



Mapping Conceptual Tensions Around Civic Learning

Fabio C. Campos, Christopher Hoadley
fabioc@nyu.edu; tophe@nyu.edu
New York University

Abstract: Civic education initiatives often display conceptual tensions that render program design a Herculean endeavor. In this poster, we map key civic learning tensions and discuss how they relate to critical topics in the learning sciences field. We find that learning scientists are already well positioned to further understand such tensions and that our research community might benefit from a new research agenda to organize our efforts around civic learning.

1. Introduction

Understanding that democracy does not run on autopilot, and that a prepared and informed citizenry is a condition for its existence, is a critical learning challenge (Westheimer, 2015). Nevertheless, how one teaches or learns about abstractions such as social justice, representation and equality is prone to a variety of conceptual tensions and misalignments. This poster asks *What needs to be learned to attain civic engagement?* We review research from the education, communication and learning sciences fields to map conceptual tensions crucial for rethinking civic learning in a digital, highly connected and polarized age. We define *civic learning* as the body of experiences a person goes through to acquire the various forms of knowledge to participate in the governance (broadly conceived) of a community. It is precisely this broad range of possibilities that afford and magnify the conceptual misalignments presented in this paper. We also relate the advances of the Learning Sciences community to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to participate in democratic life, and propose a new research agenda to respond to this challenge.

2. Conceptual Tensions around Civic Learning

Tension 1: What is a "Good Citizen"? - The lack of conceptual agreement around what counts as a "good citizen" might hinder the establishment of civic education programs, deepen the exclusion of particular groups, and result in policies and interventions informed by opinions or subjective moral standards (Kahne & Westheimer, 2004). After studying several formal and informal civic education programs across the United States, Kahne and Westheimer (2004) found a broad range of views about the characteristics needed for a participant citizen: from loyalty and full compliance with laws and regulations to the ability to critically analyze society and disobey when needed. This model shows that educators view citizenship as the practice of personal responsibilities, often manifested by notions of "character", and civil obedience. Civic programs that place compliance over critique might be favoring behaviors such as obedience, docility and blind loyalty to governments, and failing to advance critical forms of participation.

Tension 2: The locus and limits of participation - Several scholars have called for new theoretical tools to broaden the views and definitions of civic participation. Under these expanded notions, youth engagement with the civic sphere is seen through their participation in *affinity networks*: groups of individuals who share interests, practices and participatory cultures (Ito et al, 2015; Jenkins, 2009). The forms of civic participation that happen through affinity networks conform to what Jenkins and colleagues (2016) defined as *participatory politics* (PP), which are contrasted by the authors with *institutional politics* (IP). Whereas IP depicts civic participation as a domain separated from institutionalized practices, PP are naturally embedded in our daily lives and incorporated into ordinary social and cultural interactions. This expanded understanding has implications to how scholars might frame the challenges of civic learning. The very notion of civic disengagement seems to be under scrutiny by scholars of different fields such as Communications, Political Science and Education. Mihailidis and Gerodimos (2016) posit that "expanded learning cultures remain somewhat removed from spaces of formal education" (p. 379), while informal programs have been widely adopting practices that harness youth's interests and contribute to strengthening affinity networks.

Tension 3: Civic epistemologies - What constitutes civic knowledge? What forms might it take and how should it translate into designed learning experiences? Several international studies have measured what and how much learners know about civics. In the U.S., for instance, these studies often take the form of surveys and involve knowing facts about branches of government, citizen rights and elections, among other compatible topics. Knowledge *about* elections, rights, legislative processes and government is no doubt a requirement for a participatory democratic life. Two questions remain, though. First, is this knowledge enough for facing the growing inequality, the widespread of false information and rising partisanship all around the globe? Second, is factual knowledge enough or should other epistemologies be present when thinking about civic learning?

