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Teaching Students to be Political in a Non-Partisan Way: Reflections from Action Civics Education Across Red and Blue States

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Abstract: Using a student-centered approach, Generation Citizen's (GC) action civics model helps students gain civic knowledge and skills as they work together to take action on a local issue in their community. This paper draws upon reflections from GC's decade-plus of teaching action civics at scale in middle and high schools across the USA, highlighting drivers for non-partisan civics education efforts in Texas, Oklahoma, California, Alabama, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York. Reflections on GC's work also point to the opportunities and challenges that GC encountered as it scaled. We also suggest future directions for research and practice for nonpartisan action civics work into the next decade.

Keywords: action civics, civics education, political polarization, social studies education, USA

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Introduction

Historically, one of the primary missions of American public education has been to prepare students to participate in the democratic system (Evans, 2004). While school-based accountability measures often eclipse explicit civics education (Passe & Fitchett, 2013; Ravitch, 2014), recent research suggests that increased exposure to civic educational experiences increases students' civic knowledge, civic skills, and/or civic engagement (Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016; Cohen & Chaffee, 2013; Cohen, Littenberg-Tobias, Ridley-Kerr, Pope, Stolte, & Wong, 2018; Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007; Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

However, inequalities are rife in efforts to foster youth civic engagement. Structural inequities cause demographic (e.g., race, ethnicity, country of origin) and social factors (e.g., socioeconomic position) to negatively influence marginalized students' opportunities to observe and experience the change-making process (Kirshner, 2015; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). These limited school and community-based experiences affect these students' civic self-efficacy because students often struggle to feel like they can make change when they have rarely accessed, observed, and/or experienced the change process (Levinson, 2012; Schultz, 2008). Fortunately, civics education that exposes students to relevant democratic experiences (not just information) can build civic efficacy, especially for youth from marginalized backgrounds, and thereby help reduce the civic engagement gap (Littenberg-Tobias & Cohen, 2016).

Action Civics

Over the last few decades, scholars and practitioners have implemented action civics in classrooms across the USA to both address the civic opportunity gap and provide students with experiential civics education (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Pope et al., 2011). While action civics programs vary in context and scope, they generally rely on an applied approach to civic

engagement through a process of (1) community analysis, (2) issue selection, (3) issue research, (4) planning for action, (5) taking action, and (6) reflection (Fitzgerald, 2017). Through this process, students work collaboratively to address a civic issue.

Such an applied approach necessitates that action civics programs engage with a range of demographic and ideological diversity, as students collaborate within their classrooms as well as investigate and engage with perspectives from a range of community members as they explore real-world issues. The recent increase in political polarization (Hess & McAvoy, 2014) has required programs to think carefully about how to teach students in non-partisan ways. Generation Citizen, a decade-old national action civics organization, provides an illustrative programmatic case for such work as it operates in communities and states across political contexts throughout the USA.

Generation Citizen

Generation Citizen was founded on a belief in the power of non-partisan teaching about civics and the idea that every student in the United States deserves access to an effective action civics education. Founded in 2008 and incorporated in 2010, Generation Citizen (GC) seeks to actively engage youth as change-makers in their communities through action civics. The organization's Common Core and state standards-aligned curriculum includes basic civic content and offers students the opportunity to learn and practice civic skills through taking collective action as a class on a local issue chosen by students. The curriculum is facilitated in middle and high schools, typically as a semester-long, twice-weekly, in-school program. Classroom teachers receive professional development training before the semester begins and ongoing support and training throughout the program. They have sometimes been supported by college student volunteer "Democracy Coaches," who receive professional development training as well.

Students' action projects range widely by topic; the most common topics are related to safety and violence (e.g., bullying, gangs, gun violence) or schooling (e.g., school lunch, school culture, school policies) (Gustafson, Cohen, & Andes, 2019).

