A Cross Disciplinary Approach to Advancing our Understanding

of Adolescent Civic Development

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Abstract

This article argues for re-framing our understanding of civic and political participation (and by extension civic education) by sharpening our understanding of the developmental of civic skills. Civic skills appear to be critical for participation, developmental in nature, and acquired through explicit practice. I first review varying disciplinary approaches to civic engagement and then build a framework for political and civic “education” considered broadly – suggesting how and where young people learn to become engaged in civic and political life. Explicit focus on civic skills is relatively rare and I spend considerable time describing civic skills and suggesting a developmental path of civic skill acquisition. I conclude with implications of this proposed framework.
Despite the resurgence of interest in civic and political participation, usually under the umbrella term of “civic engagement”, over the past 15 years we still understand only pieces of exactly what compels some individuals to participate in political and civic life while others chose not to. Educators, policy makers and researchers alike have chased this question and the outlines of what we learned years ago remain dominant. Political participation is consistently and significantly correlated with the income and education of you and your parents. Even the significant growth in volunteering activities has not translated into increased political engagement. Following income and education of you and your parents, researchers consistently find that those who participate in extracurricular activities during high school are more likely to participate in political life as adults (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Student government leaders are on a clear participation path, these students assumed leadership positions from early ages. But what about those who participate in the yearbook or 4-H? What makes these activities such powerful predictors of later engagement?

*Voice and Equality* (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), the seminal study of political participation, provided an early finding about the relationship between extracurricular activities and later political participation. A key argument of the book is that those who participate in politics have three things that non-participants lack -- they are interested or otherwise motivated to get involved with a particular issue, they are connected to a network of decision makers and they possess the requisite civic skills to effectively utilize the time and or money they can contribute to an effort. Perhaps, the authors suggest, extracurricular participation during high school equips one with the civic skills needed for later engagement. As I will demonstrate, existing evidence strongly suggests that civic skills are learned through practice especially in adolescence. However, I have come to believe that adolescence is actually the testing ground for skills that were acquired earlier. If
accurate, this has significant implications for understanding civic development and may inform civic education efforts.

Four distinct bodies of literature contribute to my theory of Civic Development -- political science, with its focus on political participation; education, in particular writers from k-12 civic education; youth development, and developmental psychology. My own academic training does not make me an expert in any of the above, making this effort somewhat risky. I thus pose this theory as just that, an idea. I welcome discussion but am convinced that our understanding of the complexities of civic and political participation will benefit from higher level integration of our growing knowledge in disparate fields.

The past decade has seen a focus on the civic and political engagement of young people. As concern has been raised about the reported decline in participation (Putnam 2000 among numerous others) researchers in political science, education and psychology renewed their interest in young people resulting in a proliferation of programs and investment.

Much of the focus of the last decade has been on variations of service learning, community service, and volunteering. Volunteering movements have spawned community service requirements and 83% of college freshman recently reported they had done some type of community service during high school (Higher Education Research Institute 2006).

Over sixty researchers and practitioners met and signed onto The Civic Mission of Schools, a call for renewed attention to civic education in K-12 schools with six promising approaches that seem to foster increased engagement. Nearly one quarter of the nation’s colleges are members of Campus Compact, the national organization dedicated to building civic engagement into academic life (Campus Compact 2007). Philanthropic organizations such as the Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Annenberg Foundation have invested millions of dollars in youth related civic engagement programs and research. Even the
famed Carnegie classification of higher education now includes a voluntary category for “community engagement”.

While some attention has been paid to traditional curricular materials, Kahne and Westheimer (2006) observe that many recent efforts have focused on providing youth with opportunities to “make a difference in their community (pg 289).” The efforts are premised on the notion that these experiences will teach the value of service to others, develop the requisite skills, engender a sense of efficacy and improve their confidence in their own ability to make a difference.

But for all the interest, political behaviors we lump broadly under the umbrella of civic engagement have continued to decline, especially for young people. (The resurgence of young people voting in the 2008 elections may signal a change but at this writing that remains to be seen). The one major positive change, a significant growth in volunteering, has not coincided with an increase in more explicitly political arenas (Galston 2007).

