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Using Civic Participation and Civic Reasoning to Shape our Future and Education

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Abstract

Actualizing a preferred future relies on citizens who are prepared to effectively engage perhaps the most fundamental civic question: 'What should we do?' (Levine, 2016; Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018). It is a question that arises when people face a problem, must reach a decision, or must figure out how to flourish together as a group. This question is closely tied to the key question posed by the International Commission on the Futures of Education: 'What do we want to become?' Engaging both questions is a useful way for us to envision education in the future. These questions push us to consider not only what we merely *can* do, but also what is *right* for us to do in light of our responsibilities to others. Civic reasoning is the sort of reasoning we do as we answer the question, 'What should we do?' Civic discourse is a means or method by which people engage in civic reasoning. Efforts to envision improved education and futures should foreground civic reasoning and discourse as both a means and ends of citizen participation. They are important for the ways in which they directly engage citizens and for their products, which lead to future civic action and better futures.

Introduction

We should not merely adapt education to a changing world; we should proactively shape education and the world. The futures of education that we envision must be intentionally plural, allowing for an array of possibilities and diversity in learning around the globe. Actualizing preferred futures that meet our individual and collective needs well relies on citizens who are prepared to participate, who strive to fulfill democratic values, and who work through collective action to improve our world.

We need citizens who are equipped to effectively engage perhaps the most fundamental civic question: 'What should we do?' (Levine, 2016; Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018; Stitzlein, 2020). This question arises when people must reach decisions about how to handle situations, changes, or challenges, which includes making decisions about the futures that we desire. This question also arises when people are primarily concerned with how to flourish together as a group, or in UNESCO's terminology: 'learning to live together' (UNESCO, 1996: 20). We ask this civic question as we examine our interdependence, take up common projects that are mutually beneficial, and manage our conflicts.

Of course, this civic question is closely tied to the key question posed by the International Commission on the Futures of Education: 'What do we want to become?' This variation challenges us to not only to figure out how we want to act, but also to articulate the goals of that action, including the sort of people and society that we seek. These goals may also entail producing tangible objects, constructing norms of shared living, and achieving other outcomes that may rely upon empirical investigations and problem solving.

These questions push us to consider the consequences of our discussions, urging us to contemplate not only what we merely *can* do, but also what is *right* for us to do in light of our responsibilities to others. While these questions emphasize our shared fate, a 'we' cannot be assumed. Instead, part of taking up these civic questions is working through past exclusions, such as barring of females from schools and decision making, to create more just educational futures. And part of building democratic culture is nurturing a broad and inclusive 'we' rather than a 'me,' where citizens recognize and value their role and responsibilities as part of that 'we' and foster a sense of solidarity in a common humanity (UNESCO, 2020b: 80).

Civic reasoning is the sort of reasoning we do as we answer the question, 'What should we do?' Civic discourse is a means or method by which people engage in civic reasoning (Stitzlein, 2020). Engaging both 'What should we do?' and 'What do we want to become?' is a useful way to employ civic reasoning and discourse to pursue desirable educational futures. But, importantly, doing so is also central to developing the civic participation of citizens. In other words, we not only need to enact civic reasoning and discourse to figure out good educational futures, but we also need to teach and practice civic reasoning and discourse in order to produce citizens who are ready to take up the task of shaping our future world.

In this report, I argue that efforts to envision improved education and citizen participation should foreground civic reasoning and discourse as both a means and ends of citizen education. Civic reasoning and discourse are important for the ways in which they directly engage citizens in practicing democracy and for their products, which can sustain democratic life and lead to future civic action. I begin by defining civic reasoning and discourse, showing their importance to vibrant democracies and flourishing communities. I then build upon the UNESCO dimensions of world citizenship – socioemotional, cognitive and behavioral – by shedding light on some of the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that compose those dimensions and support good civic reasoning and discourse (UNESCO, 2013). These include inquiry, historical and political knowledge, critical thinking, and political dissent. They are supported by listening, empathy, civility and collaboration. They are enacted through discussion and deliberation. I suggest that we must teach these using inquiry-based action and experiential civic education in order to develop good citizens. At the same time, we must also employ civic reasoning and discourse so that we can work together to re-envision education and pursue preferred educational futures. Civic reasoning and discourse are at the heart of the participation needed to imagine and enact desired futures, especially those that include active citizen participation.

