

Taking Informed Action to Engage Students in Civic Life

Meira Levinson and Peter Levine

The C3 Framework exhibits a signature commitment to civic action from the very start, making clear even in the title its aim to guide states in preparing students for college, career, and civic life. Fittingly, therefore, students' arc of inquiry ends (and then ideally begins anew) in the fourth dimension of the C3 Framework with their "Taking Informed Action." Action is essential to the inquiry arc—and even more fundamentally, to the social studies as a whole—because, as Aristotle first argued, learning to be an active and responsible citizen requires experience. Texts and examples can help, but children learn to be citizens by working together as citizens. That means that an essential element of social studies education is experiential: practicing the arts and habits of citizenship collaboratively.

This insight captures not only what we know about successful social studies education, but also what cognitive scientists and educators know about all deep learning. Students learn to read, for example, in large part by reading. Skilled teachers will guide students' reading, scaffold their encounters with challenging texts, and teach them essential metacognitive strategies. But all of this work takes place in the context of students' actually reading texts. Similarly, students learn mathematics by doing math. They learn science in large part by conducting scientific experiments themselves, not just by learning about others' scientific findings. They learn to dance, to play basketball, and to persevere in the face of failure by actually dancing, shooting hoops, and persevering. Students need similar guided experiential opportunities to take informed action throughout their K-12 schooling in order to learn how to engage productively in civic life.

Taking Informed Action in Schools: A Historical Perspective

Good teachers have always asked students to take civic action as part of

their social studies education, in part because public schools were founded in the United States for the express purpose of preparing young citizens for active engagement in civic life. The champion of universal public education, Horace Mann of Massachusetts, wrote in 1846 that "since the achievement of American independence, the universal and ever-repeated argument in favor of public schools has been, that the general intelligence which they are capable of diffusing, is indispensable to the continuance of republican government."¹

In 1915, for example, the U.S. Bureau of Education (the forerunner of today's Department of Education) formally endorsed an approach called "community civics," which involved a strong element of action outside the school.² The Bureau's guide for teachers named action "as the end of all good citizenship and of all good teaching." It drew the implications for pedagogy: "A lesson in community civics is not complete unless it leaves with the pupil a sense of his personal responsibility and results in right action." For example,

"The good citizen should be able to write a courteous letter to the public official. Practice in writing such letters should be given to pupils, preferably relating to actual conditions observed by the pupils, or containing practical suggestions by them." Moreover, the manual advised, "It is sometimes desirable for the class to undertake a special piece of work of direct use to the community." In an elaborate real example that the manual described, students were concerned about the impact of a snowstorm on their city, learned about the ordinance that required homeowners to shovel, and noted that many residents were out of compliance. They considered various responses, including "speak[ing] personally to offenders," but decided that would be "slightly officious and perhaps offensive to older citizens." Finally, they created a paid snow-shoveling service that they offered to seniors.³

Other well-documented examples of community civics in action include Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, New York, where in 1948 students tackled negative stereotypes about their community by mapping the neighborhood's actual needs and assets in order to influence the news media.⁴ Since 1995, students at Broad Meadow Middle School in Quincy, Massachusetts, have supported the development and maintenance of a school in Pakistan in honor of Iqbal Masih, an anti-child-labor activist who was killed at 12 years old.

Taking Informed Action in Twenty-First Century Schools

As in the past, ambitious and rigorous social studies educators continue to provide their students opportunities to take informed action about issues of civic concern. Many compelling examples come from student-sponsored legislation. In Iowa in 2008, for instance, seventh-grade students from West Branch Middle School did work leading to the introduction and passage of a law requiring oil reclamation from untreated oil filters.⁵ In 2011, Hope High School students drew upon their economic and civic knowledge to propose an amendment to allow Rhode Island residents to redirect a portion of their state income-tax refund to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. Other forms of informed civic action are more direct. In a nationwide survey of high school civics and government teachers conducted last summer, some reported that their students conducted exit polls, ran mock elections in local elementary and middle schools, and completed voter registration forms in anticipation of the 2012 presidential election.⁶

Nor is informed student action limited to civics. History teachers across the nation have helped their students create public history exhibits that educate community members about important aspects of local history. In Peterborough, New Hampshire, for example, middle school students at South Meadow School curated an exhibit about the Contoocook River that combined historical and geographic inquiry. Their exhibit included a 3D watershed map, historical diaries and other texts, student-created artworks, and displays of artifacts.

