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23 Capitalists, Consumers, and Communicators: How Schools Approach Civic Education

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Today there is renewed interest in how young people acquire the ability to investigate the problems in their communities, neighborhoods, and world, circulate information, spark dialogue, produce content, and prod others to take action (Soep 2014). The ability to listen to others and express oneself is fundamental to the practice of democracy because effective communication skills are the building blocks of civic competence. With support from generous philanthropies, there has been significant documentation of the ways in which new media can support participatory politics and the practice of civic engagement (Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen 2014). Programs that encourage youth civic engagement have generally occurred in non-school settings, through youth media programs in nonprofit organizations and libraries.

Sadly however, U.S. educational reforms of the past 20 years have generally not encouraged youth to be active participants in the civic life of their communities. Civics has not been part of the “Race to the Top” testing regime that emphasizes academic improvement in English language arts and mathematics (Reich 2012). Indeed, the Common Core, with its focus on close reading “without attention to the identities of students and the context in which texts are written,” may even trivialize what it means to learn how to be a citizen in contemporary democracy and push the purpose of education toward individual economic competitiveness and away from preparation for citizenship in a democracy (Strauss 2014, 1).

In U.S. secondary schools, as in most other nations, civics is traditionally taught as a content-focused curriculum. When most Americans remember their own experiences with civic education, they recall a heavily content-focused curriculum, focused on learning about the three branches of government, how a bill becomes law, and the role of regulatory agencies. They recall student government elections that mirror the popularity contests of electing a homecoming king and queen. If a school newspaper existed, it printed generally inoffensive stories on the wins and losses of the school’s athletic program and profiles of new teachers. Unfortunately, this portrait still accurately captures what civic education is like in many American schools.

But in a small but increasing number of schools, programs that connect the classroom to the culture are on the rise. In addition, digital media and technology are creating opportunities for civic education to undergo a transformation that enables students—in and out of school—to discover how to use the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world. In this chapter, I frame up the practice of civic education in U.S. schools by briefly considering its historical and educational context and then by examining the positioning of young people in relation to three forms of civic agency: as capitalists, as consumers of news and information, and as communicators with stories to tell. I will show that although all three approaches do increase the perceived relevance of schooling in ways that support some fundamental practices of contemporary civil society, there are important gaps and blind spots that challenge educators to advance genuine civic education in a digital age.

Civic Education in Schools

Although theoretically education has long been understood as a form of empowerment, helping people move away from complacency and toward active citizenship in a democracy (Dewey 1927), the reality of American public education is more rooted in the model of the factory, where large groups of students are prepared for the workplace through a series of sorting and winnowing practices tied to social class, racial identity, and performance on standardized tests. However, at various times throughout the twentieth century, the American public has recognized how the activities that happen in schools shape the practice of democracy. Today, many young people in both high school and college get civic learning that includes the practice of open discussion, participation in passionate debates, and practices of service learning and community activism. Participation in collaborative, real-world projects reveals the power of small but meaningful civic actions to transform personal, social, and civic identity.

In some schools, teachers themselves have developed innovative approaches to connect technology, media, and civic engagement. For example, in Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, a media literacy initiative, the Communication Arts Program (CAP), has been in place for more than 20 years, offering a select group of students multi-faceted opportunities to develop voice and agency through media literacy activities, including the school newspaper, video production program, and rich civic education curriculum that includes plenty of real-world learning opportunities that address civic issues. Quasi-experimental research shows that participation in this media literacy program is associated with higher levels of civic engagement (Martens and Hobbs 2015).

Thanks to generous funding from technology firms like Mozilla and philanthropies like the McArthur Foundation, in some urban schools, public school students have the opportunity to participate in after-school programs in digital media. One organization,

Global Kids, also works in several dozen schools to bring digital media and civic engagement programs to learners. Global Kids trains urban youth to become critical thinkers, media producers, and global citizens by developing their film production and leadership skills. Teens learn skills such as storyboarding, script writing, and acting to create socially conscious, original stories and produce their own films on topics like child soldiers in Uganda, access to education, and sex trafficking.

