Ethical Citizenship and Post-Secondary Education

Sylvie Murray and Scott Fast
University of the Fraser Valley

This issue of the UFV Research Review examines the role that post-secondary education plays in fostering the values and practices of active and ethical citizenship. How are the values and processes critical to sustaining genuinely democratic civic and political communities ‘taught’ or ‘learned’ in institutions of higher education? Is educating good citizens facilitated or impaired by the forces at work in the twenty-first century political economy? What are the challenges that educating for citizenship pose at the dawn of the new century? Are its possibilities limited or enhanced by the greater globalization of our political economy? The contributors to this issue, who are teachers, scholars and administrators trained in the fields of education, history, anthropology, political science, and literary criticism, address these questions by examining three interrelated themes: the relationship between post-secondary institutions and the exigencies of our global political economy, pedagogical practices and learning theories that have the potential to enhance civic and democratic engagement, and the particular challenges that the teaching of liberal values and practices of civic engagement and political contestation pose in non-Western, and non-democratic, societies. These themes represent shared concerns among an academic community that continues to be engaged in the minutia of classroom-based activities while being increasingly cognizant of, and called to justify, its place in our broader societies. We believe that reflecting on our values and practices, as educators and responsible citizens, is critically important to ensure that we continue to meet our obligations to our students and to the non-academic communities of which we are part.

Any consideration of what it might mean to teach or learn active and ethical citizenship is well served by the clarification of key terms. The term citizenship carries a distinctly political connotation (one that is most often captured in law) and should not be confused with “civility,” which refers to the manners appropriate to a “civil” society. To be a good citizen is something different than being a good neighbor; it implies participation in the larger community. In addition, a distinction has to be made between passive and active citizenship. The former refers to one’s legal status within a state. A passive citizen, under this limited definition, may enjoy certain legal rights (protection from arbitrary arrest) and be obligated to meet certain legal obligations (pay taxes or be available for military service) but yet may not have the right to vote in elections or hold public office. This category would include citizens of non-democratic regimes, but also those in democratic regimes who have been denied the right to vote, such as women and men without property before the gradual extension of the democratic franchise. While active citizenship is defined in the modern liberal tradition through a set of rights, key among which are the rights to vote and hold public office, it cannot be reduced to that however. In the republican tradition that began in classical Greece and continues in a modified fashion to this day, active citizenship carries expectations of participation in collective deliberations about the affairs of the community. The community may be defined narrowly or broadly: the neighborhood, the city, the region, the nation, or the world. Hence, when we speak of educating citizens, we, and the authors in this issue, are speaking about developing the skills and perspectives required to vote and participate in fully democratic regimes.
Participation, of course, is not all that matters. Ultimately, the goal of discharging one’s civic duty, and the benefits to be gained from a democratic sharing of civic obligation, is the determination of a ‘common good’ that will be good for all citizens and inhabitants of a community. In our diverse, plural communities, this challenge too often remains a distant goal. How should our practice of citizenship then be both active and ethical? How should we go about deciphering a common good among citizens whose experiences differ on the basis of their gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, race, ethnicity and economic status (to name only the most obvious elements of our plural identities)? Political theorist Chantal Mouffe offers a useful answer to this question by reminding us of the basic principle that makes democracy normatively superior to any other civic and political arrangement:

What we share and what makes us fellow citizens in a liberal democratic regime is not a substantive idea of the good but a set of political principles specific to such a tradition: the principles of freedom and equality for all. Those principles constitute what we can call . . . a ‘grammar’ of political conduct. To be a citizen is to recognize the authority of those principles and the rules in which they are embodied; to have them informing our political judgement and our actions. Ethical citizenship, in brief, is radically democratic. It requires active engagement in public debate and collective self-government and genuine respect for the diversity that is integral to any human society.

