

Beyond How-To Civics Education for Adult Learners

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The Traditional Civics Class

Did your experience of learning civics in the classroom go something like this: a drawing on the board with the three branches of government and discussions about what happens among professional politicians, how a bill becomes a law, or perhaps, how to lobby your elected official? Mine too! The problem with this model is that it assumes we have a democracy, and we just need to fill learners up with the knowledge they need to vote, follow rules, and navigate government.

It wasn't until I became involved in a high school pro-choice club where we marched in Washington, D.C., while chucking tennis balls marked with pro-choice messages at the White House that political participation felt meaningful to me. The more I became involved in such activities, the more I began to feel skeptical that democracy was a done deal. I realized that to effectively influence decision-making processes, I needed to do more than merely understand how my government works and then dutifully vote every couple of years. I needed a civics class that opened up space to debate, deconstruct, and analyze taken-for-granted assumptions about the meanings of democracy. I needed a civics class that honored the democratic principle of encouraging each person to bring his or her full intelligence, creativity, and skepticism to analyze the system we've got and imagine how it might work better.

The First Challenge: Unpacking the Concept of Democracy

Different notions of democracy carry different beliefs regarding the knowledge, skills, and values needed by citizens for democracy to flourish and,

therefore, significantly different implications for civics curricula. For example, for some, democracy is related to liberal ideas about protections of individual rights such as the right to private property; for others, democracy is about equality of opportunity. For many, democracy can be found in free markets while for others, civil society is the site of democratic activity. Likewise, the definition of a good citizen changes according to your definition of democracy. For some, good citizens volunteer; for some they participate in campaigns. Yet for others, they question the existing system. (See "Three Types of Citizens" chart on p. 4.)

Two Stories from the Classroom

A critical approach to civics education would move away from treating learners as empty receptacles to be filled with information and procedures and instead draw upon learners' vast experiences and knowledge to help them examine how their personal experiences and problems are often structurally produced and connected to broader forces.

For example, after an 18-year-old student of mine was shot and killed, I asked the young people in my class what they thought needed to be done to address the upsurge in violence in their communities. One young person answered, "Kill Bush." It was an angry response that some teachers might want to deflect, but I felt it revealed a great deal about how little faith this student had in his democratically elected government. Prior to the shooting, the class had been discussing the lack of jobs and community resources available to young people, how that came to be, and who might be responsible. This comment was evidence to me that my student connected the violence in his community to larger systemic problems, including the very functioning of the government that President Bush represents. A traditional civics

What is Democracy?

class emphasizes the idea that democracy is out there somewhere quietly protecting our rights. But this student did not feel so protected.

In another one of my classes, in which many of the students were in and out of lockup or had friends who were, learners expressed frustration at their own and their friends' inability to vote due to past arrests. In response to student interest in this issue, I presented a chart displaying voter felony disenfranchisement laws in the fifty states. The conversation moved from individual stories and experiences of disempowerment to looking at the issue as a systemic problem that results from a government that students said doesn't recognize the notion of rehabilitation and second chances.

Had half the class not gotten locked up or encountered severe personal crises the next week, we would have looked in more depth at the organizing forces and structures that shape the students' individual experiences. Such an activity would have allowed learners to move between their experiences and the lens through which they view their experiences (assumptions about the political system and democracy), in order to assess and possibly adapt their interpretations and their frameworks for understanding the world around them. There's no irony in the fact that the people whose stories most fly in the face of the idea that we live in a functional democracy are most often (literally) locked up, locked out of public debate, or in some other way (through poor education, impoverished living conditions, or demeaning work) kept from making their voices heard.

From Civics as Procedure to Civics as Critical Reflection and Questioning

As ABE teachers, we have the opportunity to entertain conceptions of democracy that go beyond mastering procedure or increasing levels of participation. We have an opportunity to provide a space for debate, conflict, reflection, questioning and visioning, and a chance to grow and change in our thinking as we hear from one another and learn about various conceptions of democracy.

If we avoid this opportunity because it feels too controversial, and we decide that a more neutral approach would be to stay with the tried and true curricular approaches to civics, we're not actually being apolitical. Rather, we're choosing to leave things as they are — indeed a political choice!

So do we have a democracy? And what is democracy? Is it maximizing numbers of participants? Voting? Running for office? Civil disobedience? Discussion? Creating better systems when the current ones fail us? Does it require certain conditions such as the redistribution of wealth? Is it a given thing? Is it a process? Who participates? Let's discuss it!

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