In its early years, Generation Citizen designed its program model and curricula to establish a local, partnership-based presence and a fundraising base in the Northeast (Rhode Island (2008); the Boston, Massachusetts metropolitan area (2009), and the New York City metropolitan area (2010)); later, the same model was expanded to the West Coast (San Francisco Bay Area) (2013). Once established in these locales, organizational leaders wanted to expand operations to less politically progressive geographies in order to both (1) test their intention of having a program that was resonant and impactful in communities from across the political spectrum and (2) demonstrate the potential of the non-partisan action civics model in schools and districts of all kinds.

In 2015, Generation Citizen staff launched a national search for educational and community partners committed to its mission and interested in a multi-year pilot. In the summer and fall of 2016, Generation Citizen hired local founding site directors to launch operations in central Texas (with programming based in the Austin metropolitan area and surrounding rural communities) and in Oklahoma City, with the support of school district and community leaders. GC has since expanded programming in both states as well as supported partnerships in rural Alabama (2018) and Kentucky (2019); Salt Lake City, Utah (2019); San Diego, California (2018); and in non-urban areas throughout their initial geographies (California, Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island).

The diversity of these locations has challenged Generation Citizen to consistently actualize its commitment to teaching students to be political in non-partisan ways, and

underscored the importance of doing so; non-partisanship was important to Generation Citizen regardless of location, but also especially because of location. Strong democracy requires not only a participatory citizenry but a diversity of opinions (Barber, 2003); partisanship restricts strong democracy by reducing space for dialogue and participation (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Working with politically diverse communities and students has necessitated teaching civic engagement with a focus on communities, not political parties or ideologies.

As Fitzgerald et al. (2021) discuss in their systematic review in this issue, political partisanship increased during this first decade of GC's existence. This increase in partisan politics challenged efforts to provide effective civics education to students in various per-state educational contexts – and made such civics education even more necessary for maintaining a healthy democracy. Together, this unique context of Generation Citizen's first decade provides a case worthy of systematic investigation for exploring lessons learned in both facilitating action civics and scaling a nationally recognized civics education organization at a time of increasing political partisanship.

Methodology

As theory in practice, we recognize that Generation Citizen's action civics program is imperfect; continuous improvement is critical to being a responsive organization. As such, this exploration employs a pragmatistic reflective perspective (Dewey, 1933; Mortari, 2015) in an effort to draw important lessons from its model and inform not only the literature but also the specific program's effectiveness. This reflective lens is conceptually congruent with the subject of action civics, as it is a practice that informs the work of civic action in its various applications (Maddux & Donnett, 2015).

Generation Citizen's action civics programmatic structure engages youth in a process of

solving community problems through experiential, inquiry-based learning. This process is informed by three underlying themes from sociopolitical development theory (Watts & Flanagan, 2007): (1) local focus, encouraging students to consider the community around them rather than abstract national political debates, (2) diversity, facilitating student engagement with people and perspective different from themselves/their own, and (3) student voice, engaging students in issues that are connected to their own lived experiences. We elaborate on these themes below and share stories from Generation Citizen programming which illustrate how these elements show up in classrooms.

It is through these three themes that we reflected upon examples of Generation Citizen programming, areas for improvement, and future directions of action civics programming – all at the service of understanding how to teach civics/political education in non-partisan ways. Below, we consolidated these data into the contextual examples provided within the reflections, illustrating how these themes serviced non-partisan political education.

Reflection Themes

Local Focus

A critical aspect of Generation Citizen's experience teaching non-partisan civic engagement is via local issues in local communities. There was an explicit focus from the beginning of the organization to move beyond the rancor of partisan, national discourse and encourage students, facilitators, and teachers to confront not just ideology but real people and real issues. Students were asked to consider the assets and challenges they observed within their local community, interview peers or community members about problems, research the efforts of local organizations and individuals to address them, and interact directly with school-, district-, city-, and/or state-level decisionmakers to take action on the problem at hand. Whether engaging

with school or district staff, local elected officials, community leaders, or neighbors, these interactions with people in the community helped students practice authentic civic skills as well to avoid abstract ideological debates while favoring actions that had direct benefit to the community.