Defining Civic Reasoning and Discourse

Civic reasoning is the reasoning we do about what we should do (Stitzlein, 2020). Civic reasoning is not something one undertakes alone, in part because one is rarely capable of doing so; few individuals have the necessary knowledge, power or resources. Even when we undertake seemingly individual civic acts such as selecting which candidate earns our vote, our choices are deeply impacted by media, family, religious communities and more. Typically, civic reasoning is a plural endeavor that requires bringing together the ideas and experiences of multiple people who are connected in some way. This connection may stem from their citizenship in a nation-state, from their relationship to a shared issue or problem, or even simply from the need to figure out how to best relate to those who share our space or resources. These connections then raise ethical stakes, as we must consider how our choices and actions may impact others.

Civic discourse is a means or method by which we engage in civic reasoning, most often through discussion or deliberation. Diana Hess describes discussion as,

> dialogue between or among people. It involves, at a minimum, the exchange of information about a topic (e.g., a controversy, a problem, an event, a person, etc.). Second, discussion is a particular approach to constructing knowledge that is predicated on the belief that the most powerful ideas can be produced when people are expressing their ideas on a topic and listening to others express theirs. (2009: 14)

This social endeavor brings the resources of collective thinking and action to bear as we answer, 'What should we do?' Working with others through dialogue, we are able to overcome some of our personal biases or cognitive limitations, thereby achieving better, more complete and more just answers. This is especially true when discussion intentionally seeks out multiple perspectives and opens all contributions up to examination. Good discussion requires careful listening, willingness to change oneself as a result of exchanging ideas, and working through challenges with others in good faith. While discussion may create important shared understandings, deliberation is more aimed at reaching a resolution or action. Deliberation can give greater significance to discussions because it results in more binding agreements or definitive action (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1987).

But discussion and deliberation can also fall victim to significant problems, such as a tendency to privilege some perspectives over others or getting swept up in group-think. Or, if a group is not sufficiently diverse in worldviews, reasoning may suffer from epistemic blind spots. Discussion and deliberation are most effective in open environments, where many stakeholders with an array of perspectives are brought together to discuss meaningful or important issues. Yet, we know that many environments, including schools and civic centers around the world, have been plagued by histories of exclusion. Many schools, in particular, are still racially and economically segregated, making it challenging to enable diverse and inclusive discussion. Deliberative decision making tends to happen in spaces composed of small groups of powerful people. Even in larger and more inviting spaces, elitism and cultural norms tend to value some voices more than others. Civic and educational leaders must prepare pathways for better future civic discourse by demonstrating that more inclusive discussion improves civic reasoning and better ensures dignity and equity.

Civic reasoning and discourse can take place in many different types of settings, but it is especially important within democracies, where governing is done by and for the people. Democracy, as both a system of government and as a way of life (Dewey, 1939), relies on civic reasoning and discourse so that citizens can work together to solve shared problems. It is civic reasoning and discourse that helps citizens to take up their shared responsibilities and work together to imagine improved ways of living. They enable citizens to participate in decision making about the laws that govern them and about the future of their communities. Finally, participating in civic reasoning and discourse can help to build one's identity as a citizen and can nurture a collective sense of 'we' when citizens undertake this work together.

Knowledge, Skills, Values, and Dispositions that Support Civic Reasoning and Discourse

Learning how to engage in civic reasoning and discourse requires developing particular knowledge, skills, values and dispositions. Many of these affirm each other and should not be separated from one another, but rather should be taught in mutually affirming ways. Here I provide an overview of some of these, including: inquiry, historical and political knowledge, critical thinking, dissent, listening, empathy, collaboration and civility.

