



Students
at the
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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES

CIVIC EDUCATION AND DEEPER LEARNING

by Peter Levine & Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg
February 2015

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES

In 2010, Jobs for the Future—with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation—launched the Students at the Center initiative, an effort to identify, synthesize, and share research findings on effective approaches to teaching and learning at the high school level.

The initiative began by commissioning a series of white papers on key topics in secondary schooling, such as student motivation and engagement, cognitive development, classroom assessment, educational technology, and mathematics and literacy instruction.

Together, these reports—collected in the edited volume *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers*, published by Harvard Education Press in 2013—make a compelling case for what we call “student-centered” practices in the nation’s high schools. Ours is not a prescriptive agenda; we don’t claim that all classrooms must conform to a particular educational model. But we do argue, and the evidence strongly suggests, that most, if not all, students benefit when given ample opportunities to

- Participate in ambitious and rigorous instruction tailored to their individual needs and interests
- Advance to the next level, course, or grade based on demonstrations of their skills and content knowledge
- Learn outside of the school and the typical school day
- Take an active role in defining their own educational pathways

Students at the Center will continue to gather the latest research and synthesize key findings related to student engagement and agency, competency education, and other critical topics. Also, we have developed—and have made available at www.studentsatthecenter.org—a wealth of free, high-quality tools and resources designed to help educators implement student-centered practices in their classrooms, schools, and districts.

Further, and thanks to the generous support of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Students at the Center has expanded its portfolio to include an additional and complementary strand of work.

The present paper is part of our new series of commissioned reports—the Deeper Learning Research Series—which aim not only to describe best practices in the nation’s high schools but also to provoke much-needed debate about those schools’ purposes and priorities.

In education circles, it is fast becoming commonplace to argue that in 21st century America, each and every student must aim for “college, career, and civic readiness.” However, and as David Conley described in the first paper in this series, a large and growing body of empirical research shows that we are only just beginning to understand what “readiness” really means. Students’ command of academic skills and content certainly matters, but so too does their ability to communicate effectively, to work well in teams, to solve complex problems, to persist in the face of challenges, and to monitor and direct their own learning—in short, the various kinds of knowledge and skills that have been grouped together under the banner of “deeper learning.”

What does all of this mean for the future of secondary education? If “readiness” requires such ambitious and multi-dimensional kinds of teaching and learning, then what will it take to help students become genuinely prepared for life after high school, and what are the implications for policy and practice?

We are delighted to share this installment in the Deeper Learning Research Series, and we look forward to the conversations that all of these papers will provoke.

To download the papers, executive summaries, and additional resources, please visit the project website: www.studentsatthecenter.org.



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Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive the adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy. We work to achieve the promise of education and economic mobility in America for everyone, ensuring that all low-income, underprepared young people and workers have the skills and credentials needed to succeed in our economy. Our innovative, scalable approaches and models catalyze change in education and workforce delivery systems.

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Students at the Center—a Jobs for the Future initiative—synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college, career, and civic life. This project is supported generously by funds from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

A Nation at Risk, the 1983 report of President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, tends to be remembered for its martial rhetoric ("If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war"), its warning that mediocre schools could undermine the country's ability to compete in a global marketplace, and its role in inspiring subsequent waves of education reform. Rarely, though, is it remembered for its stirring appeal to the civic purposes of American education. For that, one has to revisit the actual text of the report:

"Our concern . . . goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society. . . . For our country to function, citizens must be able to reach some common understandings on complex issues, often on short notice and on the basis of conflicting or incomplete evidence. Education helps form these common understandings, a point Thomas Jefferson made long ago in his justly famous dictum: 'I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion'" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983).

Since those words were published three decades ago, such aims have been all but forgotten by most education policymakers and advocates. Instead, certain other priorities have risen to the fore:

First, basic reading and mathematics—and to a lesser degree, science—have been the focus of most reform efforts. By comparison, disciplines such as history and civics (as well as the arts and foreign languages) have been marginalized.

Second, skepticism about teachers' and schools' ability to assess their own students' performance has encouraged a growing dependence on standardized tests, which have been used both to evaluate students, educators, and schools and to inform parents as they choose where to enroll their children. Such tests are taken privately by individual students, and they tend to focus on concrete knowledge or directly measurable academic skills. Much less common are efforts to assess students' interactions with one another and with their communities or their ability to apply their skills and knowledge to complex real-world problems.

Third, the overwhelming emphasis of recent reforms has been on preparing students for a competitive job market in which they must try to sell their own human capital (i.e., their individual skills and knowledge).

However, the most recent wave of school reforms appears to have passed its crest. Today, many Americans seem to be tiring of narrow curricula and simplistic assessments, and growing numbers are calling for broader and deeper approaches to education. By "broader," we mean opportunities to explore not only reading, mathematics, and science but also fields like the social studies, arts, and foreign languages, as well as interdisciplinary inquiry. And by "deeper" we mean efforts to master not just core



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academic content (which is certainly important) but also—using terminology developed by the Hewlett Foundation¹—critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, effective communication, self-directed learning, and the development of an academic mindset (or the sense that one’s own intellectual work has real value).

In this paper, we argue that civic education has a crucial role to play in this movement to pursue deeper approaches to secondary schooling. If education reformers are now ready to rethink the priorities that have held them in thrall for the past 30 years—the teaching of basic reading and math, testing and accountability, and the preparation of individuals to compete in the job market—then they should be ready also to address the civic imperatives that were described so passionately in *A Nation at Risk*, and which have been waiting on the shelf ever since.

