Public Talk and Civic Action: Education for Participation in a Strong Democracy

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Civic education programs have always played a distinctive role in the American education curriculum. For the most part, however, civic education has been associated with civic knowledge and the cultivation of a cognitive faculty thought to be identical with political judgment (private judgment on public issues).

Perhaps this has been appropriate to a society which understood democracy primarily as a system of accountability in which elected representatives do most of the actual governing and "citizens" limit themselves to the passive roles of voter and watchdog.

Yet if democracy is to sustain itself, a richer conception of citizenship is required that meets the test of what may be called strong democracy. Strong democracy is not simply a system whereby people elect those who govern them, but a system in which every member of the community participates in self-government. It entails not merely voting and overseeing representatives but ongoing engagement in the affairs of the civic community at the local and national levels. Citizenship defined in this strong manner is far more burdensome and far more meaningful than the thin version with which we tend to be content.

Oscar Wilde, himself a socialist, complained that the great defect of socialism was that it took up too many free evenings. Much the same may be said of strong democracy. Perhaps that is why it requires a more forceful dose of civic education and civic experience than its weak representative cousin.

If the point were just to get students to mature into voters who watch television news diligently and pull a voting machine lever once every few years, traditional civics courses would suffice. But if students are to become actively engaged in public forms of thinking and participate thoughtfully in the whole spectrum of civic activities, then civic education and social studies programs require a strong element of practical civic experience—real participation and empowerment.

The Tasks of Citizens in a Democracy

The tasks of citizens in a strong democracy should include debate and deliberation on policy, formulating agenda, developing a faculty for making public judgments (and distinguishing them from self-serving private judgments), participating in referenda, serving in local and regional civic and political offices (PTAs, planning boards, town councils, neighborhood associations, community boards, arbitration panels, and juries), supporting and working for political parties and public interest groups, as well as voting. Active citizens engaged in such a range of activities must also learn how to engage in public or private talk, which is quite different from engaging in private talk, scientific talk, and many other useful—though comparatively private—forms of conversation. Political talk is talk in common among a community of citizens about common issues—the public good, for example.

Sustaining Active Participation

Programs in civic education must find ways to sustain active participation and promote public forms of civic talk. That will require moving beyond traditional classroom models of the active teacher talking at passive students about the virtues of good citizens. We need programs that require students to perform community service, that empower them in pertinent school decision-making processes, that give them practical political experience, and that make them responsible for developing public forms of talk and civic forms of judgment. These will not be found in civics lessons alone. If we can develop such a curriculum, it will be a powerful incentive to citizenship, for it will provide an education that is aimed not only at participation but works through participation.

Inasmuch as participation in public talk and action is at the core of strong democracy and strong citizenship, I offer a few comments on the nature of civic talk. I hope these comments may provoke further thought on what would constitute an adequate civic education program.

Talk has been central to the Western idea of politics since Aristotle identified logos as the peculiar social faculty that separates the human species from animals. Modern representative democrats maintain the close identity of politics and talk, but they do so by reducing talk to the dimensions of their smallish politics and turning it into an instrument of symbolic exchange between avuncular competitors who are seen as having only private, animal interests.

The kind of talk required by strong democracy is much richer and is characterized by creativity, variety, openness and flexibility, inventiveness. Capacity for discovery, subtlety and complexity, eloquence, potential for empathy and affective expression, and a deeply paradoxical character. All these features display our complex human nature as purposive, interdependent, active, political beings. It is capacity for this kind of talk that educators need to nourish in students.

Characteristics of Public Talk

The sort of talk that is truly public includes four important characteristics. First, it entails listening no less than speaking. Second, it is affective as well as cognitive. Third, its intentionality draws it out of the world of pure reflection and into the world of participation and action. Finally, it is a public rather than a private mode of expression and thus depends on participation in communities of engaged citizens.

In considering the liberal idea of democracy as the politics of interest, one finds it easy enough to see how talk might be confused with speech and speech reduced to the articulation of interest by appropriate signs. Yet talk as communication obviously involves receiving as well as expressing, hearing as well as speaking, and empathizing as well as uttering. The reduction of talk to speech has unfortunately inspired political institutions that foster the articulation of interests but that slight the difficult art of listening. It is far easier for representatives to speak for us than to listen for us (we do not send representatives to concerts or lectures), so that in a predominantly representational system the speaking function is enhanced while the listening function is diminished. The secret ballot allows the voter to express himself
Affective and Cognitive Modes of Talk

A second major requirement of talk in a strong democracy is that it encompass the affective as well as the cognitive mode. AFFECTIVE TALK encompasses the capacity for imagining oneself in the situation of others that is possible only where a public is assembled. It is best taught by permitting students to interact together as a group over a question of common concern in a setting where the participants are empowered to make real decisions. Learning to talk or learning to judge is not yet learning to talk in a public discourse or to develop the art of public judgment.

What these four characteristics of public talk suggest is that, in a strong democracy, civic education will be indispensable to liberal education. Indeed, all education to
the extent that it helps students become thoughtful, deliberating, critical, participating members of extended communities of learning and living is an exercise in civic education.

Once educators understand that, civic education can advance from its position as a pedagogical subsidiary of social studies to its true role as the very core of liberal education. Where participation and learning meet, where cognitive and experiential skills join in forging mature responsible human beings, there both the arts and sciences and the cherished virtues of democracy are served in common.

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