

Kicking Civics Out of Class and Taking It to the Streets

Gilbert, Joan, and Eve Rifkin. "Kicking Civics out of Class and Taking It to the Streets."

The Hechinger Report, Teachers College at Columbia U, 27 Aug. 2018,

www.hechingerreport.org/opinion-kicking-civics-out-of-class-and-taking-it-to-the-streets/

School systems are failing their students with outdated and inconsequential civics education that is only focused on facts and memorization.

The simple multiple-choice questions found on most civics tests require memorization of unconnected facts in order to pass. Samples include:

Which of the following includes three of the 13 original states?

Who is in charge of the executive branch?

Which of the following are national U.S. holidays?

Today, students have a lot more on their minds than memorizing the three branches of the U.S. government. They are in the streets exercising democracy in the pursuit of political change. Students will no longer tolerate gun laws that fail to keep them safe in their schools or neighborhoods.

In a similar manner, their teachers are engaging in expressing their frustrations and concerns over funding and school safety, taking to the streets in demonstrations, walkouts and strikes. Teachers will no longer tolerate being treated less than the professionals they are. Arizona educators, who walked out of classrooms and schools on April 26, are the latest to join teachers in Kentucky, Oklahoma and West Virginia in actively protesting and raising concerns with their legislatures.

Students and teachers hold signs, make speeches, craft policy proposals and negotiate with lawmakers. In short, they are demonstrating what real civic engagement looks like. Yet how do our schools prepare them for these actions when the civics topics they learn in school do not include logical and critical thinking about how government systems work, and how public engagement in the processes can create the change they hope to see?

Ironically, many students will not be asked to demonstrate any of these skills when they take their required civics test in order to graduate from high school.

What should schools do?

Developing and providing curricula, and testing that is based in real-world problem-solving, are critical. Students' actions today exemplify civic competencies as described by The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. These competencies go beyond memorization and include intellectually rigorous thinking with participatory engagement in schools and communities.

Young people don't become competent in these areas by magic. They have teachers who intentionally provide curricula that are meant to cultivate these skills and dispositions. The student-leaders from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School impressed us all with their public speaking and debate skills — which they gained by participating in one of the largest district-wide debate programs in the country.

“Student engagement” does not mean passively watching or listening to something interesting. It means asking questions, grappling with diverse opinions and learning to articulate ideas. Students need frequent opportunities to practice engagement by doing work that is meaningful and authentic for them.

Community connections are also key to civic engagement. Students need to understand their local communities. People are not compelled to engage with something or someone they don't know. This requires that schools go well beyond the traditional annual field trips and get kids out and into their communities on a regular basis.

City High School, in Tucson, Arizona, focuses on community connections and place-based education, emphasizing the importance of civic engagement in all grade levels through various projects. Students at City High School grapple with issues of public concern when they study the widening of city streets and the various businesses that will be affected; when they walk the perimeter of the Tucson Convention Center and learn about eminent domain; when they study water issues in the Southwest; and when they learn about legislation that threatens the very same natural wilderness areas they camp in during school trips.

Compare this learning to the types of questions on current state civics exams, which are based on fact-based citizenship tests. While it may be important for students to cite certain facts within evidence-based arguments, their understanding and application of principles must move beyond simple memorization.

If the old adage holds true that we measure what matters, then state civics tests need a serious overhaul so that they accurately measure students' abilities to ask hard questions, shift their personal perspectives, argue with evidence and truly listen.

Our educational system needs to adapt to this thinking by promoting civics curricula and instruction that engage students and teachers in real-world democratic decision-making. And only then should students be put to the test.

A Content-Free Framework for K-12 Social Studies Standards

Hess, Frederick M. “A Content-Free Framework for K-12 Social Studies Standards.”

AEIdeas, American Enterprise Institute, 18 Sept. 2013,

www.aei.org/publication/a-content-free-framework-for-k-12-social-studies-standards/

Yesterday, on Constitution Day, a coalition of social studies organizations issued their “College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for State Social Studies Standards.” One of the partner organizations was the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools co-chaired by Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. Now, the exercise had more than a little irony, given that the organizations went out of their way to ensure that these “social studies standards” make no mention of the U.S. Constitution—or other historical events, dates, or persons.

Susan Griffin, executive director of the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS), explained, “Many state standards in social studies are overwhelmed with lists of dates, places and names to memorize – information students quickly forget.” Instead, she said, the new framework would help states establish “fewer, higher, and clearer standards for instruction in civics, economics, geography, and history,” the standards emphasize “critical thinking, collaboration, and inquiry.” Without delving into what students should actually know, the new C3 framework, explains an accompanying fact sheet, “Intentionally envisions social studies instruction as an inquiry arc of interlocking and mutually reinforcing elements that speak to the intersection of ideas and learners.”

This social studies framework is not explicitly part of the Common Core state standards, but it is a distant cousin. As the NCSS delicately explains, its “framework makes important, explicit connections to the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies” but it “was developed independent of the Common Core State Standards Initiative.”

While critical thinking and inquiry are good things, keep in mind that the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress exam in civics found that more than half of students scored “below basic.” Most college graduates can’t identify famous phrases from the Gettysburg Address or cite the protections of the Bill of Rights. If our “national experts” can’t bring themselves to come out and just say “Kids should know when the Civil War was” it’s not clear that “an inquiry arc of interlocking and mutually reinforcing elements” will help kids find out.

Would-be reformers all agree that “critical thinking” is important. The question that always seems to be forgotten is just what it is that students are going to think critically about.

Final Exam Question:

While most educators believe that civics instruction needs to be improved in America, they disagree on the nature of the improvement needed. Progressive educational advocates like Joan Gilbert and Eve Rifkin argue that “[s]chool systems are failing their students” when they offer an “outdated and inconsequential” education “only focused on facts and memorization,” while conservative commentators like Frederick M. Hess contend that a well-meaning focus on action and “critical thinking” will amount to nothing because it never truly addresses what “students are going to think critically about.”

How should educators approach civics instruction? Should they encourage social activism, emphasize core knowledge in the classroom, or find some way to mediate between these two positions? What form of improvement is most likely to produce informed and active citizens?

Be sure to acknowledge the views expressed in both readings as part of your answer, citing the sources appropriately, as well as supporting your own opinions with evidence.

Follow these guidelines below in completing your response

- 1) Responses should be produced in Microsoft Word in a 12-point, easy-to-read font. Use MLA formatting rules throughout the document.
- 2) Strive to produce a 400- to 500-word response.
- 3) Demonstrate your understanding of MLA citation form by **using in-text citations**, properly punctuated and formatted. Cite specific references using the page numbers that appear at the top of the sources.
- 4) Construct a Works Cited page based upon the citations at the top of this test prompt.
- 5) Submit on Blackboard by the assigned due date.