

Curriculum *update*

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Civic Education

Civics Discourse

Cultures and Histories Shape Curriculum

John Franklin



More than two centuries after Thomas Jefferson argued that education was essential for safeguarding a republic—"No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness," he wrote in 1786—educators still debate the best ways of teaching citizens about their roles and responsibilities in a democratic society. In fact, experts find that the methods of teaching civics differ widely from country to country.

"There's no one way of educating people about democracy," says Carole Hahn, professor of educational studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga. "You can't generalize it, [because] the notion of preparing people for citizenship is buried in the cultural context of each nation."

Most countries, Hahn and other educators note, teach civics within the curriculum of other subjects such as history, economics, and religion, rather than as a separate course as taught in the United States. Some nations instruct students through activities and projects independent of an established curriculum; for example, students elect leaders and work together to plan field trips in a democratic environment. Eastern cultures, however, adopt an entirely different approach from their western counterparts by focusing primarily on morality and personal development as opposed to participation and open debate.

With so much variety, how can one define what it means to be a "good citizen," and what lessons can one draw from the ways different countries teach civics?

Making "Good" Citizens

Unlike the United States, which has always based its civics instruction on the principles espoused in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, many nations use international documents as the foundation for their citizenship lessons.

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been a focal point for civics study in most European countries," Hahn says. Many European schools use that as their basis for lesson plans. Adopted in 1948 by the United Nations, the declaration outlines what it calls "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations."

In addition to having a more international perspective, European educators also tend to

approach teaching the subject quite differently. "There's a law in Denmark that says that schools must 'model democracy' for students," Hahn continues. "As a result, there's a great deal of student participation in school events." Student councils, for example, receive budgets from local governments and hold regular class meetings to help plan and fund annual class trips. Although not as formal as a class, the activity provides students with firsthand experience in the workings of democratic practices.

This approach is not common throughout Europe, however. England, for instance, had no tradition of preparing students for citizenship until only recently. In her 1999 paper *Citizenship Education: Anti-political Culture and Political Education in Britain*, Elizabeth Frazer, official fellow and tutor in politics at New College and lecturer in the department of politics at the University of Oxford, argues that "there has been no well-established tradition of 'education for citizenship' in the United Kingdom because of a lack of any wide assent to, consensus on, or well-articulated account of the nature of politics, civic life, or the constitution." That trend appears to be changing: "In the last two decades, there has been a steady stream of projects with the aim of having education for citizenship and democracy taken seriously in schools and other educational institutions," she notes.

Such awkwardness about teaching civics is a trait shared by educators in many countries. "In Australia, people accept the core values of democracy, freedom of expression, and rule of law," says Noel Simpson, director of languages and civic education for the Australian government. "We also have a lot of celebration of community activity, volunteering, fire-fighting, and so forth, but most teachers would oppose more direct displays such as requiring the singing of the national anthem or having mandatory flag [wavings] because that would strike them as 'jingoism.'" Such overt displays, he says, would be seen as something usually more associated with the United States.

Eastern Perspectives

In Asian schools, instruction about a student's responsibilities in society not only takes a different form but also focuses on a different set of values.

"There's no correlation of the word 'civics' in Asian culture that I know of," says David Grossman, dean of the School of Foundations at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. "When people start talking about civic education and democratic ideals, they often switch into Western vocabulary," he notes. Such translation complications, he points out, can have unintended consequences. "The word 'citizen' in Japan is a difficult term because the word is associated with the World War II era and the militaristic government," Grossman adds.

In addition to language differences, countries with what Grossman and others refer to as "Confucian cultures"—Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, and Hong Kong, for instance—tend to focus on moral aspects of personal development rather than on active participation in the workings of government.

"In Hong Kong and in Asia in general, civics and morals will usually be discussed together," says Lee Wing On, professor of education at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. "It's rare

that you will not find the word 'moral' attached to 'civic.' Even when you look at the content of a textbook, there's always a strong emphasis on moral behavior."

Lessons For the Future?

Despite these differences, Asian schools do share one similarity with their European counterparts: Civics is not generally viewed as a critical or essential subject. "Civic education just is not popular," Grossman says. "There's no payoff with the subject as there is with other areas of study like science and technology. If you're a student with one shot at a brass ring in a high-stakes-testing society, you're going to go with what offers the best payoff."

Judith Torney-Purta, professor of human development at the University of Maryland, College Park, agrees. "Civics does not have an economic payoff like science and math," she says. "In some central and eastern European countries, it's not going to get a lot of community support. Without that support, it gets a lower status and isn't emphasized very much when compared to other disciplines."

Despite these differences, experts remain optimistic about the future of civics education around the world, particularly in view of the sweeping democratic movements over the last several years. "There's been a reemergence and concern in democracies everywhere about engaging young people," notes Hahn. "Democracies are concerned about involving young people and wanting to build commitments to democratic ideals."

Even with countries that have established civics teachings, Hahn points out, much work still needs to be done. In some countries, for example, the subject is taught to some but not all students. "According to one study, 78 percent of graduating seniors in one country had [taken] only one course in civics or government," Hahn says. "That means that almost a quarter of them had not had any such instruction at all when they graduated.

"That country is the United States."

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