

## **Civic Reflection**

Considering values, choices, and civic commitments in polarizing times

Civic reflection is a conversation tool developed in the United States in the 1990s to bring people together to think deeply about how and why they engage in public life. In times of political tension, civic reflection is a technique for finding commonalities, understanding differences, and encouraging individuals to consider their civic commitments. The goal of civic reflection is to build connections and understanding among participants as well as individual self-reflection and learning. In doing so, civic reflection provides spaces for conversation contemplating values, choices, and the needs of communities and the role one sees for themselves in these communities.

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### **Civic Reflection: Origins and Development**

Civic reflection originates from conversations between its founder Elizabeth Lynn and Susan Wisely, the evaluation director of the Lilly Endowment in the mid-1990s (Center for Civic Reflection, 2021). The two were concerned that while there was an awareness of the increasing importance of the philanthropic sector in the United States to the flourishing of civic life, this awareness was not occurring alongside a thoughtful assessment of the underlying values needed to support the infrastructure for and activities of voluntary organizations (Center for Civic Reflection, 2021). The philanthropic sector has historically played an important role in the United States, focusing efforts in one or more of three strands. Philanthropic giving has traditionally been seen as (1) a means of providing social relief as in efforts to provide food for those who are hungry, (2) of encouraging personal improvement as in instances of building new schools or donating educational materials, and (3) of promoting social reform as in cases where financial donations target experiments with social policies (Lynn & Wisely, 2006). During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, philanthropic efforts turned to a new, fourth strand that focused on building social cohesion and encouraging civic engagement. This shift continues, with many of today’s civic engagement activities in the United States are supported by non-profit organizations rather than the state or federal government. The philanthropic sector relies on volunteers and donations to facilitate civic education and engagement.

Lynn and others developed civic reflection through the Project for Civic Reflection, founded at Valparaiso University in 1998, to encourage deep conversations around how and why people engage in service. While Valparaiso University is a private, religious institution, and civic reflection is influenced by the religious notion of service, civic reflection is secular. Because of the decades of work by the Project for Civic Reflection, civic reflection is used today in spaces such as AmeriCorps (a government-sponsored program for up to four years of paid civic service), non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and state Humanities Councils (organizations that support public engagement with the humanities). In 2018, the Project for Civic Reflection was transferred to the Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement (PACE)

at Salisbury University (Maryland, USA) where it became the Center for Civic Reflection. Today the Center offers facilitation services, training for facilitating reflections, and hosts the national catalog of civic reflection resources.

The practice of and formal training for civic reflection is a collective effort influenced by many individuals over the decades since its inception 1990s (Center for Civic Reflection, 2021). The Center for Civic Reflection currently provides the “hub” for resources and training, but the center does not seek ownership over the method. The center's goal is to support training and provide consultation and resources for using this method. While one can read about individual success stories of civic reflection, the method has not undergone a comprehensive assessment (see for example Levin & Davis, 2010). The center now coordinates an ongoing research project to assess civic reflection as a method for community conversations in schools, public organizations, local governments, and non-profit organizations. The project aims to better understand the impacts of these conversations and how the method should be adapted to changing social circumstances.

### **The Method of Civic Reflection**

Civic reflection invites people with a common interest or connection to engage in a guided conversation to think deeply about civic commitments and relationships. These reflections require three elements: (1) a group of people, (2) a “source,” usually a text such as a poem, and (3) a shared interest or purpose related to civic life. The exclusion of one element shifts the activity from a reflection to a reading group, a dialogue, or a scholarly presentation. The Civic Reflection Triangle illustrates this relationship in which civic life, participants, and sources sit at the corners of the triangle, connected by the lines. A discussion of civic life with participants is a civic dialogue; a discussion of civic life through a reading is a scholarly presentation, and participants discussing a text is a reading group. All are worthwhile activities. Civic reflection combines the three elements, led by a trained facilitator.

The first element of a civic reflection is the group of people who participate. The only requirement for this group is that they have something in common. For example, they might live in a neighborhood facing changing demographics, perceived as problematic for longtime residents. They might be a group of college students entering their first year in a university. Perhaps they are community members participating in a voluntary organization advocating for local environmental protection. In each example, a common element ties the people together. The shared commonality will determine the reflection's theme or “big questions.” The neighborhood group might engage with the topic of identity and community, while the college students might reflect on the transition to a new stage in one’s civic life. The community organization members may engage with the topic of crisis and conflict because personality conflicts within the group have hampered their work in recent years. The topic of the conversation does not need to respond to a particular incident. For example, the environmental organization may also focus on understanding how each member interprets what it means to protect the environment.