For example, high school students in New York City once started their semester discussing the issues of racism and of sexism, both personal issues experienced at this all-girls school. Often, conversations around massive, long-lasting, and deeply entrenched social problems like these can stall, as students grow frustrated by their lack of ability to conceive of how to “solve” the problem. Inviting students to think locally offers them a chance to consider how that topic shows up in their community or their lives. When charged to look and research locally, students discovered that Black (specifically female) abolitionists were not represented among the hundreds of public statues citywide. Students published op-eds on the problem, as well as conducting a survey, circulating a petition, and contacting local elected and appointed officials, and after the semester was over, one young woman from the school was appointed as the sole student among 18 members of a newly constituted citywide “She Built NYC” advisory board, convened by the city’s First Lady of NYC to commission public artwork that honors women’s history (Coleman, 2018).

This locally-oriented approach can also serve to put students into direct contact with political processes and players, an interaction that is often limited when students focus solely on government at the federal level. For example, at the end of the Generation Citizen program, participating students take part in a science fair-style Civics Day showcase to present their projects to other young people and community members. At Generation Citizen’s first Civics Day in Livingston, Alabama, not only did the town’s mayor show up to hear students’

perspectives on pressing community issues like animal protection, mayors from the two neighboring towns did as well. Here, students had the opportunity to directly offer their perspectives and ideas to the very decision-makers responsible for overseeing the well-being and improvement of their communities. Many times, when local politics is concerned, people take precedence over partisanship.

It can be a remarkable experience too when young people realize they have the right and ability to reach out to elected officials, and to know that those public figures or governmental workers may be interested in what they have to say; such was the case for one class of eighth graders in California. They quickly focused on the topic of transportation and narrowed the issue down to consider their own experience getting to school every day. Many students did not live in areas accessible to the school district's bus routes, so they relied on the city's public buses to commute to and from school. They complained, however, that their busses were unsafe, especially for younger students or students traveling alone. The 8th grade students arranged a meeting with representatives from the city's Transportation Department to voice their concerns and share researched solutions. In the meeting, the city acknowledged that it had made an error and that the bus routes the students identified were intended to have additional supports as part of a student security initiative. That oversight was corrected within the semester.

In limiting the scope of civic action to focus on the local, students are able to (1) infuse their own understandings of the world into their work, as the 8th graders in California did, (2) connect with, work with, and challenge "named" individuals, as the students in Alabama were able to do, and (3) take meaningful action on items that are too large to address through singular policies or programs, as the students in New York learned. While issues of equality, laws, and public resources are often partisan issues, the local focus enabled these students to engage in a

meaningful change-making processes without wading far into stormy partisan waters.

Diversity

Engaging with local issues and people also creates space for dialogue across groups, whether within a classroom, with members of students' broader community, or specifically with representatives from different ideological perspectives.

By mostly engaging K-12 students through their social studies classes or through a whole-school approach (engaging all students in a grade, such as through an advisory course) rather than through optional out-of-school activities or through school subjects that are often tracked (like English or math), Generation Citizen has attempted to increase the diversity of representation in each of its cohorts. Social studies classes are one of the last spaces where students of various abilities and interests are often together in class (Passe & Fitchett, 2013). These collections of students offer an important opportunity to engage diverse groups. This diversity allows for social demographic barriers to be broken and for underrepresented youth to find voice in civic dialogues (Levinson, 2012).

For example, before their action civics semester, a pair of teachers at Kealing Middle School in Austin, Texas, strategized to specifically promote diversity and collaboration within their classroom. Kealing Middle School houses a magnet program within its public school, but the two student populations rarely interact. The teachers set out to change that and intentionally scheduled their class roster to be comprised evenly of students from each program. As the class debated their focus issue, students were split along the topics of LGBTQ rights in Austin and poverty or immigration. They engaged in the extended process of consensus-building to determine one focus issue by actively asking one another to share opinions, by conducting and offering research to the group, and by discussing their personal beliefs and experiences related to

each topic. In the end, the class elected to focus on supporting students who were in fear of losing their mothers to deportation. In the words of one of their teachers, “This is it,” one teacher said, “I don’t even care if they accomplish anything on their project, the fact that they got to have that discussion at this moment is worth it” (Generation Citizen, 2017).

