

Campbell, D., Levinson, M., & Hess, F. (Eds.). (2012). *Making civics count: Citizenship education for a new generation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Making Civics Count

Reviewed by Judith Briggs
Illinois State University

Making Civics Count: Citizen Education for a New Generation (2012), published by Harvard Education Press, is an edited volume of insightful research-based essays that make the case for revitalized civic education within the 21st Century. Editor David Campbell defines civic education as “the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experience to prepare someone to be an active, informed participant in democratic life” (p. 1). According to Campbell, civic education is under threat by three main trends in American politics: decline in political activity, polarization of current politics, and a distrust of the government. Richard Niemi (Chapter 1) and Peter Levine (Chapter 2) maintain that today’s Americans are less involved in their communities and in politics than they were in previous generations, and research reveals that young people are far less engaged than their elders, both in the voting booth and in campaigns to create social change. Campbell cites an inattention to civics within education as a source of this problem, and the text, through the voices of various authors, dissects this assumption and offers solutions.

While the editors, David Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Fredrick Hess, present various views, the common thread running through the commentaries is a call for an education that teaches students to discuss contrasting views and to resolve disagreements under the tutelage of informed instructors who value the democratic process. Classroom discussion as a pedagogical technique is considered to be more effective than any worksheet, lecture, or video for providing and retaining information,

connecting to students’ lives, and exciting passion to act. The book first outlines why we need civics, provides a brief history of educational civic engagement within the Progressive Era, calls for the inclusion of diversity within the discussion, suggests how civics should be actively taught, and provides ideas for teacher development to enhance and sustain this level of teaching. However, not all of the authors agree on the process of civic education. For instance, Campbell does not equate cyber citizenship with boots on the ground activism, but Kahne, Ullman, and Middaugh (Chapter 9) argue that digital sites can be good sources for fund raising and mobilizing, and that digital communities, such as the Gaia Community Projects, promote a participatory culture among teens and young adults that aligns with civic engagement. The editors practice what they preach in this instance and welcome divergence to allow the reader to make up his or her mind.

Democratic participation is more than just exercising the vote, it is a skill that needs to be taught, and, in the vein of John Dewey, it is the job of schools to develop civic dispositions and to serve a social purpose for all. Michael Johanek (Chapter 3) does a fine job of outlining how a historical perspective of civic education can inform the present in his tale of an East Harlem principal’s drive to bring sanitary housing to the neighborhood through school and community political efforts. This exemplar is a far cry from present civic education, which Anna Rosefsky Saavedra (Chapter 6) complains is non-confrontational, mono-dimensional, and

textbook bound. Instead of encouraging research, discussion, reflection, and critical thinking, Saavedra contends that present day civics teachers use textbooks to teach static facts that students can't contextualize, while best practice includes analysis of current events and strategies for debate. She argues that through discussion, students learn to consider various sides of an issue. Saavedra advocates the use of the Close Up Foundation's journal *Current Issues* to provide teachers with tools to understand unfamiliar issues and to begin these discussions. While the authors agree that schools play a role to develop civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, Saavedra contends that many schools stop at the knowledge piece, based on state or local standards for civic education. Yet, there is often not a state mechanism to check if students have learned the material that the standards have specified. Students take required courses, often in eighth grade or in high school to learn about the Constitution and government processes, but are not taught how to take action or to think critically about issues. Saavedra maintains that an exchange of ideas can lead to a deeper understanding of one's personal position.

Levinson (Chapter 4) argues that a presentation of narratives or attitudes by non-dominant groups may rival officially sanctioned histories and create this dialogue. Open classroom discussions, conducted in safe environments that lack power differentials, can give students voice within a system that often denies them one. However, this form of civic education can prove threatening as it raises questions about systemic inequities. Levinson contends that attention to diversity within civics education can cause strong reactions on both sides. This occurred in Arizona in 2010 when the attorney general banned Mexican American Studies (MAS) for being subversive since it taught a history contrary to the status quo.

Action taken by students, teachers, and the public protesting this decision, Levinson asserts, indicates the success of MAS in getting students, the school, and the community involved in civic action. Levinson argues that civic involvement by minority populations often falls short due to systemic barriers and socioeconomic issues, and that schools engaging in civic activism should be the leaders in social reform.

James Youniss (Chapter 5) provides examples of civic activism through service learning. Youniss describes the successful efforts of Iowa science teacher Hector Ibarra and his middle school students, which led to a ban of used oil filters in local landfills. Using a project approach to learning, students did research and presented findings to a local landfill director, the conservation board, and then to a state legislator who took up the case. Ibarra continues doing projects year after year with his students. According to Youniss, society tells its citizens that policy decisions are complex and best left to the experts, yet teachers like Ibarra, with knowledge of civic structures, can guide their students to make change within their community. Youniss also contends that not all volunteerism is service learning or is a form of political involvement; volunteerism may not always change a system that brought about its need. Youniss argues that service learning needs to be purpose driven to be effectual in changing the order of things. He points to large numbers of Teach for America Alumni, college graduates who taught for two years in underserved schools and who continue to do voluntary educational service after they leave the program, as a positive example of effective change.

Keith Barton (Chapter 7) cites that teacher training programs focused on pedagogy often do not have the time and the wherewithal to provide teacher candidates with a sophisticated view of democracy, and it can be threatening for teachers to take risks

in teaching for social justice. Lesson objectives, interpersonal relations, lesson activities, and classroom organization often hinder students' civic participation. Barton also found that civics teachers often do not enter the profession to prepare their students for democratic participation; they need training in how to take action. Campbell et al. concur that classroom discussion and debate, involvement in student organizations, and service can prepare students for active democratic citizenship, but it takes trained and active teachers to make this triad happen.

Diana Hess and John Zola (Chapter 8) assert that meaningful professional development that trains teachers to engage in service-learning through Project Citizen, and that investigates Supreme Court actions through the Supreme Court Summer Institute can be transformative for civics teachers. Hess and Zola outline five characteristics of successful professional development seminars for civic educators: challenging content; modeled successful classroom strategies; a collaborative-centered design; encouragement and ongoing collaboration; and sensitivity to the teachers' work context. However, money and time is often a hindrance to teachers' further training, and while the authors present ideals for transformative development they may be

beyond many teachers' grasps. It is no surprise that Campbell (Chapter 10) found charter schools and private schools with more economic resources available for teachers and student development did better jobs of teaching political knowledge and techniques for civic action than did public schools, with public schools in low socioeconomic areas lagging the furthest behind in civic education and skills. School ethos shape the debate of social values within classrooms; some public schools with their spoken adherence to political neutrality censure discussion and action that would be more admissible within the private sector civic education.

The text was thorough and scholarly. Campbell et al. continuously backed claims with research findings and called for more research to discover ways to combat democratic lethargy. The lack of civic engagement and the systemic disregard for active civic education within school systems seems overwhelming, yet Campbell et al. remain optimistic, if not idealistic in some cases. Campbell et al. enable us to engage in the democratic process of informed discussion and reflection in order to change the course of civic education by bringing the discussion intelligently to the forefront, providing facts and multiple viewpoints. It is up to us now to take action.