

EDUCATION FOR INFORMED, EFFECTIVE, AND COMMITTED DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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A novelist once said that there were only two or three great human stories, and that we human beings are destined to keep repeating them over and over again. One of these is the journey. History is replete with tales of journeys. The journey is a central feature in the world's great religions:

- the exodus from Egypt,
- the forty-year odyssey of the Buddha in northern India,
- the hegira of Mohammed, and
- the travels of Confucius in search of a prince who would adopt his principles.

Americans recently commemorated the bicentennial of an audacious journey—that of the Corps of Discovery led by Meriwether Lewis and Will (Captain Billy) Clark. We know a lot about that crisscrossing of North America, thanks to what historian Donald Jackson called the “writingest” explorers in American history. The expedition diarists wrote about everything including bears, bison, thunderstorms, river currents, tribal politics, and even the exploits of one of my favorites—Seaman, the Newfoundland dog. Seaman accompanied the human members of the Corps of Discovery every step of the way on that two-year, four-month journey. His services, and his heroism, are worthy of a separate story at another time.

What does the journey of Lewis and Clark—memorable as it may be—have to do with our concern here today: education for informed, effective, and responsible citizenship? Let me suggest three possible affinities:

- First, it was a journey into the unknown, into uncharted territory. Similarly, as we prepare young people for citizenship, we have no way of knowing what difficulties they will encounter or what challenges they will face in the future. We can, however, anticipate that there will be many difficulties and challenges, and our goal is to equip them with knowledge, skills, and understanding of the fundamental values and principles of democracy that they need to deal effectively with the unforeseen.
- Second, it was a journey in which a group of people from many different racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and social backgrounds took part. It also was a journey in which both men and women had important roles. Sacajawea, the young Shoshone woman, is most famous. With her newborn son strapped to her back, she served as guide and interpreter. But there were other women who also assumed essential roles. One example is Watkuweis, a Nez Perce woman, who brokered friendly relations between her tribe and the explorers. To succeed—indeed even to survive—the whole team had to work together. Despite their diverse origins and opinions, they had to find ways to negotiate their differences and to contribute their individual talents to the achievement of their common goal.

Today, as we survey the populations of most countries—including Malaysia, the United States, and Australia—we are struck by their diversity.

To thrive—even to survive—the diverse populations of these countries must learn to negotiate their differences. They must capitalize on the distinctive capabilities and talents of every member of their society. They must find ways to work together toward their common goals.

- Finally, it was a journey that was carefully planned. In his detailed, written “Instructions to Captain Meriwether Lewis,” President Thomas Jefferson spelled out the goals of the expedition. He made a list of subjects deemed “worthy of notice.” He cautioned that observations of those subjects were to be “taken with great pains and accuracy,” so that they would prove useful in the future. Jefferson’s instructions to the travelers concluded with a stern admonition. They were to be respectful of everyone they met on the journey and to treat them “in a friendly and conciliatory manner.”¹

Just as a journey must be carefully planned if it is to be a success, so too, must civic education. The goals of civic education must be clearly stated. Civic education must focus on concepts and issues “worthy of notice.” Not everything can be taught or learned, so we need to choose carefully with an eye to the usefulness and the significance in the life of citizens of what is selected. We also should remember Jefferson’s counsel about conduct on the journey. In teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships, everyone is to be treated with respect. The climate in which civic education takes place should be friendly, encouraging, stimulating, thought-provoking, and open. It should enable students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for success on their journey as citizens.

Reasons for Concern About Civic Education

At this point in time, there are compelling reasons why thoughtful people are concerned about education for democratic citizenship.

One reason is that we have moved into a new information age—into a digital culture, if you will. Digital networks now make information instantly accessible. As one television network likes to put it, news is available “24/ 7 and 365.” That information stream, however, is often unverified and devoid of context. This phenomenon creates a unique set of challenges for today’s generation of students. They find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between information and disinformation and between information and knowledge.²

A second reason for concern is that overt support for democracy has become extremely widespread, but without real understanding of democracy. In fact, one prominent scholar has proclaimed democracy as “the end of history.” Francis Fukuyama claims that history is leading inevitably to universal democracy, because there is no other coherent, theoretical alternative.³ In other words, Fukuyama contends that democracy is “the only game in town.”