In still other schools, high school students may use project-based learning curricula like Project Citizen, created by the Center for Civic Education, where students use discussion to identify a problem in their community, conduct research, and monitor and influence public policy in their communities. Such programs have been measurably effective, as quasi-experimental field research with a matched control group showed that such a process enables students to develop persuasive writing skills, gain knowledge of public policy, and activate problem-solving skills (Root and Northup 2007).

But despite these impressive examples, most educators would agree that these practices are not yet normative. Instead, in most American schools, we would find a teacher lecturing about history or government, with students sitting, listening, and taking notes. Perhaps students will be watching a video or taking a multiple-choice test. Because the general pedagogy of many social studies classes is based on a teacher-centered transmission model of education, a knowledge-based focus still offers “dry portrayals of the formal structure of our federal government, charts on how a bill becomes law, and sometimes idealized portraits of the heroes of our political history” (Quigley 1999, 1), all presented with PowerPoints and lectures by someone who knows more to fill up the heads of those who know less.

While many teachers recognize the value of using student-centered learning approaches, they work in institutional contexts with a variety of structural features that may limit and challenge their work. Approaches to civic education that emphasize inquiry, collaboration, reasoning, and problem solving have faced substantial resistance from school administrations, teachers, and community leaders for many years. Back in the 1940s, for example, Harold Rugg’s innovative and popular textbook, *Man and His Changing Society*, was attacked for espousing socialist values. Fifty years later, in 1994, the U.S. Congress voted 99–1 to reject the National History Standards developed by the National Center for History in the Schools on the grounds that they were too critical of American government and political institutions (Rubin 2012). Although the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has embraced progressive concepts including experiential education, media literacy, and project-based learning, such work is only slowly gaining traction as part of the civic education curriculum in most schools.

The impact of a content-centered pedagogy is all too evident in the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measures civic knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic dispositions. Students at Grade 4 are expected to be able to recognize that taxes are the main source of funding for government, identify a purpose

of the U.S. Constitution, and explain two ways that countries can deal with shared problems. At Grade 8, students are expected to know some of the rights protected by the First Amendment, recognize a role performed by the Supreme Court, and name two actions that citizens can take to encourage Congress to pass a law. At Grade 12, students are expected to be able to interpret a political cartoon and define the term “melting pot” and argue if it applies to the U.S. They are expected to compare the citizenship requirements of the U.S. to other countries. American students fail to demonstrate good understanding of civics. In 2010, test scores showed that only 25 percent of American fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students were proficient in civics. Fifty percent of Grade 8 students could correctly interpret a question that required the interpretation of a political cartoon. The NAEP tests also showed substantial disparities in civic knowledge between white students and minority students. Educators may attempt to shovel content knowledge into the minds of learners through lectures and textbook reading, but it does not seem to be effective. Many students graduate without a firm conceptual understanding of the legal, regulatory, and civic dimensions of being a citizen in a democracy.

There are many reasons for this. Throughout the twentieth century and until today, civic education has been a political football. Elites from all sectors aim to convey their own understanding of society and cultural values, and criticize the ideologies, content, methods, and approaches used by others to teach about civic life. In general, the content of textbooks is a source of continuing struggle (Loewen 1995).

Fortunately, innovative curriculum approaches to promoting citizenship in the context of social studies education have proved to be effective. One example of an innovative program is National History Day, where students create video documentaries, develop websites, conduct oral histories, and plan and execute community-based projects. Research comparing students who participated in the program to those who did not found students who participated are better writers, more confident and capable researchers, and have a more mature perspective on current events and civic engagement than their peers. Collaboration skills, time-management, and perseverance also are reported to be higher.

But such programs require deep investment of time and energy by faculty (National History Day 2011). Because a social studies teacher may face as many as 150 students per week, innovative initiatives, when they do occur, take colossal reserves of teacher time and energy, and as a result, are sometimes tacked on to traditional curriculum approaches which tend to emphasize a chronological content focus to learning about government.

