

Civic Renewal through Civic Learning

Exploring US civic education and a renewed transatlantic focus

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As concerns grow over the civic health of the US, the civic education field has experienced an influx of energy. A pursuit of a “new civics” in light of these challenges calls for transatlantic perspective; similar challenges and goals against the backdrop of two different civic education infrastructures, present a unique opportunity for productive exchange. In this article, we explore US civic education by looking at historical influences and several features which characterize the field today, and the way a German-American exchange in this arena can help us think more expansively about civic education.

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A year after the January 6th attack on the US Capitol – and by virtue, American democracy itself – civic education in the US is primed for policy advancements, flush with new organizations, and simultaneously fraught with partisan tensions. Deep polarization, resurgent white nationalism, alarming democratic skepticism, and misinformation via unregulated technology platforms has raised alarm bells for the civic health of the country.

Many see this as a moment of change for the field and practice of educating for democratic citizenship in the world’s oldest democracy, an opportunity for a “new civics”. In a country caught in the quagmire of partisanship, where seemingly every aspect of life is caught in its tangles, it is miraculous that there is any agreement to be found, but there seems indeed to be bi-partisan support for expanding civic education. In 2021, 88 pieces of legislation were introduced in 34 states, and two pieces of federal legislation are on the table, which would provide between \$400 million and \$1 billion annually for civics education (Healy 2021). This is 80-200 times more than the estimated \$5 million currently allotted to civic education by the federal government (Sawchuk 2020). Moreover, polling has shown that civic education is the most publicly popular solution to strengthening American identity across partisan lines (CivXNow). This “Sputnik moment” for civics has created a relished opportunity for civic education advocates.

The challenges and opportunities facing democracy and, correspondingly civic education, are not unique to the US, but transatlantic in nature, suggesting the need for an as-yet-underexplored German-American comparative perspective.

As an attempt to reinvigorate such exchange, the Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten e.V. and the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University launched the professional exchange project, the Transatlantic Exchange of Civic Educators (TECE) in Spring 2021. Together, with a group of 22 German and American TECE Fellows (all professionals in the field of non-formal youth civic education), our goal has been to ascertain whether the challenges and systems of civic learning in both countries are compatible enough for fruitful exchange and what formats and topics are best suited for a US-German transfer of knowledge and experience.

Based on my research and learnings from the TECE experience, I attempt here to paint a picture of civic learning in the US by discussing various examples of influential historical praxis and theory and describing several features which characterize the modern field and practice in the US. Finally, I present my perspective on the learning opportunities and future prospects of US-German exchange in this arena.¹

Historical influences

The primary intent of American public schools was originally preparing students for citizenship, but a strong tradition of civic learning through civic engagement has always been an important part of American civic life in out-of-school contexts.

Civic learning in the US has long been characterized by “learning democracy through doing democracy”. Alexis de Tocqueville, an influential figure in America’s civic self-perception, noted a strong experiential tradition of learning democratic skills through self-governance. As an external observer of American democracy in the 19th century, he admired Americans’ natural tendency toward associationism, and while he acknowledged the value of literacy and book learning, he emphasized the essentiality of experiencing the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship by actively shaping democracy.

During the Progressive Era (1896-1916), the US experienced an influx of social service organizations like the YMCA, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America and settlement houses. These institutions responded to the strengths and perceived needs of individuals and society and “worked to educate people with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in and contribute to society” (Coughlan/Sadovnik/Semel 2014). Settlement houses in particular, like Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago, worked to supplement a school system inadequately serving immigrant communities and the poor through social services and out-of-school education programs. Addams saw this model of community education as a “protest against a restrictive view of education” (Addams 1910). As a combination of social work , advocacy and education, settlement houses embody the origin of service learning and civic engagement as sources of civic development – “a concrete example that set the entire community, not just the school, as the center for learning and democratic action” (Longo 2007).

