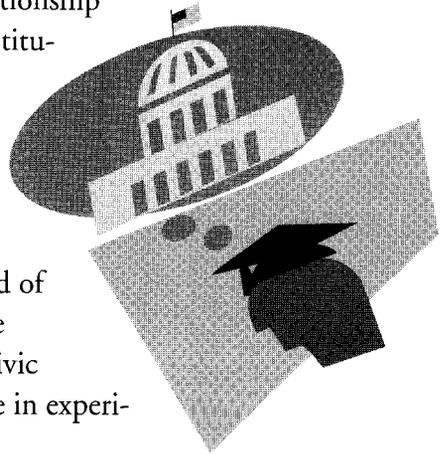


# LEARNING CIVIC EFFECTIVENESS

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. Alarming, 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 on 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 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 teaching 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 antidemocratic, 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

*“...colleges and universities are themselves anti-democratic, they are hierarchical institutions that do not create an atmosphere favorable to the teaching or practice of skills necessary for citizenship.”*

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.

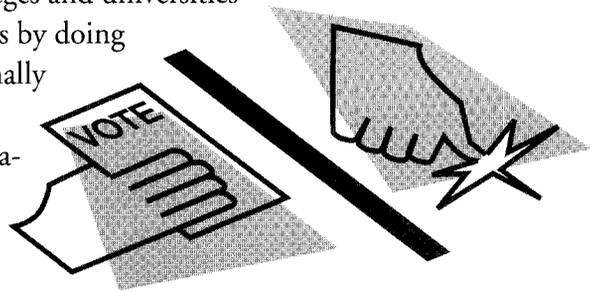
A fourth approach therefore is a classical academic model. Advocates often admit that there is a crisis in the political life of the United States. But colleges and universities should respond to this crisis by doing

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 prac-

tice of politics in a democracy depends on 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 overspecialization 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 that 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 ways 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 trade-offs; 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.

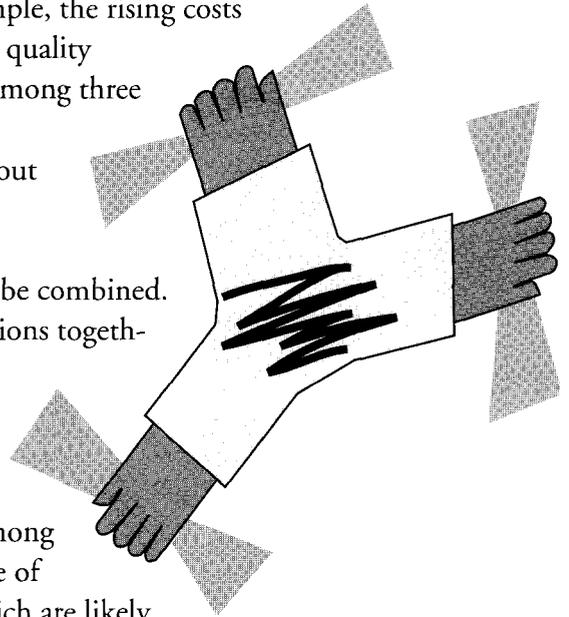
*“Deliberation is that phase of the learning cycle that makes the other phases work effectively.”*

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 that 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 applications 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 trade-offs 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.



*“Deliberation is open-ended. It engages the unknown. It seeks community.”*

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.

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# HUMANITIES STUDY AND PUBLIC DELIBERATION

By Peggy W. Prenshaw

In the early 1970s, when the state humanities councils were organized under the sponsorship of the newly authorized National Endowment for the Humanities, I first began to think seriously about the relation of humanities study to public deliberation and civic life. With a newly minted Ph.D., I had only recently commenced my academic career and was eager and anxious to understand and validate my work as an English professor. How was I to “make a difference” in my society? How to be a good teacher, a competent literary critic, a responsible member of the department and the university faculty? And how to answer my students in required core classes of sophomore literature who asked, “Prof, what good is this to me?”

Twenty-five years later, a Kettering Foundation project on the “Humanities and Public Deliberation” has allowed me to reflect on my career as an academic humanist, to return to some of those formative questions that so engaged me at my outset, to inquire specifically into the relation between the literary classroom and the public forum, and to clarify what I have learned about the relation of my work to society’s common good.

In a prescient and illuminating book, *Hamlet’s Castle: The Study of Literature as a Social Experience* (1976), Gordon Mills, a professor under whom I studied in the 1960s at the University of Texas, sought to understand and describe the nature of literary experience as it is manifest within the context of a group discussion. What Mills’ analysis so methodically and fully elucidates is how a group of disparate persons, assembled in a classroom to discuss a literary text, go about constructing knowledge. Reaching some kind of consensus (or acquiescing to irresolvable disagreement) about the meaning and significance of a text is demanding work, intellectually and emotionally and, as Mills suggests, it is analogous to the deliberations that citizens in a democratic society must necessarily employ in deciding issues of public policy.

Among the most salient characteristics of a university classroom (especially in a large land-grant university like the one in