

## **Keynote Address: Daniel Roselle Award Luncheon**

**Diana Owen**

Middle States Council for the Social Studies Conference

February 26, 2016

I am greatly honored to receive the Daniel Roselle Award, which commemorates the life and work of an esteemed history and social studies educator and past president of this association. I am grateful to be here among all of you who are doing the most important work of teaching young people about the foundations of government and the rights and responsibilities of good citizens.

Before I begin my talk, I would like to thank Marcie and Susan for their greetings and generous introductions, and especially for their outstanding contributions to social studies education.

Congratulations to you, Marcie, on receiving the Middle States Council Honor Award—it is a well-deserved recognition of all that you have done and continue to do for social studies.

Congratulations to you Susan for serving as the Executive Director of the NCSS. I also would like to recognize my research team from Georgetown University who is with us today—Jilanne Doom, Isaac Riddle, and Scott Schroeder. Currently they are working hard on the research for the James Madison Legacy Project. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Jeffrey, for his continuing support, and my cat Rocky for his constant supervision while I work. He regrets that he is unable to attend.

As you all know firsthand, social studies and civics teachers have an enormous responsibility to prepare the next generation of good citizens. This task is especially demanding as the requirements of citizenship are often in flux. Teaching social studies is a dynamic process that requires educators to continually adapt to changing societal conditions, periods of historical upheaval, transforming political realities, and technological innovations. Schools are charged with translating shifting concepts of citizenship into the practice through the civics and social studies curriculum, which is no small undertaking.

Diana Owen is an associate professor of political science at Georgetown University. She teaches in the Communication, Culture, and Technology graduate program, and has served as director of the American Studies program.

My talk today will explore the ways in which social studies teachers and civic educators have responded to societal developments and changing notions of citizenship. I will then present some of the results of research that I have conducted indicating the success of civic education in conveying knowledge to students and instilling civic dispositions and skills that are long-lasting. I will conclude by summarizing the good news for educators going forward.

In preparing for this talk, I reflected on the career of Dr. Daniel Roselle who was a pioneer in social studies education. Countless teachers benefited from his leadership through practice and his scholarship on education and pedagogy. Testimonies from students he had taught celebrate a vibrant teacher whose influence on them lasted a lifetime. His textbooks were read by millions. Over the course of more than fifty years as an active educator, Dr. Roselle witnessed many political, social, and technological shifts that prompted civic educators to adapt their class content and develop novel instructional methods. He was known as a creative innovator who felt that social studies education should go beyond the acquisition of knowledge to encourage critical thinking and community involvement.

Dr. Roselle began teaching social studies during a period that I call the Compliant Citizen Era which encompasses World War I and World War II, the Great Depression, and the early phases of the Cold War. He himself served in the Army during World War II before embarking on his career in education. Civic education during this time emphasized support for the political system, and focused on instilling patriotism, loyalty, obedience to the law, respect for government, and responsiveness to community needs in stressful times. Print, radio, and film were the dominant political media at the time when all but the tail end of the Compliant Citizen cohort was in secondary school. This group was socialized to civic engagement that maintained democratic order, and which emphasized voting and service.

The content of civic education became more controversial and unsettled during what I have labeled the Ambivalent Citizen period. The public lost faith in government, political institutions, and leaders in the wake of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the civil rights movement, and the women's movement. People increasingly questioned foundational ideals that stressed a

common culture and the superiority of Americans compared to citizens of other nations, especially as the student population became increasingly diverse. Television was the defining medium for the Ambivalent Citizen cohort, even as newspapers and radio reports remained prominent. Television radically altered the political landscape, especially as it brought the realities of war and the turmoil of protest into the living room. Civic engagement at this time was aimed at influencing elites and state institutions. Many schools dropped civics from the curriculum because of disagreements over its goals.

In the midst this volatile period for the country, Dr. Roselle sought to establish the relevance of civic education by reaching out to the larger community. He advocated for civics programs that connected the social studies curriculum to community-based activities. His pamphlet, *A Parents' Guide to the Social Studies*, made transparent the objectives and content of social studies classes, the issues discussed, and the need to go beyond rote learning of information to foster critical thinking skills. He outlined how parents might encourage their children to become good citizens by allowing them express ideas freely at home, subscribing to periodicals with differing points of view, taking an active part in PTA and other organizations, going with their children to political, economic, or social events, and maintaining their faith in the ability of people to solve problems by working together. Dr. Roselle also advocated for creativity in the social studies curriculum. An avid short story fiction writer, Dr. Roselle developed an anthology to instruct social studies teachers on how to convey world history through science fiction. Today these ideas are standard practice, but at the time they were path-breaking.

