

Shaping a Path Forward: Critical Approaches to Civic Education in Tumultuous Times

Jacob Kelley and Ashley N. Watson

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an exploration of civic education by focusing on its emancipatory potential in a democratic society. It highlights a suite of critical approaches to civic education that can inform our understanding and practice of democracy, liberation, and struggle. In particular, this chapter enacts Freire's (2018) notion of dialogue as a pathway for civic education that challenges the status quo and transforms society to be more just for all. It focuses on the educational, social, and political imperative to develop a critical consciousness among citizens in tumultuous times characterized by threats to the common good, including misinformation and mistrust. By drawing on Freirean principles of education, it demonstrates the ways in which civic education can enable us to shape a path forward by becoming active, critical, and reflective citizens who contribute to social change.

This chapter weaves together a theoretical and foundational argument that the contemporary context of political uneasiness, economic uncertainty, and social unrest (Finnegan, 2019; Keet, 2018; Kelley, 2021) requires a pedagogical intervention that empowers learners to shape a path forward.

Critical Consciousness

Education is one possibility to foster critical consciousness among learners as they interact with social institutions that are inherently unjust in tumultuous times (Ajaps & Obiagu, 2021; Giroux, 2020). Critical consciousness refers to the capacity of an individual to view and understand their social, political, and economic contexts in order to push against oppressive tendencies that are too often present (Freire, 2018). Such a shift tasks the learner with looking beyond the individual to recognize the realities that shape daily life (Kelley et al., 2021). This is especially crucial for citizenship in a post-truth era, as the distinction between fact and fiction is purposefully eroded in order to manufacture and maintain social structures that place many on the margins. Thus,

educational settings that focus on critical consciousness empower learners to contribute to social change as they challenge and transform the status quo.

Civic Education

Civic education, in particular, might be considered as a pedagogical intervention to develop citizens with critical consciousness. Civic education can be defined as “a curricular exploration of society and the individual’s role in it” (Kelley, 2021, p. 66). That is to say, it focuses on the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society. Several scholars have proposed that civic education should be critical in nature (Johnson & Morris, 2010; Swalwell & Payne, 2019; Wheeler-Bell, 2012). Such a shift is necessary for teachers to prepare agentic learners who can transform society as engaged citizens. Wheeler-Bell (2012) suggests that “the educational experience needed to radically change society is much different than one needed to reproduce, or slightly alter, the current society” (p. 6). As such, civic education from a critical perspective is necessary for social change.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is a “view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). This epistemology challenges the notion of an inherited world and reality. Instead, through the use of symbols in social contexts, we construct our world and truth. Symbols such as words, icons, and visible culture have meaning by fiat and not by innate value. A power differential arises when the dominant group views their symbol as more meaningful/significant (i.e., hegemony). True dialogue reveals these imbalances, as it is a process whereby symbols and assigned values are interrogated, critiqued, and redefined in community.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is both a philosophy and a practice of education that attempts to promote critical consciousness in learners. This is especially fundamental in a democratic society that is inherently unjust. As noted by Giroux (2020), “Critical pedagogy takes as one of its central projects an attempt to be discerning and attentive to those places and practices in which social agency has been denied and produced” (p. 1). Critical pedagogy, then, is central to developing citizens who are empowered to recognize and redress inequalities in their spheres of influence (Gorski, 2013). Moreover, it is through critical pedagogy that both teachers and learners embark on the journey toward emancipation by gaining the literacies necessary to be active, critical, and reflective citizens (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

A focus on co-constructing authentic educational settings that center the lived experiences of learners, families, and communities is fundamental to critical pedagogy (de los Ríos et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005). This often means an acknowledgment that some groups are pushed to the

margins not only in society at large but also in educational settings. Critical pedagogy calls on teachers to dispose of an ideology of neutrality as they move toward a practice that is equitable and just (Ross, 2018). This is in agreement with Freire et al.'s (1990) assertion that a teacher “has the duty of not being neutral” (p. 180). Instead, teachers must be collaborators in the struggle for liberation that critical pedagogy scaffolds and supports.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning refers to the expansion, alteration, or expunction of our frames of reference that occurs from learning that challenges our assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Across the lifespan, humans collect a variety of experiences that shape how we interface with the world. This too often means that our frames of reference are narrow and singular (Mezirow, 1996). Transformative learning, then, challenges those frames of reference to be “more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Both teachers and learners should enter into educational settings with the intellectual humility (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2020) necessary to reflexively engage. It is only through an openness to new ideas that learners can (re)examine how they think about and move through the world (Hoggan, 2016).