Specifically, we advance two theses: 1) Deeper learning has great potential to promote civic outcomes and, hence, to strengthen our democracy; and 2) strengthening civic education is an important way to promote deeper learning.

Indeed, we argue that civic education, when implemented effectively, *exemplifies* deeper learning, requiring students to work together with peers and adults to diagnose and define problems, to deliberate and choose solutions, to implement strategies, and to reflect on the results.

Such learning experiences not only build the skills and attributes young people will need as citizens, but they also

contribute a great deal to preparing them for college and careers, and ultimately, for the chance to attain the kind of economic security that will allow them to participate fully in civic life.

The skills required for effective civic action (e.g., deliberating and collaborating in diverse groups to address complex problems) have great value in the 21st-century workplace, as do the skills learned in high-quality civic education programs, such as the ability to set realistic goals, develop concrete plans, and direct oneself to follow a plan toward its ultimate goal—skills that are often grouped together under the term “agency” (Larson & Angus 2011).

As we describe later in this paper, research finds that teenagers who participate in community service have better academic outcomes than their peers (Dávila & Mora 2007; Spera et al. 2013; Anderson-Butcher et al. 2003; Fredericks & Eccles 2006), and at-risk youth enrolled in certain programs that involve civic action also see substantial improvements in academic and economic outcomes (CIRCLE 2012; Millenky et al. 2011; Flanagan & Levine 2010).

For all these reasons, deeper civic education will prepare students for success in work and life as well as for active citizenship. And developing better curricula, pedagogies, tools, and assessments for civics will benefit education generally because civics is intrinsically interdisciplinary and demands excellence in English/language arts, mathematics, and other subjects, going well beyond social studies.

DEEPER LEARNING CAN REVITALIZE CIVIC EDUCATION

In 2011, following the release of the most recent assessment of civic learning by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), *The New York Times* published a story under the headline “Failing Grades on Civics Exam Called a ‘Crisis.’” The article quoted Charles N. Quigley, the executive director of the Center for Civic Education, who said, “The results confirm an alarming and continuing trend that civics in America is in decline. . . . During the past decade or so, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the worker at the expense of developing the citizen” (Dillon 2011).

We share the premise that civic education is essential and is not receiving sufficient attention at a time of alarm about the job market. But we argue that the familiar way of framing the problem, as in this Times story, is somewhat misleading. The NAEP civics assessment does not reveal “failing grades”; in fact, the national sample achieved the scores that were expected when the assessment was designed (Levine 2013a). There has been no notable decline in NAEP civics results over time.

The rhetoric that this article exemplifies can also promote mistaken policy proposals, such as mandating a civics class or requiring that every student pass the test that is now required for naturalization as a U.S. citizen (Pondiscio 2013). In fact, almost every state already requires a civics class. Almost every student already faces tests in civics that, whether created by the teacher or an outside vendor, are more demanding than the naturalization exam. And neither of those approaches—required civics classes and tests—has an impressive track record.

Our own careful assessment of existing state standardized tests found that they have no impact on what students know about government and civics or how they behave as citizens (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine 2014a). To be fair, David Campbell (2014) found that high-stakes state civics tests did boost students’ knowledge of current politics somewhat, with the greatest benefits for students of color. And John Saye and colleagues (2013) found that when social studies teachers use “authentic pedagogies,” such as problem-based instruction, their students tend to do better on such tests. Overall, though, the evidence that testing improves pedagogy or student outcomes is equivocal, at best. Requiring courses and standardized tests is not the path that we would recommend.

We start with a different diagnosis, leading to different prescriptions: Where civic learning has been weak, it is because the instructional model and the assessments have been wanting. In order to be more effective, we argue, civic education should exemplify deeper learning.



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It should involve a combination of discussion and analysis, strategizing and planning, taking concrete actions to address problems, and reflecting on the results. And students should undertake these efforts collaboratively (working with peers and adults, and, when possible, bridging differences of demographics and values), building relationships that enable further constructive civic action. Deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships are the core aspects of effective adult citizenship (Levine 2013b), and they are also deeply educational experiences.

Presently, some students do receive civic education that meets these criteria. For example, an excellent service-learning project will involve a whole arc of activity, from an initial brainstorming of topics to a final reflection on the service and its outcomes. Ideally, it will be informed by disciplined empirical inquiry, guided by demanding values, and effective in addressing a real problem. Of course, service learning is just one of many possible forms of deeper civic education. We also see promise in collaborative research projects, in student-produced news stories and media, in debates and deliberations, and in simulations of adult civic experiences that may take the form of mock trials or model legislatures.

However, such opportunities are rare and unevenly distributed. If civic education were arranged along a spectrum—ranging from none at all, to memorizing a few concrete facts about the political system, to a combination of deliberation, action, and reflection—then most American students experience something in the middle range. All states have civics standards, and a vast majority of high school seniors take at least one course that discusses

American government. But few students experience deep inquiry or opportunities to apply their knowledge of civics. Further, they are most likely to experience the deepest forms of civic education if they attend schools in wealthy and white communities and if they are on track to go to college (Kahne & Middaugh 2009). Low-income students and students of color tend to have fewer experiential civic learning opportunities than their wealthier, white counterparts (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2013), and they performed at a much lower level on the 2010 NAEP civics assessment.

