

Closing the Civic Engagement Gap: The Potential of Action Civics

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When taught in an engaging manner, civic education can help stimulate and motivate students to excel in other academic areas, while simultaneously preparing them to be active citizens in our democracy. As an initial attempt to more systematically analyze civic education practice, this paper presents four case studies of projects in one action civics program, Generation Citizen. While it is a descriptive study and cannot be used to draw conclusions about best practices in civic education, it can raise questions to guide much-needed further research, as well as share lessons learned that may be applicable to schools or organizations.

Generation Citizen's pedagogical approach is action-oriented, community-based, and student-centered. (Figure 1 on p. 266 illustrates the steps of the action civics process, which serve as the framework for the organization's curriculum.) Students take charge of their learning, facilitated by classroom teachers and the organization's volunteer, college-student mentors, to identify and engage important local community issues. As a class, students democratically choose an issue on which to act. Student-centered, project-based learning like this improves student motivation, knowledge retention, understanding, enthusiasm, and appreciation of material.¹ Then students practice action strategies and develop skills to apply (like oral and written persuasive communication), culminating in students taking real-world action on their issue of interest. But student actions don't stop there: students have participated in demonstrations, made documentaries, organized petition drives, and more (as

described in our case studies).

Generation Citizen's other primary strength is its ability to work within the public education system. Being aligned with state education standards in history, English/language arts, and civics for each state in which it operates has increased the credibility and validity of the curriculum among school administrators and teachers, thereby increasing the likelihood of program uptake. Since this curriculum is designed for implementation during the school day, alignment with and reinforcement of state educational standards is particularly important.²

The program's methodology has shown success in civic engagement as well as content knowledge. In two years of operations, participating secondary students demonstrated significant improvements in civic and political engagement and increased participation in other academic classes, as well as an improved understanding of how their government functions and how individual citizens

can work to become agents of change within the community. That knowledge is directly applicable to standardized assessments. The Generation Citizen curriculum guide was recently endorsed by the National Council for the Social Studies.

Case Studies

In two years, Generation Citizen has worked with over 50 classes and 1,000 students in Boston, Providence, and New York City. Students develop a plan and take action on an issue that they care about (learning *about* the political process by participating *in* the political process). The goal is not necessarily for students to change policy in one semester, but rather, to learn about how to take effective action, learn civics knowledge, and become motivated to participate in the future. We present four case studies of past action projects, selected based on the diversity of topics and student experiences.

Local Transportation—Central High School, Providence, Rhode Island

In spring 2010, a class at Central High School took on the issue of student bus passes. The current transportation policy in Providence, Rhode Island, allows students living more than three miles from the school to receive free bus passes, but

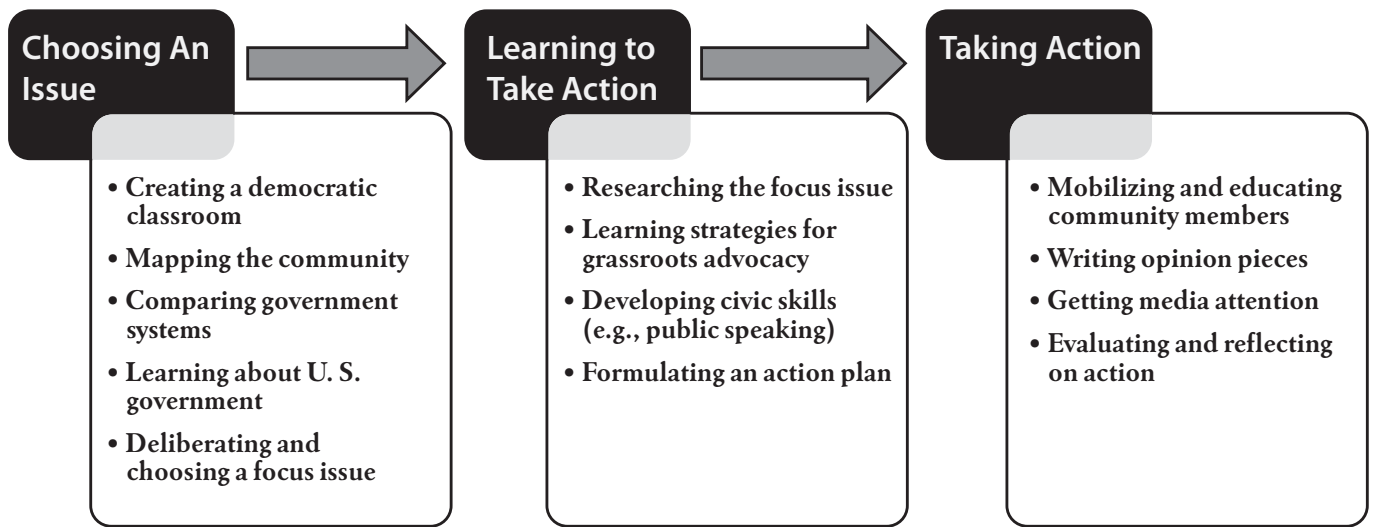


Figure 1. The action civics process, as practiced by Generation Citizen

students living within three miles are expected to walk, drive, or pay full price for the bus. The students perceived an injustice in the fact that students who lived 2.75 miles away from school were expected to walk. The class decided to write a petition to express support for a change in the policy. By the end of the semester they had collected over 450 signatures. They then mailed the petition to several state and local leaders in the hopes of convincing them to re-examine the policy and provide free or reduced-price bus passes to all Central students.

