

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Meira Levinson to share her research and practice on a kind of civic education called “action civics.” Action Civics helps students take informed action, which is Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Washington

Action Civics in the Classroom

Meira Levinson¹

The recently-released *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* proposes an “inquiry arc” organized around developing questions and planning inquiries, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluating sources and using evidence, and communicating conclusions and taking informed action. There are many ways to take informed action, including by writing editorials, leading an activity for younger students, curating an exhibit, or creating and sharing media. In this research brief, I want to draw attention to one ambitious but exciting way to foster students’ capacities to take informed action: namely, through action civics.

What is Action Civics, and How Does it Work?

As defined by the National Action Civics Collaborative, action civics is designed to create “an engaged citizenry capable of effective participation in the political process, in their communities and in the larger society.”² Through this model, students do civics and *behave as citizens* by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action. Programs that work with schools to foster this kind of work include Public Achievement and Earth Force at the national level, and Mikva Challenge, Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF), and Generation Citizen at the more local level.³

In each case, they help guide young people through the process of taking informed and empowered action on behalf of issues youth themselves care about, with the aim of helping them master knowledge, skills, beliefs, and habits of civic action that they can apply in the future as well. This work is usually divided into six stages of civic action—stages that importantly reflect and reinforce the new C3 Inquiry Arc.

The Mikva Challenge’s “Issues to Action” program, for example, teaches students to:

- Examine Your Community (*C3 Dimension 1: Developing Questions*)
- Choose an Issue (*Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries*)
- Research the Issue and Set a Goal (*Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools, and Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence*)
- Analyze Power (*Dimensions 2 and 3*)
- Develop Strategies (*Dimension 2 and Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions*)
- Take Action to Affect Policy (*Dimension 4: Take Informed Action*).⁴

These steps clearly encourage students to take ownership of a civic challenge that they care about, support their acquisition of the knowledge and skills needed to take meaningful action, expect students to take that action—to learn *through* citizenship and not just *about* citizenship—and then challenge students to reflect upon the experience as a means of consolidating

their learning and empowering them to take effective action in the future.

This kind of work is intentionally political and policy-oriented. Action civics programs discourage short-term ameliorative approaches—one-shot park cleanups or other forms of short-term volunteerism—in favor of longer term, institutionalized reforms via engagement with public policy, coalition-building, public awareness-raising, political engagement, and other change-oriented work. Youth organizers from the HSTF, for example, have successfully organized to get a youth center constructed next to a notoriously unsafe housing project, implement a pilot civics curriculum in Boston public high schools, and develop an action plan to improve relations between public transportation police and youths.⁵ Furthermore, as these examples demonstrate, these organizations and the civic engagement they foster build on students’ strengths. Students are positioned as knowledgeable insiders whose insights enable them to make a positive contribution as effective and powerful agents of change. This approach stands in stark contrast—especially for low-income youth of color—to their traditional positioning as bundles of deficits who traumatize the community via academic failure, idleness, and even criminal delinquency.

Brian Schultz, for example, has vividly described work he conducted as a teacher with fifth graders at a public school next to Chicago’s Cabrini Green housing project, in which they used action civics techniques to try to replace their crum-

bling, bullet-hole pockmarked building. Students at Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy in Washington, D.C., complete interdisciplinary freshman and sophomore “capstone projects,” a three-week junior year public policy internship, and year-long senior project focused on making “this world a better place by influencing the public policies that affect their communities.” First Amendment Schools and Big Picture Schools also demonstrate potential.⁶

The best action civics educators help students make sense of their experiences within a critical frame.⁷ They challenge students to take on a social justice orientation in reflecting upon their lived experiences and the actions they propose to take. They teach media literacy, power analysis, feminist perspectives, and similar critical stances to help young people rethink what is “normal” or acceptable about both the lives they lead and the changes they would like to bring about. Action civics-inspired educators are not content to let students’ unexamined assumptions structure and limit students’ analyses of the problems they face or of the range of solutions they consider.⁸ By changing how youth understand the world in which they live, therefore, these programs empower young people not only with respect to the particular problem they are concerned about, but more broadly with respect to rethinking social and political possibilities as a whole.