Diversity beyond the school walls is important as well. Since schools are increasingly re-segregating (Parkay, 2016), enabling students to share and explore the world beyond school settings is important to developing broader, more inclusive worldviews. Students underwent just such an exploration in Lowell, Massachusetts, one year. The class honed in on gun violence as a problem in their community. They researched other communities’ approach to this topic and set for themselves a goal of creating a gun buyback program in Lowell. They pitched their idea to the local police and health departments, each of whom signed on to the campaign. Students then conducted outreach to and partnered with 35 houses of worship and 21 nonprofit organizations and businesses to raise money to purchase gifts cards, which were given in exchange for each gun collected. They created and promoted bilingual advertisements around town and published an op-ed in the local newspaper to bring attention to the event, at which they collected 38 guns off the streets.

In addition to engaging with their communities broadly, action civics classes or teachers can be even more explicit in connecting students with people or approaches from across the political spectrum, like one class did in Oklahoma. Students at Del Crest Middle School wanted to focus on issues affecting the LGBTQ community. As they did research, they discovered that their own health curricula contained outdated information about HIV transmission which had not been updated since 1987. The students invited guest speakers to their classroom to learn more about HIV and AIDS. One guest was a Democratic state representative who had tried to pass a

bill two years earlier to update the instructional materials. They also engaged with a Republican state representative who had drafted more recent legislation. The class decided to advocate for his bill, which would require that students receive medically accurate instruction that defines HIV and AIDS and includes analysis of HIV transmission and prevention methods. Students' efforts were covered in a national education outlet and quoted one student as saying "Last year, I didn't think I could really change anything, that anyone would care what I think" (Generation Citizen, 2019, p. 23). But after working on the bill, he shared that "I have a voice, and even though I'm not old enough to vote, I can still make changes."

The role that both teachers and students play in the process of increasing the diversity of civic voices is critical to the work of action civics. These examples between students and their communities helped students to not only see the world they are in today but to envision the world they want tomorrow. Teachers play an important role in this visioning, as the teachers in Texas highlight. While action civics is student-centered, the role of the teacher to mediate, moderate, and manage the experiential components enable students to experience practical (and sometimes lifechanging) community diversity.

Community and Student Voice

Student voice has to be a core part of the action civics experience (Fitzgerald & Andes, 2012). Teachers have long recognized the value of relevance and choice in engaging young people in their learning (Fosnot, 2005; Meyer et al., 2016). In action civics, student voice also serves to explicitly tie young people's experiences to political systems and processes (Diemer & Li, 2011). Creating opportunities for young people to explore civics through the lens of issues or people they care about is vital. Student voice can have an effect not only on young people's engagement, but on how young people's communities learn about and take action on issues of

importance to students, as well. As the majority of middle and high school students cannot vote, their prescribed solutions to problems are often uniquely grounded in ameliorating challenges students experience on-the-ground, regardless of adults' common narratives or debates about these issues.

Three examples from Generation Citizen classrooms highlight how action civics enables young people to learn about civic processes by addressing issues they care about and how their engagement can often offer new, or even prescient, ideas for tackling community challenges. In the spring of 2019, students from 360 High School in Providence, Rhode Island, grappled with a lack of mental health services at their school. One counselor was expected to serve over 300 students. They advocated for a city ordinance which would replace School Resource Officers with mental health counselors throughout their district. Arguments to consider the role of School Resource Officers and police in schools can now be heard echoed throughout the country. These students proposed the idea as a response to their own need for mental health support.

Another example comes from a class at Pyne Arts Magnet School in Massachusetts where students were concerned by the prevalence of vaping advertisements aimed at young people. They set out to limit the sale of flavored vaping products to adults-only establishments, and ultimately worked with a State Representative to introduce a bill to do just that. Their unique perspective on the issue helped an elected official consider a new approach to addressing a rapidly spreading problem and taught them about the mechanics of driving political change.