Inquiry and Knowledge

Figuring out what we should do about a shared problem or even how to live together well often requires us to engage in inquiry. We must gather evidence about our situation to understand it, determine our ability to

influence it, and assess the potential implications of doing so. Then we must hypothesize about potential interventions and experiment with them to gauge their effectiveness at meeting our needs. To do this well, we must invite multiple stakeholders to the table, listening to their ideas and accounting for the differential impacts our actions may have on those stakeholders. And we must work to overcome growing proclivities, especially in countries where social media use is high, to surround ourselves with likeminded others, engaging in echo chambers, confirmation bias, hyperpartisanship, group think and motivated reasoning. These practices not only prevent inquiry from being inclusive, they make us resistant to changing the worldviews we already hold, even if they are limited, problematic or inaccurate (Kraft et al., 2015; Clark & Avery, 2016).

Inquiry also requires information. Some of that may be empirical evidence from nature that can help us understand our environment or situation. And some information purported through research studies and other outlets must be interpreted using skills of scientific literacy. While gathering information might seem relatively straightforward, it is often more difficult because it requires trusting others. Facts exist independent of us, but knowledge is constructed – often from facts – by people. Insofar as knowledge is a global common good that we construct together (UNESCO, 2015), we must be ready to receive and add to that project. That is not to say, however, that we must be willing to accept or incorporate all beliefs, for some are better justified than others and some may be morally repugnant and not worthy of attention.

Part of learning to do inquiry well entails learning how to discover and validate facts and how to participate in good knowledge construction. To accept information, we must trust its source. We may trust that source because it is a person or institution with expertise or perhaps because we have a personal relationship with the source. To trust appropriately, citizens must understand how knowledge is created as a social process, often constructed by scientific organizations, public institutions, or even media reports. Teaching students how to decide which sources to trust is an important task of education, especially in a post-truth era where fake news and conflicting facts often stem from determinations about what sources of knowledge are trustworthy or are based merely on personal belief. Teachers must fight 'truth decay,' where citizens increasingly struggle to distinguish fact from opinion and increasingly distrust traditionally respected sources (Hodgin & Kahne, 2019). Learning the skills needed to assess the trustworthiness of other citizens, authority figures, or institutions can happen in an array of educational disciplines—from critical media literacy in social studies courses to detecting characters' motivations in literature classes to data sourcing lessons in STEM experiments. At the same time, good civic reasoning recognizes that different interpretations of facts can be a part of healthy disagreement and deliberation, especially in the context of complex public problems.

We also often need historical and political knowledge, not just about governments, but also about the cultural groups, religious traditions and economic practices locally and abroad. Historical knowledge helps us understand what has been tried in the past – what has worked and what has not – so that we can reach informed decisions about what to do now (Clark & Grever, 2018). Sometimes this can be challenging, as we must sift through stories and myths to identify legitimate sources and corroborate those sources to assess their reliability (Barton & Levstik, 2015; VanSledright, 2015; Wineburg, 2002; Reisman, 2012; Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2018). History can also inform the identification of our cultural heritage and that of others so that we can preserve the best of the past as a source for respect, pride and ingenuity in the future.

Political knowledge improves inquiry by helping us understand the governmental procedures and cultural practices that may influence our decisions or our ability to carry out the plan that we craft. Political knowledge helps us identify the resources that we have as we navigate governmental structures and community norms. Finally, we must understand the laws that may constrain our decisions, limiting what we can do, and whether there are recourses for changing those laws if they prove harmful or overly restrictive. Having such political

knowledge helps us to feel empowered to influence our government and our community. Scholars of civic participation, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter explain,

> A well-informed citizen is more likely to be attentive to politics, engaged in various forms of participation, committed to democratic principles, opinionated, and to feel efficacious. No other single characteristic of an individual affords so reliable a predictor of good citizenship, broadly conceived, as their level of [political] knowledge. (1996: 6-7)

To engage in civic reasoning, then, we need to know not only how to do inquiry, we also need to know specific content, including historical and political knowledge. Such content, however, should not be understood as a static list of facts to be learned across all peoples and in all places. Instead, knowledge should be learned through participating in authentic inquiries within schools. These should be inquiries into real issues that matter to the students involved, where they can meaningfully try out inquiry and where new knowledge learned resonates with their experiences. Often, such inquiries are based on local needs or struggles, instances where students recognize their stake in the matter. Quality citizenship education teaches both for and with inquiry, where teaching *with* inquiry leads to learning content and teaching *for* inquiry develops the skills of doing inquiry itself (Swan et al., 2018). This orientation sets students up for lifelong learning because they have a broad foundation of knowledge and the skillset to access new and additional information (UNESCO, 1996). This emphasis on exploration, imagination and experimentation makes inquiry adaptable to futures that we cannot predict.