Scholarly interest in political socialization and civic education also waned at this time, and research in the area became more scarce. A personal anecdote will illustrate this point. My favorite class in high school was an elective course called "Democratic Citizenship," which was the only option for students who wanted to take civics. There were about a dozen students in the class, most of whom, like myself, had parents who were active in local politics. As an undergraduate, I took a class on "Public Opinion and Political Socialization," which focused on how people learn to become citizens. This class changed the direction of my life, as I decided against law school and in favor of attending graduate school to study socialization and civic education. I was incredibly fortunate to go to the University of Wisconsin to work with Dr. Jack Dennis, whose research had drawn me to the field. But when I arrived in Madison, I was quickly

informed that political socialization was a dying, if not dead, field, something that scholars studied “with their left hand.” Undeterred, and with a supportive mentor, I pursued this dead field which is now revitalized and thriving.

In the 1980s, studies began to document the declining civic participation of young Americans, especially their low turnout in elections. This development sparked a resurgence of interest in civic education, and a shift to a focus on civic engagement. Civic education in the Engaged Citizen era—which is where we are presently—centers on preparing young people to become active in politics and productive members of their communities. The role of media in politics increased greatly during this time. Television remains prominent even as digital technology has been fundamentally changing the way that people engage with politics. The Engaged Citizen is inclined toward a politics that emphasizes self-expression and self-actualization and a politics that often shuns established government institutions. Some call it “do-it-yourself citizenship.”

Citizenship in the Engaged Citizen Era now encompasses digital engagement. Democracy has become more complex, and requires greater knowledge and technical competency to negotiate. As has been the case historically, civic educators are at the forefront of preparing people for citizenship in the digital age. While people are glued to their technology, they often don’t understand how their computers, cell phones, and tablets can connect them to the political world. Even “digital natives,” who have grown up with the technology, lack the requisite skills to engage in politics responsibly and effectively. Citizens must be able to scrutinize the glut of competing, confusing, polarizing, and frequently misleading messages with which they are bombarded. We need look no further than the uncivil rhetoric and hostile name-calling in the current presidential race to illustrate this point. Citizens must acquire the skills necessary to take part in the evolving digital public sphere. They must learn to responsibly make connections, and use digital media to create and distribute political content and engage in politics in ever-expanding ways.

Educating emerging citizens in the current media and political environment can be a formidable challenge. As you are all aware, schools face restricted resources and limited instructional time for civics. Incorporating digital technology into the civics curriculum requires careful consideration of how not to shortchange the “basics” of American government and politics.

Further, digital media are a moving target, and how to best integrate digital political media experiences meaningfully into the civics curriculum is still evolving. And then there is my pet peeve—digital technology is already a distraction to students, and it can be difficult to keep them focused on a lesson when they are checking their social media accounts.

The frontiers for civic education are clearly expanding, along with the challenges for teachers. Yet, there is much to be excited about as we negotiate the era of the Engaged Citizen in the evolving digital world.

Unlike during the Ambivalent Citizen era, the American public today is strongly behind civic education. The results of a national study I conducted found that 93% of the public feels that all students should be required to take a civic education, social studies, or American government course in junior high and high school. The vast majority of the public agrees that educating students about government and how it works as well as core democratic principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are high priorities. Almost universally, the public concurs that preparing people to be responsible citizens and to exercise their right to vote are very important goals of the nation's schools.

There is impressive empirical evidence that civic education is successful in making good citizens who are attentive to and engaged in political life. Recent research, including my own, demonstrates that a little bit of civic education can go a long way toward making better citizens. What students learn in the social studies classroom provides a firm foundation for future political engagement. People who develop a firm base of knowledge about government and democracy developed in childhood and adolescence are likely to seek political information and take part in political and community affairs as adults. Students who understand how politics works develop a strong sense of political efficacy—a feeling that their voice and actions matter—and they are likely to vote and take part in politics in other ways.

In 2011, I conducted a national study of the influence of civic education on people over the course of their lives with Suzanne Soule, who was formerly at the Center for Civic Education and is now teaching at the University of California—Channel Islands. We found that fully one-quarter of the American public had no social studies, American government, or civics instruction

in junior high or high school. These people are far less likely to follow politics, to be politically informed, vote, or take part in politics in other ways than those who had at least some civics instruction, which could even be a small unit as part of a history class. We found that as the quality of people's civics instruction increased, so did their inclination to engage in politics throughout their lives.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, I conducted research in Indiana on the effectiveness of civics instruction for high school students. The study included 21 teachers from 12 high schools across the state that varied in terms of size, location (urban/suburban/rural), and type (neighborhood/selective enrollment/technical; public/private). Schools with teachers who instructed classes using the *We the People* (WTP) curriculum were recruited to take part in the study and matched with teachers who did not use *We the People*. I collected survey data on students' attitudes toward political engagement, their propensity for future engagement, classroom climate, and the classroom pedagogies used by their teachers before and after they took their civics class. Teachers provided data on their instructional methods for each civics class that they taught.