The problem with his claim is that today, citizens in Albania or Zimbabwe are as likely to express a favorable opinion of democracy as are citizens of Australia or the United States. The favorable opinions, however, are often superficial. People know the slogans of democracy, but they display little understanding of what democracy means and what it requires of its citizens. As Ronald Inglehart reminds us, “unless these professions of support for democracy are accompanied by deeper-rooted orientations of

tolerance, trust, and a participatory outlook, the chances are poor that effective democracy will be present at the societal level.”⁴

A third reason for concern about civic education is that while the need for it ought to be evident to anyone interested in the maintenance and improvement of democracy, civic education is being relegated to the fringes of school life. In primary schools, reading and mathematics occupy the major portion of the school day. They are the first and often the only subjects tested at the district, national and international levels.

No one is arguing that reading and basic mathematics are nonessentials or that one cannot be an effective citizen without a solid grounding in both subjects. Fixation on reading and mathematics, however, is too narrow. The “core” of learning must be broadened. It must include the knowledge and skills needed to support the larger civic life in a democratic society. The importance of placing civic education on a par with education for literacy and numeracy cannot be overstated. Education for citizenship is “core.” Even so, it is given insufficient attention in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Research tells us that adolescence—and early adolescence in particular—is the optimal time for citizenship education. William Damon, Director of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University has concluded that:

.... There is reason to believe that a person’s crucial orientations to life incubate during adolescence. If civic concern is not among them, it may never arise.... Students need a positive exposure to the history, cultural heritage, core values and operating principles of their society, if they are to become motivated to participate as citizens in that society.... What is more, students need to be given a sympathetic introduction to the workings of democracy, if they are to become good critics of the democracy. All this must be done through action as well as words, in multiple contexts, and in ways that inspire students on the emotional as well as the intellectual plane.⁵

Other recent research tells us that civic education, which is designed to encourage dialogue between children and their parents, can have a dual effect. The dialectical relationship that occurs between child and parent when discussing politics results in both child and parent increasing their civic knowledge.⁶ When teachers ask students to interview their parents or grandparents and to solicit and discuss their views on public issues, all generations make civic gains.

Civic education also is neglected at the tertiary level. If today's college and university graduates are to be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess technical knowledge but also to see themselves as members of a community and as individuals with a responsibility to contribute to their communities. They must be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. Regrettably, a recent, large-scale study sponsored by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that "One of the most striking patterns in the history of undergraduate moral and civic education is its progressive segregation into narrower parts of the curriculum, and its removal to the extracurricular sphere in some kinds of institutions."⁷

Essential Components of Civic Education

To exclude civic education as a "core" subject is to make a serious mistake. It is to assume that somehow students will learn how to fulfill the role of citizens in a democracy from sources other than schools. Research—as well as human experience—contradicts that false assumption. We know that there are three essential components of civic education and that all three are indispensable. Those components are civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. Time does not permit the extended discussion each of those components merits, but a brief explanation of why each is important is needed.

Civic knowledge, the first component, is concerned with the content, the subject matter, or what citizens ought to know. Civic knowledge is more than an acquaintance with facts or being familiar with the structure or “anatomy” of a particular government. It is an understanding of the purposes of government and the constitution through which those purposes are carried out. Understanding government means that one recognizes that government, no matter how it is organized, is the most powerful instrument for social control ever devised. Understanding government also entails an appreciation of its impact on our lives. It is government that can foster justice or injustice, can enact fair or unfair laws, and can protect or violate human rights.” Citizens who understand government can act as individuals and as members of groups to see that their rights are protected, democratic procedures are observed, and the common good is promoted.

