

Citizenship education: making it count

Keith Heggart describes Justice Citizens: a successful participatory program for Year 9 students at a low fee paying Catholic school in Sydney's West

Citizenship education: historical and topical

The idea of citizenship is certainly very topical at the moment amongst Australian politicians, especially those searching for a boost in the polls or a distraction from other issues. While the proposed changes to Australian citizenship tests, including an increased emphasis on English language proficiency, appear to be stalled in the Senate, there remains much discussion in the public sphere about what it means to be an Australian citizen, and what kinds of values an Australian citizen should demonstrate.

As is normal for public conversations like this, there is a lot of confusion about values – for example, things like ‘a fair go’ or ‘mateship’ are often cited as important Australian values, although they are generally not explored in any great detail, and these values are then linked to a desire (at least among some commentators) for ways to ensure that new arrivals to Australia learn these values.

Of course, this conversation is just the most recent iteration of a long-running argument regarding citizenship and immigration in Australia, and, indeed, much of the rest of the world. In the lead up to the millennium, numerous countries across the globe were engaged in a process to determine what ‘citizenship’ meant for them, and what kind of national values, if any, were to be promoted as central to that individual country.

A country's education systems were seen to play a pivotal role in the development of these notions of citizenship. For example, in the United Kingdom, the *Crick Report*, released in 1999, recommended that Citizenship be taught as a compulsory course for all school children. Closer to home, the Australian Government released *Discovering Democracy* in 1997, a program for children in both primary and secondary schools that was meant to target the ignorance and apathy that was exhibited by young Australians in relation to their systems of government.

Although *Discovering Democracy* was replaced by *Values Education* in 2007 (another example of the way that citizenship education is often linked to ideas about national ‘values’), the centrality of citizenship education in Australian schools was reaffirmed through the

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various declarations, including the Melbourne Declaration which explicitly stated that one of the main aims of schooling in Australia was the development of ‘active and informed citizens’ (MCEETYA 2007, p.12).

This was further affirmed in the citizenship syllabus devised for the Australian Curriculum, although the relative importance of civics and citizenship waxed and waned through various iterations and reviews of the curriculum. In the most recent version (Curriculum Corporation, Version 8.3, consulted in July 2017), Civics and Citizenship is integrated into Humanities and Social Sciences in primary schools, but has its own section for Years 7–10.

Perhaps because of the changing landscape of education in Australia, and the lack of clarity the study of civics and citizenship itself has faced, there is relatively little awareness amongst teachers or students of the importance or value

of the discipline. This might be down to few teachers having any qualifications in the study of the subject (Mellor 2003), the way that the subject was often seen as the less important sibling to Australian History and Australian Geography in the school certificate (at least in New South Wales schools), or perhaps because neither the subject matter or the way that it was often taught were sufficiently engaging to young people (Kennedy 1997; O'Loughlin 1997).

What went wrong?

Regardless of the relative failings of its implementation, civics and citizenship education continues to be discussed and seen as vitally important in today's society by the broader community. The stimulus for such discussions often begins with concerns about falling rates of youth participation in civics institutions or organisations, like political parties, or worry that young people do not recognise the value of democracy as a political system.

These concerns are then matched against a backdrop of globalisation, mass migration of people and rapid technological advancement.



In search of answers, it has become common for policy makers, politicians and educators to discuss what it means to be a citizen in the 21st century, and even to essay new conceptions of citizen – like the Global Citizen, or the Eco-Citizen or even the Consumer-Citizen – in order to fit the changing nature of life in Australia.

While not necessarily wrong or useless, these ideas are destined to continue the legacy of failure of civics and citizenship education for the simple reason that they, like *Values Education* and *Discovering Democracy* before them, fail to include the views and opinions of young people in the discussion about what citizenship means and how people might embody or express that citizenship in Australian society in 2017.

Unlike other subjects taught in Australia's schools, it is not right to assume that young people are ignorant about their neighbourhoods or their societies, and it is similarly not correct to assume that they are apathetic to their society's problems. Any civics and citizenship program that seeks to genuinely meet the call by the Melbourne Declaration for the development of active and informed citizens needs to recognise the primacy of young people's points of view, as well as privileging their own experiences and knowledges as part of the learning process.

Such an approach would be an example of a 'maximal' or 'thick' approach to civics and citizenship education (McLaughlin 1992). Approaches like these are built upon participatory models of education, where the curriculum is co-constructed by teachers and students, and the emphasis is less on the mechanics and institutions of civic life (that is, the bicameral system of government, voting and taxation) and more on a broader approach to citizenship (geographically or personally local issues and events).

