Civic Engagement:
Teaching Ethical Citizenship in the Classroom

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Abstract
This paper explores three keys to teaching ethical citizenship in the classroom. First, educators must emphasize the importance of civic engagement in the classroom. The Case Foundation recently called for a civic renewal movement, but in doing so it overlooked the integral role that classrooms at the college level should play in such a process. In contrast, this paper argues that the classroom must play an active role in cultivating the skills, habits, and values that are the foundation for civic engagement. Second, this paper maintains that democratizing the classroom helps prepare students for the opportunities and responsibilities attached to democratic citizenship. By replacing lectures with discussions, encouraging regular class participation, and using peer reviews for written assignments, educators can democratize their classrooms. Third, in order to encourage good citizenship, educators must draw wisely from the classical traditions while simultaneously preparing students to adapt to an increasingly diverse world. The scholar Martha Nussbaum has been particularly important in showing how a liberal arts education can help educators teach students to ask the big questions, construct a classroom environment in which students can weigh ethical quandaries, and develop a richer understanding of their status as citizens. Finally, this paper also draws on the author’s experiences in teaching in Valparaiso University’s first-year humanities Core program.

There is little doubt that the lifeblood of a democracy depends on an educated and engaged citizenry. The challenge, however, occurs when that society has to choose the steps with which to educate its citizenry. This challenge may be increasing as a spate of recent studies has condemned the quality of civic life in the United States. For instance, the Civic Health Index of the National Conference on Citizenship provides sobering evidence that civic life in the United States has deteriorated dramatically over the past three decades. Through analysis of forty indicators, the study found a “nation of spectators” which was wracked by divisiveness, distrust, and disconnectedness.

Likewise, scholars such as Robert Putnam have evidence of a society that no longer has a vital civic life. These findings on the United States’ ailing civic life bring to mind the words of the nineteenth-century educational reformer Horace Mann, who astutely noted, “It may be an easy thing to make a republic, but it is a very laborious thing to make republicans.” Mann’s statement provides a useful caveat about the difficulty in preparing an educated and engaged citizenry. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we press forward and ask: What can citizens do — especially at colleges and universities — to improve the civic health of our youth?

I have concluded from my experiences teaching at the university level that there are three keys to teaching ethical citizenship in the classroom. First, educators must emphasize the importance of civic engagement in their classrooms, cultivating an environment in which students learn how to think about important civic concerns and to participate actively in their communities. They should not rely on traditional civics courses or service learning to fulfill this need. In particular, I encourage educators to use the Case Foundation’s
“Citizens at the Center: A New Approach to Civic Engagement” as a guiding source to help them prepare students to become active and useful citizens. Only I offer one significant distinction. The Case Foundation seeks to develop an ethos of civic engagement in larger communities and, concomitantly, discounts the role of the university classroom in aiding with this broader process. In contrast, I maintain that in order to achieve a “citizen-centered” populace, educators must dedicate themselves to teaching students in the classroom about the possibilities afforded by civic engagement. Second, in order to increase civic activity amongst students, professors must create structural changes to democratize the classroom. Students should be at the center of the classroom — not the professor. This practice, of course, will demand that faculty members invite chaos into their classrooms, where discussion, with all of its twists, turns, and meanderings, must play a greater role than the lecture, but the payoff is that a democratized classroom prepares students for the demands of democratic citizenship. Finally, in order to aid students to become engaged and ethical citizens, educators must draw wisely from the liberal arts traditions while simultaneously preparing students to adapt to and navigate a world that is increasingly diverse. The scholar Martha Nussbaum has been particularly important in showing how lessons from the classics can help educators teach students to ask the big questions, construct a classroom environment in which students can weigh the ethical quandaries of their times, and develop a richer understanding of their status as citizens.