Civic knowledge also includes an appreciation of the role of civil society in democracies. The autonomous, self-organized sphere of voluntary relationships that constitute civil society is of critical importance. Civil society provides a check on the power of government. It ensures that neither government nor a single dominant group, such as a political party or religious organization, hold a monopoly on sources of information, organized political influence, resources, or ideas that are considered legitimate.⁸

Research reveals that formal instruction in civics, government, law, history, and democracy is most promising as a way to increase civic knowledge. It also reveals that such instruction needs to begin in the earliest years of schooling and continue through secondary and tertiary schools. Knowledge is a valuable civic outcome in and of itself, but knowledge also helps people engage politically. More knowledgeable adults are more

likely to vote on the basis of issues rather than personalities; they vote more consistently; and they distinguish better between substantive debates and personal attacks.⁹

The Importance of Civic Skills

The second essential component of education for citizenship is civic skills. If citizens are to exercise their rights and discharge their responsibilities as members of self-governing communities, they need to acquire both intellectual and participatory skills. These skills are essential because, in addition to knowing how their political system works, citizens need to be able to negotiate that system. Prominent among the skills needed are those of deliberation, communication, and persuasion. Having these competencies not only makes effective action possible, it naturally leads to a greater sense of empowerment or efficacy. Having skills leads people to see themselves as politically engaged and thus to be further motivated toward engagement. Research tells us that the development of skills contributes to and interacts with the development of values, understanding, and self-concept.¹⁰

Intellectual or critical-thinking skills are inseparable from content. To be able to think critically about a political issue, one must have an understanding of the issue, its history, and its contemporary relevance, as well as a command of intellectual tools useful in dealing with such an issue. The *National Standards for Civics and Government* and the *Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* categorize these necessary intellectual skills as:

- identifying and describing,
- explaining and analyzing, and
- evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public issues.¹¹

Equally important are participatory skills. Democracy is premised on collective decision making. If citizens are to be part of that decision-making process, they must command the skills necessary for civic engagement. Those skills include:

- interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests,
- monitoring public events and issues,
- deliberating about public policy issues,
- influencing policy decisions on public issues, and
- implementing and monitoring public policy decisions.¹²

It is interesting to note that when students in Penang were asked what they liked most about **Project Citizen (Projek Warga)**, their responses almost mirrored that list of skills. The *Evaluation Report* prepared by Dr. Lim Hong Hai¹³ notes that students named interacting and cooperating with their peers as the most rewarding part of **Project Citizen**. They also rated the opportunity to make new friends as valuable. Political scientists would agree that those are important citizenship skills. Robert Putnam in his now famous book *Bowling Alone* gave that kind of networking a special name. He called it “social capital” and he explained its importance to a democratic society in this way:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects [like factories or machinery]... social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.... A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society.... Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity. Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligations and responsibility for action.¹⁴

The Penang *Evaluation Report* corroborates what political scientists have found to be true: social networks encourage trustworthiness and “trustworthiness lubricates society.”

As the *Evaluation Report* puts it: “The main hoped-for effect found is the significant

increase in the variable of trust. This holds for students as a whole and in most cases when students are distinguished by gender, race and father's educational level.”¹⁵

Civic skills are not developed in a single program or in a single course taken in school. They develop slowly over time and with practice in the classroom, in the community, and through participation in student government and other organizations. A number of studies have confirmed that pre-adult opportunities to acquire civic skills affect later participation in civic life. One survey involving 15,000 adults found that their adolescent experiences in discussing politics at home and in the classroom, along with their participation in school clubs, strongly influenced their subsequent civic engagement.¹⁶

Other studies have confirmed the finding that civic participation in adolescence is strongly associated with civic participation in young adulthood. Membership in school clubs, classroom discussions and debates, and service learning provide “hands-on” training in communication, organization, and leadership skills. Those experiences are predictors of future civic engagement.¹⁷

The Critical Importance of Civic Dispositions

A third essential component of civic education is what is called civic dispositions. Some political scientists call them civic virtues, values, or motivations. All these terms refer to traits of private and public character which contribute to the maintenance and improvement of democratic society. Traits of private character such as moral responsibility, self-discipline, and respect for the worth and human dignity of every individual are imperative. Traits of public character are no less consequential. Such traits as public spiritedness, civility, respect for the rule of law, critical mindedness, and

willingness to listen, negotiate, and compromise are indispensable to democracy's success.

