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# Experiential Education and Civic Learning

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# N•S•E•E Quarterly

National Society for Experiential Education

## Experiential Education and Civic Learning

by Robert H. McKenzie

THE NATURE OF CIVIC LEARNING not only demands experiential education; civic learning reinforces for us the nature of experiential education. To explore the relationship between the two, we must understand a number of factors: the nature of the contemporary challenges to civic learning; the relationship of the purposes that educational institutions choose to that civic challenge; the pedagogical choices available for learning civically; and the relationship of learning theory to the centrality of choice that lies at the core of civic learning. At the end of this investigation, we will find some important guiding principles that civic learning suggests for how we engage in experiential education.

**The Civic Challenge.** The challenge that deliberative pedagogy addresses is enhancing civic capacity. Contemporary involvement in politics is predominantly angrily adversarial at one extreme or alarmingly absent at the other.

These extremes stem from a common root: too often, formal political processes treat citizens as consumers. When citizens begin to see themselves as consumers rather than as owners

of government, they become passive. Critics describe them as apathetic. When spurred to action, citizens too often conceive of politics simply as influencing government to achieve partisan ends. The result is often adversarial gridlock, or at best, constantly shifting policies as first one group, then another, achieves a transient 51 percent majority. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the tendency of identity politics to overshadow common work to be done.

In recent years, citizen anger with formal processes has increased — to the point of great suspicion of, even retreat from, participation in public affairs. Alarmingly, the reaction of college-age students has been less that of anger than of disengagement. The loss of democratic memory, what it means to engage in effective public problem solving, bodes ill for the republic. For democracy to survive, citizens must realize that they have responsibilities that cannot be delegated: to establish the legitimacy of government, to provide direction for its policies, to create and sustain political will, and to evaluate the work of government and other social institutions.

**The Relationship of Educational Purpose to the Civic Challenge.** For a variety of reasons, a historic purpose of education — the cultivation of civic virtue and effectiveness — has atrophied. A civic purpose for curriculum pales in our time compared to emphases on purposes of fostering economic competitiveness and personal autonomy.

Competitiveness and autonomy both emphasize individualism. Experiential education should play an important role in developing the individual. But experiential education should play an important role in developing civic capacity as well. Individual competitiveness and personal autonomy and civic cooperation are all intertwined. Tensions exist among these purposes, but those tensions must be used productively.

Experiential education is particularly important to civic effectiveness. Citizens are made, not born. Citizenship, like any skill and the understanding that undergirds it, is learned by practicing. We learn to make good choices, the essence of civic effectiveness, through experiences in making choices and by reflecting upon the consequences of those choices in further experiences.

In order for politics (defined as the responsibility of the *polis*, not just government) to work, citizens must be actors. To act

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together, citizens must make choices. To make choices, citizens must engage in deliberative dialogue across diversity, not just within their own interests. To use dialogue effectively, citizens must make public judgments and create a coherent public voice. That public voice creates common ground for complementary action. And citizens must constantly monitor their effectiveness in making choices and implementing them.

**Pedagogical Choices for Civic Learning.** If we admit civic capacity as a legitimate purpose of education, the next question is pedagogical: where and how do students realize their responsibilities and develop the skills to exercise them? Four basic approaches are in the public mind. One is service-learning. Another is learning deliberative skills. Another is democratizing the campus. And another is providing a traditional liberal arts education. These choices are not mutually exclusive. But an examination of the pros and cons of each as a separate choice provides a deeper understanding of how they all can be formed into effective educational philosophy and practice. These choices sometimes provoke heated debate, particularly when any two are posed against one another. The pros and cons of these four choices can be quickly stated.

Advocates of *service-learning* believe that colleges and universities are isolated from the demands of public life. This educational isolation contributes to the lack of civic-mindedness among students. Students should have increased opportunities for involvement in the community beyond the campus. This involvement would produce a more engaged and committed citizenry. Involvement in community challenges is a powerful motivation for lifelong civic activism.