Sadly, it is an open question whether innovative teaching approaches like the ones described here can shift this longstanding tension about the content, pedagogy, and thematic focus of civic education curricula in American public education. Some conservatives have attempted to address some of the failures of civic education by identifying

new problems, including American's generally low levels of knowledge about economics, banking, and finance. To be an effective worker *and* citizen, it is argued, young Americans need to be able to balance a checkbook, evaluate interest rates, and understand how money moves in a global economy.

Youth as Capitalists

Learning about capitalism is a key part of civic education because of the closely interconnected and overlapping relationship between the social roles of family member, worker, and citizen. For a growing international community of civic leaders, financial education, social education, career education, and financial inclusion are seen as the building blocks of personal and social empowerment. In a sense, being able to participate actively in the financial dimensions of capitalism enables and underpins citizenship in Western democracies. Financial literacy is viewed as a life skill that supports individuals and institutions at the same time. As stated in the mission statement of Child and Youth Finance International, a Dutch NGO, "When children ... experience financial inclusion, or real access to appropriate financial products and services along with the opportunity to practice using those services," they invest in their own futures (CYFI 2014).

In Britain and Canada, financial literacy is conceptualized as a strategy to help create self-sufficient citizens who do not need to rely on the welfare state and are thus not a burden to their fellow citizens. In the UK, a curriculum resource entitled "My Money: Citizenship Teacher Handbook" emphasizes self-sufficiency, charity, and ethical buying as elements of civic duty (Arthur 2012).

The rise of interest in financial literacy in the United States developed from an appreciation of its absence in the context of public school education. Although economics is offered as an elective course in some American high schools, social studies educators often feel unqualified to teach the practical business knowledge and competencies that directly relate to life skills, like opening up a checking account, balancing a budget, or getting a loan. Particularly in poor, minority, immigrant, and underserved communities with many non-working adults, adolescents may be unfamiliar with basic fiscal concepts that are part of everyday life for the children of middle-class workers. In 2012, the U.S. Financial Literacy and Education Commission gathered a group of experts to assess what is needed to improve the overall state of financial literacy among young people in the United States. They recognized the need to better understand the current state of financial literacy education, attitudes of educators and other stakeholders, and the impact of risk and financial shocks on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of teens and young adults.

To be a citizen is to be aware of how all our fiscal choices, at both the micro- and macro- level, affect our short- and long-term quality of life. Today many adults are

mired in debt; the employment situation is dire for teenagers and young adults, and the changing economics of higher education has had a dramatic influence on the financial situation of youth. Yet few efforts to promote civic agency include a focus on financial literacy. In the context of young people's identities as workers, consumers, and entrepreneurs, financial literacy is generally provided using a "stand and deliver" approach, where expert knowledge about best practices for spending, saving, and investing is offered to learners. Typical curricula include "Money Talks," which is a monthly newsletter targeting teens, who read and discuss the newsletter during class time.

Because financial literacy curricula are developed by members of the business community, they place great emphasis on framing up personal economic practices as fundamentally rational choices. There is little emphasis on providing critiques of capitalism or alternative framing that positions individual behavior within a larger global and structural economic context. Few programs make use of constructivist learning principles. Notably, educational and instructional strategies are described as "delivery systems" with focus on how media, including print and digital technology, could be used to deliver information and affect behaviors of learners.

Little emphasis is placed upon situating lessons about financial literacy in the context of the lived experience of the learner. Instead, information about cash flow, savings, and investment are provided but little attention is given to instructional strategies used to engage learner interests, build knowledge, and develop skills that connect to real life. Professionals in finance cannot be expected to understand the needs, interests, and capabilities of teens and young adults. Fortunately, there is a growing understanding of this problem. A review of leading financial literacy curricula emphasized the problems of pedagogy, noting the gap between providing information and providing education (Varcoe et al. 2005).