A Model for Civic Engagement

Throughout American history educational leaders have wrestled with the most effective methods for creating a capable citizenry. When the Case Foundation set out to find the best approaches to expand civic engagement and service, it did not endorse traditional civics classes which teach the roles of government or classes that provide cultural literacy. Indeed, it focused little on civic education. Instead, the Case Foundation decided that it was time to move beyond an emphasis on “voting and volunteering, which are necessary to a healthy democracy,” but “insufficient to embed a sustainable, deep, and broad cultural ethos of engagement.” The study found that while “service already is a deeply embedded value in American culture,” unfortunately it “may be less a springboard for deeper engagement in civic life and more a temporary panacea to the alienation and sense of being unable to ‘make a difference’ that many Americans feel.”

Studies of voting patterns also seemed a less than stellar indicator of civic health, in large measure because the nation’s political discourse is so steeped in spin and partisanship that it breeds cynicism and apathy. Taking these limitations into account, the Case Foundation wisely argued that it is time to move “beyond the tactics of civic engagement (voting or volunteering). . . to the process of civic engagement.” The chief advantage of such a shift in strategy is that it should allow communities to focus on “culture change” instead of focusing on short-term outcomes or tactics.

With America’s civic spirit flagging, members of the Case Foundation believe that communities around the United States need to embark on a “broader civic renewal movement.” As part of the larger civic engagement tradition, its report calls for “citizen-
centered approaches” which consider people as “proactive citizens rather than consumers of services.” To that end, these citizen-centered approaches should focus on creating opportunities for ordinary citizens to come together, deliberate, and take action collectively to address public problems or issues that citizens themselves define as important and in ways that citizens themselves decide are appropriate and/or needed—whether it is political action, community service, volunteering, or organizing.

By fostering greater participation and better relationships in civic and political processes, the Case Foundation sets as its goal to foster self-government in which citizens can reach their own decisions through open civic deliberation that involves “a wide cross-section of the entire community.” The report makes clear that the deliberative process is essential, and cannot be slighted no matter how “messy or complex” it is. The report also importantly acknowledges that people can tire if there is only talk and no action, because “deliberation without work is empty.”

The Case Foundation is correct to endorse the effectiveness and inherent power of civic engagement as a way to bring energy and renewal to our communities. By embracing these deliberative processes citizens develop “patterns of habits, values, and attitudes” which can help create “new civic cultures.” The democratic process can flourish when people are not pursuing short-term goals, but culture changes in a non-partisan way and when experts cannot dominate local proceedings. This transformation occurs in large measure because “embedding a deeper ethic of civic engagement across communities” means that this ethos “becomes part and parcel of everyday life, rather than episodic activities such as volunteering or voting.” Moreover, this ethic of engagement will bring a spirit of renewal because as the president of the Kettering Foundation explains, “Organic, citizen-based democracy is not an alternative form of politics like direct democracy; it is the foundation for democratic institutions and representative government.”

While the Case Foundation has made a tremendous effort to champion its formula for civic engagement, ultimately this organization has underestimated the role that universities can — and must — play in civic renewal. The Case Foundation envisions universities merely as “mediating institutions” that help bring communities together or develop innovative service learning projects. But universities must play an essential role in creating and cultivating a deep rooted ethos of civic engagement. Toward the end of its report the Case Foundation proclaims that the “biggest question is whether and to what extent citizen-driven and citizen-centered approaches help to embed” such an ethos. The Foundation states that this is an issue that is yet to be studied. But we cannot rely exclusively on the actual process of civic engagement to generate its own engaged citizens. Instead, educators must look to their school systems — from elementary schools to universities — to cultivate such “habits, values, and attitudes,” as well as civic skills such as deliberation, organization, and collaboration in order to weave an ethic of engagement right into the tapestry of their students’ education.
Democratizing the Classroom

