



Plus Ça Change....

Democratic goals for civic education in the digital age



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Left: Kindertransport children arriving from Germany during World War II. Right: The present-day Frankfurt train station. The author's mother left on a kindertransport to Switzerland from this station 80 years ago.

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BY JOEL WESTHEIMER

THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING. In scholarly journals, professional magazines, and popular media, there seems to be widespread agreement that digital media has radically transformed the way youth engage with one another and with the broader society, both socially and civically. Educators and researchers in civic education have understandably sought to adapt. There is little doubt that certain kinds of adaptations are necessary, and potentially transformative if they can harness the capacity for youth and young adults to be connected, to reach large audiences, and to organize others using the right combination of online and brick-and-mortar tools. But I am also concerned that an all-consuming focus on

these powerful new tools for civic engagement may distract attention from serious shortcomings that have been widespread for decades. Are there basic principles of citizenship education that are important to maintain, even as we embrace and adapt to the digital era? Or do the bits and bytes of online social, political, and economic life obviate the need to focus on a more timeless set of fundamentals - habits of the heart and mind - that make democratic societies robust and enduring?

A personal story

These questions were on my mind recently, when I stood in the Frankfurt *Hauptbahnhof* (train station) waiting for

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my train to Prague. Both of my parents were born in Germany, my father in Karlsruhe in 1927, and my mother in Frankfurt in 1928. My father was displaced by WWII (he moved to Lisbon with his parents and then to Louisville, Kentucky); my mother was less fortunate. Like my father, she left Germany before being sent to a work camp or concentration camp. Unlike my father, she left her hometown without her parents on a *kindertransport* to Heiden, Switzerland.

As I waited for my train, I realized that 80 years before my mother had stood in this same train station and waved goodbye to her mother and grandmother, who ran next to the train as it left the station. She remembers smiling so that her mother would not be sad. She also remembers giving her favourite doll to the girl seated opposite her, who was disconsolate. They were two of 100 children on the train headed to relative safety in Switzerland. It was the last time my mother would see her family. She was ten years old.

Although my parents - both German Jewish refugees - spoke little about their experiences during the war, I suspect that the profound injustices that informed their childhoods have had an indelible impact on my views about education and citizenship in democratic societies. What went wrong in German society that led to such unthinkable events as those that define the Holocaust? How could such a highly educated, mature democracy descend into such unimaginable cruelty and darkness? Historians have suggested a great number of causes, including Germany's punishing defeat in World War I, the suffering German economy after the worldwide Great Depression, and the populist appeal of a leader who promised to fix it all.

As an educator, however, I can't help but wonder what German schools might have done differently. What can we learn from what schools did or didn't do in Weimar Germany (which was a democracy too)? What, if anything, should schools today teach children about civic participation, courage, and dissent? How can schools help young people acquire the essential knowledge, dispositions, and skills for effective democratic citizenship to flourish?

Where are we vulnerable?

Tools for engagement have changed, but our social, political and economic vulnerabilities have not. Educators imagine focusing on a kind of teaching and learning that puts democratic community life front and centre at the same time that it uses changes in digital technology to their advantage. These are both worthwhile goals, but they are not one and the same. If we care about robustly democratic societies, we will have to be explicit about the kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of democratic citizens.

Digital technologies, as the other articles in this special section demonstrate, have tremendous potential to help build a kind of participatory politics that strengthens democratic societies.¹ Teachers, researchers, and policymakers alike attest to the benefits of these powerful technologies and what they allow students to do, including:

- use the Internet to access information that would otherwise be unreachable or require enormous effort to attain
- develop narratives, both alone and with others, about events and actions
- share opinions and perspectives with a potentially large audience
- provide and receive feedback from others, irrespective of their physical location, age, or social position
- exchange information and ideas directly with other youth without institutional gatekeepers.

These are powerful tools. These same features of digital civic engagement and exchange, however, can be put to use in the service of facile educational goals. As I detail in my recent book, *What Kind of Citizen? Educating our children for the common good*, when schools across Canada and the U.S. set out to teach democratic citizenship, a vast majority of them end up teaching good behaviour instead: follow the rules; listen to teachers and other authority figures; be respectful and responsible; and manifest a sense of patriotism and loyalty. These can all be admirable traits. But none of them are uniquely essential to *democratic* citizens. And none of them would have been the kinds of traits needed by German citizens in 1933 in order to alter the course of history. "Good character" is insufficient for safeguarding and strengthening democratic institutions and traditions.

