Defeating the "Hidden Curriculum"  
Teaching Political Participation in the Social Studies Classroom

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Laments about the decline in citizen participation in the American political process seem to grow louder each year. Clearly the failure of large numbers of Americans to participate even minimally in the democratic process by voting is a matter of grave concern. It has been derisively noted, for example, that among the top twenty industrialized nations, the United States ranks "number one in oil . . . [and] natural gas consumption . . . [and] number one in lowest voter turnout" (Moore 2001, 174).

Critics often blame that sorry state of affairs on the nation's schools, especially the social studies classroom. Such expressions of anxiety, of course, are not new. In 1968, Langton and Jennings reported research that "showed that whether or not students had taken any civics courses was largely irrelevant to their levels of political knowledge, political interest, and interest in political media, political discussion, political efficacy, civil tolerance, political trust, and participatory orientation" (cited in Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1991, 148).

To emphasize that point, a number of critics cite the work of Richard Merelman, who argues that "American schools do not and cannot teach democratic values." More particularly, "order keeping seems to demand an authoritarian school environment that is inconsistent with the content and procedures required for the learning of democratic behaviors" (cited in Hennessy 1985, 197). Merelman argues that "discussing political values in the classroom invites controversy and division" (197).

According to proponents of this view, attempts by social studies teachers "to socialize students to democratic values are delegitimized by . . . [a] hidden curriculum" (Erikson, Luttbeg and Tedin 1991, 149). This "hidden curriculum" has been defined as "the informal and decidedly antidemocratic set of teaching practices and power relationships by which the school operates" (149). There is an all too obvious "disjuncture between the democratic creed and what actually goes on in school . . . [which] tends to inhibit political learning" (149). Political satirist Michael Moore (2001) describes entering a public high school and realizing that he "was . . . walking into the halls of a two-thousand-plus inmate holding pen" (97).

A Vermont Town Meeting?

The Norman Rockwell ideal of American democracy is perhaps best represented by the image of the Vermont town meeting in which each resident assumes an active and informed role in the decision-making process. Informed and concerned persons meet to discuss and decide issues, and from an intelligent and often vigorous debate good public policy inevitably emerges. Livingston and Thompson (1971) make this point when they state:

In traditional democratic theory, the essence of democratic procedure was held to be reasoned debate of alternative solutions to public problems. Democracy, thus conceived, offered a unique solution to the problem of conflict, a solution which would control conflict without seeking to eliminate it. The assumption was that public policies and the statutes which embody them will express a majority opinion which has itself resulted from a free and open debate of public issues and which continue to be open to criticism and discussion. Underlying this arrangement was the assumption that there is an objective moral order which human reason and discussion can discover. (24)

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The citizenry, in effect, was made up of persons who were "rational, infinitely improvable . . . [beings] who could be trusted to govern . . . [themselves]" (Livingston and Thompson 1971, 34). It was just such a vision that was in Thomas Jefferson's mind when he "substituted the pursuit of happiness for 'property' in the familiar Lockean triad that opened the Declaration of Independence . . . [Jefferson] tied the new nation's star to an open-ended, democratic process whereby individuals develop their own potential and seek to realize their own life goals" (Foner 1998, 20).

Romance and reality, of course, do not always coincide. In the immediate context, the romantic view of an informed and active citizenry simply flies in the face of fact. Vincent Blasi argues that the "vision of active, continued involvement by citizens fails to describe not only the reality but also the shared ideal of American politics" (cited in Gillmor, Barron and Simon 1998, 8). As noted above, large numbers of citizens do not participate at all. Furthermore, the so-called marketplace of ideas in which concerned political partisans grapple in an effort to discover the truth is, according to political commentator Bill Moyers (1999), fast becoming "the verbal equivalent of mud wrestling" (411).

What accounts for what many perceive as the disintegration of the ideal of a democratic political process in America? Erikson, Luttbeg and Tedin (1991, 335–37) suggest four possible explanations for the current public apathy:

1. mass political incompetence
2. rational disengagement
3. elite manipulation
4. public contentment

Explanations 2 and 4 present particular food for thought for social studies teachers. According to the "rational disengagement" thesis, for example, "from a strict cost-vs.-benefit standpoint, one should not follow public affairs closely, since the investment would get one nowhere" (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1991, 336). Put simply, perhaps individuals are not more active in the political process because rationally they have better things to do with their time. Does each citizen have a responsibility to become a C-SPAN "junkie"?