This article argues for re-framing our understanding of civic and political participation (and by extension the role of civic education) by sharpening our understanding of the developmental of civic skills. Civic skills appear to be critical for participation, developmental in nature, and acquired through explicit practice. I first review varying disciplinary approaches to civic engagement and then build a framework for political and civic “education” considered broadly – suggesting how and where young people learn to become engaged in civic and political life. Explicit focus on civic skills is relatively rare and I spend considerable time describing civic skills and suggesting a developmental path of civic skill acquisition. I conclude with implications of this framework.

Collective action as the root of civic and political engagement

The origin(s) of civic and political participation continue to puzzle scholars. Disparate fields including political science, K-12 education (in particular a sub-group interested in civic education) and developmental psychology all contribute research and theory with the potential to
advance practice. Those interested in the preparation of young people for civic and political participation are faced with competing and occasionally contradictory theories (Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

The first question is just exactly what type of participation is desired. Many forms of participation are possible including voting, donating money or time to political campaigns, contacting elected officials or the media, protesting, boycotting or boycotting, or joining with others to improve the community through government and/or non-profit organizations. While each of these activities has value for sustaining a democracy, the latter activity is the focus of this paper.

Collective action in a democracy, working with others to improve the collective or common good, is a particularly sophisticated form of action and is one of the less common activities among Americans generally (Verba, Schlozman Brady 1995). In a national survey (Lopez et al 2006) 16% of 15-25 year olds reported being an active member of at least one political group and 19% reported having worked on “community problem solving”. This compares to 26% who indicate they are regular voters and 30% who have boycotted or boycotted products. Fewer numbers of young people have contacted elected officials (11%) or the media (7-9%) but that may be a function of age, exposure and opportunity.

While the indicators are imprecise, general trends indicate that young people remain relatively inactive in traditional political activities while voluntary and third sector activities are increasingly seen as an appropriate substitute for more explicitly political activity. This appears to hold even with the upsurge in youth voting during the 2008 Presidential election. While voluntary activities can help public schools avoid controversial issues and the accompanying political problems, the danger is a message to young people that society’s problems are best solved by individuals helping other individuals or “learning that citizenship does not require government,
politics or social action (Kahne and Westheimer pg 294)*. Collective decision making and action are falling by the wayside, something this approach tries to address.

**Current theories relevant to civic and political participation**

The seminal political participation model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) argues that adults who participate in politics are interested or motivated, connected to a network of decision makers and possess the requisite civic skills for participation. Other dominant political science concepts include political efficacy or confidence in ones ability to make a difference (Eyler and Giles 1999; Kahne and Westheimer 2006) and social capital, networks of relationships in the community (Putnam 2000). Whether more active individuals simply self-select remains an open question although Glanville (2000) found that personality traits and political attitudes only partially accounted for the relationship between extracurricular activities and political participation. The Political Engagement Project (Carnegie 2004) and programs run by institutions such as the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Center for Civic Education consistently find positive outcomes from projects aimed at enhancing political participation, even though participants do not always self-select. More research is needed but the evidence leans towards self-selection as an incomplete explanation.

Educators have coalesced around three necessary components of a civic education -- knowledge, skills and dispositions (Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE 2000; Patrick 2000). These are seen as the building blocks for engaged citizens. The nature of their work means that K-12 educators generally describe their efforts in a prospective manner – what is needed in the education process to produce X outcome while political scientists can reflect backwards asking what led to X outcome. In Table 1 I suggest a blending and extension of the two disciplinary approaches to provide a more useful framework for understanding civic and political participation.
Blending the two perspectives allows us to consider more completely how we can create more engaged citizens.

Table 1 here.