A particular weakness is education for any form of political engagement. Only one in ten Americans aged 18 to 24 met criteria for “informed voting” in the 2012 election, which included news consumption, issue awareness, voter registration, voting, general political knowledge, and consistency between the individual’s political opinions and choice of candidates (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge 2013).

Many educators, it seems, regard it as *safer* to ask students to do apolitical community service projects and to study formal governmental systems (e.g., learning how a bill becomes a law) than to ask them to discuss contemporary, politically divisive issues and how we might address them as citizens (Hess 2004; Hess & McAvoy 2014). But if teachers were to give students more chances to confront such issues, the result would likely be higher levels of civic engagement—indeed studies have found such opportunities to have positive effects on civic participation and engagement (Hope & Jagers 2014, focusing on African-American youth).



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Historical Background: The Decline in Concern with Civic Learning

When it comes to assessments of students' current political knowledge, we would join critics who think that the low scores are problematic. They are especially troubling when one considers that the original rationale for public education in America was civic: to make citizens capable of fulfilling their responsibilities as voters and jurors. Horace Mann, the most influential early proponent of public schools, rested his entire case on the premise that, "A Republic is a political contrivance by which the popular voice is collected and uttered, as one articulate and authoritative sound. If then, the people are unrighteous, that utterance will be unrighteous." As he told the authorities of Boston in 1842, "If the human mind ever is to be expanded by knowledge and imbued with virtuous principles, it must be done during the susceptible years of childhood and youth" (Mann 1842). That was a sufficient basis, he argued, for establishing free schools for all children.

By the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, the classic modes of civic education were already in place. In 1915, the U.S. Bureau of Education formally endorsed a movement for "community civics." Its aim was "to help the child know his community—not merely a lot about it, but the meaning of community life, what it does for him and how it does it, what the community has a right to expect from him, and how he may fulfill his obligations, meanwhile cultivating in him the essential qualities and habits of good citizenship" (Brown 1929, p. 28).

One method was to provide extracurricular groups and clubs where students could learn civic skills and habits from experience. Groups such as student governments and school newspapers were already well established during the lifetime of John Dewey, for example.

Another essential method was to teach citizenship in courses. By 1929, more than half of all American ninth-graders took a class called "civics." Another course, "problems of democracy" was also popular in the first half of the 20th century, reaching 41.5 percent of American high school students by 1949. A third popular course was called "American government" (Niemi & Smith 2001).

It is not clear that the total amount of classroom time spent on civics has declined since then. In fact, high school students earn more credits in the social studies than in previous decades (Lopez, Marcelo, & Levine 2008), not

to mention that more Americans now complete high school. But the balance of content has shifted. Overall, the curriculum is more academic and more derivative of college-level social science than it was 50 years ago, while less time is spent discussing or addressing contemporary problems.

For example, the "civics" course of the early 20th century was mostly about a citizen's role in the community, and "problems of democracy" typically required reading and discussing a daily newspaper. Those could be described as forms of "deeper learning," since they required critical thinking, communication, and application of academic knowledge. But these courses are mostly gone from American high schools. "American government," which remains, is modeled on an introductory college-level political science course and emphasizes the academic study of politics and government. That course has remained roughly as common for the past hundred years (Niemi & Smith 2001) and has been joined by popular college-type social science courses, especially economics and sociology. Generally speaking, then, the current emphasis of civic education is the acquisition of knowledge about systems. Less emphasis is placed on the development of skills and dispositions.

Further, even as the high school curriculum becomes increasingly derivative of college-level studies, colleges themselves have lessened their emphasis on preparing students for citizenship (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). Liberal education, including various aspects of civic learning, has gradually come to be overshadowed by a focus on career readiness.

The original civic case for public schooling can still be detected in state laws and policies. All states have standards for civics, and 40 states have a standardized social studies test, although not always in civics (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge 2013). However, civics education is not usually regarded as a high priority in the current educational system. The U.S. Department of Education acknowledges that, "Unfortunately, civic learning and democratic engagement are add-ons rather than essential parts of the core academic mission in too many schools and on too many college campuses today" (U.S. Department of Education 2012). But, for its part, the Department has had no authorized funds or programming for civics at all since 2011, and even before that, it merely



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administered a single earmark for the Center for Civic Education, a provider of curricula and textbooks.

Currently, virtually all of the statewide social studies and civics tests use multiple-choice formats (Godsay et al. 2012), representing a decline of essay and short-answer testing formats. One exception is Tennessee, where middle-school students' civic skills and knowledge are evaluated based on their performance on a community-based project (CIRCLE 2014). The Tennessee policy is new, though, and will be challenging to implement.

Only 10 states have a pre-service certification requirement for high school civics or government teachers (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge 2013). Service learning is incorporated in the social studies standards of 35 states, but only one state (Maryland) requires service for graduation (Godsay et al. 2012).

Most teachers do not routinely use pedagogical techniques that are designed to build civic participation skills. For example, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg (2013) found that less than half of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students ever experience a simulation in civics, such as a mock trial, mock election, or model legislature. Also, the amount of time devoted to instruction in reading, math, and science has increased in recent years, further shrinking the time available for civics. And Martin West (2007) found that in states with stronger requirements for history, students spent more time learning about history as a discipline, but they did not spend more time engaging in civics-related activities.

