Educating for active citizenship

A perennial debate

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In this paper I explore the relationship between civics and citizenship education (CCE) and two opposed conceptions of political participation. First I outline some arguments for and against substantive political participation, and align these arguments with different conceptions of CCE. Next, I argue that we need to consider political interest and opportunity as we educate for active citizenship, and conclude that we need to allow students the freedom to opt out of political participation with dignity.

When each of our three classes (businessmen, Auxiliaries, and Guardians [rulers]) does its own job and minds its own business, that ... is justice and makes our state just. (Socrates in Plato c.375 BC)

We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. (Pericles in Thucydides 431 BC)

The moment a people adopts representatives it is no longer free; it no longer exists. (Rousseau 1792)

The ideal type of a perfect government must be representative. (Mill 1859)

Low levels and patterns of participation in politics do not constitute a threat to democracy; they seem, in fact, to be a realistic adjustment to the nature of modern society. (Milbrath 1971, p.154)

This paper continues a discussion which began in September 1999 at a meeting called to discuss civics and citizenship education (CCE) in the Asia Pacific region. Towards the end of the meeting, a colleague asked whether emerging democratic states wanted citizens to be active. This led to another question: do citizens want to be active?

In this paper I explore the relationship between CCE and two opposed conceptions of political participation. First I outline some of the arguments for and against substantive political participation. Next I align the arguments with different conceptions of CCE.
Finally, I raise two related issues which I believe we need to consider as we educate young people for active citizenship, namely interest and opportunity. This leads to my concluding question – in our drive to educate young people to be active citizens, do we allow them the freedom to opt out of political participation with dignity? I argue that this question needs answering if we are to empower, rather than disempower, young people, but I offer no definitive answer. Instead, I map out the key concepts in the hope that others will continue the discussion.

The question ‘Do states want citizens to be active?’ is as relevant to established western democracies as it is to emerging democratic states. Further, the question of whether citizens ought be active in government is a perennial one – the battle lines in the debate are as firm today as they were at the ‘birth of democracy’ in the ancient Greek city state. The battle is mirrored in two conceptions of CCE.

Sears (1996, esp. pp.6-9) argues that there is an ‘elitist’ and an ‘activist’ conception of CCE. The elitist conception holds that parliament is sovereign, ‘appropriate’ people are elected to govern, and citizen participation extends to sharing a national culture and tradition, obeying the law, and casting an informed vote. Consequently, students need to learn about ‘history and political structures ... a particular set of national values and norms, ... [and acquire] information gathering skills to allow them to vote in an informed manner’.

In contrast, the activist conception holds that the people are sovereign, that citizens participate in government, and that citizens recognise that they are part of a diverse community in which all are not empowered equally. Activist education develops students’ critical faculties so that they can participate in government beyond voting.

Battles usually generate considerable heat, and the CCE debate is no exception. As labels like ‘elitist’ and ‘activist’ are likely to trigger the launch of yet more pre-programmed missiles, in this paper I use the alternative labels which Sears mentions (1996, p.8) in the context of the Senate’s 1991 report Active Citizenship Revisited. These are ‘protectionist’ rather than ‘elitist’, and ‘participatory’ rather than ‘activist’:

Protectionist democracy limits citizens’ participation to the selection of leaders, thereafter remaining relatively isolated from the decision-making processes of the governing elite. Participatory democracy, on the other hand, promotes a public process of decision-making through which citizens have a strong sense of ownership of decisions. (adapted from Wood 1985 by Kippin in Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991)

Broadly, the focus of protectionist CCE is elections, and the focus of participatory CCE is shared decision-making. At the heart of the protectionist conception of citizenship is the belief that government is a specialist business which should be conducted by the few who are best equipped to do so. In contrast, the participatory conception of citizenship holds that there is a substantive role for citizens in making public policy.

A protectionist reading of democracy, defined as collective self-government, would conclude that democracy is a most inefficient, possibly dangerous, way to manage the
affairs of a nation or a group. It takes time and effort to make space for everyone to speak and be heard, hence decision-making can proceed at a snail's pace. In groups, some members find it tedious to listen again to the person who always speaks regardless of the topic, to wait while others strive to grasp complex issues, and to accept others’ preferences for relatively low risk, 'least-worst' options. In short, democratic decision-making is difficult and time-consuming work.