Critical Thinking and Dissent

Critical thinking, as 'reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do,' is central to quality civic reasoning (Ennis, 2011, p. 1). We must understand how individuals and institutions work together to produce legitimate knowledge. Critical thinking helps us determine which knowledge is more justified and which sources are more trustworthy. But critical thinking goes further in that it entails a spirit of criticality which identifies and interrogates the power that influences, and sometimes distorts, inquiry and knowledge. Questioning power reveals how some shared problems may disproportionately impact, harm or privilege some stakeholders over others. Students must learn how to pose questions that reveal and name power at play in civic reasoning. In this way, critical thinking can help us answer not only 'what should we do?' but 'what is feasible or best to do and for whom?' (Lim, 2011).

When understood this way, critical thinking is not just confined to the cognitive dimension, but rather becomes a social endeavor and a collective practice. This differs from the more individualist or even instrumentalist understandings of critical thinking common in some education literature. Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk explain that critical thinking is

> a function of collective questioning, criticism, and creativity, it is always social in character, partly because relations to others influence the individual, and partly because certain of these activities (particularly thinking in new ways) arise from interaction with challenging alternative views. (1999: 62)

Within this endeavor, individual reasoners must consider their relationships with others and move into the behavioral dimension where they work collaboratively.

Students must learn critical thinking in order to not only name power or articulate how it works between individuals or groups of people, but also to confront and change power inequities. One of the primary ways to

do this is through enacting political dissent, where citizens disagree with those in power, social norms or laws that they believe are unjust, raise awareness of the problems they contain, and put forward better alternatives. Dissent is one way of embodying democratic values of freedom of thought and expression.

Dissent also plays another important role during civic discourse: it legitimizes disagreement between citizens as a source of improved civic reasoning. In other words, when engaging in discourse, we should not try to just work past disagreements between interlocutors. Instead, those differing views should be seen as sources for new ideas and the sorts of change that can enhance our ways of living together. Those who value dissent and are equipped with the skills to engage it can work to highlight minority or opposing views, especially those that may expose flaws in mainstream beliefs of behaviors and generate better alternatives. Valuing dissent can also cultivate appreciation for diversity and tolerance of differing viewpoints. Few schools, however, teach the skills and dispositions needed to dissent. Pursuing educational futures depends on robust civic agency, which is nurtured by teaching political dissent (Stitzlein, 2014).

Emotions, Values, and Dispositions

Civic reasoning is not merely a cold or calculating scientific pursuit or fact hunt. It involves emotions that can help us detect the significance of a situation, draw our attention to the experiences of particular stakeholders, and motivate us to act. Emotions can be useful inputs in the reasoning process. Students can learn how to attune to their emotions, to harness them when beneficial and sideline them when harmful.

Additionally, civic reasoning entails thinking about and discussing values, the ideas and ideals that we hold dear. This includes not only identifying what our values are and being able to explain why they are important to us, but also being able to understand the values of others and how conflicting values can be reconciled (Allen, 2019). And sometimes we may need to be prepared to question or change our values. When we ask 'what should we do?', we are engaged in a normative endeavor, where we are trying to determine some better outcome based on what we think is good or desirable. That outcome is a realization—sometimes even a physical instantiation—of our values. The decisions we make reflect what matters most to us.

In some cases, values themselves may be at stake as we try to answer 'What should we do?' or 'What do we want to become?' In other words, we may actually be reasoning about values. We must work to elucidate what those values mean and how they function so that we can arrive at acceptable answers, but also so that we can figure out who we are as peoples – what matters to us and why. Civic reasoning can actually help us develop or revise our dispositions toward certain values because they may lead us to change our minds, to reach new understandings of values, or come to prioritize one value over another.