In response to these trends, one state, Florida, passed legislation—the *Sandra Day O'Connor Act*, in effect since 2010—designed to increase the amount of time devoted to civic education. However, the law embeds civics within the state's very strong accountability climate, which means that as the policy moves into a full-implementation phase, districts and teachers may experience strong pressure to teach to the test, rather than to sponsor more participatory learning experiences.²

Evolving Contexts for Civic Learning

We have already noted some important changes in the context of civic education: an increasingly academic curriculum, a strong emphasis on testing, and a focus on job skills. Two other trends are also important to note.

CIVIC LIFE IS MOVING ONLINE

At a time when politics and education are becoming increasingly mediated by digital technology, it would be unwise to replicate the “civics” or “problems of democracy” courses as they were taught in the mid-1900s, when news sources, political campaigns, and social movements relied mainly on print media and face-to-face communication. Perhaps citizens should still be able to read a newspaper article and give a speech, but now they must also be able to search the Internet for reliable political information and enlist support via social media (Stoddard 2014).

In 2012, 41 percent of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25 reported engaging in at least one act of “participatory politics,” which was defined to include activities such as forwarding a political video or starting an online group focused on an issue of public import (Cohen et al. 2012). Recent social movements, such as the efforts to permit gay marriage and to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, have been driven largely by young people who use social media.

Online civic engagement can take the form of superficial actions, such as clicking to “like” a comment. However, online platforms can also diminish existing gaps in civic engagement by social class (National Conference on Citizenship, et al. 2009), and online engagement is correlated with offline participation in politics and community groups.

According to our own analysis of the Pew Research Center's Digital Civic Engagement data (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012), young people who actively and frequently discuss political and current affairs online

are far more likely to participate in other forms of civic engagement as well. For example, 31.8 percent of young people who said that they discuss political affairs online every day reported that they worked or volunteered for a political party or candidate in 2012, compared to just 2.5 percent of those who never discussed politics online. (The average rate for the age group was 7.1 percent.) More than half (52.2 percent) of youth who discussed political and public affairs online said that they worked with fellow citizens to solve a problem in their community, compared to 23.8 percent of those who never engaged in online discussions. Further, the strong relationship between online and offline civic engagement held true regardless of young people's educational attainment, ethnicity, gender, income, or reliance on welfare benefits. Altogether, after controlling for other factors, online engagement accounted for 20.5 percent of the variance in offline civic engagement.

But if many young people already use social media for civic and political purposes—and if online and offline engagement are positively correlated—then one might ask whether it is really necessary for schools to *teach* young people to be digital citizens. We would say yes, for four reasons.

First, there remains a social class divide in using social media for civic purposes (albeit not as serious as the gaps in voting and volunteering rates; Cohen et al. 2012), suggesting that the least advantaged young people need help to take full advantage of the new media. Second, much false and misleading information circulates on the Internet, especially among networks of like-minded individuals. Classroom teachers have an important role to play in encouraging young people to seek out new ideas, and in teaching them how to distinguish reliable from unreliable information online. Third, actually changing the world remains difficult. It requires a mix of skills and strategies, not just online organizing but also the ability to understand and influence formal political institutions.

Finally, digital tools may offer other kinds of opportunities for deeper civic learning, both in and out of school. For example, iCivics, a nonprofit founded in her retirement by Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, offers a whole suite of free video games focusing on civic themes. And while most existing games for civic education involve single players interacting with the computer, digital games can also enable groups of students to collaborate on civics-related activities in a simulated environment (Shaffer 2007).

POLITICS IS POLARIZED

A second major change in the environment involves political polarization (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2014). Today, Americans are angry about the political system and especially angry at those who represent the opposite end of the political spectrum from their own. Further, not only are they angry at partisan political leaders, whom they can vote against, but they also distrust their fellow citizens. The Pew Research Center found that “a dwindling majority (57 percent) [of Americans] say they have a good deal of confidence in the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions” (Pew 2007).

Teaching about politics and civic engagement will always be somewhat controversial because it can influence students' values and actions in ways that affect the long-term direction of the country. Horace Mann may be revered as a founder of universal public education, but he wanted all students to learn Protestant values in public schools. Today, he would likely be criticized as a proponent of state-sponsored religious indoctrination (Taylor 2010).

We would argue that civic education can be ideologically fair and open-ended and need not turn into propaganda, but we acknowledge that civic learning will always be



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subject to suspicion, and when that suspicion is intense and widespread, civics can easily be cut from the curriculum, or at least rendered anodyne. Today, the situation seems particularly delicate, as public schools and teachers are quickly accused of political bias, and youth have come to be viewed as a partisan constituency. Young adults voted for the Democratic presidential candidate by lopsided margins in both 2008 and 2012.

Moreover, many Americans resist engaging in any sort of controversy at all (Eliasoph 1998), including classroom debates. That has long been true, but it is especially significant at a time when political controversy seems particularly bitter and unproductive—adults worry about what could happen if students are encouraged to discuss and argue about serious topics, and teachers fear the repercussions if parents and the media find out that such things are happening in their schools. According to our national survey of high school civics or government teachers, roughly one in four believe that the parents of their students or other adults in their community would object if they brought discussion of politics into the classroom (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge 2013).

For most of the 20th century, it was at least a point of bipartisan agreement that the United States was and ought to be a democracy. In 1984, for example, President Reagan, speaking on the beaches of Normandy, asserted that, “Democracy is worth dying for, because it’s the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man.” And in previous decades, most civic education programs proudly boasted that they intended to prepare youth for citizenship in a democracy.