For these reasons, educational media, interactive games, and other approaches that engage students in project-based learning around financial literacy can be important sources of learning for children and young people. Some efforts to advance financial literacy through media and communication have been notable: Entrepreneur Ray Martinez's company, Ever-Fi, has created financial literacy interactive programs where private industry, wealthy individuals, businesses, and foundations sponsor middle school and high school students to enroll in digital education programs where edutainment videogames introduce concepts like risk and reward, profit and loss. Students playing these interactive games get to practice balancing a checkbook, keeping track of credit card expenses, and deciding how best to finance a major purchase like a car. When the program rolled out in a summer program in Chicago in 2013, students learned about business fraud, personal finances, and banking, and were able to receive stipends for participating in the program, which was supported by a local bank.

Another initiative, *Biz Kid\$*, is a PBS TV show about money and business, produced by the team who created *Bill Nye, the Science Guy*. Funded by a coalition of credit unions, it uses a clever blend of entertainment and education; each *Biz Kid\$* episode shows kids how to make and manage money by introducing concepts of financial literacy and entrepreneurship. The program offers a fast-paced mix that includes actors, sketch comedies, animation, and feature stories featuring young entrepreneurs. In one episode, a vampire dad has a conversation with his daughter about getting into the family business and this video clip inspires discussion about the concepts of entrepreneurship and succession. In another clip, we see Dorothy with the Tin Man, Cowardly Lion, and Scarecrow, each of whom reveals different “money personalities,” including being oblivious about the future, over-spending to assuage self-esteem, and making impulsive financial decisions. And the “King of Ka-Ching” explains how marketers use various persuasive strategies to promote consumption. Lesson plans and at-home materials make it possible for teachers to advance an understanding of key financial literacy topics, including credit and debt, entrepreneurship, saving and investing, and careers.

Despite the availability of engaging curricular resources, in some communities, school leaders are ambivalent about teaching financial literacy in the context of civic or mathematics education. Some teachers often don’t feel comfortable with these topics because of their own conflicted perspective on capitalism. Some teachers are adamantly opposed to teaching about capitalism on principle. Some educators may see financial literacy as essentially a form of propaganda, where “money creates more money,” leading young people to see individual consumers as morally responsible for managing economic forces that are essentially out of their control (Arthur 2012).

Other educators are aware that all financial literacy curricula have a distinctive point of view that requires careful scrutiny and interrogation. However, it may not be easy for high school teachers to recognize the full scope of ideological implications embedded in a financial literacy curriculum. For example, in many financial literacy programs, personal money management is treated as if it were an effective solution to socially created economic risks. As Arthur (2012) notes, for genuine financial literacy to occur, students should be “able to reflect on and alter the very conditions that give rise to consumer choice” (p. xvii). Merely focusing on and promoting individual responsibility is insufficient for understanding how money flows in a global economy. For financial literacy to be conceptualized as a form of civic education, it must be paired with a deep understanding of news and current events in a global context.

Youth as Consumers of News Media

During the fall of 2014, when a grand jury failed to indict the white police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, many teachers compiled, traded,

and shared articles, handouts, and other resources to help them address the news story with their students. Although at least one school district warned teachers not to address the news event, many teachers engaged in dialogue with students about the case. Jesse Hagopian put it on his blog in a post on teaching about Ferguson, “If education is not dedicated to empowering our youth to solve the problems they face in their communities, in our nation, and in our world, then it isn’t really an education at all—it is an indoctrination designed to reproduce oppression” (Desmond-Harris 2014).

But apart from blockbuster news events like this, the reading and discussion of news and current events has been challenged during the twenty-first century as the profession of journalism has faced monumental challenges to its business model as a result of the rise of the Internet and digital culture. Today, an increasing number of people engage in surveillance of their environment through Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, not through reading the *Providence Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune*, or the *Houston Chronicle*, or watching FOX News, CNN, or ABC’s *World News Tonight*.

Research shows that regular news reading and viewing of television news not only builds language, reading and viewing comprehension, critical thinking, oral expression, and listening skills, but it directly models expectations in preparing students for adult life, where attention to local, national, and international events is expected as a core tenet of informed citizenship (Rubin 2012). But although one in three American middle school and high school students watch *Channel One News* each school day, researchers have little faith in the power of the journalistic marketplace to meet the genuine needs of children and teens. In a recent study of the journalistic quality of adolescent-targeted newscasts in the United States, researchers compared *Channel One News*, *CNN Student News*, and the *CBS Evening News*. Content analysis revealed that *Channel One News* had significantly more references to commercially oriented websites than *CNN Student News* or the *CBS Evening News* (Scott, Chansior, and Dixon 2014). In the U.S., it seems, child and adolescent audiences are just another market for the now-struggling field of journalism, whose leaders have only recently recognized that without a focus on the “demand side” of news, there may be little opportunity for growth on the supply side.