Critics of service-learning are first worried by the prospect of mandatory service requirements. Few people object to allowing students to perform voluntary service in their free time, but many critics believe it inappropriate and unnecessary for all students to meet a public service requirement. They also worry about the dangers of political activism, fearing that direct student involvement in political life hinders educational institutions from teach-

ing subject matter in the classroom. They worry about the depth of intellectual quality in service-learning. Other critics argue a more subtle point. They are concerned that service-learning stresses therapeutic values at the expense of more fundamental civic skills.

Another basic approach is acquiring *deliberative skills*. Advocates of this approach believe that the current lack of commitment to our political system is the result of a failure of deliberative skills in our society. In this view, the core of public life requires individuals to struggle together with differing perspectives and priorities and then to exercise public judgment together on consistent direction for public policy. This task involves people working together to develop creative solutions and complementary actions to address common predicaments. Advocates of this approach sometimes charge that the popular idea of critical thinking is taught too often as an individual skill, not also as a group endeavor. They stress the need to educate students in deliberative discussion and group problem solving.

Critics of this approach believe that it puts too much stress on something that students learn to do anyway. People exercise the skills of listening and working together in their private lives without any particular practice or training. Should institutions spend precious time and resources to address these skills? Furthermore, some critics believe that deliberative problem solving assumes that everyone has an equal place in a discussion from the beginning. The deeper problems in public problem solving are often imbalances of power.

This criticism leads to a third basic approach to teaching civic skills — *democratizing the campus* to ensure that students understand democracy by living it. Proponents of this approach argue that colleges and universities are themselves anti-democratic, that they are hierarchical institutions that do not create an atmosphere favorable to the teaching or practice of skills necessary for citizenship. Students with little real opportunity for participation within educational institutions become graduates who are unwilling and unable to assume responsibilities in public life.

The historic role of a liberal undergraduate education in producing civic virtue has been too much taken over by emphases on economic competitiveness and personal autonomy. Curriculum struggles on campuses are over these two competing objectives, not the development of capable citizens. Advocates of this approach believe that a more egalitarian, democratic community teaches democratic politics most effectively.

Critics of this option form two distinct groups. One group agrees with the need to eliminate hierarchy within colleges and universities but worries that the means proposed are inadequate. They fear elitism. They question whether including students meaningfully in institutional governance without addressing power relationships among students would really create democracy. For these critics, the race, gender, and class composition of newly empowered student leadership becomes a critical concern. A second group of critics argues that colleges and universities are not intended to be democracies at all. Students are transients. They bear little responsibility for the continuing character of institutions of higher education. Empowering students to practice democracy distracts them from their intellectual purposes in the same manner as service-learning.

A fourth approach therefore is a *classical academic model*. Advocates often admit that there is a crisis in the political life of the United States. But colleges and universities should respond to this crisis by doing best what they are traditionally charged to do. That charge is to provide a quality education in both the broad areas of the liberal arts and the professions chosen by individual students. Effective practice of politics in a democracy depends upon a thoughtful public and well-trained leaders. These resources come from an intellectually rigorous education.

Critics of this approach argue that it is far too narrow. They believe it is elitist and does not represent citizenship education at all. By overly stressing traditional notions about leadership, this approach leaves those outside of formal leadership positions with nothing to do or to contribute. The problem is made worse by over-specialization within traditional academic departments. The technical emphases and jargon common to academic discourse are

difficult to relate to public decision making. Ironically, these problems are often most acute in political science and political theory, the disciplines which should be most relevant to public life. Critics also argue that it is naive to believe that simply being smart or well-educated makes a good citizen any more than these characteristics are enough to make a good doctor. This view believes it dangerous to assume that a purely curricular approach to civic learning produces moral agents. Producing good citizens requires more than academic rigor.

As this brief discussion suggests, each of these basic approaches has strengths and weaknesses. Obviously, no one of these approaches alone is sufficient for the task of building citizenship. Each institution and program of higher education must examine itself and its environment carefully to determine how best to address the need for new civic ideals. How is such a choice made?