**Knowledge and Interest – Chicken and Egg**

Educators suggest an important role for civic knowledge and following a period in which we seemed to doubt the importance of political knowledge; work has once again generated interest with results indicating a clear link between knowledge and participation (Delli Caprini and Keeter 1996 and Neimi and Junn 1998). However, as Dudley and Gielson (2003) observe about our current understanding, “political knowledge is a necessary precondition to civic engagement, but information per se is unlikely to be a sufficient precondition to civic engagement. (pg 265).” Political information alone does not predict civic engagement.

Political knowledge appears to be most useful when it is in conjunction with what Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) call interest or motivation. Their Political Participation Model finds that interest is necessary but not sufficient for participation, in their model civic skills and connections to decision makers are also required for participation. A natural extension of this model is to presume that a base level of knowledge is required as well. The chicken and egg question of which comes first, the knowledge or the interest, does not require resolution if we presume they work in tandem, each encouraging the other. Educators and academics may lean towards knowledge as first, probably given their own approaches to understanding the world, they are highly skilled at conceptual learning, the acquisition of knowledge about something leads to an interest. However, an increasing body of literature about learning styles makes it plausible that many people, especially children, will become interested first and acquire a more conceptual
understanding second. The cycle of particular, general, particular (Tufte 2006) allows us to better blend knowledge and interest.

The concept of knowledge and interest as linked is supported in part by evidence about the importance of student voice for effective service learning projects (Morgan and Streb 2000) and school governance (Civic Mission of Schools 2003). The more students are involved in the choice and design of projects the more effective the service learning seems to be. A plausible argument is that lacking voice, students may not be interested in the project selected, and thus the learning becomes rote. Student voice provides a much higher chance that the students will be interested and thus the activity will be more consequential to them. The more consequential the activity to individuals, the more attention is given and the deeper the learning.

A corollary argument is found in adult behavior. Other than a small group of hyper-involved and attentive adults, most of us are involved in a relatively small number of activities, those that hold our interest or motivate us to act. Adults are involved in the things that interest them and matter to them. We would not suggest "picking" the activities for adults to be involved in and yet we have little difficulty doing the same for young people. Political scientists may be the least able to make this distinction, many of us have spent years in the profession and have an interest that borders on obsession. It does not seem natural to expect the same level of interest from the general public.

For civic educators then, re-considering existing theory and empirical evidence leads to an important conclusion: Knowledge is important, but interest and motivation are related to knowledge acquisition; either without the other is insufficient.

Civic Skills – A critical component

In political science, education and other disciplines, civic skills exist as part of a larger set of ideas about what is necessary for citizens to be engaged in public life (Kirlin 2003). The Political
Participation Model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) includes communication and organization skills as central to the ability to use contributions of time or money effectively. Patrick (2003) captures the manner that educators have labeled civic skills, largely as participatory and cognitive skills. Similarly, The Civic Mission of Schools (Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE 2003), a report identifying the components of “effective and feasible civic education programs” (page 4) includes acquisition of civic skills as a key goal in all the approaches they recommend. Finally, “positive youth development” has also contributed to the literature about programmatic experiences that have positive outcomes with a relationship to civic skill development, even if civic skills are not separately delineated. For example Stoneman (2002) argues that youth programming involving young people in project creation and governance of their organizations develops leadership and governance capacities that are useful for civic engagement.

The disciplinary starting points help explain the different interests but civic skills appear consistently. What has been lacking to date, even within disciplines, is a shared definition of civic skills and an understanding of the origins and development of civic skills.

**Civic Skill Definitions**

A first step in understanding civic skills is the creation of meaningful definitions. Previous research has demonstrated that although the term “civic skills” is used extensively there is no agreement about definition (Kirlin 2003). The following section describes four consistently referenced civic skill areas: communication, organization, collective decision making and critical thinking.

The most well-defined civic skills are those falling under the communications category identified originally by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) and Brady, Schlozman and Verba (1995). These include writing letters, being proficient in English, vocabulary, and making oral presentations or speeches (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Patrick 2000; Patrick 2003;
Batistoni 1997; Boyte 2000; Schwadel 2002; Torney-Purta 2002). These are perhaps the most intuitive of the civic skills because many behaviors associated with political participation, such as contacting elected officials, making presentations at public meetings and persuading others, involve some type of communication skill.