The conversation facilitator will select a “source” based on the chosen theme or “big question.” In the early years of civic reflection, the source, sometimes called an “object,” was a written text of some type. Typically, the text was a poem or short story. In recent years, civic reflection facilitators have expanded to other kinds of sources, including images (for example, pictures of paintings and photographs) and short videos. While the format of sources continues to evolve as technological developments make accessing various kinds of sources easier, the type of source is essential to the reflection. Sources should provide for open-ended discussions rather than state a definite perspective. Poems, short stories, or short philosophical pieces best frame open-ended discussions as their meaning and relevance are debatable, and interpretations are influenced by the moment in which the conversation occurs (Davis, 2009, p.13). Popular texts, poems encountered in school, and professional literature are avoided. Participants may have already decided their interpretation of the piece or position on a subject and be less open to using the source to anchor an exploratory conversation. The purpose of civic reflection is for a group of people to have a conversation that has never occurred, which can only happen with the participants in the group. This is best facilitated with a source that leaves open space for interpretation.

Finally, grounding the conversation in the civic life of the participants transforms the conversation from an academic interpretation or a reading group to a reflection exploring the values and commitments of the group and the individual participants. The facilitator leads the group through a conversation involving three stages, prompted by different types of discussion questions. After explaining the “hopes and expectations” or “ground rules” for the conversation and the opening activity, the discussion moves to the text. The text is read aloud while participants follow along on their copy. The facilitator encourages participants to highlight phrases that are interesting or confusing. Participants are then given time to read the text silently before the facilitator begins the discussion with questions of clarification.

Clarifying questions ensure that everyone in the room understands the main aspects of the story or poem. Often adult participants remark that they have not read a poem since they were a student. Questions of clarification alleviate fears of participation and reinforce that civic reflection is not an academic conversation of finding the “right” or “true” interpretation of the source. It is also important to define words that group members might not know, recognizing that not all participants have the same background and experience. While power differences exist in every group and should be recognized, the facilitator should flatten these differences when possible. The questions thus assure that group members share a common but broad understanding of the piece.

Next, participants are guided to evaluate and discuss the piece's meaning. With guided questions of interpretation, the facilitator seeks to create conversation among participants that may point out differences in understanding and perspective of the group. Participants share their opinions of characters and the use of specific phrasing but always directed towards the text. This technique depersonalizes the conversation and distinguishes civic reflection (Davis, 2009, p. 19). By focusing on the text but incorporating their own experiences, participants begin to shift the conversation more explicitly towards civic life. The facilitator in this phase uses the

source as a means of filtering the group's developing ideas about the primary theme under discussion. Rather than moving directly into personal accounts of exclusion, a group of first-year university students might instead reference the source to talk about how representations of exclusion in the text resonate with certain experiences they have had. This encourages empathy among the group, using a common reference point—the source—that is understood to have multiple interpretations, rather than anecdotes that can limit the interpretative frame to that of the speaker.

Finally, the facilitator helps the group consider questions of implication. These questions challenge participants to move outside the source and consider how the themes resonate or relate to their work or engagement in civic life. Here, participants connect their own experiences or understandings of civic life. The neighborhood members facing changing demographics may connect the experience of a character challenged by a new situation to one they have faced themselves. Students entering the university may reflect on how their relationship with and feeling of responsibility towards their community changes when they leave home and how they might find new spaces of engagement. Members of an environmental organization might better understand why their colleagues approach the work or personal conflicts differently. The role of the facilitator is to guide the conversation through these three sets of questions while allowing the participant's latitude to make the conversation meaningful to them in the moment.

### **Civic Reflection in the Current Context**

COVID-19 creates both barriers to and new possibilities for civic reflection. As of March 2020, all facilitator training has moved online. Remote training expands access to groups with limited resources and those outside of the United States. Civic reflections have also moved online, but the authors of this piece believe that in-person conversations are optimal for creating an open and inviting space where people can more easily read the physical and verbal cues of the facilitator and their fellow participants. Virtual or in-person, the goals of civic reflection remain the same: encouraging deep conversations considering how and why individuals and groups should participate in civic life. It is important to stress that while civic reflection can create action items or aid with decisions, it is not necessarily outcomes oriented. The conversation does not always result in agreement on a topic or plans of action for a particular issue. Rather, civic reflection can occur before or alongside community decision making. Civic reflection allows people to find shared experiences and understand divergent opinions in increasingly divisive times. It is also a way for people within communities and civic organizations to consider their work and why. These are important steps in the deliberative system and can promote positive liberal democratic outcomes (Searing et al, 2007).

The Center for Civic Reflection's mission is to support and assess the method of civic reflection, providing training, facilitation, and resources for facilitators. The center's staff is currently evaluating how civic reflection, a tool developed in the 1990s, can remain relevant in today's political, social, and economic climate. The center continually seeks new partnerships and opportunities to share this method with organizations across the globe. Center staff offer free

discussions about civic reflection and its relevance for particular groups or circumstances, provide guidance in the selection and preparation of reflection materials, and create customized training and other support systems. The civic reflection strategy is not proprietary; rather, the center exists to promote this conversation strategy as one means to improve peoples' considerations of our role in the world.

## Literature

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