What about today?

I do not mean to imply that another holocaust is imminent or that there is some kind of equivalency between anti-democratic leaders today and Adolf Hitler. I use this example both because it has personal resonance given my family history and also because extreme examples have a way of making visible concerning developments and trends. Currently, in the U.S. notably but also in many other countries, a toxic mix of rising economic inequality and ideological polarization is increasing, leading to waning trust in democratic governance.

Eighty-five years after Germany's democracy was replaced by a totalitarian Nazi regime, popular support for democratic governance is the lowest it has been in decades. In a widely circulated 2017 report, the Pew Research Center raised considerable alarm among those who had assumed that western democracies enjoy relative stability within an entrenched culture of democratic governance. Although the report was titled "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy," commentators, civic educators, and political scientists highlighted a number of findings that challenged the rosier title. In the U.S., for example, 22 percent of respondents thought that a political system in which a strong leader could make decisions without interference from Congress or the courts would be a good way of governing. Close to one in three respondents who identified as Republican and almost half of U.S. millennials thought the same (globally, that figure was 26 percent).²

Ruth Westheimer (the author's mother) stands in front of Frank Meisler's sculpture "Kindertransport" at Liverpool Street Station in central London.



PHOTO: COURTESY JOEL WESTHEIMER

In another study, Harvard lecturer Yascha Mounk and Australian political scientist Roberto Stefan Foa examined longitudinal data from the World Values Survey and found considerable cause for concern. Between 1995 and 2014, the number of citizens who reported a preference for a government leader who was “strong” and who did not need to bother with elections has increased in almost every developed and developing democracy and, again, the growth has been greatest among youth and young adults.³ Neither Canada nor the U.S. are exceptions. Democracy, it seems, is not self-winding.

Concrete examples now abound of leaders stoking the flames of populist nationalism – the rallying of “the people” against both “foreigners” and a constructed “elite” in the service of right-wing nationalism. Worldwide, politicians can now openly express disdain for hallmarks of democratic society, including the free press, civil liberties, and the courts, while fostering resentment against foreigners and ethnic “others.” These kinds of anti-democratic rhetoric and policies can drive individuals and groups to withdraw from the broader civil society altogether, preferring sub-group identity – what James Banks aptly calls “failed citizenship.”⁴ Recent rhetoric during election campaigns in Canada reveals similarly concerning trends.

A rise in xenophobia and nationalism has resulted in incidents of hate speech, antagonism, and assaults on both newly arrived immigrants and native-born visible minorities in a growing number of western democracies. In the U.S., the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has documented a precipitous rise in hatred, fear, and alienation among students; and teachers have similarly reported a dramatic increase in hate speech.⁵ Social media echo chambers further entrench anti-democratic tendencies and pollute genuine social and political discourse.⁶ Yoichi Funabashi, chairman of the Rebuild Japan Initiative (dedicated to strengthening democratic ideals in Japan) summarizes the risks succinctly: “If society becomes characterized by intolerant divisions, in which people immediately select their allies and dismiss others as foes based on such criteria as race, ethnicity, religion or lifestyle, then democracy’s foundational principles, rooted in careful deliberation and compromise, will be rendered inoperable.”⁷

What kind of civic education do we need?

Online and offline, we need citizens who can think and act in ethically thoughtful ways. A well-functioning democratic society benefits from classroom practices that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in factual content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democratic societies. Here are three strategies that can help shape educational practices in an era of both increasingly powerful digital tools and decreasing support for social democracy:

1. Teach students to ask questions: One hallmark of a totalitarian society is the notion of one single “truth” handed down from a leader or small group of leaders to everyone else. Questioning that truth is not only discouraged, but also often illegal. By contrast, schools in democratic societies must teach students how to ask challenging questions – the kind of uncomfortable queries that challenge tradition. Although most of us would agree that traditions are important, without questioning there can be no progress. Dissent – feared and suppressed in nondemocratic societies – is the engine of progress in free ones. Education reformers, school leaders, and parents should do everything possible to ensure that teachers and students have opportunities to ask these kinds of questions.