**The Centrality of Choice.** The quintessential political act in an effective democracy is making an intelligent choice. Just as institutions make choices about their best approaches, citizens must make choices about life together as a public. We learn to make better choices by making choices, experiencing their consequences, learning from them, and applying that learning to new choices. In a democracy, those choices are not only individual, they are collective. Unless one continues an assumption rooted in an always open frontier that collective good results from the sum of individual choices, a primary challenge for developing effective democracy is learning how to make choices that affect everyone **with** others, not **to** others, nor **over** others. This learning together from our choices is how the public learns the public's business.

**Choice and Learning Theory.** Veterans of experiential education quickly see in the preceding section the elements of a familiar cycle of learning articulated by David Kolb: experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application or experimentation.

When we examine the four basic choices for developing civic effectiveness, we are actually deliberating the strengths and weaknesses of emphasizing any one particular phase of a learning cycle. In this sense, deliberation is the way in which

citizens collectively reflect on their varied grasps of reality. Individual grasp of reality is derived from personal experiences and from ideas about those experiences derived from personal reflection and from the observations of others (from the ancients through history to contemporaries) about the meaning of similar experiences over time. In making collective decisions, these individual grasps of reality must be brought into juxtaposition with one another. The next two paragraphs are a somewhat oversimplified but useful-for-thinking formulation.

Service-learning is immersion in concrete experience. A classical curriculum is immersion in conceptualizations about experience. Arguments between these two approaches are arguments about preferred way of grasping reality. Since reality is grasped in both ways, arguments between the two approaches are often simplistic. The question to be answered is not which is best but how are they best integrated.

Similarly, democratizing a campus is immersion in experimentation, bringing experience (the essence of service-learning) into constant juxtaposition with the most useful ideas (the essence of a classical curriculum) through intensive application. It is a means of transforming grasp of reality to personal and collective use.

And teaching deliberative skills is immersion in the reflective process that weighs reality and judges the effect of applications of past judgment about the meaning of that reality. The element of judgment converts deliberation from mere speculation about meaning. Deliberation aims at application. The word literally means "to weigh." Deliberation compares multiple experiences and ideas about experiences (together the record of past experimentation); weighs their advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs; and forms a judgment about an idea for future applications and how to implement them.

Deliberation is that phase of the learning cycle that makes the other phases work effectively. It applies judgment to imagination and in the process creates the political will or courage to undertake change. Therefore, developing deliberative skills is a key pedagogical question.

**Deliberative Pedagogy.** One approach to understanding the dynamics of a deliberative pedagogy is provided by Charles Anderson, author of several books

on education for democracy. Anderson's sequential analysis abstracts the chaos of reality as stage theories do (including the idea of a learning cycle). Still, his analysis provides an initial framework for understanding deliberative dynamics. For Anderson, echoing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, appraisal of and decision among competing claims and cases is the basic task of citizenship. In a word, this activity is choice. In another word, choice involves judgment.

Anderson asserts that the ability to make sound political judgments requires effective deliberation. Deliberation encompasses four types of reasoning. First, the case for a prevailing practice must be heard. The rationale for a current application of ideas must be fully appreciated before change is attempted. Anderson calls this type of reasoning Reasons of Trusteeship. Second, Critical Reason involves pointing out the values or principles that current policy is violating. In other words, this type of reasoning uncovers the disparity between theory and practice. Third, Entrepreneurial Reason proposes new undertakings, better ways of doing things. Thus far, Anderson's analysis is not foreign to "business-as-usual" politics and its traditional reform movements. The next steps in this approach would be to forge the compromises that enable the forming of necessary majorities permitting a new custom or policy. This approach is often the battle ground of identity politics and the politics of victimization.

But Anderson adds a fourth type of reasoning, which he calls Meliorative Reasoning. This mode of reasoning goes beyond the incremental or tradeoff approach and seeks to accommodate the concerns of "the silent, the awkward, and the oppressed as well as the vocal, the active, and the intense." Anderson asserts that all four modes of reasoning are important as part of political deliberation. The overall objective of deliberation is for each participant to broaden her or his sense of all considerations that bear on custom and policy. By assimilating the points of others, citizens develop a mysterious capacity. People speculating in the presence of others may produce perspectives or positions that could not have been previously anticipated by any of the participants beforehand. This capacity makes reasoned deliberation different

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from any system of formal logic consciously insulated from other modes of thought. Deliberation, therefore, is not only reasoned, it is creative. And that creativity is not merely brainstorming; it is purposeful in moving toward application.