Similar—and in some ways interrelated—is the case vis-à-vis explanation 4: public apathy as public contentment. Perhaps individuals do not take a more active part in the political process because they are basically content with the manner in which the system currently functions. Paradoxically, in fact, it may be that "when many people do participate in politics, it is a distressing signal either that government has ignored public needs or that conflicts between societal groups are no longer being successfully resolved by political leaders" (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1991, 337).

In short, social studies teachers need not view themselves as failures if every student in class is not motivated to become a reader of Political Science Quarterly. Teachers in secondary school biology classes do not deem themselves failures if all their students do not become medical doctors! Certainly few will question the need to motivate citizens to become more active in the political process, as "one can hardly applaud when people do not actively seek to protect . . . [even] their own interests" (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1991, 338). What is required is perspective.

Adopting an "Aristotelian" Perspective

The social studies teacher might look to the Greek philosopher Aristotle for guidance in how to approach her task. Aristotle has been called a "down-to-earth thinker who emphasizes the positive and presents a full vision of a virtuous and happy person" (Merrill 1997, 32). Of particular relevancy in the context of this article is Aristotle's concern that one strive to achieve a mean or "balance . . . between thinking and acting in extreme ways" (32).

Fagotey (1976) observes,

The . . . [Aristotelian] mean is not absolute but . . . relative [to each person]. . . . [W]hat is the right amount for one would be too much or too little for another. . . . [For example], a temperate meal for a wrestler would be overindulgence for a dyspeptic, a generous gift from a poor man would be a stingy one from a rich man. (174)

Aristotle believed that we get into trouble when we move to extremes—although many have misunderstood what he was proposing. He certainly would not tell a judge, for example, that he should only be moderately concerned about justice (Fagotey 1976, 174). He would, however, suggest "that justice itself is a mean between lenience and severity" (174). Similarly, a teacher must keep control of his or her classroom. That ideal level of control, however, is the mean between anarchy and authoritarianism.

The social studies teacher must approach the task of developing active and responsible citizens with a similar attitude. Not every student in class is going to run for Congress in the future. How can the social studies teacher encourage the diverse group of individuals that make up a typical class to at least consider becoming more active participants in the political process? Three specific considerations are of importance:

1. The teacher must foster a classroom atmosphere in which the spirit of democracy prevails. Democratic values should be practiced, not just talked about.
2. Classroom instruction must be directed toward political/governmental questions and issues to which students can readily relate.
3. The role the mass media play in politics, the explosion in media technology, and the way the media...
interact with the democratic process must be examined in considerable depth.

**Getting Beyond the "Hidden Curriculum"**

In my senior year of high school, my social studies course was disastrous. The teacher apparently believed that students learned best under the constant threat of one of her extreme emotional outbursts. The atmosphere in her classroom went beyond authoritarian—it was totalitarian! I mostly discounted the experience because I had learned at home to know better. Others were likely not so fortunate. After all, "responsible citizenship is not easily learned in a dictatorship" (Gillmor et al. 1990, 646).

Several other social studies courses in my high school were taught by the football coach—not an uncommon occurrence (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1991, 149). Whether or not we had a test on a Monday was once determined by whether or not the football team won a key game on Saturday. In fact, far too often social studies course are taught by "teachers . . . [who] are simply not intellectually prepared to effectively handle the discussion of complex political topics" (149). Add an authoritarian mindset to a lack of intellectual preparation, and anyone can see why the hidden curriculum is alive and well.

School administrators often are deeply concerned about avoiding conflict and controversy. But well-taught social studies courses invite conflict and controversy. A school superintendent in Florida, for example, responded to a survey by declaring that "the first priority of our school is to provide a safe environment" (Martinson and Kopenhaver 1992, 162). The same administrator asserted that "confrontation and controversy lead to unsafe conditions" (162). It is doubtful that such an individual will be excited about hiring social studies teachers who will facilitate a classroom experience where genuine learning about active citizenship in a democratic society becomes part of the socialization experience.

**Making the Subject Matter Relevant**

Another vivid memory I have about my high school social studies courses is the requirement that we memorize things. A certain amount of memorization is useful. Too often, however, what we were required to memorize was intellectually empty and trivial. One teacher, for example, required that we memorize the capital city of every state in the nation—and we did not get credit unless we spelled the city name correctly.

More useful might have been requiring that we be able to recite portions—in a reasonably contextually accurate manner—of U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis's legendary opinion in favor of freedom of expression, from the case Whitney v. California. That, of course, was unlikely to happen because (a) my teachers were likely not familiar with it, and (b) it would have challenged the "hidden curriculum" that ran unbridled in my high school.