The importance of civic dispositions, or the “habits of the heart,” as Alex de Tocqueville called them, can scarcely be overemphasized. In the long run, civic dispositions may be of more consequence than either the skills or knowledge a citizen may command. That is because the character of the citizen body itself—the dispositions or commitments that citizens share—is a key issue for democratic quality. Public values or virtues that are essential in a democracy would include at minimum:

- Respect for the dignity and worth of every human being and a tolerance of difference.
- A willingness to participate in public life not only by voting but in the discussion of public policy issues, in communicating with and demanding accountability from elected representatives, in monitoring official conduct and in direct engagement with public issues at the local level.
- A readiness to exercise one's own civil rights and to stand up for them, not only when one's own rights are threatened, but to stand up for the rights of one's fellow citizens when they are threatened.
- A commitment to civil and rational discourse and to procedural impartiality.
- A concern for the common good and a recognition that each individual is part of the larger social fabric.

Conclusion

Today we are embarked on an educational journey of enormous consequence. It is a journey that is reminiscent in some ways of the one undertaken by Lewis and Clark and their Corps of Discovery. When they set out over uncharted lands and waters, they were expected to do more than just survive that journey. They were enjoined to learn things “worthy of notice” which would prove useful to themselves and to others in the future. They were counseled and required to work as a team, with each individual contributing his or her unique talents to the success of their common enterprise. Even more important, they were admonished to deal with all those whom they met in a “friendly and conciliatory” manner—in other words, they were to conduct themselves in ways befitting citizens imbued with democratic values.

What better goals could we set for ourselves, what clearer instructions could we give ourselves as we undertake our important journey to educate young people for democratic citizenship?

Notes

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3. See Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
4. Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel. "Political Culture and Democracy: Analyzing Cross-Level Linkages." Typescript 2004. (Forthcoming in *Comparative Politics*.)
5. William Damon. "To Not Fade Away: Restoring Civil Identity Among the Young" in *Making Good Citizens*. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteretti, Eds. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 126 and 137.
6. M. McDevitt and S. Chaffee. "Closing Gaps in Political Communication and Knowledge: Effects of a School Intervention." *Communication Research*, March 2000, pp. 259-292. McDevitt and Chaffee are quoted in Jonathan F. Zaff *et. al.* "Promoting Positive Citizenship: Priming Youth for Action." CIRCLE Working Paper 05, March 2003, p. 24.
7. Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens. *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, p. 36.
8. For an extended discussion of the role and functions of civil society, see *Res Publica: An International Framework for Education in Democracy* (Draft). Calabasas, California: Center for Civic Education: 2003, pp. 94-95, www.civiced.org. See also *Civil Society, Democracy and Civic Renewal*. Robert K. Fullinwider, Ed. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999.
9. See Lake Snell Perry & Associates. "Short Term Impacts, Long Term Opportunities: The Political and Civic Engagement of Young Adults in America (Analysis and Report for the Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) as the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Council for Excellence in Government, Washington, and D.C.: 2002.
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11. *National Standards for Civics and Government*. Calabasas, California: Center for Civic Education, 1994, pp.3-6.
12. Margaret S. Branson. *The Role of Civic Education: A Position Paper*. Washington, D.C.: The Communitarian Network, 1998, pp. 8-10. See also “Introduction to Education in Civic Engagement” in *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices*. Sheilah Mann and John J. Patrick, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University, ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2000.
13. *Projek Warga: Project for Schools in Penang (Malaysia)*. June – September 2003. *Evaluation Report* prepared by Lim Hong Hai, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Penang, Malaysia, March 2004. Typescript.
14. Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000, pp. 19-21.
15. *Projek Warga, Evaluation Report op.cit.*, p. 28.
16. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Scholzman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and Equality, Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995.
17. See Mary Kirlin “Civic Skill Building: The Missing Component in Service Programs,” American Political Science Association. Typescript 2002.