Recently, nonprofit organizations and university programs, well-funded by charitable foundations, have begun programs in news literacy. The most well-known programs include the StonyBrook news literacy program, led by former *Daily News* editor Howard Schneider, and the News Literacy Project, led by former *Washington Post* journalist Alan Miller. Some of these programs emphasize how journalists verify information by looking for high-status sources to confirm facts; other programs feature classroom visits from journalists who describe their experiences in constructing the news. In these programs, students listen and ask questions, presumably inspired by the opportunity to meet a journalist who has contributed to creating “the first draft of history” by gathering information from multiple sources.

News literacy certainly represents an advance upon even more traditional approaches like the Newspaper In Education (NIE) programs, which were widely promulgated during the 1970s and '80s and included activities such as looking for active verbs in news headlines and summarizing a single news article. Sadly, using the newspaper often has little to do with reading and discussing news and current events, as some curriculum approaches include activities like searching through a newspaper to find adjectives from A to Z (Rubin 2012). Such activities might naturally discourage students' interest in news and journalism, and are certainly no substitute for regular sustained reading and discussion of current events.

Perhaps the entrance of former journalists into the classroom is indeed an improvement over the sporadic or occasional use of news and current events as a curriculum resource. Research shows that American students do not generally discuss current events in school during class time. In a study of a nationally representative sample of ninth grade students, Kahne and Middaugh (2007) found that low-income students, non-college bound students, and students of color are the groups least likely to discuss current events in class. As Rubin (2012) explains, "most social studies classes are not structured to take into account or build upon students' varying experiences with civic life; many educators choose to avoid controversial social and civic issues their classrooms" (7).

Researchers have identified a variety of reasons why news and current events are not routinely used in American high schools. Passe and Fitchett (2013) write, "Whether it is because of a desire to get through the curriculum, prepare for standardized tests, or simply avoid anything that might be deemed controversial, teachers often do not engage students" in discussions of news and current events (249). Teachers say there is simply no time in the typical content-heavy social studies curriculum for reading and discussion of the news (Rubin 2012). News articles, in fact, are too episodic in nature to be of much educational value to children and youth, as they lack background information and context to be easily comprehensible to young people. And because many teachers themselves are not active news consumers, they may lack the needed background information to scaffold and support students' emerging interpretation of the news. It might be noted that teachers' expertise is too easily challenged when using news media resources with their dynamic and ever-changing content. Furthermore, teachers may avoid teaching about current events because these discussions can be too controversial. For example, some teachers have experienced backlash from administrators when teaching about the Iraq War (Burgos 2008).

As traditional mainstream journalism continues to decline, it's possible that user-generated content may provide fresh opportunities for learners to engage in discussion and dialogue about news and current events across geographic and cultural divides. One powerful example of how online producers are addressing children and youth as news consumers comes from the work of Brad Montague, founder of the YouTube

channel “Soul Pancake.” One of the channel’s videos, “Kid President—How to Change the World” features an African American boy, Robby Novak, age 9, as Kid President, commenting on why people don’t think they can change the world, followed by his charming and insightful reflections. Kid President offers a playful, optimistic perspective on small actions that people can take to respond to the news and current events in the world around them. “Things don’t have to be the way they are,” Kid President notes, offering small, kid-friendly ideas for solving social problems (like donating socks to homeless families for Socktober). With optimism and off-beat energy, amateur and local producers on YouTube may provide meaningful opportunities for children and young people to experience and engage with diverse others, using compelling content to explore differences and promote genuine dialogue, helping to counter the increasingly re-segregated communities in which we live.