Anderson has also developed a scheme of levels of civic competence that represents a movement from a passive consumer orientation toward public life to active participatory engagement with public issues. Level One is the ability to understand how institutions work. Level Two involves the critical ability to understand the rationale behind prevailing practice. Level Three involves the skill to support reasons for believing a personal interpretation is the most adequate public orientation to a problem. Level Four moves one toward civic competence. It involves ability to interpret public issues from diverse points of view. (This level in Anderson's schema is where the deep work of deliberation begins.) Level Five involves the skill of adjudication, the ability to develop alternative competing cases and decide among them. This level involves the search for a principle or common basis for collaborative action. Level Six involves the ability to critique dispassionately the case for democratic practices as opposed to other possible forms of government.

Anderson's analysis provides answers to *why* and *what-difference-does-it-make* questions. He provides a vision of new possibilities. He provides frames of reference that one could take back to the four choices mentioned earlier for evaluating how each contributes to modes of reasoning and levels of development. He does not, however, provide much advice on *how* to deliberate, *how* to incorporate Meliorative Reasoning in thinking process that involves the other modes of reasoning: Trusteeship, Critical, and Entrepreneurial.

A marvelous resource for understanding how deliberation takes place is the fifteen-year experience of the National Issues Forums (NIF) program. Each year, NIF produces three issue books on matters of national importance. These are available to any organization that wishes to use them. Some 6,000 or more organizations participated in NIF last year. The number of participating organizations is

not as remarkable as their diversity: social and community organizations of all sorts, libraries, literacy programs, prisons, churches and synagogues, high schools and colleges, neighborhood associations and housing projects, etc. NIF also provides training in convening and moderating deliberative forums through some 20 public policy institutes (PPIs) around the country. The cumulative reflections of these annual forums are reviewed in an annual program, "A Public Voice," conducted each spring at the National Press Club. An annual video of this event is the most shown public affairs program on Public Broadcasting System affiliates.

NIF is by no means the only program promoting deliberative experiences among citizens. The Studies Circle Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut, is another. NIF is unique, however, in an important research sense. One of its sponsoring organizations, the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, an educational research foundation, has for 15 years engaged in action research on deliberative democracy as it is occurring in NIF programs. That research has not yet been formally published. It is available in internal memos, thought pieces, and handbooks prepared by Kettering Foundation staff and its extensive network of associates in many different areas of theory and practice focused on understanding politics. The essence of those research findings follows.

As stated earlier, deliberation is learned experientially. Deliberation is a natural act. People make decisions, personally and collectively, by deliberating — at various levels of effectiveness. But, people have difficulty transferring deliberative skills to arenas which are described to them as or which they perceive to be "politics." Hence, a key aspect of building deliberative skills as citizens involves reconceptualizing the meaning of the word "politics" to include all those ways, not just governmental, in which citizens make decisions together about their common life.

Deliberation is different from debate and from mere polite conversation or effective group dynamics. Deliberation is not therapeutic (although therapeutic releases may occur). Deliberation is political. It involves making choices that have real ap-

plications and real consequences. Deliberation requires framing of an issue in public, not expert, terms. That framing always involves more than two choices, hence deliberation lies outside the dynamics of debate involving only two polarized positions.

Deliberation rarely occurs in sustained, easily observable fashion. Moments of deliberation in a forum (formal or informal) are like deposits of oil dispersed as molecules in a rock formation, not existing in discernible pools. However, the capacity for sustained, effective deliberation can be increased by practice and concentration.