In recent years, however, “democracy” itself has come to be viewed as a divisive word. The National Council for the Social Studies released a new voluntary framework for state social studies standards in 2013. A conservative blogger named Shane Vander Hart reviewed a draft, writing, “I noticed that on pg. 29 it is mentioned we live in a constitutional democracy when in fact we live in a constitutional republic. It is troubling that those writing this document couldn’t get something as basic as that right” (Hart 2013). And when radio commentator Rush Limbaugh reprinted Reagan’s 1984 Normandy speech on his website, he ended the long excerpt just before the invocation of “democracy.” (The words “BREAK TRANSCRIPT” mark where that passage would start.)

Thus, any effort to strengthen and deepen civic education must take into account the fact that many topics once viewed as neutral—even the word “democracy”—are now seen as partisan and ideologically loaded. Yet, under such conditions of polarization and bitter debate, it is arguably more important than ever to teach civil, cross-partisan deliberation in schools.

We acknowledge that even if we invest in efforts to teach teachers how to moderate debates, restrain their own partisan views, and choose balanced materials, examples will arise that are problematic. To cite one recent case, when a Pennsylvania middle school teacher assigned her students to read a *New York Times* article on the federal government’s shutdown, a parent complained that the assignment showed a leftist bias, and then the local teachers’ union head publicly asked whether that parent was a “neo-Nazi” (Miller 2013). We would criticize the union head while defending the teacher’s choice to assign the article (ideally with a contrasting viewpoint).

Opinions will vary about each such case, but we would urge educators not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Discussing controversial issues boosts students’ knowledge and interest and is especially valuable for children who come from homes where there is not much political discussion (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine 2014b). Parents and educators should tolerate flare-ups of public controversy in order to preserve the principle that it is important to talk about difficult issues in school.

Toward a Shared Agenda for Deeper Civic Learning

At a high level of abstraction, it is possible to achieve a broad consensus about civic education. For example, the 2003 *Civic Mission of Schools report*, which became the charter for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, had 50 authors, whose affiliations ranged from the conservative Heritage Foundation to the two national teachers’ unions (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE 2003). In spite of their many political differences, the participants were able to agree on a diagnosis of what ails civic education and on a set of proposed reforms.

However, that’s not to minimize the real disagreements that can arise when advocates debate their competing priorities, especially when they know that instructional time and other resources are scarce.

Some leading experts in the field are concerned primarily with ensuring that young people understand the basic structure of the U.S. government as it is enshrined in the Constitution and its amendments. They argue that our political system deserves great respect and support, and they fear that the system will weaken unless students are taught to understand and appreciate it. Thus, they tend to emphasize the value of instruction that focuses on the founding era and the national level of government, and that fosters an appreciative attitude toward the political system and a sense of unity around our shared history and principles (Damon 2011; Pondiscio 2013; Feith 2011).

For instance, consider *We the People*, a curriculum that was funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Center for Civic Education for many years. The program, which likely has reached more than 26 million students (Hartry & Porter 2004), was found to have “a strong positive impact on high school students’ knowledge of the history and principles of the U.S. Constitution” (Educational Testing Service 1991, p. 2). Hartry and Porter explain that the goal of the program was “promoting civic competence and responsibility,” defined by students’ positive attitudes toward American political institutions, knowledge of these institutions, and political participation (e.g., working for a political party or candidate; participating in a peaceful protest).

In contrast, other advocates are concerned primarily with empowering young people to participate in civic life, with an emphasis on civic action that takes place at the local level (as most civic action does). From this perspective, it is important for students to gain some understanding of the U.S. Constitution (for instance, they should know that speech enjoys constitutional protection), but it may be just as important for them to investigate local social conditions or who exercises real power in the community.

Further, those who favor such “action civics”—a new term for an old idea, which likely was more prevalent in 1915 or 1945 than it is today—tend to value a critical stance toward the existing political system, and they often call for instruction that emphasizes the value of diversity, localism, criticism, and action, rather than instruction that aims to foster a sense of patriotism and unity and an understanding of core political documents and principles (Levinson 2012).³ Thus, action civics programs⁴ tend to engage students in activities such as local elections, interactions with elected

officials, debates, community organizing, and other forms of experiential and authentic engagement. Such work is located, according to proponents, at the intersection of traditional civic education, youth leadership development, and guided experiential civic education (Gingold 2013).⁵

Divergent philosophical views of civics tend to suggest quite different pedagogies and subject matter, and they reflect quite divergent views of the current U.S. political system and society, mapping roughly onto left/right ideological debates. Such controversies can easily intimidate teachers and students. But controversies can also motivate students to learn and help them make sense of complex material. As Gerald Graff, the distinguished literary critic and former president of the Modern Language Association, wrote two decades ago:

One does not have to be a tenured radical to see that what has taken over the educational world today is not barbarism and unreason but, simply, conflict. The first step in dealing productively with today’s conflicts is to recognize their legitimacy. [We should] rethink the premise that the eruption of fundamental conflict in education has to mean educational and cultural paralysis. My argument is that conflict has to mean paralysis only as long as we fail to take advantage of it (Graff 1993, p. 5).

Graff might recommend that debates about the purposes of civic education be brought into the classroom, that multiple ideological perspectives be treated as legitimate, and that students learn to integrate material into meaningful arguments by participating in these debates. “Organizing high school and college courses around compelling debates could make information and books more meaningful—and worth looking up—than they now often are to many students” (Graff 2008, p. 4).

