefer to learn, and are comfortable learning, emerges as a central theme in this collection of articles.

For each of the authors reporting on classroom projects, the need to get students engaged at higher levels is a central piece of the work. Some of this is reflected in inspired pedagogy, such as the service-learning project used by Michael Smith. For other authors, this is reflected in the very nature of the programmes being investigated, such as the online citizen education programme described by Hugh Starkey and Nicola Savvides. And while Nancy Thomas does not report on her own investigation, she suggests useful models for adding inter-group dialogue and deliberative democracy to curricula in an attempt to teach students as they are engaged by civic issues. The hope is that engaging in these dialogues and conversations will validate students' experiences as they construct their own knowledge (Vygotsky 1978).

Summary of articles in this issue

Matt Hartley's article, 'Reclaiming the democratic purposes of American higher education: tracing the trajectory of the civic engagement movement', opens this issue. Matt traces the roots of the civic engagement movement in the United States, which has been running for far longer than most people think. Still, a sense that this civic mission was being lost led to a re-emergence of the movement in the 1980s, highlighted by the founding of the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) and the Campus Compact, and by the publication of influential reports and arguments advancing this agenda. Hartley speaks quite directly about the question of how 'political' civic engagement should be. He praises community involvement, which provides a useful service and allows for unique learning experiences. But, he argues that a focus solely on community involvement often leads to 'a strikingly apolitical "civic" engagement'. Hartley's essay provides a useful orienting frame for beginning this issue.

In their article, 'Learning for citizenship online: how can students develop intercultural awareness and construct knowledge together?' Hugh Starkey and Nicola Savvides discuss an innovative online Master's programme in citizenship education. Their work directly considers the question about how effective online courses (and programmes) are, and if they are as effective (or, perhaps, even more effective) than traditional classroom-based learning. They carefully examine these issues, using sophisticated analytical techniques. In addition to speaking to the issue of innovative pedagogy, Starkey and Savvides also examine how students construct knowledge through online discussions and the construction of an international learning community. Their community has a different feel than we typically imagine when considering our classes but also provides a unique glimpse into another model of constructivist learning.

One of the exciting innovations in civic education in the last two decades has been the growth of the academic service-learning movement. Service-learning moves beyond volunteerism to connect the community service students do to the coursework they are pursuing. Service-learning offers a way for students to see and serve 'the real world' (reflecting the civic orientation of their generation), but also to use what they are seeing to advance their disciplinary learning. This issue of *Learning and Teaching* includes a useful example of academic service-learning, pedagogy that can engage today's students.

Michael Smith's chapter, 'What History is good for: service learning and studying the past', provides a compelling model of how service-learning can engage students as citizens while also enhancing disciplinary learning. A key part of Smith's story is empathy; students become better historians when they develop a deep understanding and appreciation of contemporary people's experiences.⁸ In addition, Smith argues that students need to develop a sense of historical perspective and of how historians make causal claims; the empathy that Smith attempts to cultivate in his class helps the students to do this. As I read Smith's article, I appreciate not only how he is able to blend strong disciplinary learning with cultivation of civic virtues, but also how he demonstrates the effectiveness of his approach



by using student work as data to support his claims about student learning.

The theme of conversation plays a critical role in Nancy Thomas's piece, 'Teaching for a strong, deliberative democracy'. Thomas describes widespread experimentation with the ideas of inclusive, deliberative approaches to addressing social, economic and political issues. She argues that colleges and universities would do well to adapt their activities, both inside and outside the classroom, to help students interact with each other as they attempt to jointly solve problems and 'do democracy'. Her article provides useful models for how this has been done at various schools. Making Thomas's vision a reality will take a great deal of work and perhaps even dramatic paradigm shifts within the academy. The ideas, however, fit well with how students learn (cooperatively) and with the importance of political conversation and collective meaning-making. It provides a powerful model for how to educate students to be effective citizens.

This special issue concludes with a commentary piece by Bob Simpson, entitled 'Citizenship, craft and the making of Mode Two citizens?' Simpson suggests a transformation in colleges and universities from Mode 1 institutions (hierarchical, devoted to more traditional disciplinary work, and closed-off from the outside world) to Mode 2 institutions (characterised by more cross-disciplinary work, more entrepreneurial, and more likely to be connected with the communities and broader societies in which they are located). It provides, I think, a fitting close to this issue, as it reflects upon the transformations reflected in each of the pieces. It also provides a nice counterpoint to what in the end became an issue tilted more towards the American experience than Europe or the rest of the world. Simpson provides useful background on the historical development of the civic education movement in Europe, which is much appreciated.

Wearing my editor's hat, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the contributors to this issue, whose work has enlightened me and enabled me to glimpse this all-important topic through a different lens. I hope the reader will have a similar experience and will enjoy reading these articles as much as I have. Thank you also to my many

colleagues in the academy who served as peer reviewers and book reviewers for this issue; your work has enhanced the quality of this issue a great deal.

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Notes

1. I use the word citizens in this context, fully aware that the conferral of citizenship legally happens at the national level; we are not, in any legal sense, 'citizens of the world'. Still, the notion that we have obligations both to our nation-state as well as to the world (i.e., protecting the environment) resonates with me and, I suspect, with the authors in this issue. The notion of citizenship as transcending national and political boundaries is a key theme in Smith, Nowacek and Bernstein (in press).
2. While used in a course focused on American politics, Wattenberg's book used data from many advanced democracies and newly-democratising countries to build the argument that voting is, increasingly and internationally, 'not for young people'.
3. Even the election of Barack Obama, and the hope and optimism it engendered among many students, did little to dampen the disaffection toward the political system in general when I taught this course in the winter 2009 semester.
4. The Dalton book is reviewed in this issue of *Learning and Teaching*.
5. There remains the question of whether any information can be 'unbiased', as all information necessarily reflects the biases of the person or people writing or disseminating it. Still, the distinction between sources intended to convey 'just the facts' and those seeking to manipulate the facts in service to the desired opinion remains worthwhile (even as we may disagree on which side of the line various sources might be placed).
6. I am, of course, painting with a broad brush in making these arguments. Still, the ratings of different styles of newscasts and sales of different styles of political books provide broad-brush evidence that my argument applies to a significant segment of the electorate.
7. From an intellectual development standpoint, Perry (1970; see also Hofer and Pintrich 1997; King and Kitchener 1994) suggests that students' early epistemologies begin from the belief that issues are black and white, that there is a right and wrong view. We must help students move from viewing all issues in these simple dichoto-



mous terms to an understanding not only that there are multiple views, but that they can be evaluated by some standard of proof (and not merely that we all must 'agree to disagree').

8. Empathy became a critical buzzword in American politics during the summer of 2009 when President Obama publicly stated that 'empathy' was a quality he desired in a nominee for the Supreme Court. His eventual nominee, Judge Sonia Sotomayor, had a compelling personal story (the first Latina to be nominated for the court, Judge Sotomayor had grown up in housing projects in a poor section of New York City). She had (perhaps clumsily) stated in speeches that she believed these life experiences would make her a better judge than those who did not have these experiences. In her confirmation hearings before the Senate, however, Sotomayor rejected the empathy qualification, suggesting a rather mechanised view that judges merely interpret law and that their personal views and circumstances ought not to matter. This view, while politically expedient in the confirmation process, seems unrealistic, denying both the impact of our experiences, as well as the need to understand the circumstances of those whom we teach and study, and whose cases judges adjudicate.

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