Further, if most or all citizens are active in government, outcomes are relatively unpredictable because as the number of people increases, so too does the range of preferences, and the incidence of disagreement (at least in a diverse and open community). For example, outcomes would be relatively unpredictable if all members of a professional association attended an annual general meeting, or if every parent attended a school meeting. At the extreme, democracy would be less stable than autocracy or oligarchy. In sum, it is difficult to argue that democracy is efficient or predictable, so perhaps we should not encourage more people to participate in government. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle would surely agree.

Socrates (Plato's teacher) argued that only the wise should rule, and that wisdom was a function of bloodlines and of specialised education. In Socrates' ideal city state, people would believe that they were born to one of three classes: iron and bronze (workers), silver (military) and gold (guardians). Only people born to silver and gold were citizens; they were born to, and educated for, rule. According to Socrates, a just state was one in which 'each of our three classes ... does its own job and minds its own business' (in Plato 1987, 434c). In brief, mass political participation is unnecessary and undesirable.

For Aristotle (Plato's student), a citizen is a person who is 'entitled to participate in office' (1981, 1275b13). Entitlement turns on the capacity to reason, and independent financial means. According to Aristotle, the capacity to reason is present in men, absent in slaves, underdeveloped in children, and 'ineffective' in women (1259b32), thus men could be citizens, but not all men. Men who relied on paid work (the 'mechanics') were not citizens, nor should citizens engage in paid work 'for they must have leisure to develop their virtue, and for the activities of a citizen' (1328b33-1329a17, 1337b4). About 50 years earlier Socrates showed equal disdain for the 'mechanics' when he criticised philosophers who accepted a fee for their services, saying they were unworthy, 'their minds being as cramped and crushed by their mechanical lives as their bodies are deformed by manual trades' (in Plato, 495d-e).

Hence in the Greek city state the citizens did assemble in person to participate in government, but citizens were a minority – women, slaves andmetics (resident foreigners, including Aristotle) were excluded. Maddox estimates that 6,000 men governed a population of about 250,000 (1991, pp.66-67).

Yet among the Athenian governors stood Pericles, a prominent political leader whose conception of citizenship was more participatory than protectionist. In a funeral oration delivered to honour Athenian soldiers who died in the Peloponnesian Wars he said:

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people ... We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public
affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect ... Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics ... we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. (in Thucydides 1972, pp.145, 147)

Clearly Pericles disagreed with Socrates about a just state, for he said 'a man who minds his own business ... has no business here at all'. For all we might contest Pericles' claim that 'the whole people' governed, here is a powerful statement in support of participatory democracy. Similarly, if we set aside Aristotle's exclusive citizenship, we might endorse Ignatieff's interpretation:

[An ideal Aristotelian citizen is] one who is fit to both govern and obey, fit both to make the laws and to observe them. Citizenship thus implies both an active and a passive mode. (1981, p.55)

More than 2,000 years after Aristotle, active citizenship was the foundation of Rousseau's ideal city state.

In The Social Contract Rousseau describes how a community could be self-governing. Here there is no Hobbesian exchange of autonomy for security, for that would be slavery; Rousseau also observed that when Aristotle concluded slaves were not fit to be citizens, he 'mistook the effect for the cause' (1968, pp.51-52). Rousseau's free citizens meet face to face and make laws which serve the interests of the community, and consequently themselves. Citizens have rights, and they have duties (including participation); they are 'forced to be free' (1968, p.64). For Rousseau, freedom is 'obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself' (1968, p.65).

Rousseau conceded that his preferred direct democracy was more likely to endure civil war and unrest, for which he proposed a remedy to remind citizens that freedom was the paramount value. Every day, citizens would repeat 'Better freedom with danger than peace with slavery' (1968, pp.113-114). Above all, citizens would never allow themselves to be governed by others who claimed to rule in their interests, because 'the moment a people adopts representatives it is no longer free; it no longer exists' (1968, p.143).