These more critical approaches incorporating both power analysis and social justice frameworks are most evident in programs and educators inspired by community organizing, like the Mikva Challenge and HSTF, and by traditions of youth participatory action research (YPAR), which are often inspired and led by university researchers and students. In YPAR, students “study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems,” but they do so usually using the techniques of critical theory and analysis. Students research current and historical power dynamics and systems of oppression, investigate their own reali-

ties through a newly developed critical lens based on their research, and then formulate collective action plans to create social change.⁹ As the noted YPAR researcher and activist Michelle Fine explains, “YPAR is not just about collecting stories and voices. It’s about attaching those ... to local conditions and the history of those conditions so young people can interrogate: how did we get here and how else might it be?”¹⁰ In so doing, students potentially learn to see not only current conditions but also knowledge itself as fallible and susceptible to reconstruction. In this respect, YPAR may function not only as a direct tool to promote civic empowerment, but also as a way of thinking about knowledge and the world that is itself civically transformative beyond the application of YPAR techniques themselves.

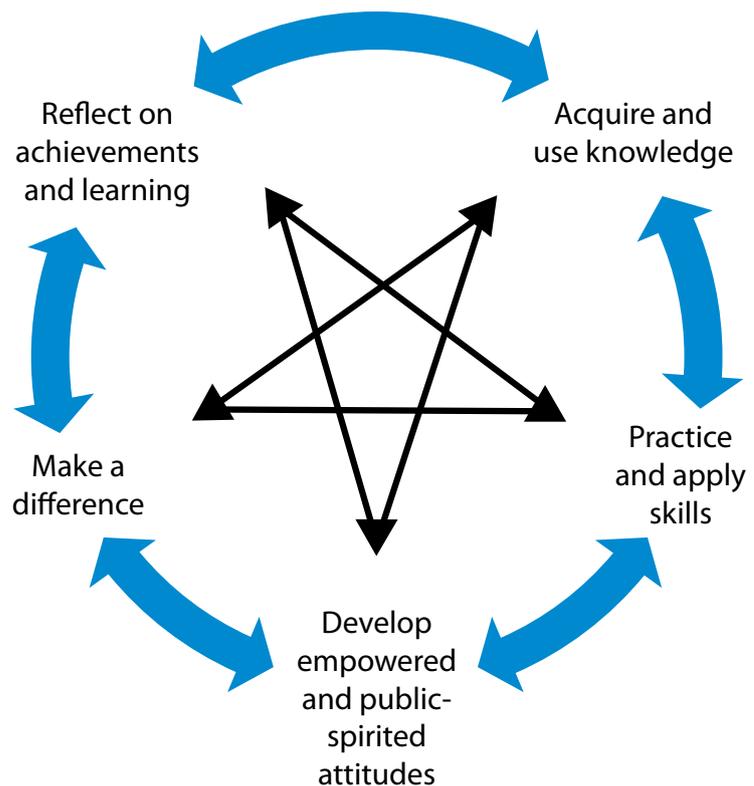
How Does Action Civics Work?

Action civics can motivate students to learn civically empowering knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors because

they are necessary to complete meaningful and demanding projects. The knowledge, skill, and behavior demands are intrinsic to the task, rather than extrinsically imposed by apparently arbitrary curriculum guides, standardized tests, or even teacher whim. In this respect, action civics replicates the virtues of other forms of “authentic” education, in which students consistently demonstrate greater learning, motivation, retention, and transfer than they do in more artificial, school-based contexts. It also replicates the “stickiness” of authentic learning: When young people (or adults) master knowledge, skills, or practices to accomplish real world tasks about which they care personally, they are much more likely to retain what they have learned and apply it to other contexts than when they merely try to memorize facts or the steps of a skill for a school-based test.¹¹

