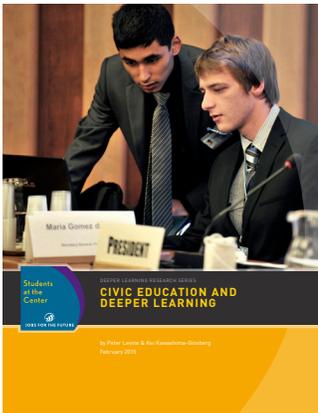**Students at the Center**

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES | FEBRUARY 2015

CIVIC EDUCATION AND DEEPER LEARNING

By Peter Levine & Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg

A Nation at Risk, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, tends to be remembered as a stirring call to boost the rigor of the high school curriculum and provide the American economy with a stronger workforce. Few recall, though, that it made an equally stirring appeal to the civic purposes of education, too:

"Our concern . . . 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."

In the three decades since, policymakers have all but ignored that concern, choosing instead to focus on basic reading and math, testing and accountability, and preparing individuals to compete in the job market. And in the meantime, young people's participation in civic life has languished (judging by their voting patterns, membership in community organizations, and other measures).

However, the most recent wave of school reforms appears to have passed its crest. Today, many Americans are calling upon their schools to spend less time preparing students for standardized tests and more time ensuring that they study a broad range of subjects—and that they study them deeply, with ample opportunities to practice critical thinking, problem solving,

collaboration, effective communication, self-directed learning, and the development of an academic mindset.[1]

The turn to deeper learning should go hand in hand with a renewed emphasis on the teaching of civics. Not only does deeper learning have great potential to promote civic outcomes and strengthen our democracy but, at the same time, civic education *exemplifies* deeper learning. When designed and implemented effectively, it provides students with exactly the sorts of challenging, collaborative, and highly engaging experiences that advocates of deeper learning celebrate.

CIVIC LEARNING IN CONTEXT: THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

The original rationale for public education in America was civic. Horace Mann, the most influential early proponent of public schools, believed that establishing free universal schooling would create citizens capable of fulfilling their responsibilities as voters and jurors.

By the mid-19th century, civics was well established in American education. Popular courses, including Civics, Problems of Democracy, and American Government,

reached a majority of high school students. Students also learned civic skills and habits in extracurricular groups and clubs, such as student governments and school newspapers.

It is not clear that the total amount of classroom time spent on civics has declined since then. However, the curriculum has become more academic and less focused on contemporary problems, as high school social studies increasingly resembles college social sciences, emphasizing the study of systems, rather than preparation for citizenship. Although all states have civics standards, and 40 have a standardized social studies test, civic education is not a high priority in the current educational system.

EVOLVING CONTEXTS FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Two current trends in American life—the growth of digital technology and the polarization of political discourse—have important implications for any new effort to emphasize civic education.

Civic Life Is Moving Online

Both politics and education are becoming increasingly mediated by digital technology. And while some might worry that the Internet is having a negative impact on civic life, distracting citizens from issues of public importance, the evidence suggests a more complicated dynamic. In fact, many Americans have become savvy in using the Web as a platform for political organizing and advocacy. Further, according to recent data from the Pew Research Center's Digital Civic Engagement project, young people who discuss political and current affairs online are far more likely to participate in other forms of civic engagement.

But even if many young people already use technology for civic and political purposes, schools still need to teach them to be effective and responsible digital citizens, both in and outside of school. For example, students should learn to distinguish reliable from unreliable online information, and they should become aware of the ways in which civic participation may differ in online and offline contexts. Further, there remains a significant class divide in the use of social media for civic purposes, suggesting that it may be important for schools to teach their least advantaged students how to take full advantage of the new media.

Politics Is Polarized

Americans are more politically polarized than they have been in decades, leading many to fear that if they introduce controversial topics in the classroom, the result will be unmanageable conflict among students and, perhaps, angry complaints from parents. Yet, at a time of such divisiveness, it is arguably more important than ever that schools teach civil deliberation and debate. Discussing controversial issues boosts students' knowledge and interest and has powerful effects on their understanding of logical argumentation and persuasion, particularly for children who come from homes where there is not much political discussion. While many parents and educators may be wary of classroom debates, and of the possibility that teachers will propagandize, they should be willing to tolerate occasional conflicts in order to preserve the principle that it is important to talk about pressing social and political issues in school. By the time they graduate, every student should have learned to listen respectfully to competing arguments, to consider all sides of complicated debates, and to analyze the logical premises and reasoning that support competing positions on matters of public importance.

DEEPER LEARNING SUPPORTS CIVIC EDUCATION, AND CIVIC EDUCATION SUPPORTS DEEPER LEARNING

Some have proposed that in order to improve civic learning, states should require high school students to take a civics class and/or pass the U.S. citizenship test. But in fact, almost every state already does require a civics class, and many students already take state civics tests that are more demanding than the naturalization exam. Neither of those approaches have an impressive track record.

We argue instead that the best way to strengthen civic learning is to focus on improving the instruction that students receive, with an emphasis on precisely the kinds of teaching that lead to deeper learning. When taught effectively, civics involves not just the study of American history and its laws (academic content) but also the analysis of and deliberation about complex social issues (critical thinking and effective communication), the taking or simulation of real-world actions by a group of students (problem-solving and collaboration), and careful reflection

on what was accomplished and its efficacy (metacognition). If they fail to provide such deeper learning experiences, then required civics classes and tests have little impact.

At present, some students are lucky enough to participate in high-quality service learning programs, collaborative research projects, student-produced newspapers, classroom debates, mock trials, model legislatures, and the like. But such opportunities are rare, unevenly distributed, and most likely to be offered to college-bound students from affluent, majority white communities. Evidence shows that low-income students and students of color have fewer experiential civic learning opportunities and, perhaps not coincidentally, performed at a lower level on the 2010 NAEP Civics Assessment.

TOWARD A SHARED AGENDA FOR DEEPER CIVIC LEARNING

Civic education itself has long been divided into competing camps. Some advocates are concerned primarily with ensuring that young people understand the history and structure of the U.S. government—including its core documents and legal principles—while others give higher priority to empowering young people to participate in civic life, with an emphasis on civic action at the local level. The former tend to argue that our political system deserves reverence, and that instruction should foster a sense of patriotism and unity, while the latter tend to take a more critical stance toward the existing political system, favoring instruction that celebrates diversity, localism, and active engagement in community issues.

But while advocates may debate the proper content and emphasis of civic education, they also share a lot of common ground. In 2003, for example, 50 politically diverse members of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools were able to agree upon a core set of civic education practices, 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 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.

Note that these practices are designed to help 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 that characterize deeper learning.

Further, civic learning can easily be integrated with other academic content areas—for example, students can discuss the theme of injustice in a literary work in English, explore debates about the environment in biology, or perform a statistical analysis of public health issues in math. When students have a chance to apply what they learn in the classroom to a real-world setting—through service learning, community projects, or simulations—they are asked to think critically, strategically, and collaboratively; confront unexpected circumstances and complex problems; communicate effectively with people who have different values, perspectives, and backgrounds; and reflect deeply on their own learning. These approaches can take better advantage of advanced technologies, should be assessed in more authentic ways, and can pervade the entire high school curriculum.

In short, the relationship works both ways: Deeper learning is essential to high-quality civic education, and the study of civic issues (whether in social studies or other subjects) can be a powerful means of teaching the academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capacities associated with deeper learning, which contribute to success in college, the workplace, *and* civic life.

ENDNOTE

[1] This terminology about deeper learning was developed by the Hewlett Foundation.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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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The full report is available at http://www.jff.org/publications/civic-education-and-deeper-learning