Certainly, civic education should be ideologically open-ended rather than propagandistic. Students should form their own views after appropriate reflection, academic study, and deliberation with others. Civics can thus be neutral even as it is a field of controversy.

Furthermore, the modalities of civic education are not as controversial as the goals. Despite ongoing debates about the proper purposes of civics instruction, participants in the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools managed to reach consensus on six “promising” (Carnegie & CIRCLE

2003) or “proven” (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools et al. 2011) practices, which are well-supported by expert opinion and existing research:

1. Instruction in government, history, law, and democracy.
2. Discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events.
3. Service learning that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.
5. Student participation in school governance.
6. Simulations of democratic processes and procedures.⁶

Note that such practices are not inherently partisan, and they can and should address the concerns of both conservative and progressive educators. Moreover, they are entirely consistent with the goals of deeper learning.

Teaching civics in this way means helping young people develop a sophisticated understanding of social studies and civics content, while also helping them develop into competent civic actors who possess the range of skills highlighted by advocates for deeper learning. For example, the capacity to collaborate and communicate effectively is required in order to have a respectful, articulate debate with those who hold different political views. The ability to reflect on one’s own thinking (i.e., metacognition) is key to making sense of those other views and questioning one’s own assumptions. And the ability to persist in the face of complicated real-world problems is critical to the task of confronting important civic dilemmas.

In fact, deeper learning is the only kind of learning that seriously addresses the “civic readiness” part of the common slogan “college, career, and civic life.” To date, the argument for deeper learning has tended to be made in reference to the cultivation of knowledge and skills that matter in college and the workforce. But deeper learning is truly preparation for civic life.

CIVIC EDUCATION CAN SUPPORT DEEPER LEARNING

The effects of civic education have not yet been assessed as comprehensively as we and others in the field would like. However, available studies tend to support the premise that civic education can be an effective means of teaching not just civics-related content and skills but also the various kinds of academic content and inter- and intrapersonal skills that are grouped together under the banner of deeper learning.

What's Known About the Effects of Civic Education in General?

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools names the six practices described above as “proven” on the basis of favorable program evaluations and survey data that show positive correlations between these practices, on one hand, and civic knowledge or civic engagement, on the other (see a summary in Levine 2007).

In 2012, we surveyed a large sample of young adults and asked, among many other questions, whether they recalled the following experiences in high school: discussion of current events, controversial issue discussions in any classes, conducting research on social or political issues, projects on community issues or in the community, and keeping up with news media. Participation in more of these practices, we found, was associated with greater engagement with the 2012 election. Service learning also had positive effects when the young adults recalled that they had addressed the root causes of social problems; otherwise, its effects were negative (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine 2014a).

A large study of Chicago public school students found that having good “civic learning opportunities” increased adolescents’ commitment to civic engagement—these opportunities were defined as a combination of “learning about problems in society, learning about current events, studying issues about which one cares, experiencing an open climate for classroom discussions of social and political topics, hearing from civic role models, learning about ways to improve the community, and working on service learning projects” (Kahne & Sporte 2008).

Additionally, a number of studies have found benefits from discussion of controversial issues in classrooms (Campbell 2008; McDevitt & Kioussis 2004; Hess & McAvoy, 2014), participation in extracurricular groups (Smith 1999; McFarland & Thomas 2006), and community service, whether required (Metz & Youniss 2005; Hart et al. 2007) or not (Hart et al. 2007). Service learning has also been found to enhance students’ interest in voting and increase their academic success in social studies classes, but much variation was observed in the quality and impact of service-learning programs (Billig, Root, & Jesse 2005).

These sources create a fairly strong basis for the belief that recommended approaches to civic education have positive results, at least when well implemented. However, we acknowledge that more rigorous methodologies (especially random assignment) might complicate the story by suggesting that other factors, beyond the civics class itself, are primarily responsible for the results. Further, we do not have answers to some important questions, such as whether civic education in adolescence has effects that persist decades later, whether subtle differences in content and ideology matter, and how to narrow severe gaps in civic learning; while many studies find that all students benefit from recommended practices, the most advantaged students tend to benefit most (e.g., Kawashima-Ginsberg 2013).

Finally, although we have some evidence that good civic education has an impact on civic knowledge and participation, we do not yet know how to increase the prevalence of good civic education, and our analysis of state policies—such as course requirements and tests—finds that they have had no impact on what students know

about civic issues or the extent to which they participate in civic life (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine 2014a). That could be because the existing menu of state policies is too narrow and modest, but it also suggests that the gap in our knowledge of policy interventions remains a serious limitation.

In any case, though, the recommended approaches to teaching civics appear to be entirely consistent with, and supportive of, the goals of deeper learning.

Civics and the Whole Curriculum

Students do not learn democratic and civic knowledge and skills in their social studies classes alone; civic learning can occur in all other subject areas. For example, a particularly powerful way to learn about injustice may be to read and discuss a fine play about tyranny in English class. A biology curriculum may offer particularly challenging and valuable opportunities to explore environmental issues. In mathematics, statistical problems can involve social issues and teach important civic skills.

When designed and implemented thoughtfully, civic learning is a way to make any subject more authentic, helping students to become more engaged in the given content by allowing them to apply concepts from textbooks to real problems of public significance. In short, civic learning can provide a vehicle for deeper learning.

