

Mapping Conceptual Tensions Around Civic Learning

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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.

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. 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 (LS) fields to map conceptual tensions crucial for rethinking civic learning in a digital and polarized age and propose a new LS research agenda to respond to this challenge.

Conceptual tensions around civic learning

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 we present in this paper.

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. After studying 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: What counts as "participation"? - Several scholars have called for new theoretical tools to broaden 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 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 various fields. 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: What constitutes civic knowledge? Several 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, and government is no doubt a requirement for a participatory democratic life. However, a question remains whether factual knowledge is enough or if other epistemologies should be considered when thinking about civic learning. For this reason, LS scholars are invited to investigate what other forms might civic knowledge take and how should it translate into designed learning experiences.

Extant studies in the LS describe 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 elements that might be studied, designed, and promoted under an expanded notion of *civic knowledge*.

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:

1. Avoiding “keychain civics”. Engagement with civic knowledge must be deep enough to promote civic learning. 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.

2. 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 are *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, within and beyond school walls, can be thought of as a venue for civic learning.

3. 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 Global North. More than a mere geographical issue, scholarly work in Northern countries 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).

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