A significant part of this body of literature describes new literacies as capable of encompassing both factual and practical knowledge about critical participation in society. Mihailidis and Gerodimos (2016) described



such literacies as "fluences" for young people to navigate the civic space and acquire the necessary practical skills to act upon it. Similarly, Jenkins (2006) proposed that such fluences are a bridge between in and out of school realities. Finally, researchers such as Ito et al. (2015) and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argued that internal motivations or personal dispositions are a fundamental piece in the epistemic puzzle of civic activity. *Civic voice*, a term described by Mihailidis and Gerodimos (2016) is "the dispositions and modalities of expression that young people use to participate in daily life". This metacognitive knowledge about oneself resonates with recent work by Jenkins and his team (2016), who collected cases of civic action based on identity building by asking young people "what is your civic superpower". The results point to identity, self-awareness and self-efficacy as crucial parts of one's civic journey.

3. Towards a Civic Learning agenda for the Learning Sciences

Below, we discuss how notions of civic learning in the LS might disrupt problematic conceptions of education:

First, engagement with civic knowledge must be deep enough to promote civic learning. Currently, civic education is positioned in the learning sciences as what we term *keychain civics*. Blikstein (2013) describes the *keychain syndrome* in maker education where simple engagements with 3D printers to make a keychain impede meaningful interaction and tokenize learning. Keychain civic learning then is where learners engage with basic facts, symbols and myths of origin of a country but never move on to more complex ways of knowing. To avoid it, learning designers need to shift from focusing on factual knowledge in siloed civics courses or short, highly scripted and self-contained activities to a more complete civic epistemology, including skills and identities, in all learning designs.

Second, civic learning cannot be devoid of civic pedagogies. As civic media rise to address gaps in formal civic learning (Zuckerman, 2016), learning scientists need to ask what pedagogies are needed to be in place so that civic media fulfils its potential. We suggest that civic learning should be thought of not merely as learning of a particular topic (the school subject Civics) but rather as a framework for understanding how learning and education is *always* contextualized by the civic identity, engagement skills or proclivities, and epistemologies of the learner's context as a member of society. Much as Gutiérrez (2014) seeks to embrace syncretic forms of literacies that "support educational, economic, and sociopolitical opportunity for youth from nondominant communities" (p. 49), we argue that all learning environments can be thought of as a venue for civic learning.

Third, civic pedagogies must honor the diversity of epistemologies beyond the Global North. Much as Freire (1970) called for "epistemologies of the South", we argue that civic learning must be understood and designed beyond the constraints and traditions of the North. More than a mere geographical issue, ideas of knowledge in the global North often instantiate a particular epistemology in which knowledge is "by definition fragmentary, imperfect and socially dispersed" (Krašovec, 2013, p. 66). In this view, the learner "wastes no time dwelling on higher truths or grand narratives but possesses and uses only a tiny socially necessary (sic) quantity of specialised knowledge, One is no longer required to know why, only how." (p. 69).

References

- Blikstein, P. (2013). Digital fabrication and 'making' in education: The democratization of invention. *FabLabs: Of machines, makers and inventors*, 4(1), 1-21.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (MB Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Gordon, E., & Mihailidis, P. (Eds.). (2016). *Civic media: Technology, design, practice*. MIT Press.
- Gutiérrez, K. (2014). Integrative research review: Syncretic approaches to literacy learning: Leveraging horizontal knowledge and expertise. In P. J. Dunston, L. B. Gambrell, K. Headley, S. K. Fullerton, & P. M. Stecker (Eds.), *63rd Literacy Research Association Yearbook* (p. 48-60). Altamonte Springs, FL.
- Hoadley, C. (2018). A short history of the learning sciences. In *International handbook of the learning sciences* (pp. 11-23). Taylor and Francis.
- Ito, M., Soep, E., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., & Zimmerman, A. (2015). Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 45(1), 10-29.
- Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*.
- Jenkins, H., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2016). Superpowers to the People! How Young Activists Are Tapping the Civic Imagination. *Civic media: Technology, design, practice*, 295-320.
- Krašovec, P. (2013). Neoliberal epistemology: from the impossibility of knowing to human capital. *Filozofija I Društvo*, 24(4), 63-83. <https://doi.org/10.2298/FID1304063K>
- Mihailidis, P., & Gerodimos, R. (2016). Connecting pedagogies of civic media: The literacies, connected civics, and engagement in daily life. *Civic media: Technology, design, practice*, 371-391.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American educational research journal*, 41(2), 237-269.
- Zuckerman, E. (2016). Effective civics. In *Civic media: Technology, design, practice*, 49-76.