A contemporary of Addams, John Dewey drew inspiration from Addams in his conception of “community schools”, where schools become the center of community engagement and education. Dewey recognized the benefit that schools reach all children, not as an inconsistently available “matter of philanthropy”, but as a public institution owned by the people (Dewey/Dewey 1915). A core tenet of his theory is that students have the opportunity to experience democratic decision-making about real problems within the school and in concert with the community. Although he saw schools at the center, his ideas were a departure in that he emphasized an experiential, community-engaged structure that would provide health services, adult education, job training, and community organizing, etc. (Coughlan/Sadovnik/Semel 2014). This not only blurred the lines between formal and non-formal education, but also youth and adult education.

¹ Many thanks to Georg Pirker for the valuable input on this article.

Myles Horton, who founded the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee in 1932 was directly inspired by Dewey and Addams and also Grundtvig's Danish folk schools. With the goal of connecting education with social change, Highlander served as a residential education center, which used non-credentialed "workshop retreats to bring people together outside their home communities to reflect and plan for collaborative action back home" (Longo 2007). Active first as a labor organizing school during the 1930s and 40s and later as part of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, Highlander played a significant role in preparing young leaders of the civil rights movement, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. among them. Horton's aim was to transform learners into leaders and their existing knowledge into power. He saw "educational work during social movement periods as the best opportunity for multiplying democratic leadership" (Horton/Kohl/Kohl 1997). The Center's "Grassroots Citizenship Education" programs, led by Septima Clark, were developed to promote basic literacy skills while also educating about the rights of citizenship among African Americans, part of a long tradition of non-formal citizenship education in African American communities.

Central to the success of Highlander's brand of popular education was a reliance on the power of community knowledge and experience: "You don't need to know the answer. You can help people get the answers.... You have to respect their knowledge.... and help them to respect their knowledge" (Horton/Freire 1990, S. 55). As one participant described the experience: "the most important thing one ever learned from Highlander, was how we could help ourselves" (Highlander Research & Education Center 2012).

The aforementioned examples showcase several core tenets of American civic life, but access to these kinds of opportunities has been far from widespread. In more recent history, a "new civics" approach has sought to make opportunities which build on these ideas more universal; ideas which are "consistent with the tradition of education for democracy but approach the subject in ways that are responsive to their situation" (Ayers/Quinn 1998).

A broad conception of non-formal civic education

The US infrastructure for civic learning is starkly different from Germany in its organization; a unique field of non-formal civic education does not exist in the same way. Rather, out-of-school civic education lies at the intersection of civic engagement, popular education and positive youth development (PYD) and takes place in schools and non-school settings.

There is a focus on schools as the main setting of civic education, based on the largely accepted view that schools are most likely to reach all young people (Kahne/Westheimer 2003). In turn, many community organizations and national non-profits focused on youth civic development work closely with formal education out of both "school as social center" pedagogical principles and practical necessity, by designing curriculums, providing teacher training, and bringing programming into classrooms.

Certainly, there are other actors that work outside the bounds of the formal classroom, such as social service (i.e., the YMCA and the Scouts) and special interest organizations (i.e., 4-H and human rights or environmental NGOs), community-engaged universities (departments of civic engagement, for example), libraries, museums, etc. Because there is no national youth policy and

limited public funding, the availability of these offerings is highly localized and, often, grassroots. For many (but not all) such organizations, explicit civic education is part of a broader mission, so that civic/political learning becomes a byproduct, rather than a primary aim. Professionals in these organizations may not describe themselves as educators, despite having a similar role and responsibilities to that of an extracurricular civic educator in the German context.

This structural difference became apparent during recruitment for the TECE Fellowship. The use of the term "non-formal civic educator" did little to clarify our target audience for an American audience, as the term "educator" implies "teacher" and the term "non-formal" is not used in the American field. To clarify this, we changed the description of our target audience to "professionals working toward the civic development of young people in out-of-school contexts." Ultimately, our group of U.S. Fellows reflects the diversity of fields and sectors that make up the U.S. civic learning ecosystem, including higher education, youth work-oriented NGOs, national civic education organizations, and community organizing initiatives.