Action civics also creates a virtuous circle or feedback loop, where effective learning and practice improve outcomes in a way that motivates further learning

Figure 1: Virtuous Cycle of Action Civics Inquiry



and engagement. As one youth participant explained, “I never really had to make any decisions like this before this kind of experience.... Whereas, in school you work with a group to finish a project and do it the best you can, [here] you work in a group to make a good decision that will benefit other people and go farther and constantly expand.”¹² We might conceive of this virtuous cycle as represented in Figure 1.

When I taught eighth grade Civics in Action in the Boston Public Schools, for example, my students formally followed the exterior, clockwise cycle in completing their action civics projects. Students acquired and used knowledge both to select and to learn further about a problem they cared about. In so doing, and in order to make a case to others, they practiced and applied a variety of extant and new skills. As they developed expertise both about their problem and in how to deploy the levers of power to address their problem, they developed empowered and public-spirited attitudes. Instead of being overwhelmed by the challenges they saw in their communities, they developed efficacious and engaged civic identities that pushed them to try to make a real civic difference. Their celebration and reflection about their achievements, and about obstacles they still faced, helped them acquire new understandings about both themselves and their problem in particular, and about civic action and the political process in general, which in turn set them up for another cycle.

But the backwards-facing arrows, along with the internal arrows connecting each stage of the process with the others, demonstrate the more iterative and dynamic nature of the enterprise. As students improved their research skills, for example, they were able to access new knowledge. Some kinds of new knowledge—who their city councilor is and what he or she does, for example—directly impacted students’ capacities to make a difference. Action civics does not follow one neat path from conception to completion, just as its impact cannot

be limited solely to one kind of capacity. Studies of other, similar programs illuminate these varieties of impacts and outcomes, including significantly higher levels of: personal and political efficacy; communication, collaboration, and decision-making skills; knowledge of and interest in politics; expectation of participating in civic and political life, and sense of civic obligation.¹³

Why Does Action Civics Empower Youth?

It makes sense that action civics has such effects. There are three basic causal components of individuals’ civic engagement: ability or resources, motivation or engagement, and opportunity or recruitment.¹⁴ Action civics addresses all three of these causal components. In enhancing students’ acquisition of civic knowledge and skills, for example, action civics increases youths’ cognitive resources and abilities to participate effectively in civic and political life. Action civics gives students direct civic engagement opportunities, and also facilitates future recruitment by introducing youth to networks of civically engaged peers and adults who get to know one another and encourage each others’ participation often across boundaries of race, class, immigration status, education level, and other traditional sources of social segregation.¹⁵

Furthermore, action civics is especially promising and effective with respect to increasing motivation/engagement, which is often the forgotten middle child of political socialization and mobilization practices. By providing opportunities for civic involvement via personally meaningful experiences and projects that reflect students’ own interests, action civics builds motivation to participate that can then overcome diminished resources or opportunities in the future. As one HSTF youth worker explained, “Sometimes, like, working here makes me think that I have, like, the key to a door we can open. So it gives you a ray of hope.” Other youth civic leaders I interviewed made similar comments. What excites these young people, at least initially, is

not the civic engagement itself; rather, it is the achievement of goals that are personally important to them, for which civic engagement turns out to be the means. By achieving their goals through civic action, however, these youth remain civically engaged and are motivated to continue participating.¹⁶

These findings are consonant with other research. In her study of political pathways, for example, which also focused on civically active individuals who were demographically less likely to get involved, Hahrie Han found that “people’s commitment to issues often grew out of their participation,” rather than vice versa.¹⁷ Likewise, a comprehensive survey of research on the long-term effects of participating in extracurricular activities and community organizations such as 4H and Scouts finds that participation in such experiential civic activities “helps youth incorporate civic involvement into their identity during an opportune moment in its formative stages. Participation promotes the inclusion of a civic character into the construction of identity that, in turn, persists and mediates civic engagement into adulthood.”¹⁸