Finally, as a third example, students in Berkeley, California, joined a conversation occurring within their broader community about homelessness. Unlike adult advocates, however, students focused on the issue of youth homelessness. One student in the class who had experiences homelessness found herself leading her peers in an exploration of what services their

municipality offered on this topic. Students realized that there was, in fact, a youth homeless shelter in the community, but it only operated during the school year. Their lobbying efforts resulted in the shelter being funded to stay open year-round.

Breaking down the metaphorical barriers between the schoolhouse walls and the community enables students to look beyond the theoretical ideologies of partisan politics and explore the realities of their communities. These interactions enable them to frame experience not in terms of cultural politics (Apple, 1996) but in terms of need through relevance and choice. Integrating student voice and community enables youth to experience civic action within a real world framework, dulling partisan divisions.

Successes and Challenges

While creating completely non-partisan spaces for students to practice civic action is challenging, GC's close work with teachers, schools, and school systems, its student-centered curriculum, and its local community-oriented approach have provided students with non-partisan opportunities to engage in authentic civic issues, as the above case studies illustrate. A strong commitment to student-led project decisions and a community-based, local grounding (despite GC's national scale) have helped support Generation Citizen's non-partisan action civics education efforts. Expanding the view from the local work of the cases above, we reflect on the successes and challenges of scaling a non-partisan civics education organization as well as potential goals for civics education in the coming decade. They represent lessons learned from those actively engaging in expanding and deepening GC's impact across the USA.

One area of upon which Generation Citizen and the civics education community can grow is in teaching students to manage partisan ideas within a framework of civil discourse by engaging diverse perspectives. While teachers continue to struggle with (maybe even fear)

engaging their students in controversial issues (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), they struggle even more with teaching students to manage partisanship. Looking across the Civics Day capstone presentations, many student groups choose to focus on local, small projects, as a repercussion of Generation Citizen's commitment to engaging students in learning about local government. For example, students might research and make recommendations to public officials about reproductive health policies. However, to foster political efficacy in non-partisan ways, it would be counterproductive to encourage student groups to confront groups with opposing views. In our currently partisan world, helping students to identify partisan ideas and manage civil discourse with people who hold different partisan ideas is an important skill to teach (Shaffer, 2019). Generation Citizen attempted to do such through encouraging students to conduct intensive research on issues, organizations, and those affected in their community, and then to proactively and respectfully engage with community members and campaigns advocating for approaches different from their own. Moving forward, the organization intends to incorporate more reflection on personal identity and perspective into its work. This reflection can be built upon to support deeper analysis of how personal experience and ideology relate to political opinions and behavior (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

As communities become more segregated, though, the opportunities for students to dialogue, collaborate, and compromise with others with varied experiences or perspectives becomes more challenging. While a local lens enables students to avoid much of the national political vitriol in their own discussions, as one GC administrator asked, "How useful is it to build consensus when the students are in cultural bubbles and are surrounded by people similar to themselves?" Between segregated schools and the structures of social media, epistemic isolation is a challenge for the next decade of civics education.

One possible solution is to intentionally structure perspective-taking exercises more explicitly into the curriculum, especially as they relate to social media. This strategy may be particularly helpful in partisan times. To the extent that some people hold ideological beliefs that they mask or hide from others, there are certainly a diversity of political opinions and beliefs in any community. Engaging students in perspective-taking exercises may help students to recognize (and maybe empathize) with perspectives that are different from their own, leading to civic action that is more inclusive and – to the extent that inclusive action is more widely accepted and adopted – better overall.

Conclusion

Throughout the last decade, Generation Citizen has attempted to supplement and complement K-12 education by providing curricular and pedagogical supports that encourage students to meaningfully engage in their communities. Through a pragmatic reflective approach, we illustrated areas in which local focus, diversity, and student voice and community enable action civics to be taught in a non-partisan way. Meaningful engagement provides students with a local focus, inclusive, diverse learning environments, and access to communities. Into this next decade, we anticipate these themes remain strong factors in teaching civic education in partisan and polarized settings. We also found that there is more work to be done regarding inclusivity of diverse perspectives, bringing students from their localized experiences to understanding their connections with larger national and global issues. Engaging and solving these problems will enable civics education to remain strong and effective in the decades to come.

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