Through this process, the class conducted extensive research on the issue, using newspaper articles, policy papers, and other primary sources to develop their critical analysis and higher-order thinking skills. Discovering that Rhode Island’s bus company raises 40 percent of its revenue from a gas tax led to math, economics, and policy lessons regarding the multiple uses of taxes. Students also developed persuasive communication skills as they prepared to engage with governmental officials in high-level policy conversations, convinced peers and fellow community members to sign a petition, and sent letters with nuanced, informed, and impassioned policy recommendations to their public officials. Through taking action on the busing policy, students advanced research acumen, critical thinking skills, math skills,

oratory abilities, and improved writing abilities.

Gang Violence—Central High School, Hope High School, Providence, Rhode Island

“I’m so happy we are finally getting our voices heard and not just sitting around. We are making a change.”

—9th grader, Central High School, Providence, RI

In February 2009, a series of gang shootings shook the Providence community and affected students at Hope and Central High Schools, many of whom lost friends to the violence. The incident sparked a dialogue among students about the prevalence of gang violence in the community, and both Hope and Central decided to focus on gangs for their action plan.

Students at Hope began by researching past interventions used to prevent gang violence in Providence and meeting with relevant representatives from the Providence police and a prominent non-profit. Ultimately, students decided that the best way to take action was to work with younger students to share what they (the older students) wished they had known when they were in late elementary and early middle school. Hope students partnered with a nearby elementary

school, teaching gang violence prevention workshops to over 100 fifth and sixth graders. The students developed these workshops on their own, honing leadership and communication skills as well as determining which subjects would be age-appropriate for elementary school students. Importantly, leading these workshops on gang violence in a tumultuous time in the community provided the students with a sense of motivation and self-efficacy.

Students at Central decided to focus on raising awareness of gang violence in the community by creating a documentary film. Partnering with the Providence Streetworkers Program, Central students interviewed former gang members, families affected by gang violence, and local residents about the ways that gangs have affected the community. Through this process, students learned about the filming process, prepared and conducted interviews, and decided which footage was most important to include as a final product. The process helped to develop communication and oratory skills, tested their research abilities, and culminated in a final project that inspired and motivated them for the future.

Hunger—Hope High School, Providence, Rhode Island

“We were sitting in class thinking ‘How

can we make this project go from short term to long term?"

—12th grader, Hope High School,
Providence, RI

Rhode Island has been struggling to meet the needs of hungry citizens. Particularly with the economic downturn, food banks in the state have been stressed to feed the 55,000 people who need food assistance every month. Students in a senior history class at Hope High School devised a plan to bring additional revenue to the food banks, without raising existing taxes.

During the 2009–2010 school year, the students worked on a hunger project. As part of their own food drive, which brought in over 1,000 pounds of food, the class collected surveys from their schoolmates. However, they realized that this direct action was not enough. Analyzing the surveys showed that hunger was an issue that directly affected the lives of many students at Hope. Looking toward the future, the class began thinking of ways they could implement sustainable change that could help reduce the negative impacts of hunger in Rhode Island.

Nearly a year later, these students were in front of the Rhode Island House Finance Committee, lobbying for a bill they had helped introduce with their local state assemblywoman. The students' bill, called "Reciprocity Agreements – Setoff of Personal Income Tax," would allow residents to mark any percentage of state income tax refunds as payable to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. In addition to having their bill heard on the floor of the State House, students were profiled in *The Providence Journal*, which highlighted the students' positive impact on state policies through focused civic action.³

School Closings: Boston, Mass.

In fall 2011, students at the Engineering School and Social Justice Academy decided to take action on an issue very pertinent to their lives. The Boston Public Schools had decided to shut down

their schools at the end of the year due to fiscal and performance issues. These students researched the reasons why their schools were being shut down, and, being personally affronted, decided to take action. They wrote letters to local administrators, produced small documentaries using powerful testimonials, and lobbied district officials.

At the end of the day, their efforts were not successful, and their schools closed.

The students, however, demonstrated recognition of a valuable civics lesson in this disappointment: that political change is difficult, and does not come overnight. We hypothesize that the lessons learned from this experience will inform and motivate civic engagement and civic action in the future as well.

The cases profiled here illustrate that action civics programs align with many of the best practices identified in civic

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Students at Hope High School (Providence, RI) participate in a Generation Citizen classroom activity about the branches of government, spring 2011. (Photographer: Molly Mills.)

education research, such as studying government and current events, participating in service learning, and acting not only in simulations, but in real-world democratic processes.⁴ Students who have traditionally been marginalized in our political processes are often able to effectively take action, and when appropriate opportunities for reflection are present, can also learn from less successful experiences. However, these cases also leave many questions yet to be answered. What distinguishes projects that enhance students' knowledge, skills, and motivation from those that have little impact? What contextual factors enhance the implementation of action civics programs in some schools and communities? What are the long-term effects of action civics programs?

Conclusion

While school leaders may agree that students must learn civic competency with the same zeal given to literacy and numeracy, they may be unsure how to support the development of active citizenship. This is especially true amidst pressure to adhere to standards and raise test scores, which may not consider aspects of civic and academic participation (such as

complex skills and motivation). We must broaden standards and thus instruction to include skills and motivation in addition to knowledge, embodying not only a broader vision of what students need to learn in order to participate in schools and society, but also how students learn best. Action civics has the potential to kick-start this process by helping to close both the academic achievement and civic engagement gaps. The above case studies highlight how a student-centered, action-oriented, standards-aligned approach to civics education can be implemented in a variety of school and community contexts. More research is needed to identify the effects of this approach on students, schools, and communities. Through renewed attention to civic knowledge, skills, motivation, and participation, schools can empower the next generation of young people in figuring out how to make a difference. 🗳️

Notes

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3. Bob Kerr, "These Students Found a Way to Make a Difference," *Providence Journal* (May 11, 2011).
4. Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (2003). Retrieved from http://civicmissionofschools.org/cms/site/campaign/cms_report.html.

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