In order to achieve the level of civic renewal that the Case Foundation seeks, it is imperative that educators do the most we can at the university level to prepare our students for citizenship. To that end, I recommend taking the Case Foundation’s “citizen-centered” model of civic engagement and applying it to the classroom in order to create a student-centered environment designed to prepare students for the opportunities and responsibilities that come with citizenship. I have employed this model at Valparaiso University, a private Lutheran college located in Northwest Indiana with a relatively homogeneous student body of approximately 3,500 undergraduates who are primarily white, Midwestern Christians. In particular, we have a required first-year humanities course (the “Core,” with a maximum enrollment of 20 students per section) that allows me to embark on this practice of teaching citizenship in two distinctive but reinforcing ways. First, the Core allows me to democratize the classroom — particularly through structural changes — so that my students can develop habits and skills which are necessary to become engaged citizens. Second, the Core course has one unit which deals expressly with the challenges of citizenship (which I will return to in the next section). Ultimately, while courses at other institutions might not emphasize the issues of citizenship nearly as much as the Core does, the techniques used in this class are applicable to many — if not most — other courses in the humanities when they have small enrollments (25 students or fewer).

In order to democratize the classroom it is necessary to recognize that most university classrooms simply are not democratic and that undemocratic classrooms are not the best environments for forging active citizens for a democratic or representative system. Indeed, several years ago the Kettering Foundation pointed out the obvious: “Most colleges and universities are content to educate for democracy, not practice it.” I find this conclusion deeply troubling and agree with an educator who warns that “We need to think very seriously about how we educate for democracy within institutional structures that will never be, in any strict sense, democracies themselves.”

But how do we create a more democratic college education? The Valparaiso Core virtually has eliminated lectures and in its place highlighted discussion. This decision reflects the sentiment of critics of the hierarchical classroom who maintain that when experts lecture students they do not “engage them in the conversation, in active learning, or in any kind of critical thinking.” Instead, Core class embraces the scholarly advice which acknowledges that teaching citizenship demands that educators also look at “the ways in which [students] should learn.” Of course, teaching in the discussion format invites chaos into the classroom which students can criticize as inefficient or even, sometimes to my dismay, as pointless. But there is also a virtue in this chaos — in this unwieldy deliberative process. Indeed, class discussion, like public deliberation, has the advantage of being a dialogical act rather than a monological one. In short, it is inherently a more democratic process with the added benefit that students often learn more from listening to one another as compared to listening (or not listening!) to me. Therefore, when my students grouse because they think we talked in circles on a particular day, my
responsibility is to reinforce the importance of the deliberative process and the need for our respect for it.  

In order to encourage deliberative democracy in the Core, I emphasize the role of participation in the classroom from the first day when I hand out the syllabus. I have learned that the best way to ensure a high rate of student engagement is to state my expectations at the beginning of the semester so that every student comes to class prepared to participate each class — and then participates each class. Participation, I explain, begins with two fundamental complementary skills: listening and speaking. Both these qualities are essential if the class is going to reach my goal for building a safe, honest, and energetic community based on the free exchange of ideas. If students do not listen respectfully when others talk it is necessary to stop the conversation and gain everyone’s attention. If some students do not contribute, it is incumbent on me and their peers to follow through on the guidelines until participation becomes a regular practice and then eventually a habit. If the standards are not met, others receive the subtle message that they need not participate either and the social contract begins to fray. Also, each class I persistently use what Mike Rose calls “the power of invitation” so that my students feel more comfortable in the classroom and can embrace the more active roles that are demanded of them in a student-centered environment.

The process of creating regular, active participation in the classroom is not easy, however, because our educational systems privilege the written word over the spoken word. Indeed, quiet students often come up to me and inform me that they are shy and do not speak in class. The subtext, of course, is that previous teachers have not made them speak, that not speaking in class is acceptable classroom behavior, and that my demands are what is unacceptable. At the same time, I have never had a student say to me, “I’m sorry but I’m not going to turn that paper in because quite frankly, Professor, I don’t write papers.” Why is there such a large discrepancy between educators’ expectations for writing and participation? Professors deem the teaching of writing to be an essential role of the university; teaching oral skills, however, does not meet such a high standard. But we continue with such misguided expectations at our own peril. As Peter Levine, executive director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, points out: “we don’t even know how to talk publicly in groups anymore.”

Scott London, however, explains that talking publicly — the tradition of “deliberative dialogue” — is so important because it is not simply about talking together but thinking together and this process helps communities not merely solve problems but gain a common understanding about what divides them. For these reasons, it is incumbent on universities to create environments for active participation where students can develop the skills necessary for civic engagement.