2. Expose students to multiple perspectives: Much as Darwin’s theory of natural selection depends on genetic variation, any theory of teaching in a democratic society depends on encouraging a multiplicity of ideas, perspectives, and approaches to exploring solutions to issues of widespread concern. Students need practice in entertaining multiple viewpoints on issues that affect their lives. These issues might be controversial. But improving society requires embracing that kind of controversy so citizens can engage in democratic dialogue and work together toward understanding and enacting sensible policies.

Why would we expect adults, even members of Parliament, to be able to intelligently and compassionately discuss different viewpoints if schoolchildren never or rarely get that opportunity? In schools that

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further democratic aims, teachers engage young people in deep historical, political, social, economic, and even scientific analysis. They also challenge children to imagine how their lived experiences are not universal and how issues that may seem trivial to them could matter deeply to others. They have students use online tools to examine multiple perspectives not only to know that their (or their parents') views may not be shared by everyone, but also to engender a kind of critical empathy for those with competing needs. This is the kind of teaching in a digital era that encourages future citizens to leverage their civic skills for the greater social good, rather than their own particular interests, thus working to challenge social inequities.

How should we do this? For example, teachers might present newspaper articles from around the world (easily accessed through the Internet) that examine the same event. Which facts and narratives are consistent? Which are different? Why? Textbooks from several different countries could provide another trove of lessons on multiple viewpoints and the role of argument and evidence in democratic deliberation. Many of these textbooks are now accessible online, allowing the kinds of comparisons that would have been difficult before the advent of communications technology. If textbooks are not available online, teachers can use the power of social media to connect with classes in other countries who are reading different textbooks. Even within English-language textbooks there are many opportunities. Schools in Canada, the U.K., and the U.S., for instance, present strikingly different perspectives on the War of 1812.

Why not ask students to use online and offline sources to research who wrote their textbook? Why were those people chosen? What kind of author was *not* invited to participate? The idea that a person or group actually *wrote* a textbook reminds us that the words are not sacrosanct but represent the views of a particular time, place, and group of authors. These approaches help demonstrate to students that “facts” are less stable than is often thought.

Students should also examine controversial *contemporary* issues. Students are frequently exposed to past historical controversies – such as slavery, Nazism, or laws denying voting rights to women. But those same students are too often shielded from *today's* competing ideas (for example, the #MeToo movement, women's reproductive rights, misinformation campaigns that employ social media as a dangerous and powerful tool, controversies over what should be taught in the school curriculum and how). Engagement with contemporary controversies using a range of perspectives and multiple sources of information – something online tools are uniquely well-suited to promote – is exactly what democratic participation requires.

3. Focus on the local: It is not possible to teach democratic forms of thinking without providing an environment to think about. Schools should encourage students to consider their specific surroundings and circumstances. Here too, social media and other digital tools can be an asset.

One way to provide experiences with democratic participation in civic and political life is to engage students in community-based projects that encourage the development of personal responsibility, participation, and critical analysis. Action civics is a particularly powerful and thoughtful way to foster civic participation that transcends community service to also include a focus on government, policy, and dissent.⁸ We saw this with the students of Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida, who, in response to the February 2018 mass shooting in their school, leveraged the power of social media and other digital tools to become key figures in a national dialogue on gun culture in the U.S., while also mobilizing both locally and nationally to agitate for gun control legislation, organize demonstrations, support electoral candidates, and register voters. Their ability to connect a very personal experience with the ways in which government, policy, and social and economic forces shape their lives has allowed them to participate on a national scale, and no doubt prepared them for a life of effective civic engagement. When students have the opportunity to engage with civics education through direct action in their own local context, the impacts of their work are integrated with their lived experience and can teach fundamental lessons about the power of citizen engagement both on and off-line.

Of course, choosing to be explicitly political in the classroom can cause friction for teachers – with students, parents, and administrators – even when teachers avoid expressing their own political views. Encouraging discussion, controversy, and action in the classroom can be daunting. Students may express views that make classmates uncomfortable; they may engage in political acts that concern their parents; or they may choose to challenge their own school's policies. Democracy can be messy. Rather than let fear of sanction and censorship dictate pedagogical choices, however, teachers should be supported and protected, encouraged to use debates and controversy as “teachable moments” in civic discourse.