Such an approach to civics and citizenship education would be a significant departure from the way that the subject is often taught in schools in Australia today, where the focus is usually placed on the history of Australian democracy, often in an uncritical, hagiographic way. These approaches fail to engage students because they are removed from the issues and stories that matter to young people. They also fail to allow students to take any form of meaningful action about the issues that matter to them. It has become commonplace to suggest that young people do not care about matters. People making this argument support it by referring to declining membership rates in civic and public organisations but this fails to understand the ways in which young people engage with these issues today.

Young people are a heterogeneous group, so it would be foolish to suggest that they all care about the same thing, but one only needs to look at organisations like the Australian Youth Climate Network, the Occupy Movement, Get Up! or the Women's March to see that young people are both active and well represented



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in these campaigns. One apparent difference is that young people appear to be more issue-based than organisationally-based; that is, they are more likely to indicate broad support for a range of issues, like action on climate change, for example, than they are to join a specific organisation, like a political party.

It is this approach that illustrates the way that civics and citizenship education needs to be taught if we are to meet the goal of developing an active and informed citizenry. Citizenship education needs to, much like some of the movements described above, begin with a grassroots approach; that is, it needs to be organised from the bottom up, rather than the top-down. By allowing students to identify specific issues that are of concern to them – by problematising their local communities – teachers can begin the process of thick citizenship education in a more successful and meaningful way.

Justice Citizens: a new approach to citizenship education

Fortunately, there are examples of such approaches to civics and citizenship education. One such example (and one that I have been involved with) is Justice Citizens. Justice Citizens was a participatory program for Year 9 students at a low fee paying Catholic school in Sydney's West. The program lasted for six months, and

took one hour per week of class time, although it should be noted that students committed far in excess of this in order to realise their finished projects.

Students had the opportunity to identify a topic that they felt was of great importance to them personally, or to their community. The only condition was that the topic needed to be tangentially related to the theme of 'justice'. Then, working with local journalists, students investigated the topic, researching and gathering data, both from secondary sources and also through interviews with community members. Then, with the assistance of volunteer filmmakers and producers, students prepared short films about these topics.

The best 10 of these films (as selected by the Year 9 cohort) were then presented to the community at a local film festival, which was funded by the local government arts program. Federal and state politicians were invited to this event, and so too were the participants in the films themselves. The festival was a chance for the students to report back on their findings to the wider local community, as well as to demonstrate the skills that they had learned throughout the process.

The films were varied, both in terms of topics chosen by students and also the way that students chose to present their films. Students generally worked in groups of five or six using technology

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to communicate with each other when they were not in class. Some of the films were presented as quite straightforward interview pieces: for example, one memorable film had two students interviewing an Indigenous Australian man about his life, interspersed with statistics that highlighted Indigenous disadvantage. Other films were much more creative in nature: one group of student tried to communicate to the audience the challenges faced by refugee students, especially in terms of communicating with other students. Other topics included an expose of waste dumping in the Nepean River, a 'how-to' film about dirt bike safety, and a powerful domestic violence recreation and advertisement.

The films themselves served as powerful testaments to the depth of knowledge that students had about their local communities, and their desire to be involved in improving those same communities. However, in keeping with McLaughlin's ideas of maximal citizenship education, it was the process that was more important than the final product. Indeed, numerous students who took part in Justice Citizens expressed a desire to deepen their

involvement in their local communities. These desires included greater participation in networks that they had identified (for example, the students who made the film about the Nepean River joined a local environmental group dedicated to the conservation of the river) or a desire to take the skills that they had learnt through the program and apply them in new contexts (for example, a number of students indicated that they were now considering running for school student leadership positions because they wanted to be involved in the governance of the school). I have termed these effects as 'follow-up' and 'knock-on' effects respectively.

Justice Citizens is just one example of a successful maximal citizenship education program, but there is no doubt that it is a powerful representation of alternative models of civics and citizenship education. The structure of the program – placing student interests and knowledges at the centre of the curriculum, linking various community groups in order to develop networks and social capital, and focusing on both face to face and online communication – all point towards a new form of civics and citizenship teaching and learning

that I have tentatively entitled *justice pedagogy*. As the name suggest, a *justice pedagogy* is one that seeks to equip students with the skills, values and knowledges necessary to remedy inequality and injustice in their communities. In order to do this, it invites students to act as equal participants in a learning process that begins at a local level, and draws upon the resources of both schools and communities in order to effect positive social change.

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