A recent effort to organize the field, the CivXNow network, is a coalition of over 185 organizations working to improve formal and out-of-school civic education. The wide range of organizations, representing different target groups, approaches, ideologies, and education settings, offers the opportunity to learn across silos. These and other developments point to the increasing acknowledgement that a return to a "broader ecology of civic learning" is critical (Longo 2007).

Lacking a concrete professional self-understanding presents challenges, but it also leads to a broader and more imaginative conception of what constitutes civic education. In too-starkly defined "occupational silos...it is easy to ignore the commonalities of practice and shared realities that link crafts and professions" (Jeffs/Smith 2021). The opportunity to learn from different ways of organizing the field in the US and Germany may help us achieve the benefits of a defined and networked professional field while encouraging an inclusive view of civic education that reaches beyond silos to build more collaborative civic ecosystems.

Experiential and action-oriented

A general American orientation toward experiential learning via authentic opportunities for civic engagement and political action combines community-based approaches to civic education with knowledge and reflection. Although civic education in schools has primarily focused on civic knowledge and out-of-school learning has long taken a more action-oriented tact, formal education has also begun to use more action-oriented strategies.

With a tip of the hat to Tocqueville and Dewey, there is a general belief that civic and political skills and attitudes should be learned through non-simulated experience. This is evident in an emphasis on various forms of civic engagement as methods of civic education: social capital-building forms of action (i.e., service learning and public service) as well as more political-oriented action (i.e., community/youth/intergenerational organizing and participatory action research). These examples demonstrate how education and civic engagement come together to educate for democracy via reflective participation.

In recent decades, service learning has developed as a common form of civic education, which combines learning objectives with community service and reflection. The practice, although still common, has been critiqued for its service orientation that asks learners to simply respond to social problems rather than targeting the core causes of an issue.

In an effort to move from service to deeper engagement, an “action civics” approach has become popular. Action civics can take many forms, but is essentially civic action as a form of civic learning, combining youth leadership development, guided-experiential civic education and “traditional” civic education. In its narrower definition, action civics is a multi-step process where, with support of adults, young people lead civic projects that culminate in collective political action.

Critics of action civics (mainly ideologically conservative) view the practice as a laboratory for left-wing protest movements, but there is a large degree of support for the practice within the civic education community. The approach is cited as good practice in several influential publications and there has even been legislation passed to include action civics projects in education standards for several states.

Grassroots and citizen-centered

In the U.S., there is little public funding for civic education and youth work. Organizations active in this field rely primarily on funding from individual donors and foundations. This is consistent with a contrasting view of state responsibility, as civil society in Anglo-Saxon countries tends to be seen as detached from state control (Kontinen 2009). Moreover, there is neither a national youth policy nor national guidelines for civic education, so the available opportunities vary geographically. In this environment, civil society must “take the reins,” which is why non-state-sponsored civil society organizations play such an important role. Rooting institutions and structures at the grassroots level can lead to greater responsiveness to community needs than adhering strictly to government funding parameters and thematic priorities.

This is certainly true of historical examples, Myles Horton, Septima Clarke, and Jane Addams, who responded to a perceived need in their communities with their citizen-centered civic education. The American “bootstraps theory” is reinterpreted here to mean that individual citizens are responsible for fighting for their own rights and needs through active engagement. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many youth work and civic education approaches aim to prepare young people for this role of self-governance through leadership development and youth-centered approaches.

At the heart of the literature and practice is “youth voice”, that is, the authentic expression of their ideas, proposals, or interests that can lead to organizational, social, or political change (Skali 2015). Youth voice implies that young people are empowered to realize their own interests and needs through empowerment and capacity building. This approach assumes that youth are

uniquely capable of determining young people's needs. Approaches such as youth participatory action research² and youth organizing³ incorporate youth voice as part of their inherent logic.