Critical Approaches to Civic Education

It is at the intersection of social constructivism, critical pedagogy, and transformative learning that we situate our theoretical and foundational argument. Together, these underpinnings support the stance that civic education can inform our understanding and practice of democracy, liberation, and struggle. We suggest that civic education should foster the development of critical consciousness among learners in such a way that empowers them to recognize and redress systems of oppression. In order to contribute to this lifelong and lifewide journey, we identify dialogue, engaged pedagogy, and decolonial praxis as approaches to civic education that promote transformative learning and ignite critical consciousness.

Dialogue

For Freire (2018), true education is a “practice of freedom” that is impossible to achieve without dialogue, for “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (pp. 92–93). In this sense, dialogue is more than conversation. Dialogue is an equalizing “act of creation” that requires love, humility, faith, trust, and hope (Freire, 2018). Through this orientation, teachers are no longer viewed as subject experts but learning partners. Learners have agency in what they learn. Furthermore, learners have a responsibility to apply their knowledge to (re)building their communities and, by extension, the world.

Freire (2018) believed that the pervasive Western banking model of education reinforces and reproduces what Battiste (2016) calls cognitive imperialism. The banking model, which views learners as empty vessels to be filled by teachers, contributes to stratified social and cultural reproduction that causes the oppressed to internalize their oppression. Mackenzie (2017) states,

“Imperialism was more than a set of economic, political and military phenomena. It was a habit of mind, a dominant idea in the era of European world supremacy which had widespread intellectual, cultural and technical expressions” (p. ix). By subordinating minds—critical thinking, creativity, personhood—imperialism continues to spread as dominant culture is reproduced and unchallenged.

One alternative to the banking model is problem-posing education, which centers dialogue between teacher and learner about real-world issues affecting learners and their communities. Freire (2018) further expands upon problem-posing education as the following:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (p. 81)

This model is antithetical to notions of habitus (Nash, 1990), which claims the value of education is measured by the reproduction of social and cultural capital. True education is not a tool to “rise to” elite status or to increase one’s upward social mobility, but rather that education must be based in community and serve community, which can only be done through dialogue that encourages respect and reciprocity.

It is important to recognize that certain learners in our society are often better positioned to participate in dialogue and critical reflection. A liberal education that features seminars and independent studies may provide learners more autonomy, greater exposure to dialogic curriculum, and enhanced opportunities for exploration of interests. The assumption, then, is that there are some learners unqualified to engage in these acts. Freire supposed all learners are capable of, qualified to, and benefit from dialogue and critical reflection, not only a selected elite. A Freirean orientation toward education requires they be used for the benefit of the collective, whereas a traditional model focuses on social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997).

An implementation of Freire’s notion of dialogue can be observed in culture circles (Souto-Manning, 2010). Originally developed by Freire as an adult literacy method for liberation in the 1960s, culture circles are “dynamic spaces of learning and knowledge exchange that value the group experience and promote its participation in the construction of collective, contextualised knowledge that is committed to the transformation of reality” (Monteiro et al., 2015). A culture circle is comprised of five phases—generative themes, problem posing, dialogue, problem solving, and action—that are recursive in nature. Throughout this cycle, the identities and experiences of learners are intentionally centered in such a way that fosters meaningful connections (de Castro Chaib, 2010). Thus, the curriculum for a culture circle is “literally hand-made from the social fabrics of the students’ lives” (Salvio, 1998, p. 69). Learners emerge from culture circles, then, empowered and equipped with the literacies necessary for social change.