Some values support good civic reasoning and discourse. These include commitments to equity, justice, diversity and freedom of thought. Engaging such values during civic participation can head off the sorts of exclusionary behaviors that further marginalization of some populations and prevent full and effective participation of all citizens. These values can help ensure that civic reasoning is plural and ethical (Mansbridge, 1991; Parker, 2006). Citizens must learn which values have historically played significant roles in their communities and globally, and must become familiar with debates about competing values, such as liberty versus equality. And while even longstanding values must be open to revision, students should be nurtured to appreciate some democratic values that have stood the test of time and which promote or enable quality civic reasoning.

Dispositions are traits of character that lead us to care about or act on particular values. Virtues are excellences of character. Having a virtue helps us see when a value pertains to a situation and to act on that value. Some of

the virtues and dispositions most essential to good civic reasoning and discourse include: listening, empathy, collaboration and civility.

Listening and Empathy

Answering 'What should we do?' or 'What do we want to become?' cannot be done well if we only consider the stake of ourselves or others like us. To answer these civic questions well, we must work to grasp the perspectives of others and how these questions impact their lives. This entails socioemotional understanding. Such understanding begins with good listening, where we are open and receptive to learning from, about and with others. We should listen to improve the quality and products of our civic reasoning, for it can help us to detect gaps in our understanding. Listening carefully helps us to discover that others have reasoned beliefs that may be worthy of consideration and can possibly improve our own beliefs or the outcomes of our deliberations. Listening can also improve the ways in which we relate to others, helping us to better respect them and treat them as political equals. Through such listening, we can discover aspects of similarity, explore our shared fate, and deal with our significant differences.

Empathy entails working to see the world from another person's perspective. Taking human dignity and equality as precepts, as UNESCO desires (UNESCO, 2020a), suggests that empathy may be a foundational virtue that disposes us to foreground and attend to the well-being of others. When we empathize with others, we are better able to understand their struggles and desires. Effort and imagination can help us span gaps between ourselves and others, enabling us to construct creative ways of mutually helping one another and finding peaceful means to reconcile differences (UNESCO 2020b). In this way, civic reasoning is not just problem solving, but rather is a responsive endeavor where we become mutually attuned to each other (Laden, 2012).

Learning to listen and empathize require considerable training. We must learn how to actively seek out information about other people, including their lives, opinions and worldviews. We must be careful not to stereotype or other those we are trying to understand (Bickmore, 2014). Sometimes, that requires taking time to actually get to know those people. The value of this time-intensive work may not be readily clear to all participants, especially those from dominant groups whose experiences and views tends to be widely shared or reflected in mainstream outlets. Often those people have been able to navigate life without the need to acknowledge or attend to the perspectives of others, while those with less power or influence have often had to learn dominant perspectives in order to get by. These power inequities and differential positions are best accounted for in what Mirra calls 'critical civic empathy' (Mirra, 2018: 7). This notion of empathy is directed toward equity-oriented action.

Unfortunately, prejudice and exclusionary practices may inhibit our ability to be genuinely open and receptive toward some people, thereby preventing us from effectively learning from and alongside those people well or from taking needed action. Because of this, critical civic empathy and active listening should be overtly developed in schools to help students learn how to engage others with humility and reciprocity as they strive to overcome prejudicial tendencies and to answer our guiding civic questions in more inclusive ways (Parker, 2006; Allen, 2004).