Another important tool for democratizing the classroom is the use of “collaborative peer writing groups” to evaluate students’ papers. Of course, there are some preconditions. Successful peer groups require regular attendance, thorough preparation for each meeting, as well as reading and commenting on papers in a respectful and helpful manner. When these conditions are met, peer review groups allow students to develop “a
strong group identity and sense of shared community.26 Moreover, these groups encourage deeper deliberation, as students not only reflect upon each others’ writing but, perhaps more importantly, each others’ ideas as well. To be fair, some instructors consider peer review groups a risky practice because they lose some control over the classroom, the process itself is time consuming, and not every group works effectively. My experiences, however, show that the strengths outweigh the weaknesses; students acquire the habits and skills to read one another’s work critically and reflectively, as well as a democratic spirit. According to Nedra Reynolds, a writing expert, the “teamwork and collaboration” that students learn from doing peer review will prepare them “for future collaborations or for the workplace.”27 But peer review groups can do more than that. Peer groups also prepare students for citizenship, since they are communities that “offer the privileges of belonging” as well as an insistence “on responsible membership.”28 In short, these groups are akin to little experimental labs of democracy that allow students to model the kinds of behavior that are necessary for a civically engaged society.

Another way to enhance democratization of the classroom is to repeatedly inform students that a course is “their class — or our class, but it is not my class.” This point naturally would be truer if my Core students and I drew up the syllabus together at the beginning of the semester, rather than working from a common course syllabus. But be that as it may, I have learned that verbal reinforcement coupled with attending to the cultivation of new habits of active participation can go a long way during a semester. Regularly reminding students that they as individuals — and collectively — have more ability to control the agenda of the Core classroom than their instructor is a lesson that students can grasp intellectually; yet it is a lesson that demands significant repetition before it becomes a habit. To aid this process, I leave class occasionally during the semester so that the students can set the class agenda or complete the material together on their own. Likewise, when a conference forces me away from the classroom, the students still meet because the class culture recognizes that students can cover the assigned material in an intelligent, imaginative, and thorough way without the professor’s presence. Giving up power as an instructor can be a difficult, and even a frightening, thing to do. But having 20 students prove their mettle when you are not in the classroom — or even in town — reflects empowered students who are using a democratic classroom to develop the skills necessary to become ethical citizens.

**Asking the Big Questions**

Universities have a responsibility to produce ethical citizens. But this task seems Herculean when studies show that outside of participation in service projects today’s youth are civically disengaged.29 Various reports indicate that students do not like, or for that matter, follow politics. This point is perhaps best captured by a poll which found that 64 percent of surveyed youth in the United States (ages 15 to 26) knew the latest “American Idol,” but only 10 percent could name the Speaker of the House of Representatives.30 Results from a survey from the Association of American Colleges and Universities give further pause. Examining why students attend college makes clear that the ideal of liberal education is on the decline while the university as a vocational — or
even trade — school is rapidly gaining popularity. According to an article on the study’s findings in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “students consider the least important outcomes of a college education [to be] values and ethics, an appreciation of cultural diversity, global awareness, and civic responsibility.” These students acknowledge “that college is important to their success in the work force, but they do not recognize its role in preparing them as citizens, community participants, and thoughtful people.” The weight of such evidence might make someone who is thinking of joining the chorus for civic renewal stop, turn around, and make a beeline back into the comfort and security of the Ivory Tower.

Nevertheless, there is also positive evidence which indicates that universities can create laboratories of democracy that develop ethical citizens. For instance, Campus Compact is a national coalition that represents over one thousand colleges and universities in its efforts to foster civic and social responsibility through community service, civic engagement, and service learning. Similarly Project Pericles, an organization founded by the philanthropist Eugene Lang, helps students become more active in politics and leadership on over one hundred campuses. But we need not look only to designated programs for civic preparedness to find important efforts in the education of a new generation of citizens. Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher and ethicist, found that classrooms across North America that stress the liberal arts tradition also serve as wonderful experiments in democracy by drawing on classical ideals from such standards as Socrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics. An optimistic Nussbaum believes that, “Never before have there been so many talented and committed young faculty so broadly dispersed in institutions of so many different kinds, thinking about difficult issues connecting education with citizenship.” Moreover, another educator notes that while “students don’t like politics they do like deliberation and the sustained dialogue process,” which are essential skills for civic engagement.