Representative government was already established in Britain. Less than 20 years before The Social Contract, Edmund Burke told his constituents:

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays you, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion'. (1967, p.11)

According to Burke, a citizen's primary responsibility was to elect representatives who would make decisions on their behalf, rather than delegates who would act in accordance with constituents' wishes.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill published his case for representative government. Mill argued (1996, pp.217-234, 390) that whereas direct democracy
was impractical, and the rule of one bred passive subjects, representative government was the best form of government because it brought out, and used, the best in people. He advocated extension of the franchise for its educative effects, adding 'Let a person have nothing to do for his country, and he will not care for it' (1996, p.220).

Yet Mill had serious doubts about the ability of elected representatives and the working class (1996, pp.261-276). To counter the deficiencies in representatives, he placed great store in bureaucrats who were trained to govern, a position he surely shared with Plato. His fear of majoritarianism led him to advocate proportional representation; his fear of self-interested 'class legislation' emanating from the more numerous working class led him to propose a system of plural voting, rather than 'one vote one value' (1996, pp.308-313). Mill proposed that people who were illiterate, innumerate, unemployed, or bankrupt would not vote, and university graduates, non-manual workers, and others who passed a knowledge test would have more than one vote. Finally, he insisted that women should vote, claiming they needed the vote more than men did because it would encourage them to think for themselves, introduce a level of 'personal accountability', and prevent their 'indirect agency ... from being politically mischievous' (1996, pp.314-316).

Voting was the beginning and the end of political participation for Joseph Schumpeter in the 1940s:

[The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [representatives] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote ... [The classical theory ... attributed to the electorate an altogether unrealistic degree of initiative ... The principle of democracy then merely means that the reins of government should be handed to those who command more support than do any of the competing individuals or teams. (1954, pp.269, 273)]

For Schumpeter, like Burke nearly 200 years earlier, division of labour was the rule for the modern world; electors voted and representatives governed until electors chose other representatives.

Milbrath (1971, pp.143-154) argues that limited political participation is functional for US democracy. Governments 'flourish' and are 'effective' without active citizens, and this 'enable[s] citizens to keep politics as a peripheral concern in their lives'. In contrast, widespread participation would produce 'wide and deep cleavages' which would be inimical to good government. Thus, 'present [low] levels and patterns of participation in politics do not constitute a threat to democracy; they seem, in fact, to be a realistic adjustment to the nature of modern society' (1971, p.154). The claim is that the system works because citizens are not active – the passive citizen is functional for representative government.

Over time and space the disagreement about citizen participation continues unabated. Protectionists argue that government is a specialised business best left to representatives who are equipped to do it; hence in modern times the primary citizen duty is to vote for representatives. In contrast, participationists argue that government is the citizens' business, and that citizens should engage in it fully.
Much closer to home, the debate continues. At the 1998 Australian Constitutional Convention, delegates disagreed about the extent to which citizens should participate in choosing a republican head of state. For example, protectionists said:

When someone speaks of a democratic republic with the stress on the 'democratic', it is well to become cautious. When the term becomes 'people's democratic republic', it is time to turn and run. (Arvi Parbo in PM&C 1998, p.673)

Whatever model ensures the continuation of representative democracy in this country gets my vote. (emphasis added) (Neville Wran in PM&C 1998, p.865)

Obviously, we need to remain a parliamentary democracy. (Tony Rundle in PM&C 1998, p.53)

[Popular election of a head of state] is a thoroughly republican model ... [but] the head of state would be too strong, would have too much of an independent mandate and could provide a destabilising influence on our government. (emphasis added) (George Winterton in PM&C 1998, pp.684-685)

100 percent of Australians believe in parliamentary democracy ... The parliamentary election of a president is ... the truly democratic method of election. (Steve Vizard in PM&C 1998, p.976).

Richard McGarvie cited Edmund Burke, and claimed that selection of a President by the Prime Minister 'would leave us totally a republic but totally a safe democracy at the same time' (in PM&C 1998, p.41).