Youth as Communicators

The use of media and technology in education has received much attention as a result of deep investment by venture capitalists and charitable foundations, who are aware of the changing economic context of K–12 and higher education and the need for fresh, innovative approaches to meet the needs of learners today. Although most economic analyses project that, by 2018, more than 60 percent of the workforce will need to have some form of higher education, fewer than 35 percent of the population are expected to have attained degrees by that time (Tierney and Rodriguez 2014). Along with the rise of for-profit higher education, a variety of forms of online and social media are now being explored in the hopes that they may emerge as potentially disruptive force.

There is no shortage of idealism among those in the area of digital media and learning. Aiming for a sea change in American public education, some media and education scholars, practitioners, and advocates consider the near-limitless possibilities of digital media education to be vital dimensions of educational transformation (Davidson and Goldberg 2009; Gee 2010; Jenkins 2009). To provide digital media courses in civic engagement will mean overcoming several challenges, including a lack of time, funding, and training.

But when young people discover a sense of agency from participating in a meaningful form of public communication, where their voices are part of a strategy to create social change, the impact can be transformative. One example of this is the PBS Student Reporting Labs, a school-based news media literacy initiative which connects middle and high school students to local PBS stations and broadcast news professionals in their communities to report on critical issues from a youth perspective. Through a project-based, active learning model, students learn how to synthesize information and

investigate important topics, while building media literacy, communication, and problem-solving skills. In 2013–2014, the program involved more than 50 schools across the country, with each site adapting the program as needed to meet the particular educational needs of its students, faculty, and community. In our quantitative research conducted with nearly 500 high school students who participated in the program, we measured the development of media production skills that involved gathering and synthesizing information, using digital media and technology to communicate ideas in the format of a broadcast news package, and engaging in cycles of revision and feedback to polish their work. We found statistically significant increases in collaboration and teamwork competencies, including intellectual curiosity, the ability to give and receive feedback, and confidence in self-expression and advocacy. We also found increases in media literacy analysis skills, more selectivity in media use choices, and a shift toward high-quality news sources over entertainment-type news. Students had a less apathetic view of news and journalism, as well as orientation toward journalism careers. We also observed increased commitment to civic activism and an interest in civic engagement activities, particularly ones that are digital and collaborative (Hobbs et al. 2013).

Still, some have wondered whether simply creating, composing, or making civic media is enough—especially if there is no one to watch or respond to it (Weiland 2014). “Students must find appropriate audiences for their work in a crowded media environment dominated by commercial products,” notes Levine (2008, 119). Is real civic agency achieved if young people create videos that nobody watches? Indeed, critics of life in “the late age of print” wonder about the depth of readers’ engagement and comprehension with screen media (Carr 2010; Striphos 2013). Perhaps the values of entertainment culture have eclipsed any educational or civic value of amateur and youth media video.

However, educators are developing creative approaches to activate youth civic engagement while developing important communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills. Some of these skills may be learned as part of general education and are not specifically tied to civic education. For example, in a large-scale study of California high school and college students, Kahne, Lee, and Feezell (2012) found that about 50 percent of students self-reported that they had learned how to assess the trustworthiness of online information, were required to use the Internet to get information about political or social issues, were required to use the Internet to find different points of view about political or social issues, or were given an assignment where they had to create something to put on the Web.

A number of civic education programs rely on external partnerships—including university faculty or nonprofit organizations—to stimulate and support innovation. For example, Rubin (2012) documented her work with three social studies teachers, as she

used design-based research to generate, implement, and track new approaches to civic education. Her work encouraged teachers to make active use of discussion, writing and expression, current events, and civic action research. By re-organizing the history curriculum into thematic units undergirded by essential questions, Rubin found that teachers were able to more effectively integrate the teaching of current events in the context of history. Simple instructional practices that promoted authentic discussion were effective; a strong focus on writing and creative expression became a means for students to represent their knowledge and emerging understanding. Similarly, in another example of a university–school partnership that aimed to integrate media literacy into an urban elementary school, skills of critical analysis of the news media were activated through a range of creative media production activities that included critically analyzing the representation of courts and law enforcement, talking back to the news media, and analyzing news media portrayals of youth (Hobbs and Cooper Moore 2013).