Engaged Pedagogy

Much in line with the ideas of Freire, bell hooks (2009) proposes that teachers should practice engaged pedagogy. This begins with an acknowledgment that learning involves “an interactive relationship between student and teacher” (p. 19). Such a relationship can only flourish if teachers are willing to increase their proximity to learners to gain insight into who they are as humans. hooks notes, “Engaged pedagogy emphasizes mutual participation because it is the movement of ideas, exchanged by everyone, that forges a meaningful working relationship between everyone in the classroom” (p. 21). In other words, teachers must be willing to engage in the very tasks they expect learners to complete. By lessening the power differential in this way, teachers foster a sense of trust and excitement that contributes to learning.

Decolonial Praxis

Educational settings, particularly in the United States, are rooted in settler colonial logics that center whiteness, English, Christian supremacy, and other Western ideals (Brown, 2019; Mitchell, 2018; Patel, 2015). We see this influence within curricula, methods, infrastructures, and policies across all levels of education. Styres (2019) argues that teachers should enact decolonizing praxis, which “resists mainstream approaches to teaching and learning as well as challenging taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in the hidden curriculum within classroom practices” (p. 32). At the very heart of this call is a challenge of settler colonial logics that permeate educational settings in often harmful ways. Teachers must be reflexive enough to recognize the epistemic injustices that limit ways of knowing, doing, and being (Fricker, 2007). Of course, this is a journey that is best taken alongside learners and communities in the spirit of respect and reciprocity.

Implications

The important question to consider, then, is how each of these elements connect to civic education. Civic education can be defined as “the lifelong process that makes people into active, responsible, and knowledgeable members of their communities” (CivXNow, 2020, para. 1). Civic education is agentic in that learners have rights and responsibilities in their learning. Learners shape and are shaped by their experiences, environments, and outcomes. Thus, applying critical consciousness to civic education, teachers, learners, and community partners redresses endemic inequalities and injustices. As noted by Freire (2018), true dialogue embodies the highest human qualities, such as hope, love, and humility. Teachers and learners who engage in true dialogue do not use education as a mechanism for societal mobility; rather, education is seen as a tool vested members of society use to better their communities.

We can see this focus on dialogue in Freire’s (2018) problem-posing education, which brings together teachers and learners as partners in dialogue to address problems for the purpose of liberation. Much in the spirit of social constructivism, they not only co-construct reality but

also “create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of fuller humanity” (Freire, 2018, p. 47) through shared experiences of action and reflection related to civic education. It is probably not surprising that we find such a method at the center of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020), which seeks to develop a critical consciousness among learners in order for them to transform society. For many teachers and learners, this pedagogical intervention often involves a shift in their frames of reference toward education; thus, the notion of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) helps us make sense of their experiences as they explore civic education through a critical lens that might challenge their worldviews by asking them to consider their own positionalities and enact a praxis of dialogue for social change.

Likewise, we can recognize the relevance of dialogue in both engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2009) and decolonial praxis (Styres, 2019). This is especially true when applied to civic education. hooks’ notion of engaged pedagogy calls on teachers to co-construct learning environments that are exciting for learners on all levels—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Learners must recognize and appreciate that civic education has direct connections to their daily lives in a democratic society, which can be strengthened through dialogue between the teacher and the learners as they examine citizenship (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012). Decolonial praxis, as conceptualized by Styres, challenges our assumptions about teaching and learning that are often informed by settler colonial logics. When applied to civic education, this means rejecting hegemonic tendencies to place the nation-state at the center of citizenship (Sabzalian, 2019). Instead, teachers should focus on forming dialogic relationships with learners and communities.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a collection of critical approaches to civic education that can inform our understanding and practice of democracy, liberation, and struggle. It especially focused on the emancipatory potential of dialogue in civic education to cultivate the development of critical consciousness in tumultuous times. Because this chapter is certainly not the first nor the last attempt to mesh critical approaches with civic education, we join the voices of scholars and practitioners who advocate for learners to become active, critical, and reflective citizens who contribute to social change. We stand in agreement with Wenger’s (1998) assertion, “Education is not merely formative—it is transformative” (p. 263). This is particularly true for civic education, a discipline that empowers and enables learners to shape a path forward in tumultuous times.

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