Another obstacle to focusing locally is the obsession with provincial (and national and international) standardized testing. The resulting emphasis on memorization and regurgitation of generalized knowledge prevents deeper critical analysis and runs counter to almost everything we know from education research about how to make teaching and learning meaningful and about how to foster engagement and participation in civic life.⁹

Education in a digital era

The communication technologies of the digital era have enormous potential to bring people together in collective pursuits. Those pursuits, however, must be consistent with democratic values. History demonstrates that just because schools teach children about citizenship and character does not necessarily mean they do it well, or even toward admirable aims. In fact, schools have sometimes engaged in some of the worst forms of citizenship indoctrination. Counted

among the many examples of organized “citizenship” education are the hateful lessons learned by members of the Hitler Youth brigades such as racism, antisemitism, the glorification of Nordic and other “Aryan” citizens, and blind obedience to authority; or the Young Pioneers of the USSR who were taught to report any religious activity in their own homes to authorities so their parents could be prosecuted. Had these same youth had access to YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, would they have been more or less likely to teach one another about democratic ideals and the dangers of authoritarian rule?

Similarly, when we use digital technologies in schools, do we use them to teach children to unquestioningly preserve our social, political, and economic norms and behaviours, or do we use them to imagine and pursue new and better ones? Do we teach them only the importance of following the rules or also to question when the rules are not worth following? Do we teach students to mobilize in support of policies that promote only their own self-interest, or to think more broadly about their ethical obligations to others? I wonder what might have been different in 1941, the year my mother received her last letter from her parents, had children been taught not only compliance but also doubt and the obligation to imagine a better society for all. I think about what civic educators can do now - whether focused on new technologies or on the kinds of critical thinking skills necessary to sustain democratic norms and behaviours - to convey to students the power of community, as well as the pitfalls of blind allegiance to it.

Long before computers or the Internet, John Dewey described schools as miniature communities and noted that the school is not only a preparation for something that comes later, but also a community with values and norms embedded in daily experiences.¹⁰ In many ways the question of how to teach citizenship in a digital era is a much broader question about the purpose of schooling writ large. Transforming the way we teaching citizenship is not only the purview of the civics and social studies classroom, but a journey into all classrooms, all subjects, the hallways, and the relationships of the entire school experience. Citizenship education - indeed education of all sorts - is, ultimately, a proxy for the kind of society we seek to create. **EC**

NOTES

- ¹ Also see the work of Erica Hodgins, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, Ben Bowyer and others

at the Civic Engagement Research Group in Riverside, California. www.civicsurvey.org

- 2 Pew Research Center (PEW), *Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: PEW, 2017).
- 3 R. Stefan Foa and Y. Mounk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The democratic disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 5-17.
- 4 J. A. Banks, “Failed Citizenship and Transformative Civic Education,” *Educational Researcher* 46, no. 7 (2017): 366-377.
- 5 United Nations (UN), *Racism, Xenophobia Increasing Globally* (New York, UN, 2016), www.un.org/press/en/2016/gashc4182.doc.htm; M. Costello, *The Trump Effect: The impact of the presidential campaign on our nation’s schools* (Montgomery, AL: The Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016); W. Au, “When Multicultural Education Is not Enough,” *Multicultural Perspectives* 19, no. 3 (2017): 147-150; J. Rogers, M. Franke, J.E. Yun, et.al, *Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump: Increasing stress and hostility in America’s high schools* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2017).
- 6 For research about media echo chambers, see, for example: J. Kahne & B. Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the challenges of motivated reasoning and misinformation,” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2017): 3-34.
- 7 Y. Funabashi, “Trump’s Populist Nationalism,” *The Japan Times* (2017, January 17). www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/01/17/commentary/japan-commentary/trumps-populist-nationalism
- 8 See, for example: B. Blevins, K. LeCompte, and S. Wells, “Innovations in Civic Education: Developing civic agency through action civics,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no. 3 (2016): 344-384; M. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 9 D. Koretz, *The Testing Charade: Pretending to make schools better* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017); J. Westheimer, “No Child Left Thinking,” *Colleagues* 12, no. 1 (2015). <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol12/iss1/14>
- 10 J. Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1909/1975).