These initiatives in some cases reflect state standards that encourage action of various forms.⁷ Hawaii, for example, requires students to come to a consensus on issues and then take action to gain community involvement. Minnesota requires students to demonstrate the skills necessary to participate in an election, including registering to vote, identifying and evaluating candidates

and issues, and casting a ballot. Nevada's standards call for active participation in civic and community life. But explicit and clear action standards are relatively rare or buried amid many pages of standards about specific topics from history and politics.

Thus the C3 Framework offers a historic, and essential, opportunity to expand and deepen students' engagement in civic life through action. In a survey of young adults (18–24) that CIRCLE conducted in 2012, just 27% recalled

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that they had “done a project in the community” for their high school social studies class. To be sure, students can also take action inside the classroom or school, but this survey of community projects suggests that most never experience that form of engagement. And high-quality opportunities for action are particularly rare in schools serving lower-income students, exacerbating a civic empowerment gap between historically privileged and marginalized youth. For instance, middle-class students whose parents attended college are far more likely to get opportunities to discuss current events or other contentious issues, to participate in simulations such as Model UN, to present arguments backed by evidence in a public forum, or to meet with community leaders.⁸

Furthermore, students' opportunities for taking action are often limited these days to one form of action: namely,

service learning. In 2008, almost one quarter of all K-12 schools offered service-learning: community service projects that connect to the academic content of a course.⁹ Research shows positive results when teachers allocate substantial amounts of time to the project, develop strong partnerships with organizations outside the school, challenge students intellectually and academically, and enable students to address important social issues. Oftentimes these demanding criteria are not met, however, and the service activity has little to no effect on students' civic learning. Furthermore, recent research with young adults has found that community service in high school was positively related to civic engagement later on only if the young people remembered that they had learned “about possible causes of and solutions to social problems” that they were addressing.¹⁰ Other research has similarly found that service experiences beget more service and volunteerism, while students who have the opportunity to participate in explicitly civic and political activities in school are more likely to be civically and politically engaged in the future.¹¹

State standards, guided by the C3 Framework, need therefore to incorporate a wide variety of student action as part of social studies. Experiential social studies takes many forms, including:

- making collaborative decisions within the school or classroom;
- starting, leading, and sustaining student organizations;
- conducting community-based research;
- producing student journalism and media;
- making presentations to public audiences or contacting the news media; and
- campaigning for changes in politics or public opinion.

Although particular approaches may not be appropriate for specific students,

schools, communities, or contexts, all students should experience an appropriate mix of these forms during their K-12 education in the social studies.

Conclusion

By regularly taking informed action in response to rigorous, sustained inquiry in the social studies, students have opportunities to contribute to—even to co-create—a more engaged, democratic, civil, and generally revitalized public life. A survey conducted by CIRCLE last year found that 98 percent of teachers said that it was very important or essential to teach students to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and jury duty. Many offered strong supportive statements, such as “It’s why I get up at 5:30 a.m. every morning.” Students, too, respond well to the idea that they can take responsible action. Once action takes its rightful place in the social studies, courses will no longer be greeted with groans, indifference, or questions about “Why do we have to learn this?”

Even more to the point, the social studies will be able to regain ground as an essential component of education for college, career, and citizenship. There is promising initial data that social studies knowledge increases students’ reading comprehension skills, and that social studies action can positively impact students’ academic success in high school and college.¹² Students’ active engagement can also improve classroom management, discipline, and school culture.¹³ And most important of all, it prepares children to take on the demanding responsibilities of engaged, responsible citizenship over a lifetime. ●

Notes

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5. James Youniss, “How to Enrich Civic Education and Sustain Democracy,” in *Making Civics Count*, 115-133.
6. Data collected for the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement” (Medford, Mass.: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2013); see p. 44-45 for information on the survey.
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