



The Double Crisis and the Civic Mission of Education

by David Scobey

IN AMERICA TODAY, WE ARE LIVING through a double crisis. On the one hand, we are mired in an educational crisis of legitimacy that afflicts both K-12 and higher education. Whatever else you may think of the No Child Left Behind Act—and I personally believe it inimical to good schooling—the policy is undeniably a symptom of that crisis and a response to it. Nor is it the only symptom. Underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, cuts in arts programming, proposals for tuition waivers—all underscore the failure of public schools to offer rigorous, creative, enlivening education to all American children. In higher education, the crisis of

legitimacy takes other forms: jeremiads against tuition hikes, cultural battles over political correctness, calls for faculty and administrators to be accountable to stakeholders who provide the American academy with its massive resources. Much of the current civic conversation about the goals and goods of higher education has devolved into an instrumental discourse about credentialing, jobs, and local economic growth. Meanwhile students reinforce this shrunken vision of higher education, alienated from the joy of learning and the experience of its usefulness in their own lives.

On the other hand, we are living through a crisis of citizenship. Falling voter participation is the most widely lamented evidence of this crisis, but to my view far from the most worrisome. As commentators of both left and right have argued, our civic culture seems to be thinned out and fragmented, marked by consumer privatism and disengagement; political dialogue has devolved into media polarization, deliberative dialogue into opinion polling. Such fractures and segregations are especially damaging in a society divided by ethnic identities and religious values, organized around class and racial inequalities. In such a diverse democracy, “civic” must come to mean more than simply “public-spirited.” It must embody the capacity to engage those with whom we share common problems and a common destiny, but not necessarily common opinions and experiences. Civic competence has to include the capacity

for boundary crossing, for empathy with strangers, for dialogue across difference.

Renewing our commitment to the public purposes of education—not only in big ideals but in vibrant, everyday practice—is an essential means of resolving both of these crises. We cannot solve either the crisis of the schools or the crisis of citizenship unless we solve them together. Democratic life requires us to know how to engage, honor, listen to, argue with, and act with diverse strangers. Its skills and values cannot simply be learned at home or in the cozy space of the familiar. Schools and colleges are thus essential laboratories of civic practice. Conversely, the terrain of civic action and democratic practice is a good place for education. Active citizenship requires and reinforces active learning; it integrates knowing what and knowing how with actual problem solving undertaken with others. Anyone who has seen the exhilaration that students experience in project-based community work understands the joy and sharpness of mind that comes when learning is combined with public life.

The good news is that educators at all levels have been devising myriad, effective ways for students to “leave the bubble,” as they like to put it, engaging democratic life and their minds in the process. The best practices make clear the vibrancy of the movement to link the public purposes of K-16 education and the renewal of civic engagement. The message of those practices is one of eclectic creativity. Civic learning

takes many forms, from project-based community partnerships to deliberative immersion in complex political issues to multicultural dialogue to instituting democratic governance practice in school and on campus. Even a single project may deploy many of these strategies to model civic work and democratic dialogue.

Yet the message is also that this movement is in an early, exploratory, sprawling stage of work, characterized more by centrifugal than centripetal energy. We are still unsure not only about what works best in civic learning, but also about what we mean by civic learning. We remain in a condition of ferment and experimentation, rejecting both the old, dead model of patriotic civics courses and the apolitical focus on academic disciplines that took its place in both K-12 and post-secondary curricula. To be sure, our goal should not be to certify some new monolithic model, holding, for example, Lewiston's Youth Court above the University of Southern Maine's Model United Nations, or constitutional history above service learning. But we *do* need to reflect critically, to assess, to theorize, to map the landscape of civically engaged education in which all these best practices take place.

And so, by way of advancing that process of critical reflection, let me end by posing two problems for educators and policymakers in Maine: one focused on educational practice, the other focused on the meaning of citizenship.

The first is a challenge. How can we pursue the civic mission of education not as a do-gooder add-on, not as an extra course or one more package of learning outcomes, but as a thread of practices that weaves through all our courses and pedagogies? It seems to me that civic education is best understood not as a subject matter, not as a noun. If we think of it that way, it will simply become a sub-unit of social studies, a set of core democratic values checked off in high school civics classes, a set of service learning projects that fulfill a distribution requirement.

Rather I would argue that citizenship is a verb, like the verb "writing": it is a reflective, active practice that we want our students to use in all their learning and in their everyday life. And we need to think of it—like writing—as a practice seeded across everything we teach, learn, and think about.

And second: what is our own politics of citizenship as we think about these goals, strategies, and practices? Citizenship is a word to conjure with, but it is also a word with edges, a double-edged sword. It can be deployed on behalf of the most inclusionary or the most exclusionary policies; it can generate curricula that are prescriptively canonical or pragmatically exploratory. The current furor over immigration law underscores its double edge: citizenship is invoked on one side as a besieged status that ought to be hedged about with restrictions to keep the unworthy out, and on the other side, as an aspirational pathway that organizes migration, life-course development, and public activism, even for the most excluded and oppressed. Similarly, the phrase "educating for democracy" has wildly different, conflicted meanings. For some (including the current federal administration), it means inducting young Americans into a core repertoire of American values and virtues through a canonical curriculum of historical and cultural literacies. For others (including me), it means endowing students with the knowledge, skills, and capacities to create a common life and solve problems with others quite different from themselves. This sort of citizenship is not so much the gateway into a public sphere that is fully formed with prescribed duties and rights; it is the practice of producing that public sphere in the first place, collaboratively, inclusively, and continuously. As we map the goals and strategies of our movement for civic learning, let us make sure we ask what we mean by citizenship and let us make sure we can discuss—democratically, deliberatively, creatively—what to do with it. 🌊

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