The papers in this issue examine these questions from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives. The first two articles address the plight of education in the modern, globalized, neo-liberal world. Tatjana Chorney (English, Saint Mary’s University) traces the commodification of education — a process by which “education is [viewed] as a commodity, students as consumers and educators as service providers.” This development, she argues, reflects a shift in the values and meanings ascribed to education which educators committed to the values of ethical citizenship must actively counter. The “values associated traditionally with education and knowledge as a public good, something worthy to be pursued for its own sake and serving the needs of all members of society,” she notes, are in the process of being eroded and replaced by a view of education “as a means to an end defined primarily in economic terms.” Emery J. Hyslop-Margison and Alan Sears (from the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick) pursue this reflection by examining, more specifically, the neo-liberal assumptions which have become explicit in public discussions of education. Habits of mind and skills that inform democratic practices, such as lifelong learning and critical thinking, are now being redefined in market-oriented terms. The implications these developments may have for our students’ ability to learn the basic skills of ethical citizenship are, for these authors, alarming: “The idea that a university experience is about intellectual growth, social debate and democratic dialogue has been largely usurped by the neo-liberal objectives of customer service, credentializing, technical training and instrumental learning.” Like Chorney, they call on educators to “mount a concerted resistance to the contemporary attack on democratic learning principles.” Strategies they suggest include training students to decipher the work of ideology in their society and presenting historical or contemporary alternatives to the neo-liberal paradigm.

The authors of these two articles clearly identify the chains that bind our institutions of higher education to the political economy. Their call for educators to reflect critically on pedagogical strategies that cultivate values necessary to the practice of ethical citizenship is also critically
important. But how new is the phenomenon that they decry, one may ask? Hasn’t education most often been valued through its economic functions?

Perhaps we risk succumbing to pessimism regarding the economic functionality of education because we compare our contemporary predicament to a version of our past that never really existed. In the long history of republican, limited franchise democracy that began in classical Greece and ran through Rome to the Italian city republics, and then through to the Dutch, English, French and American versions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, full participation in the political arena of one’s city or state was restricted to male property owners. The goal of the classical republican model of higher education was explicitly the education of the public, political actor as opposed to the education of the private, economic actor. Only the male heads of successful economic households shared in the full rights and obligations of citizenship. It was therefore only they who required a citizen’s education and, as well, only they and their male offspring who could afford the leisure to have such an education. Women, workers and slaves had neither the need nor the means for a citizen’s education. Furthermore, although from almost the beginning the liberal arts embraced fields of study that were considered to develop the whole individual (even contribute to their civility) and not just his role as political actor, the notion remained that its primary purpose was the development of effective property-owning citizens. This, then, is the model upon which the western tradition of liberal arts education was based and from which it evolved: mass higher education has always been about economic opportunity, however much it has continued to vaguely bask in the ideals of classical republican education dedicated to preparing “citizens.”

This link between citizenship, education, and male property ownership has been gradually loosened in western liberal democracies over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but up until the end of World War II post-secondary education was largely reserved for the propertied classes. Access to higher education was significantly broadened after 1945 to include veterans and children of the segment of the working class who benefited from postwar prosperity. The increasingly technical, professional and white-collar nature of our postwar western economies required a widely-accessible education, and the system delivered. Ideological and diplomatic rivalries among nations also enhanced public funding for education, as illustrated by the massive North American investment in science programs that followed the realization, with the successful launching of the satellite Sputnik in 1957, that the Communist Soviet Union had technologically outpaced western democracies. Today, while university participation rates remain low for some groups (most notably among indigenous peoples in Canada), the general population for the most part receives the educational and economic opportunity it desired for itself and its children, and the propertied classes enjoy the employees they require, for the most part trained at public expense.

As Chorney’s and Margison and Sears’ articles reflect, the expectation that liberal arts education should go beyond mere economic ‘training’ to enhance the character development of virtually all citizens has wide currency. But to do so casts education as part of a radical project that was never embraced by the architects or the beneficiaries of the twentieth-century democratization of higher education who saw the role of universities as providing career preparation for the burgeoning post-war economy. Shouldn’t calls for universities today to prepare students to participate in an increasingly global economy be seen then as only the most recent manifestation of this postwar career-based education? Moreover, is it not a reasonable expectation? When one’s standard of living is not assured by the established wealth of one’s family, one is likely to approach educational opportunity as the doorway to
economic opportunity rather than an opportunity to develop character or educate enlightened citizens. This is not to say that the latter becomes irrelevant, but is it, or should it be, the primary and chief purpose of one’s education?