I believe that social studies teachers can use a technique that I have found useful in college-level ethics courses to make material relevant to the students. Students coming to my classes know little of the basics of ethical decision-making. I try to stimulate their moral imaginations to recognize relevant ethical issues (Jaks and Pritchard 1994, 12–14). To do this, I talk about drivers who disobey posted speed limits except when a highway patrol officer is present. I suggest that ethical drivers are those who obey traffic laws even when a highway patrol officer is not present, because that is the ethical or right thing to do.

Students come up with all sorts of inventive reasons why it is okay for them to disobey posted speed limits. Some get angry with me for suggesting that they might not be ethical drivers. Many of them probably begin to think about ethics in a somewhat serious manner for the first time in their lives. I would never have reached that point had I begun the course with a discussion of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.

The number of topics that a teacher in a social studies course can approach in a similar fashion seems almost limitless. Instead of beginning a discussion of freedom of speech and press and the First Amendment by having students memorize the writings of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the teacher can ask them to consider whether student publications in their school should be genuinely free of administration/faculty censorship. The specific right of groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses to engage in door-to-door evangelization can provoke discussion. By addressing topics in this way, teachers may bring students to recognize the tension between majority power and minority rights in a constitutional democracy.

**The Role of the Mass Media**

For students to appreciate the political realities in America in a new century, they must have some understanding of the role the media play in the contemporary political process. It is no hyperbole to argue that

> "If, for example, the political process is being challenged—and changed—by the very way television covers political campaigns, students need to understand why that is happening. Why have them memorize Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address if it would be impossible for Lincoln to be elected president in the television age? (Martinson 1993, 126)

Although there are still a few apologists who question the power of the media to significantly influence public opinion, that view has been largely discredited by social scientists who have seriously examined the question. That is not to say that the mass media have unlimited power. The "magic bullet" theory of media
impact was rejected decades ago. But news media have considerable power to “influence... social and cultural situations, trends, and processes within our society” (DeFleur and Dennis 1998, 459). The media may be limited in their ability to induce a Democrat to vote for a Republican, but they may be instrumental in determining whether an individual decides to vote at all.

An excellent example of this more sophisticated understanding of media effects on the political process centers around what is labeled “agenda-setting theory.” Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media may not be as influential in telling individuals what to think as in telling them what to think about. Researchers Iyengar and Kinder argue that “Americans’ views of their society and nation are powerfully shaped by the stories that appear on the evening news” (cited in Baran 2001, 328). The audience is not told explicitly whom to vote for, but it is certainly influenced when told what are the most important issues in the campaign. McCombs and Shaw state,

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important role in shaping political reality. . . . [The audience members] learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue. . . . The mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign.” (cited in Baran 2001, 327)

Some communication scholars advance what they label “media-intrusion theory,” which holds that the “media have intruded into and taken over politics to the degree that . . . [the political process has] become subverted” (Baran and Davis 2000, 325). The media, particularly television, have “subverted politics by undermining political party control . . . [and] replaced parties in the election process” (326).

Social studies students will remain largely ignorant of the political realities of contemporary America if they do not appreciate the impact of the mass media on the political process. This means, of course, that social studies teachers must be genuinely informed about current mass communication research and theory. It is no longer sufficient that the social studies teacher read the morning newspaper and watch the evening news (Martinson 1993, 127).

Conclusions

By taking a realistic approach to the subject matter, social studies teachers can increase their chances of having a positive effect on students. The immediate goal should be providing a motivational experience. If the teacher can motivate future members of the silent majority to be just a little less silent, more vocal, and more willing to participate in the political process, he or she will have achieved an important educational goal.

As Austin Ranney once noted, “for most Americans, politics is still far from being the most interesting and important thing in life... [What is really important] in their lives... [is] making friends, finding spouses, raising children, and having a good time” (cited in Harwood 1999, 278). Social studies teachers are not going to change that. What social studies teachers can do, to paraphrase James Fallows (1996), is provide students with the motivation and tools that will allow them to participate more actively in public life (269). To accomplish this more limited but realistic end, social studies teachers must move beyond the “hidden curriculum” mentality, demonstrate the relevancy of the subject matter, and know and teach how the mass media and media technology affect the political process today.

Key words: social studies, political participation, voting, hidden curriculum, democracy, mass media

REFERENCES