In contrast, participatory delegates argued that the people want to elect their head of state, that the people should do so, and that the people were fit to do so:

[P]eople are the best guardians of democracy ... we can actually trust the people of Australia to elect the right person. (Kate Carnell in PM&C 1998, p.163)

The public will, on balance, make a sensible and correct decision as often as or more often than any group chosen from among them. (Andrew Gunter in PM&C 1998, p.787)

[W]e have enough faith in the Australian people to elect the candidate of the highest calibre. (David Muir in PM&C 1998, p.313)

I have faith in the Australian people. (Peter Beattie in PM&C 1998, p.830)

Pat O'Shane declared that those who opposed direct election were 'absolutely terrified of democracy' (PM&C 1998, p.171).

For the protectionists cited above (none of whom was writing or speaking in a newly emerging democracy), representative government is closer to the ideal form of government than is democracy. Representative government provides stable, predictable, efficient government, legitimated by the electorate. Once they have cast an informed vote, citizens can resume activities which are of more interest and relevance to them. In this conception, a competent citizen needs to know about political history, the machinery of government, the rule of law, and how to vote – in short, citizens need civics education.
Participationists are not content with this. At the very least, they want representatives to be more responsive and inclusive, and they want citizens to participate in shaping public policy. For this, both civics and citizenship education is needed.

The Discovering Democracy curriculum materials address both civics and citizenship. At the heart of the kits are teacher guides and units of work. The guides include this statement of purpose:

The project has been designed to enable students to act as responsible citizens throughout their lives, which requires them to have:

- knowledge and understanding of Australia's political and social heritage, its democratic processes and government, its judicial system, its system of public administration, and how all these relate to other nations

- the skills and values needed for effective, informed, and reflective participation in civic life. (Curriculum Corporation 1998, p.2)

The first part – knowledge – is civics education in which students learn about government. For example, students learn about the structure and composition of parliaments, and how business is conducted there. The second part – skills – is citizenship education in which students learn how to participate in government. For example, students learn about how citizens championed change in the past, and undertake projects which develop their own skills as potential agents for change and co-operation. Values are arguably a part of both civics and citizenship, albeit perhaps different values.

The foundation for civics is Hirst's accessible Guide to Government and Law in Australia. This book is mainly about Australia's political history, the machinery of government, and law. Hence it is the foundation, and an excellent one, for civics. The CDROM, video, posters and cards, and website are imaginative and stimulating resources for teachers of either civics or citizenship. Finally, the teacher guides and units of work offer detailed yet flexible lesson plans and ideas, handouts and visual aids. Again, these could be used to teach either civics or citizenship.

Teaching about government (civics) engages more directly with the reality of Australian citizenship as it is practised today, for very few citizens participate in government. Young people who proceed through the civics materials in Discovering Democracy will be better-informed citizens than previous generations. This would be a substantial achievement in its own right. In contrast, the citizenship teacher who helps students learn how they can participate in government grasps an opportunity to change the form and content of Australian political life. Discovering Democracy has the potential to begin to produce informed and active citizens who can deliberate about public policy co-operatively and effectively.

What is the ideal mix of civics and citizenship in CCE? I offer no definitive answer, of course, for just as the debate about civics vs citizenship education is a perennial one, the search for the right mix is perpetual. The ideal mix should change as circumstances change. For example, the nature of CCE is influenced by education resources and priori-
ties, teaching demands, student needs and interests, and ultimately the institutions of government and the opportunities they provide for participation.

Students are the focus of the rest of this paper, in which I address the second question raised in the introduction. Do citizens want to be active? The short answer is 'not necessarily'. Nor is it necessarily the case that we serve the best interests of students if we assume that all students must become active citizens. I aim to open discussion of this substantial topic by raising two issues which bear on the question of student participation: interest and opportunity. I argue that within the teaching of citizenship we need to balance real and ideal government and citizenship.

Government and politics is not a central interest for many people, but this does not necessarily mean that people are derelict in their duties as citizens. For example, as the recent republic debate proceeded, the electorate was criticised often for not engaging with the issue. Some even attributed the failure of the referendum entirely to apathy and ignorance, suggesting that a large number of citizens were deficient. However, deciding not to engage with, or learn more about, government and politics can be 'rational' in two ways.