Concentration involves the willingness to explore the pros and cons and tradeoffs in all possible choices. Most especially, concentration involves identifying and focusing on the fundamental tensions that make an issue an issue. (True issues in public life are often masked by calling broad topics "issues." Education, crime, poverty, environment, etc., are not issues; they are topics. An issue involves tensions among more than two things held valuable. For example, the rising costs of providing broader access to quality health care involves tensions among three things held valuable: access or coverage, costs, and choice about quality. We have no certainty about the ways in which these things held valuable may best be combined.) Working through these tensions together is the essence of deliberation. These tensions identify the fundamental unknowable in an issue. That unknowable involves a risk among participants to pursue a course of action, the exact results of which are likely resistant to tangible measurement. Deliberation involves discovering what participants can live with amid their differences and their uncertainties.

Reducing uncertainties in a true issue places a value on diversity. Recurring questions in effective deliberation are "who is not here?" and "how would they see this issue?" Deliberation is open ended. It engages the unknown. It seeks community. Deliberation focuses on solving common problems from which personal meaning and identity are derived, not establishing identity before engaging in problem solving. These two activities are invariably intertwined, but it is important which takes precedence. When establishing identity as a primary consideration, the speeches that often go with that activity

too frequently separate participants in addressing a common problem and hinder its resolution. Individuals participating in deliberation do so as individual human beings meeting individual human beings, not as representatives of different groups.

All these elements of deliberation are made easier to implement by a few simple guidelines. A moderator must remain neutral in guiding a deliberation. Participants must listen as well as speak. Participants must realize that everyone has good reasons in their own mind for how they understand a matter. Therefore, their observations are interesting, not ignorant or immoral. The task of deliberation is to understand all the choices and how participants see them, not to "win" a contest. A measure of effectiveness is the ability to make a good case for the choice one likes the least as well as the choice one likes the most. Consequently, all choices before a group must be given full consideration. Participants must move toward a choice, not merely analyze. No one session of deliberation is likely to reach a final decision. Deliberation leads to deliberation until common ground for action is uncovered and political will to implement that action is created. To assess progress, a group participating in a deliberative session should reflect at the end on how individual perspectives may have changed, how the group's perspectives may have changed, and what needs further deliberation. Deliberation's goal is application, but that application (complementary action) may be much different from "business-as-usual" concepts of political action.

Above all, deliberating together is learning together through joint reflection. A self-governing, democratic society of necessity requires a self-educating, learning citizenry. Deliberating is learning. Deliberating is at the heart of the educational enterprise.

**What Does Civic Learning Tell Us about Experiential Education?** The above discussion reminds us of some guiding principles of experiential education. Experiential education is education based on experience. Experiential education is not merely having an experience. Experiential learning is not merely focusing on one phase of a cycle of learning. Focusing on only one part of a circle of learning (service-learning, for example) is limiting. To use an analogy from geometry, one point is

merely a dot unconnected to anything else. Two points (service-learning and a classical curriculum, for example) provide a narrow line of connection with maximum possibility of falling off in either direction. Three points (service-learning, classical curriculum, and a democratic campus, for example) provide definition of a surface, but a surface absent the capacity to change. The fourth point of deliberation, like the legs on a table, produces a surface with the likelihood of wobble. Life together is constant wobble. In civic learning, we must deliberate (itself an experience) with one another to make a choice of how to combine the best of the other three choices for maximum learning effectiveness.

Given individual differentiation, the need for capacity to adjust ourselves to one another is always present — if we will admit the necessity that we must live together. Deliberative democracy is that form of politics that gives us maximum opportunity to do so effectively. But deliberative democracy does not work unless we bring everyone to the table as equals in the experience of learning.

*The points raised in this article were the subject of a seminar on deliberative democracy at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation in July 1996. The 33 participants included 5 students and 28 teachers from a middle school, a high school, four community colleges, and several different types of four-year colleges. Participants were drawn from a national network of those who use National Issues Forums programs in their classes, on their campuses, and in their communities, including over 600 teachers. International participants were drawn from 20 countries that use programs parallel to NIF. If you are using deliberative pedagogy, especially NIF, to develop experiential learning in your teaching and are interested in participating in next summer's Deliberative Democracy Seminar at Miami University, please contact the author at [rmckenzi@nc.ua.edu](mailto:rmckenzi@nc.ua.edu).*

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#### Resources:

National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton OH 45459-2777.  
Study Circle Resource Center, PO Box 203, Pomfret CT 06258.

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