When I teach the citizenship unit of the Core, the goal is to turn the classroom into a laboratory of democracy which prepares my students to become ethical citizens who are capable of confronting the big questions. In particular, I want my students to examine the two different types of big questions that *Liberal Education* labels “contemporary” and “enduring.” According to editor, David Tritelli, contemporary big questions are “‘big’ in the sense that they affect broad sectors of society or even whole populations.” In contrast, enduring big questions “are the fundamental questions of what it means to be human”; in short, they are questions that are universal in the asking, but not in the answering. The key to the success of this unit is rooted in the liberal arts tradition, as the class explores how lessons from these texts can help teacher and student alike prepare for the upcoming challenges that they will face in the twenty-first century. In particular, Martha Nussbaum’s efforts to balance tradition and innovation are a sound foundation for the class’s immersion into this experiment in civic engagement.

In order for this laboratory of democracy to work, students must embrace the practice of critical thinking. Indeed, students do not need professors to provide them with answers to the big questions; rather, as W. Robert Connor writes, students need their instructors to offer “vocabularies, metaphors, exempla, and modes of thought” that can help them reach
their own conclusions. Connor would assuredly agree with Malcolm X’s message to the youth of Mississippi in 1964 that “The most important thing that we can learn to do today is think for ourselves.” But critical thinking also demands that we strip down the highest altars and look at them anew with fresh eyes. According to Nussbaum, the central tenets of the Western philosophical tradition do not demand retrenchment against other cultures or traditions; instead a “liberal” education should liberate people who are unthinkingly bound by custom and tradition. Thus, Socrates’ belief that a citizen must lead an “examined life,” becomes a call for “critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions,” and good citizenship demands the questioning of all traditions, authorities, and beliefs before they are to be accepted. In other words, civic engagement is predicated on critical inquiry and instructors should not let their students shy away from the big questions; rather, they must guide their students to them. Learning to ask probing questions is essential to critical thinking, and to encourage the skill of asking questions, some educational experts go so far as to recommend that teachers set aside a class or two when students can do nothing but ask questions.

Ethical citizenship requires deliberating over the big questions. Meaningful civic engagement cannot take place without this step. To facilitate a healthy respect for inquiry I start the unit with several broad framing questions about citizenship. For instance, I ask, what is a good citizen? Here it might be useful to compare and contrast Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne’s rubric for three different kinds of good citizen: a “personally responsible citizen” who is of excellent character and believes in hard work and sacrifice; a “participatory citizen” who regularly contributes to efforts to improve the community; and a “justice oriented citizen” who seeks to create systemic change to eliminate societal injustice. Additionally, I ask my students whether they can rank their different loyalties (such as family, friends, country, God, etc.) in a hierarchical order? Is it always important to follow the law or is civil disobedience a legitimate action? How do we form the ideal community? Is there a common good?