Particularly when students have a chance to apply what they learn in the classroom to a real-world setting—for example, through service learning or a community project—they are required to think critically, strategically, and collaboratively. Inevitably, they will be confronted by

unexpected circumstances and complex problems that need solving (Rosing et al. 2010), often in partnership with other students and adults, and often demanding that they communicate effectively with people who hold different values, perspectives, and backgrounds. Confronting opposing views and dilemmas is also a critical part of service learning that helps students reflect deeply on their learning and define their values (Scott 2012).

Further, students who become involved in experiential civic learning opportunities often have a chance to see tangible results from their efforts to confront meaningful challenges, helping them develop an academic mindset by teaching them the value of hard work and collaboration. As one study found, civic and leadership programs in afterschool settings provide particularly useful contexts in which to develop persistence, a sense of agency, and a sophisticated understanding of complicated real-world issues (Larson & Angus 2011).

Although the connections between civic learning and the rest of the curriculum have not been adequately explored or exploited so far, some policies and programs do take these connections into account. For instance, Florida's O'Connor Act explicitly mandates that civics content be integrated into elementary grade English/language arts classes. The organization EarthForce has developed an environmental science curriculum that incorporates the teaching of civic responsibility. And the Common Core State Standards may lead to a greater emphasis on discussion of civics-related content in English language arts, thanks to their emphasis on informational texts and the "comprehension and collaboration" standard, which includes collective decision making.



When designed and implemented thoughtfully, civic learning is a way to make any subject more authentic.

Exciting Trends in Civic Learning

The federal government has allocated some funds for civics over the past decade through the U.S. Department of Education and the Corporation for National and Community Service. However, very little federal funding has gone toward the creation of novel teaching models or materials, and recent investments in research and development for civic education have been paltry overall. For their part, when it comes to civics, the states have commissioned the cheapest and most traditional exams possible—i.e., multiple-choice written tests—and only a small number of foundations have supported K-12 civics in any form. And while it should be possible to design reliable and valid measures of students' ability to work together to address common concerns, we know of no serious efforts to do so. With the exception of a recent draft framework from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2013), there has not even been much discussion of the value of measuring students' ability to work together on social or community problems.

Nevertheless, there have been several important recent developments in civic education, with promising implications for high school education writ large.

First, Advanced Placement American Government is currently the fastest-growing AP course, and—insofar as it emulates college-level political science—it often serves as a model for other high school civics courses. Because it requires relatively rapid coverage of a large body of information, some argue that the course gives too little attention to helping students learn how to address contemporary problems. However, University of Washington professor Walter Parker has been developing an alternative method of teaching AP American Government that involves group projects—he explicitly describes it as a “deeper learning” approach. In a randomized experiment, Parker and his design team (which includes teachers) have been able to match the AP scores achieved with the traditional approach while considerably boosting students' civic skills and interests (Parker et al. 2013).

Second, in 2013, the National Council for the Social Studies released a new framework to help inform states' efforts to revise their social studies standards. It is shorter, more coherent, and more demanding than typical state standards (which tend to be long lists of miscellaneous topics), but it

makes new room for civic participation with the addition of “taking informed action” as a major learning outcome (National Council for the Social Studies 2013).

Third, three states have recently enacted new policies to strengthen civic education on a large scale. As noted earlier, Florida imposed a new high-stakes civics test along with a set of other requirements, such as mandating the inclusion of nonfiction texts in elementary reading curricula. Tennessee also added a required assessment, but in lieu of mandating a high-stakes standardized test, it requires students to compile a civics portfolio for graduation. And Hawaii created—and then protected from a planned cut—a new mandatory high school course that focuses on the application of academic content and skills to the solving of important real-world problems (CIRCLE 2014). While it is too early to know whether these reforms will work, they are all bold and, at the same time, intriguingly different in their approaches.

Fourth, Action Civics is gaining recognition as an engaging pedagogy that enables students from diverse backgrounds to address relevant and serious community issues through action-oriented pedagogy. Harvard professor Meira Levinson gave the movement a strong theoretical basis in a recent book (although she prefers the phrase “guided experiential education”; Levinson 2012), and many organizations, including our own, have joined a National Action Civics Collaborative to strengthen and expand the Action Civics model. There is some evidence of its impact on students, but empirical research so far is limited.

Fifth, there is an emerging field of game-based and technology-assisted civic learning. Based on the concept of “gamification” (the use of games to engage users/students in solving problems and learning), these tools aim to support the active learning of key civics concepts (such as the branches of power and function of the Supreme Court) integrated with the development of deeper learning skills such as collaboration, effective communication, and persistence in the face of complicated problems (e.g., Chesler et al. 2013). CIRCLE's evaluation of one iCivics game, Drafting Board, indicated that students who played it achieved the desired learning outcomes while reporting greater engagement with the class than did a control group of students who did not play the game (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2012).

Sixth, civic learning can be incorporated into settings outside of traditional social studies curricula, and some prominent national organizations have successfully done so. For example, YouthBuild USA defines civic engagement and leadership as important pillars of its work, and it actively engages its participants in leadership development activities, mentoring, and civic activities—as a result, many graduates of YouthBuild serve in key leadership roles in their home communities (CIRCLE 2012).