Digital media tools can support the deep integration of reading and writing into the civic education classroom. Research shows that students need extensive instruction to develop online reading comprehension (Coiro 2011), and organizations like the National Writing Project are exploring how to use digital media for multimedia (or multimodal) composition and self-expression. An online learning program called Drafting Board helps students develop policy analysis and argumentation skills. Created by iCivics, the nonprofit organization founded by former Supreme Court justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Drafting Board involves students in gathering information about a controversial topic, matching evidence to support their position on the issue. A digital tool, Paragraph Constructor, helps students create grammatically correct and sequentially logical paragraphs, while Critic Crusher helps them recognize weaknesses in the arguments of the opposition. Research with 1,500 middle school students showed statistically significant gains in writing skills using the California Writing Standards evaluation rubric (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2012).

In addition to discussion and writing activities, simulations are sometimes used as expressive activities in which writing is used to deepen students' understanding of a historical or current event. In these forms of learning, students role play particular characters and converse with others as a way to demonstrate their knowledge. Some students play the part of journalists, asking probing questions to gather information and provide opportunities for evaluating ideas (Rubin 2012).

There are many strategic assumptions embedded in how digital media learning addresses learners in how to be voters, consumers, and global citizens. One concern is that some new initiatives engage learners directly in ways that do not offer a role for a classroom teacher. Instead, mentors from the community provide support services to youth. For this reason, civic education initiatives that include digital media may receive strong support from philanthropies, university researchers, and nonprofit

organizations, but considerably less support from K–12 educators and public school leaders.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how schools have addressed youth as capitalists, as consumers of news, and as communicators. To help young people learn about capitalism, initiatives in financial literacy have been introduced in schools. The practice of reading news and current events and the development of effective communication skills, including students' use of media as a vehicle for advocacy, are small but key dimensions of civic education in the U.S. public education system.

But given that we have not reached the tipping point with any of these initiatives, I wonder: Are educators' attitudes toward youth voice partly to blame? When students speak out, they can say things that make adults uncomfortable. They can point out adult hypocrisy and make astute observations about the gaping divide between our democratic ideals and the actuality of contemporary life. But they can also say things that are out of context, uninformed, and mean-spirited. The paradox of youth voice is a subject that requires deep interrogation within the context of financial literacy, discussions of news and current events, and youth as media makers.

Because most schools are essentially undemocratic institutions, it's a risk to teach civic education with any point of view that emphasizes empowerment. When students are conceptualized as products whose value is measured with standardized tests, and where learning how to follow orders trumps the cultivation of intellectual curiosity, students learn to tolerate or submit to injustice because they lack any meaningful form of social power, despite the presence of mock institutions like student government and school newspapers, which sadly no longer serve to help them learn how democracy should work. Instead, students capitulate to an image-conscious, status-driven, "brand-me" world, where individual achievement leads to entry into selective and exclusionary institutions of higher education, followed by further burnishing of the personal brand in college and beyond.

Financial literacy, teaching about news and current events and empowering young people as communicators in their own communities can be key dimensions of civic education that aim to address the limits of the currently dominant paradigm of teaching civics through a focus on content knowledge about how government works. But because teachers are largely disempowered to effect curricular change in the U.S., textbook publishers, testing companies, and state departments of education work with private industry and large charitable foundations as de facto shapers of curriculum. School administrators, controlled by local government, are influenced by fads and fashions that result from non-professional community leaders reacting to crisis rather than pro-actively and strategically using best practices. But this bleak perspective does

not fully represent the full complexity of what is happening in American public education in both high schools and institutions of higher education.

So we have no choice but to be optimistic. There is a need for creative new approaches that help teachers and students, in schools, use the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world. It's possible that a combination of financial literacy, media literacy focused on news and current events, and youth media initiatives that combine project-based learning with community activism can be effective in cultivating the range of citizenship skills needed for full participation in work, civic, community, and cultural life, locally, nationally, and internationally.

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