Many community organizations focus such programs on low-income or BIPOC communities that have limited opportunities to engage politically and for whom the content of school-based civic education may be irrelevant or seem out of touch due to power imbalances and different life experiences. Programs that focus on youth voice and leadership can create an empowering environment that emphasizes the history of their respective communities, democracy as a process in which all people should participate, and techniques for generating power and creating change, and can ultimately be more responsive to the needs of marginalized communities (Checkoway 2011).

These citizen-centered and grassroots-led opportunities for political learning are common in a field that is itself driven by civil society due to the funding and political context. However, they are by no means unique to the United States; in many ways, they also reflect the discourse around civic learning and political education for young people in the European context⁴. In addition, methods based on the empowerment principle, a theoretical import from the U.S. civil rights movement that is well known in Germany, have become more widespread.

Deeply polarized

Many see civic education as a solution to unprecedented levels of polarization. New programs and entire organizations have emerged with a focus on fostering civic dialogue, pushing the goals of civic education in new directions. However, the field has become the subject of partisan ideological battles itself.

In a pluralistic society, it is to be expected that there is debate about what civic education content and approaches should be prioritized. There have long been debates within the field about whether civic education should reinforce a patriotic love of country or encourage participants to think critically about problems facing the country, for example, but the degrees to which these conversations have entered the mainstream “culture wars” poses a concerning threat to progress.

There has been particular controversy over how to teach about racism. The issue exploded into the public discourse in Spring 2021 under the guise of a debate over “critical race theory” (CRT). CRT is an academic concept that posits that race is embedded in legal and institutional systems. This original definition has been wildly misconstrued, with critics purporting that efforts to understand the US’ racist history and how it impacts current policy and society is itself racist and pushes an anti-white, anti-American perspective. Legislation which bans “the discussion, training and/or orientation that the US is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” has passed in nine

² YPAR is an approach in which young people conduct systematic research to improve their lives and communities.

³ Youth organizing involves youth in community organizing to effect power relations and change in their communities.

⁴ For example, Yael Ohana's Critical Youth Citizenship approach, the development of the RFCDC competency framework in the Council of Europe, or the ETS competency model in the youth field.

states. 19 others have either already introduced similar legislation or plan to (Ray/Gibbons 2021).

There is a general commitment to the idea that political and historical education should be non-partisan. However, this pursuit of bipartisanship is becoming increasingly difficult in an increasingly polarized environment where values once considered common are increasingly contested. As one American TECE Fellow put it, "even using the term 'human rights' has become controversial." Active attempts to punish educators who act "non-neutrally" with fines and firings make this work increasingly dangerous. Moreover, conservatives have begun to criticize bipartisan attempts to strengthen civic education as leftist attempts to use civic education as a venue for CRT. These challenges offer a comparison to European-level approaches to "teaching controversial issues" and to German debates about neutrality in civic education, which have been intensified in recent years by pressure from the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

Relevance of US-German exchange

Civic education in the United States stands at a precipice of change, and there is great value and increased interest in looking beyond its borders. But the challenges and opportunities facing the United States are far from unique and should be confronted with international perspective.

Revived investment in German-American civil society exchange appears to be on the horizon. The 2021-2025 coalition agreement advocates for support for transatlantic civil society and youth exchange, mirroring preliminary efforts to establish a German-American Youth Office already underway. The TECE project has allowed us to "get ahead" by uncovering what structural and logistical barriers exist and the topics which are most relevant, as well as asserting the importance of civic education as a focus of any such initiatives.

The TECE process has sought to highlight and probe the unique characteristics of civic education in both countries and to re-evaluate essential questions about this work with a comparative, outsider perspective⁵. Vastly different cultural and socioeconomic landscapes and differences in the structure and practice of civic education create opportunities for learning by thinking outside of our conventional frameworks. In this way, we are challenged to think more expansively about what civic education is and can be.

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⁵ You can find more information about the project here: [:www.tece-usde.org](http://www.tece-usde.org)

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