Finally, there are ample opportunities for engaged civic learning in extracurricular activities. For example, Junior State of America provides forums for students to join peers in exploring their interests in politics and foreign affairs, and it encourages them to take leadership roles in

all aspects of the organization. Similarly, studies find that students who participate in Urban Debate Leagues increase their chances of academic success dramatically compared to similar students who do not participate. The latest evaluation finds that the program not only teaches debating skills, leading to better overall academic performance, but it results in young people becoming more engaged in civic life and more optimistic in their views of the future (Mezuk & Anderson 2013). Such out-of-classroom opportunities are critically important, we argue, because they offer pathways for students who are not well served by traditional educational settings. And by giving young people a chance to engage on their own terms with civic content and to participate in deliberations about civic matters, they allow diverse students to discover their love of learning.

CONCLUSION

Even though *A Nation at Risk* was explicit and eloquent about the critical importance of civic learning, the waves of education reform that have followed that report have generally ignored civics. Since 1993, education for effective citizenship has been an afterthought in most federal and state policies and has received minimal investment from government and philanthropy. As a result, current programs and assessments in civics tend to look old fashioned and small scale, even as the political and technological contexts that confront young citizens have changed rapidly.

The few bold recent efforts to strengthen civics have taken the form of state-level tests or course mandates. Although we do not oppose those reforms (which may help if very well implemented), we think they miss the main point. Civics needs new approaches that involve deeper and more collaborative learning, that take better advantage of advanced technologies, that are assessed in more authentic ways (without sacrificing rigor), and that pervade the curriculum—including social studies but also reaching into other subject areas.

If states choose to require civics courses and exams, they should design the tests to measure students' ability to think critically about current issues and to interact with institutions and with other citizens (at least in hypothetical scenarios). Teachers will also need strong professional development to prepare their students for these tests without sacrificing opportunities for deeper learning. It is possible that professional development, mandatory courses, and thoughtful standards and tests could generate excellent pedagogy and outcomes. But tests are not particularly promising on their own and may not be necessary for improving civics.

Nor would we recommend requiring particular experiences, such as service learning, at the district or state level. The

positive effect observed from some small-scale projects probably depends, at least in part, on the teachers' enthusiasm for undertaking these efforts; making them mandatory might well reduce their benefits.

If any pedagogy has a strong basis for being made mandatory, it is the engagement of students in moderated discussions of current, controversial issues. However, in order to support such discussions, districts and states should also adopt policies that explicitly protect teachers who address controversies in the classroom, while giving them guidance about how to moderate such discussions fairly and effectively.

Above all, we recommend the application of deeper learning to civics and the integration of civics in deeper learning. Deeper learning's emphasis on inter- and intrapersonal development seems very much in line with civic educators' long-term interest in cultivating the development of active and engaged citizens. Both movements seek to develop youth as people who not only understand how our political and legal systems work but who are equipped to join their fellow citizens in responsible and respectful debate, to reflect on and revise their own positions, to negotiate and work through thorny conflicts, and ultimately to address local and national problems.



Civics needs new approaches that involve deeper and more collaborative learning, that take better advantage of advanced technologies, that are assessed in more authentic ways, and that pervade the curriculum.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Hewlett Foundation, “What Is Deeper Learning?”: <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning/what-deeper-learning>

² The trends we have noted for the United States are not unique to this country. A comparative study of civic education in 24 nations found that it “is a low-status subject and curricular aim” almost everywhere. “Civics goals are thought of as important, but much less critical than goals in subject areas such as science, for example. For very few students is any civics-related subject part of an important exit or entrance examination” (Torney-Purta et al. 1999, p. 31). Courses are typically required, however, and there is typically some effort to use student groups and school governance as opportunities for learning civic skills.

Students from the United States typically score at or above the mean on internationally standardized tests of civics. However, they perform better on some items (e.g., interpreting political information) and worse on others (mainly having to do with the conceptual underpinnings of democracy and rights). At the same time, they show much greater variation in scores than students in most other nations, with American students’ performance strongly correlated with their social class (Torney-Purta & Barber 2004). It’s worth noting, though, that these comparative results are somewhat out of date, because, unfortunately, the U.S. has declined to participate in international studies of civics since 1999, and it missed the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, which collected data in 38 other countries (Schulz et al. 2010).

One significant recent development is the adoption of a national “Citizenship” curriculum in the United Kingdom in 2002, along with an ambitious measurement effort. However, results appear to be mixed so far (Keating et al. 2010).

In many countries, textbook adoption is a national matter, and when there are deep divisions about how to present a nation’s history, those disagreements result in battles over the textbooks. Americans certainly debate history in contentious ways, but textbook adoption is handled by states, districts, schools, and/or teachers. This differentiation of our textbook market alleviates the textbook controversies that dominate many other countries. In the United States, debates about pedagogy in civics appear comparatively more prominent.

³ See National Action Civics Collaborative: <http://actioncivicscollaborative.org/>

⁴ Well-known programs include Generation Citizen, Mikva Challenge, and Earthforce.

⁵ Additional theories of civic education are implicit in other research and programs. For example, the organization Facing History & Ourselves—which supplies schools with curricula, materials, and professional development—aims to develop in students a sense of security about their own ethnic/religious identities along with an understanding of and respect for others’ identities (Schultz, Barr, & Selman 2001).

⁶ We note also that civic learning can occur outside of the traditional classroom settings. For example, some researchers argue that extracurricular activities provide young people with a chance to develop social capital, agency skills, and hands-on experience with community problem-solving (e.g., Kawashima-Ginsberg 2014). And out-of-school programs such as YouthBuild appear to provide meaningful opportunities to develop personal and civic leadership for young people who have dropped out of the formal educational system.

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