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Theory to Practice Essay

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Politics and civic engagement have been a core interest of mine for as long as I can remember and I have devoted many years of my life to struggles for environmental and economic justice. I have never taught in an exclusively civics classroom, yet this course has stoked my desire to do so. I believe that I would deeply enjoy the opportunity to engage students in passionate dialogue about critical issues of the day, issues that will define their lives in the years to come. Yet, even more than dialogue, I want to help my students overcome the pessimism and surplus powerlessness (Lerner, 1998) that so pervade the psyche of the working-class. I have observed that many people's lack of knowledge of how to achieve social change, combined with their lack of confidence that they personally can contribute to such change, feeds a self-defeating cycle of hopelessness and disengagement. Both issues can be addressed via a justice-oriented civics education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) that combines a liberatory curricular framework with concrete community organizing skills (Ho & Barton, 2020). In what follows, I propose a specific civics project and corresponding curriculum that I believe embodies some aspects of the justice-oriented approach.

I would like to develop and implement a civics project that utilizes the practice of deliberation as its base, but enhances and expands upon this practice through democratic student engagement, implementation of community outreach strategies, and focused attention to the

process of deliberation and community organizing as well as its products. I would begin this project by guiding students through a process of deciding upon a topic worthy of public discussion. I would then divide the students up into three groups, using ranked-choice voting to attempt to place students in their desired group: a “perspective 1” or “pro” group, a “perspective 2” or “con” group, and a research-focused group. Over the length of the project, the pro and con groups would focus on two distinct deliverables: (1) building an in-depth case for their position that they would prepare to deliver publicly, and (2) community outreach with the goal of attracting an audience for a culminating public deliberation. Throughout the length of the project, students would receive instruction on three critical elements of a participatory-democratic civics education (Sleeter, 2008): research and argumentation methodology, public presentation, and methods of effective community outreach and mobilization, each element incorporating digital literacy into both the instruction and the student projects (Kahne et al, 2016). The third group, the research-focused group, would essentially serve as embedded journalists throughout the project, objectively documenting each team’s processes. They would create a survey device that would be administered to the audience in attendance at the public deliberation, and lastly, they would prepare a presentation to deliver to the class at the end of the project that divulged each team’s methodologies as well as the results of the audience survey. The research-focused group would be assessed on the quality of their survey and final presentation, while the pro and con groups would be assessed based on the quality of their deliberative participation as well as their community outreach success.

This project would probably work best with college students, though it may also work well in a high school setting. A potential obstacle would be the required participation in a public event outside of regular class hours, although the students should be engaged in choosing the

date, time, and location of the event as well as determining whether it needed to be held in person or whether an online forum would serve the purpose just as well. Another potential area of concern that would perhaps require greater instructor guidance is the choice of discussion topics. Students may be tempted to choose (or avoid) controversial topics, issues that are settled (Geller, 2020) and/or disempower or invalidate minoritized identity groups (Conrad, 2020), or topics that do not easily lend themselves to quality discussion.

I do not believe that this curriculum alone addresses the myriad of concerns discussed throughout this course. Other important areas of concern that must be thoroughly explored in a justice-oriented civics curriculum include explorations of identity (gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality and citizenship, among others), social movement history, and power literacy (Gibson, 2020). Further, I believe that we do our students a disservice if we do not discuss civics in an international context (Osler, 2015). Those caveats aside, I believe that this project could effectively engage students and help them gain some of the key insights and skills of a holistic, justice-oriented, and participatory-democratic civics education.

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