Citizens who are content with the status quo have less reason to participate in government. For example, in the recent republic debate, constitutional monarchists argued that we owe our political stability to the present form of government, which continued to serve Australia well. The battle cry was 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. If this message resonates with me as an individual, I have no rational reason to make scarce time available to learn about the republic options. Milbrath, referring to government in general, writes:

As long as public officials perform their tasks well, most citizens seem content not to become involved in politics ... Society has evolved helpful mechanisms, called political parties, to simplify further the choice between alternative sets of public officials. (1971, p.144)

Further, protectionists and constitutional monarchists alike can well argue that we take unnecessary risks when we attempt to add more political participation to our well-tuned political system. If we heed the protectionists' argument that Australian government is relatively stable because most citizens are disinterested, we have rational reasons to give more attention to civics education than to citizenship education.

The term 'rational ignorance' has a second meaning, namely that people discover their participation makes little or no difference, and decide that their time is better spent on other pursuits. This takes us to the second topic, opportunity.

Opportunities for substantive participation are not available routinely in Australia, that is, political participation is not institutionalised. Hence students who are motivated by classroom exercises may be demotivated, even alienated, when they engage with government in practice. A teacher's submission to the 1991 Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training is indeed 'A Cautionary Tale' worth repeating here at length.
A Year 10 class in regional Tasmania mounted a campaign to open a local CES office. They collected a petition, obtained press coverage, and wrote to ministers, their federal representative, and the CES. The teacher, Mike Atkins, reports that at this stage 'the whole class became enthusiastic and optimistic about the outcome'. However,

The students' initial optimism soon turned to cynicism when the final letter from the CES arrived stating that no change to the existing system would occur.

The students' feelings were not directed at the C.E.S. but towards the politicians whom they felt had done nothing, or had not given the idea fair consideration. In fact, to the students all the exercise eventually proved was what they had thought in the beginning: that politicians do nothing, and their antipathy towards them and politics in general seemed even stronger! ...

The exercise illustrated the dangers of a purely 'social action' approach to political education. It can, if there is no ample provision made, lead to a more cynical attitude than existed prior to the exercise, despite the fact that we are aiming for a sense of political realism; that is we mean that students familiarise themselves with the manner in which government agencies operate. (emphasis added) (1988, pp.15-16)

These students no doubt acquired some citizenship skills, but the enduring legacy is likely to be a cynical attitude about active citizenship. Perhaps expectations were raised too high in class; perhaps the students were unable to accept that in this case they could not have what they wanted from government. Even if this were so, Atkins' experience alerts us to the need to temper our enthusiasm for citizenship education with a realistic assessment of the political environment in which we operate. Specifically, the institutions of representative government are not based on the expectation that many citizens will participate in government. In short, opportunities for political participation are, at present, limited. This is not to say that our system of government is defective, for representative government was not designed to accommodate participatory democracy (for a comprehensive and compelling argument on this, see Manin 1997).

These few brief examples show why we should not assume that students want to be active citizens. Students may have learned by personal experience, or through the experience of others, that there is little point to political participation. Alternatively, they may have learned directly, or from others, that present outcomes of representative government warrant leaving the business of government in the hands of representatives.

The bleak picture sketched above does not indicate that I believe we should retreat from teaching citizenship as participation. Rather, I am cautioning against making the assumption that all students want to engage as active citizens, and I am cautioning against raising expectations about participation too high, at least in the short run. Further, I would hope that the way we teach and promote CCE allows students the freedom to opt out of substantive participation with dignity, for otherwise they will be less likely to opt in when an issue is of intense interest to them in the future. Treating citizens disdainfully builds resentment and alienation; further, it is exclusive. In contrast, any
amount of CCE made available to students who are uninterested now will improve their ability to engage with government and politics should they choose to do so later.

Whereas Rousseau determined to force people to be free by insisting on universal participation, I hope we can allow students the freedom to choose when, and if, they participate in the work of citizenship. We serve their interests best by providing opportunities for acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for participation, without making judgments about their position on the protectionist-participatory continuum.

REFERENCES