Collaborating toward Compromise or Consensus

Civic reasoning and discourse are often best served by an all-hands-on-deck approach, where we collaborate together to inquire into and address shared issues. But sometimes, it's difficult or impossible to be fully inclusive, and sometimes doing so can bring so many perspectives to the table that it can be hard to sift through them all and arrive at an acceptable decision. Civic discourse about thorny public problems can also

pose challenging moments of impasse, where answers to civic questions are contentious or not universally supported. In those moments, dispositions that lead one to seek consensus or be willing to compromise can help citizens to arrive at workable solutions, even if only partial or temporary.
Consensus entails reaching a unanimous decision or conclusion, even though not all differences between what individuals believe or desire may be resolved. In other words, everyone may agree to accept a decision even though it may not be exactly aligned with each individual's views or wishes. Consensus can be helpful because it can build a sense of solidarity, uniting citizens around a proposition or solution they see as best or beneficial. Compromise differs from consensus because it is more focused on giving up on parts of one's view in order to strike a deal between our desires or conclusions and those of others. Compromise often includes relinquishing some of our own views or building new shared perspectives with others, thereby carving out middle ground between stakeholders.

Sometimes we intentionally seek consensus or compromise as our goals of civic reasoning, while other times we must be open to consensus or compromise as approaches that help us out of impasses. Citizens must learn how to detect when consensus or compromise are desirable ends and when they are necessary means in civic discourse. Citizens must also develop the skills of collaboration needed to understand their differences and to build mutually acceptable solutions that span those divides. Compromise as a means of discourse may require the disposition of moderation, summarized by Robert Boatright as

> a willingness to pursue a pragmatic politics that accepts the humanity of one's opponents, that abandons the assumption that there is an ultimate goal for human endeavors, and that seeks to place the goal of fostering an inclusive political community above the goal of dictating what the community is or should do. (2019: 3)

Like empathy, then, compromise can be a way that we foreground our commitments to each other.

Despite their many benefits as both ends and means of civic discourse, consensus and compromise should not be used to simply avoid confrontation or working through challenging situations. This is especially the case in matters of injustice, where the more appropriate response may be to reveal and disrupt the status quo or to stand resolute in defense of justice. Sometimes, rather than rushing toward consensus or compromise, we need to slow down to ensure that perspectives are not being cut short or silenced. We must hold open our discussions and deliberations, even when contentious and uncomfortable, in order to provide sufficient time and space for others to participate and to be heard (Backer, 2019). And in some cases, we need identity-based advocacy groups to help empower minority perspectives and to bring them to the fore so that they are not overlooked as we collaborate toward consensus or compromise (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

Civility

Civility shapes both the ways in which we interact and the outcomes of our civic reasoning by foregrounding relationships. Many people define civility merely in terms of manners, as being polite or respectful during civic discourse. But, this sense of civility is too often used to silence or marginalize some people by holding them to norms of participation that may favor other participants. Instead, civility should be understood in a much richer way, as a form of responsiveness (Laden, 2019), where we focus on how our participation impacts others in content, form and tone. Civility calls us to hold ourselves accountable to reshaping unjust interactions between people and to head off potential problems resulting from our own behavior. The focus is on how we respond to and work together, and how our relations with each other may give rise to responsibilities to each other.

Civility relies upon skills and dispositions of cooperating with others toward continued mutual engagement in a just dialogue. It encourages equal participation and affirms the humanity and dignity of others, even as we may critique their views. Understood this way, civility can be compatible with impolite speech, especially when such speech is a way that one expresses justified outrage or puts forward a political cause (Rossini, 2019).

Conclusion

In order to cultivate the skills, knowledge, values, and dispositions needed for civic reasoning and discourse, education must move from a history of more passive learning about communities and governmental oversight to more active engagement. Students must practice civic reasoning and discourse on matters that are of importance to them (Bickmore, 2014). They must try out and be apprenticed into the habits and dispositions of good citizenship which ultimately develop civic agency and commitments to democratic values (UNESCO, 2020b). This is best done through crafting inquiry-based, engaging action and experiential civic education that doesn't just teach about civic reasoning, but actually does it. These are educational opportunities that entail collaborative work, both locally and globally, to take up authentic challenges and experiment with solving them (Putnam & Byker, 2020).

With those sets of knowledges, skills, values and dispositions in place, citizens are primed to participate in public dialogue about the futures that they desire in their schools and in their communities. Graduates will be equipped with the tools needed to answer 'What should we do?' and 'What do we want to become?' In this way, civic reasoning and discourse function both as a means and as an end for civic participation and the crafting of educational futures.

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