

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2010

What Counts as Civics Education?

The title of a [recent article](#) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* declares that "college makes students more liberal but not smarter about civics." The evidence for this claim comes from a [study](#) that found students were leaving college without significant information about U.S. political history, cultural institutions, foreign relations, and the market economy. While I recognize the value of these questions (I teach such subject matter as Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream"), I'm not sure that we should limit civics education to historical knowledge. In fact, this knowledge matters little if students do not know how to *implement* civic education in their own way.

What is troubling in this regard is the study's implication that teaching critical thinking is problematic. For example, the study included a section under the heading "Additional Finding: How College Teaching Alters the Public Beliefs of Professors." As the report notes, "If two people share the same basic characteristics, the one who has taught at the college level is more likely to agree that:

- America corrupts otherwise good people;
- The Ten Commandments are irrelevant today;
- Raising the minimum wage decreases employment;
- [Educators should instill more doubt in students and reject certainty](#); and
- Homeschooling families neglect their community obligations."

Despite the shaky causal logic here (how do we know teaching college causes these beliefs rather than, say, these beliefs causing one to become a college teacher?), the study suggests that these views should *not* be taught in the classroom because college professors are outliers, beyond the domain of "normal" belief. While I can understand why some of these are not "desirable" beliefs to teach our students, I believe that doubt and dissent are crucial to civic education.

Especially in the domain of communication, where so much relies on interpretation of the participants, it is not only impossible to teach certainty but also undesirable as it would suggest rigid rules or guidelines where a world of contingency exists. There is not a single account of what the "message" in MLK's Dream speech is (see Appendix A, question 16 in the study). Moreover, it does a disservice to our students to suggest that there is a certainty in that regard.

Critical thinking and media literacy are, and should continue to be, important elements of our curriculum so we might encourage students to not accept messages on face but consider the larger (persuasive) implications of them. In my mind, this education better prepares students for their role as citizens--by enabling them, for example, to recognize the strategic elements of campaign advertisements prior to voting or to use their communication skills as advocates for social change--than teaching them the answers to the questions on this survey. Ultimately, I know the value of learning historical U.S. information but I'm reluctant to accept it as the only or even best way we teach and measure civic education.

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