Just as the experiential component of action civics taps into the strengths of “authentic” educational practice more generally, action civics programs’ approach to youth as a positive resource—as a source of often untapped knowledge and strengths rather than a locus of deficits—taps into the more general strengths of culturally responsive and congruent education. Culturally relevant teaching is “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right.”¹⁹ When youths’ own cultural knowledge, habits, and practices are affirmed as having value, they can see themselves as valuable members of the polity more broadly; they also gain confidence in their capacities to navigate obstacles and challenges that

arise both inside and outside of school.

Some may worry that findings from out-of-school youth community engagement initiatives are especially suspect because of self-selection bias. Young people who get involved in community organizing efforts and similar groups are more likely already to be civically motivated and engaged. There's no reason to think that imposing action civics on other youth, who haven't sought out such experiences on their own, will have the same effect. There are good reasons, however, to think that they will have some effect—and also that they are among the most promising means of engaging at least some youth who otherwise would remain at the bottom of the civic empowerment gap. Consider 26 adult and youth civic leaders I interviewed in Boston, Austin, Atlanta, and Dearborn, Michigan. All of them had grown up (or were growing up) in financially struggling circumstances in low-income areas of town and were

from historically marginalized racial and/or ethnic groups. All but one attributed their initial civic involvement to being brought in by a parent, relative, teacher, pastor, or other mentor, or to participating in a youth group that to their surprise organized civic experiences. Admittedly, many others may also have been introduced to civic and political activities by a personal contact or youth group experience but failed to pursue additional opportunities on their own. These data do not prove that personal introduction to a civically empowering experience is *sufficient* for engendering civic engagement and empowerment. But they do suggest that such opportunities are *necessary* for doing so, and that a "simple but direct invitation to participate can make a critical difference."²⁰

Furthermore, many of the youth and adult civic leaders I interviewed described in detail how unintentional their initial involvement was—even to

the point of outright resistance. A student leader from Mikva Challenge acknowledged, "I kinda joined because all the other [after school] programs were full, so I thought, 'Hey, why not?'" Lourdes, an adult civic leader with Austin Interfaith, also became involved in civic action despite herself. "When the organizer came and talked to me I said, you know, whatever. Just someone else coming here to fix things for us. So I was not really interested in it, but I was going to be polite because the principal was getting them to talk to me. I really thought, though, one year and they'll disappear. That will be it. Things will be back to normal. So, for me it was—I had no interest." Although those who stick with youth organizing and other forms of civic engagement are likely different in a variety of ways from those who don't, it seems that initial interest can certainly be made rather than born; in other words, if young people are led

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or even forced to participate in action civics activities that are engaging, they may well become more civically engaged in the long run. Self-selection is not a necessary condition for civic experiences to be effective.²¹

Making it Real

Action civics is challenging, especially in traditional school-based settings. Teachers require support from within and outside schools. They need assistance identifying and developing high-quality curricula, programs, and partnerships, and then implementing them effectively. They need ample time both to plan and to teach. They need supportive colleagues and administrators, funds to pay for school buses, field trips, and site visits, food for end-of-project exhibitions and celebrations, and other necessary resources. And teachers will likely need assistance in the classroom itself during the height of action civics implementation, so 30 students at a time aren't relying on a single adult to guide them through a complex and challenging process. With these supports, however, educators have the opportunity to transform their own teaching and students' learning, engaging everyone in Taking Informed Action as an essential, motivating, and deeply educational culmination of the C3 Inquiry Arc. 🌍

Notes

1. Meira Levinson is a professor of education at Harvard University. The material in this article is adapted from *No Citizen Left Behind* by Meira Levinson, published by Harvard University Press. Copyright © 2012 The President and Fellows of Harvard College. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
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