To recognize the potency of the link that ties education to the economy is not, of course, to dismiss the importance of cultivating the radical potential that education may hold in terms of building a truly active and ethical citizenry. Thus perhaps the lesson that we may learn from the famous dictum “It’s the economy, stupid” is how institutions of higher education and educators must recognize its central importance to liberal arts education if they wish to participate in preserving, and enhancing, democracy. This is the challenge that historian Eric Davis, currently Dean of Arts at the University of the Fraser Valley, poses in his friendly critique of the critique of neo-liberalism. Erecting barricades to protect a besieged university from the assault of an omnipotent global economy, he argues, is not the answer to correcting the perceived irrelevance of our disciplines; rather, we should embrace and incorporate in our liberal arts curriculum the ‘applied’ dimension that has always been part of a liberal education; we should recognize the real (and at times debilitating) economic constraints that our students face; most fundamentally, we ought to face head-on the challenge to transform our “knowledge economy” into a “knowledge society.” To this end access to higher education must become wider yet. Educators must succeed in engaging their communities, governments, students and their employers in the most pressing task of the twenty-first century: to recognize the continuing ‘problem’ that democracy presents, and find means to ensure its preservation and expansion. Davis offers no concrete suggestions for how this might be done, but he provocatively suggests that blaming neo-liberalism for our own failure to live up to our democratic ideal is neither historically accurate nor socially responsible.

The following three articles address some of these questions in the context of specific classroom practices and learning environments. Historian Alan Bloom from Valparaiso University (Indiana) reminds us of the critical importance of classroom discussions in the learning process. Educators, he writes, must be willing “to invite chaos into their classrooms, where discussion, with all of its twists, turns, and meanderings must play a greater role than the lecture.” But a successful discussion hardly comes naturally; it requires a clearly-stated set of rules (a social contract of sort), constant encouragement (“the power of invitation”), and revised expectations to ensure that oral skills are given the same importance, and treated with the same rigour, as writing skills. It also requires that participants be asked to consider “the big questions” of our historical and collective experience — these are questions that are “contemporary” and “enduring.” The insights which Bloom shares with us follow from his conviction that educational institutions must play a key role in the process of “civic renewal” needed in consumerist North America. Civic education, he argues, not only supplements traditional markers of civic engagement (such as voting and volunteering, which may remain “episodic” and “goal oriented”), but it occupies a privileged place because of its transformative nature. The deliberative processes used in student-centered classroom discussion mirrors the “citizen-centered” model of civic engagement, and constitutes a training ground for it by facilitating the development of “patterns of habits, values, and attitudes” that university-educated citizens will carry with them beyond graduation to help sustain democratic civic and political cultures.

Bloom’s piece echoes a common criticism of the “sage on the stage” lecture-based approach to teaching: he approvingly cites “critics of the hierarchical classroom who maintain that when experts lecture students they do not ‘engage them in the conversation, in active learning, or in any kind of critical thinking’.” The “guide on the side” model is branded to be an
“inherently more democratic process with the added benefit that students often learn more from listening to one another as compared to listening (or not listening!) to me.” This might very well be true, but only if we compare the worst lectures to the best discussions. As anyone who’s been engaged in teaching and learning from either the front or the back of the classroom has experienced, one can be stimulated by an engaging lecture and hopelessly tuned out from a peer-centered discussion. Is the “deliberative process” that we all value exclusively achieved in the context of small-group discussion, one may ask? Deliberation implies not only discussion but consideration of all sides of an issue; to be deliberate is to give an issue thorough and careful consideration; it is to be thoughtful in decision or action. This is often accomplished through discussion, but not exclusively or necessarily so. Active and deliberate learning may come from the act of exchanging with one’s peers in an open and respectful environment, as it may come from the act of listening to an informed and balanced lecture, reading a good book, or writing a thoughtful essay.

Similarly, UFV’s Academic Vice-President and Provost Dianne Common presents the case for the centrality of conversations to the educational enterprise. Grounded in educational theories that draw on the Socratic tradition of critical questioning, her contribution emphasizes the transformative power of face-to-face conversations. Rather than presenting a set of best practices, her essay explores the conceptual underpinnings of a conversation-based pedagogy: in particular, she emphasizes “interpretative discussion” and “collaborative learning.” The former refers to discussions that lead to a sharing of interpretations, recognizing that the students’ are as valuable as the teacher’s: “The task of the teacher is to guide the students’ attention towards objects that will draw out the understanding they have, understanding that, once expressed, will enrich the meaning of their experiences in significant ways. The teacher does not tell students what to find in the topics of study.” Embracing this concept requires a profound questioning of professorial or expert-based authority. In this model, accumulated knowledge (of history or mathematics, for instance), as well as the acquired skills to synthesize it (or, in the case of mathematics, to simply comprehend it), become secondary to the process of enquiry itself, which is facilitated in a peer environment: “Traditional university teaching, such as learning, demonstrating, or structured questions situates the teacher at the center. Conversation occurs between the teacher and each student as individuals. . . .Collaborative learning, however, changes the pattern. The primary focus of students’ attention in the conversation is each other.”