The findings are striking. Students' political knowledge increased significantly as a result of taking a civics class, especially for knowledge of the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, government institutions, political parties and elections, and race and politics. Further, students who gained the most knowledge were also the most likely to indicate that they intended to engage in political activities in the future. They reported that they would be likely to contact public officials, vote, participate in an election campaign, engage in their community, and use digital media to take part in politics. Knowledge of the U.S. Constitution has the strongest relationship to political engagement followed by knowledge of government institutions.

We also studied the influence of social studies and civics classes on students' development of civic dispositions. Civic dispositions are traits that are essential for democratic character formation and the maintenance of constitutional democracy. We found that students from the outset strongly respected the rule of law. Still, their level of respect for the rule of law increased

after taking a civics class, and became almost universal. Students showed significant improvement on a range of dispositions as a result of their civics instruction:

- They paid more attention to government and politics.
- They were more likely to follow politics, enjoy talking about government and politics, and critically consume political news.
- They were more inclined to anticipate they would vote regularly and serve on a jury.
- They were more likely to believe that it is their responsibility to work with others to solve problems in their community.
- They became more tolerant of opposing political ideas.

There are two areas where students' attitudes did not change significantly.

- Students' desire for a career in government service or to run for office was low at the outset of the study, and improved only slightly as a result of taking a civics class.
- Civic education had no influence on students' perception of their duty to serve in the military. The vast majority of students did not think of military service as a civic duty.

Studies since the 1990s have shown that when classroom instruction and real world learning experiences are integrated, the influence on civic engagement and political participation can be strong and long-lasting. Students whose civics class was taught in an open environment and whose instruction included active learning approaches are the most inclined to engage in politics. My own studies strongest finding is that an open classroom climate is conducive to developing participatory inclinations among high school students. Active learning pedagogies are related to students' political confidence and propensity to engage. Active instructional methods, such as discussion of current events, mock elections, simulated hearings, and moot court, are especially beneficial to students' political development.

We also examined the extent to which civics instruction is being adapted to the digital age. Teachers in the Indiana study incorporated a variety of instructional techniques involving digital media into their civics classes. The methods ranged from basic information seeking to more sophisticated uses of digital media for creating and posting content. The number of teachers using a technique declines with the level of sophistication. The use of online news sites, holding

online issue discussions, using government websites, and teaching students to be critical consumers of online news were almost universally employed. More than half of the teachers incorporated the use of campaign and political party websites and the sharing ideas and class work via digital platforms into the curriculum. A third had students contact government officials using digital tools. Students in only a small number of classes created and posted digital content.

An open classroom climate is by far the most essential condition for making digital citizens. This echoes the findings for traditional forms of engagement. Class climate appears to be more effective in encouraging online participation than teachers explicitly using digital technologies for civics instruction. In fact, teachers' instructional use of digital technology makes a limited contribution to students' development of participatory orientations. Students who feel comfortable discussing politics in a respectful and encouraging classroom environment are substantially more confident in their ability to engage in politics and more inclined to participate whether in a traditional sense or digitally.

In conclusion, there is much to celebrate on the civic education front.

Support for civic education among the public and political leaders is strong. Congressional endorsement of civics comes from both sides of the aisle. After years of funding cuts, Congress extended funding for the U.S. Department of Education's Supporting Effective Educator Development grant to "civic education instruction." The Center for Civic Education was awarded a substantial SEED grant for the James Madison Legacy Project, which will ultimately benefit thousands of teachers and high need students. I know some of you here are involved in that project. Senate Resolution 427 which recognizes the importance of civic education in American schools was passed unanimously. Senator Ben Cardin and Senator Charles Grassley sponsored the resolution. Senator Cardin is a very worthy recipient of the Middle States Council Distinguished Service Award. I was an APSA congressional fellow in Ben's office years ago, and it was a wonderful experience.

The empirical evidence that civic education is effective is irrefutable. Students acquire civic knowledge, dispositions, and skills that form the foundation for a lifetime of active citizenship. To repeat: a little bit of civics goes a long way in the making of good citizens.

The intelligence, dedication, and innovation of social studies teachers ensures that civics instruction will continue to convey the essential fundamentals of American government and also evolve in new and important ways. The impressive program for this conference speaks volumes about the quality of and innovation in civic education today.

I am inspired by commitment of outstanding educators like you. Your dedication ensures that the future of American citizenship is in great hands.