After the students wrestle with these central questions based on their own experiences, we turn to the assigned texts which will provide additional fodder. Each year the unit covers about six texts, ranging from classical tracts to recent books and films, though the texts change periodically. This past year, the unit included Plato’s Apology and Crito, Sophocles’ Antigone, William Riordon’s Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, Tracy Kidder’s Mountains Beyond Mountains, the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul Haggis’ Crash. In an age when we reify family, what are students to make of Socrates’ principles as a father and as a citizen when he says, “Do not value either your children or your life or anything else more than goodness”? Is George Washington Plunkitt, the Tammany Hall ward boss, a good citizen? Granted, he saw his opportunities and he took them, but, as Jane Addams observed, the political boss also delivered goods and services (and perhaps justice?) to his followers that reformers did not. Tracy Kidder’s study of Dr. Paul Farmer urging medical aid for the dispossessed in Haiti and other underserved populations puts the question of interconnectedness in a global context and allows students to explore what they believe about the possible limitations on the common good. How, then, should medical resources be divided when there are such vast economic discrepancies in the world? Who should Westerners consider their neighbors, which the Sermon on the Mount
asks them to love, and who might they ignore? Once Farmer sees these discrepancies in care what is his responsibility as an individual? Farmer’s story, in particular, asks the students to reconsider how they want to engage in the human community. By contending with these questions and the ensuing discussions, the students are honing the foundational skills of ethical citizenship that they will be able to use the rest of their lives.

Conclusion

Teaching ethical citizenship in the classroom is an important task for universities in the twenty-first century. While institutions of higher learning are currently transforming themselves from “ivory towers” into “engaged universities” that partner with their local communities and emphasize the merits of service learning, educators must not overlook the fact that the classroom itself still can — and must — be an incubator for democracy. When institutions such as the Case Foundation call for increased civic engagement in communities across the United States, but simultaneously downplay the role that the university should play in this process, we would be remiss to listen to such a message. In order to have the “civic renewal movement” that the Case Foundation wants, citizens must be prepared to become civically active. But such a result cannot occur unless college classrooms help young citizens acquire the habits, skills, and values that are essential to developing an ethos of civic engagement. In my experience with the Valparaiso first-year humanities course, students come into my class with little sense of themselves as citizens; or as the students term it, they live in “the bubble.” But by democratizing the classroom and drawing on the liberal arts tradition in order to ask the big questions, students will be better prepared for the challenges of becoming citizens in a world that is increasingly diverse and complex.

Notes


5. Steven and Jean Case founded the Case Foundation in 1997. The Cases were active in the online revolution. Steven Case was the co-founder, chairman, and CEO of
Amercia Online, Inc. and Jean Case served as a senior executive with the company. Their foundation emphasizes three objectives: “Encouraging collaboration; supporting successful leaders; and fostering entrepreneurship in the nonprofit sector.” For more information about the Case Foundation, see http://www.casefoundation.org/about/overview.


11. Ibid., 1, 4.


17. Ibid., 8, 11. The inventor Charles Kettering created the Kettering Foundation in 1927. The non-partisan research organization focuses its work around the following central question: “What does it take to make democracy focus as it should?” For more information on the Kettering Foundation, see http://www.kettering.org/about/history.aspx.
18. Gibson, Citizens at the Center, 22, 17.

19. Ibid., 23.


28. Ibid., 25.


37. Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity, 8. Though Nussbaum has learned these lessons from Greek and Roman civilization, she forthrightly acknowledges that other traditions maintain similar notions.

38. Ibid, 8–9.

39. Postman and Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, 196.


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We take the phrase of “civic engagement” as a pragmatically necessary compromise to the multiplicity of phrases and terms signaling academic programs engaged in community-based models of teaching, learning and research. It includes information relevant to the areas of learning in civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices/action. (See the reference list at the end of this section.) The author of this section of the text focused on a consideration of best practices in civic engagement teaching and learning.

Chart 1: Summary of Literature Review. CIVIC KNOWLEDGE. Other citizenship skills discussed in the literature include networking (Flanagan & Levin, 2010), negotiating, and effecting change (Dudley et al., 1999). Civic engagement or civic participation is any individual or group activity addressing issues of public concern. Civic engagement includes communities working together or individuals working alone in both political and non-political actions to protect public values or make a change in a community. The goal of civic engagement is to address public concerns and promote the quality of the community.

2.3. Schools and teaching civic engagement beyond self-regarding individualism

In addition to describing a context of self-regarding individualism that influences schools, I recognize different traditions of teaching students beyond this context in the US (Ravitch, 2008; Semel & Sadovnik, 1995). Dewey (1927, 2005), for example, advocated for democratic education so students could challenge the social barriers resulting from self-interest.