There is tremendous value in this approach. But how widely applicable is it? Should it supplant, or simply (but most importantly) supplement, an expert-based approach to the construction and transmission of knowledge? Are there disciplines (types of knowledge) that lend themselves better than others to Socratic enquiries? What are the “texts” and “facts” that call for the creative and chaotic energy of the conversationalists and those that require the systematic exposition of a skilled lecturer? Perhaps it is prudent then to move our discussion away from the either/or paradigm (sage vs. guide), with its inherent connotations of passive vs. active learning, self-centered vs. caring teacher, and focus on the educational and civic goal that we all pursue, recognizing that many roads may indeed lead to Rome.

Catherine McGregor and Kathy Sanford (from the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria) expand our examination of university-level education by relaying their experience in the education of K–12 educators. In particular, they describe the importance of incorporating a “service learning” component to the education of teachers in order to prepare them better to play their role as “citizenship educators.” Offering all students a community-based placement in a non-educational institution, write the authors, will provide their novice-teacher-students
an “authentic” experience of civic engagement. It reflects the program designer’s expectation that “teachers should live, not talk, their civic identities.” Teachers should “model for learners the ways in which citizenship is not only understood, but practiced.” Sites of political contestation therefore become important to train not only teachers but to form teacher-activists through “identity-constructing practices.”

The authors suggest not only that one needs to participate in civic-minded organizations in order to experience first-hand the skills and orientations that they would seek to impart to their students, but also imply that groups that take an oppositional stand offer the most valuable form of participation. But surely citizens’ participation can include support of the status quo. We need as well to note that opposition to the status quo in a democratic society does not necessarily imply the promotion of democratic values.

The final two submissions each provide, in their own way, thought provoking counterpoints to our theme. While our authors all clearly subscribe to the western ideals of democratic citizenship and the education appropriate to it, Vanessa Ruget (Political Science, Salem State College, Massachusetts), in an account of her teaching political science in Kyrgyzstan, poses a number of important ethical questions and considerations that one teaching citizenship in non-democratic and semi-democratic regimes must ponder. In particular she examines the implications of teaching values which if the students embraced would place them in jeopardy. She raises legitimate concerns about foreign lecturers imposing Western values where they might seem alien. Finally, given that many of her students will translate their education into successful careers abroad, she considers the implications of fostering brain drain. Where all of the authors support the importance of citizenship education in democratic regimes, Rucha Ambikar (a PhD candidate at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco) challenges us with the example of democratic India where the coalition government headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party made the promotion of Hindu nationalism a dominating national educational priority at the expense of certain western democratic values such as sexual equality and the separation of church and state. There, the coalition government sought to counter the globalization of values with the intent to impose a rigorous curriculum based on traditional Hindu and nationalist values. This is a reminder that not all responses to globalization square well with Western ideals, and it is not sufficient to claim that the promotion of liberal democratic values is “education,” while other responses intrinsically and necessarily deserve to be called “indoctrination.”

Perhaps one final note is in order. It is often said that in the context of a global economy the task of a civic-minded education is to prepare for global citizenship. But the concept itself is arguably incongruous. Global citizenship, like “global village” and “global community,” seems to imply that matters of scale have nothing to do with matters of substance. In a sense, to be a citizen is to embrace the political institutions and to participate in the legally binding decisions which govern and shape one’s national community. But in the broader sense, and especially in a global context, citizenship is a felt, or moral, obligation. While I cannot vote for a foreign government, and while I have no democratic leverage when petitioning a foreign government, I still feel the ethical obligation to influence the course of global events. Thus in an increasingly global world there is a need to develop an understanding of citizenship which goes beyond the limitations of the nation-based model.
Sylvie Murray teaches American History at the University of the Fraser Valley. She earned her PhD at Yale University. Her book, *The Progressive Housewife: Community Activism in Suburban Queens, 1945–1965*, examines practices of active citizenship among the postwar suburban middle-class. Her current work includes SSHRC-funded research on citizens’ participation in the 1950s presidential elections. She is also writing an undergraduate text on changing conceptions of American citizenship during World War II.

Scott Fast has taught Canadian Politics, Comparative Government, and Political Theory at the University of the Fraser Valley since 1975. He received his Master’s Degree in Political Science from the University of British Columbia. His sub-field focus has been in Classical and Renaissance political thought and he is presently working on a book examining the intimate connection between property and citizenship in the Western tradition.

**Note**