Scholars have paid significant attention to the delivery of communications by politicians and leaders but almost no attention to the development of explicitly civic communication skills. Stotsky (1991) highlights the lack of understanding and attention paid to civic writing while giving a thoughtful discussion of the reasons that civic writing is important to democracy. In a later work (1996) the author brings together a series of essays about civic education and language education, demonstrating that many aspects of communication are similarly under-studied. This may prove to be more important than it appears on the surface. One study of the hurdles urban youth face in attempting to become civically engaged made a poignant observation (Hart and Atkins 2002). As part of a project, a group of teens were asked to write postcards to their parents. “Only a few knew how postcards work – where stamps are placed, where the address should go, and so on. …we believe that these specific deficits reflect large holes in their knowledge of the United States and a broad lack of development of the skills necessary to participate in political life” (Hart and Atkins 2002, pg. 228). Communication skills can be summarized as the ability to effectively communicate in writing and orally.

Organization skills were also identified by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) and are necessary for accomplishing tasks, for knowing “how to cope in an organizational setting (pg 305)”. Specific skills here include organizing individuals to take action (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Brady, Schlozman and Verba 1995; Schwadel 2002), running meetings, and planning to take action (Boyte 2000). The acquisition of resources and execution of the plan prove important organization skills. Central to the organizing tasks are seeming simple tasks such as finding
space for an event or meeting, getting notices out, keeping records of decisions and following up on action. The organizing is the central theme, not the action.

In civic and political environments, the organization skills become crucial – generally speaking, individuals can do more by working together toward common interests than by acting alone. While one letter may have an impact on a decision maker, organizing a group of people to express similar opinions is usually much more powerful. Note that this is distinct from making decisions about what to do, that falls under a separate skill category.

The third set of skills is grouped under the heading collective decision making skills. I have labeled them such because these encompass a distinct set of skills which are necessary for democratic governance, as Patrick puts it, ‘interacting with others to promote personal and common interests’ (Patrick 2000, pg. 5). This skill set includes the interrelated skills of expressing your own opinion, understanding other’s preferences, and working towards a decision (sometimes involving some individual compromise) for the collective or common good.

This is a distinctly different concept that individuals inherently value “differences” or diversity for its own sake, seeking out diverse viewpoints for the richness of the experience. Collective decision making as a civic and political skill simply recognizes that, in order to accomplish a task for many people, individual preferences need to be expressed but then aggregated in a manner that reflects what is best for the group. It is a skill because it appears to be a learned behavior, not a naturally occurring behavior. This becomes clearer when developmental influences are introduced later in this paper.

Working through differences to find a consensus is often done in organizational settings. Extracurricular organizations can provide lessons in consensus building on issues less divisive then those found in the political arena. On a less optimistic note, a recent study examined how students’ pre-college experiences predisposed them to see the world from other’s perspectives,
believe that conflict enhances democracies, and view social action as important (Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan and Landerman 2002). These authors note positive relationships between extracurricular experiences and democratic values but overall, find that college students are often poorly prepared to negotiate in environments with conflict, exactly the type of environment in which political decisions are often made. This finding may be because exposure to differing opinions and the development of tolerance is important but not sufficient for true collective decision making.

Collective decision making requires that one be able to seek a solution that is best for the group as a whole. For now, it is sufficient to note that at some point individuals must learn that working collectively has more benefit that going it alone.

The final category of civic skills is critical thinking, referred to in much of the education literature as cognitive skills. These are well described and include identifying and describing, analyzing and explaining, synthesizing, thinking critically and constructively and formulating positions on public issues (Center for Civic Education 1994; Patrick 2003). A series of increasingly complex cognitive processes are beneficial for engaging in political life. First, individuals must be capable of thinking through the options presented in a given situation. More sophisticated cognitive skills include the ability to think abstractly, reasoning about categories of problems and conceiving of new solutions to problems. It is important to observe that the more advanced conceptual skills are not required for making choices about individual preferences in policy situations but are important for those charged with reaching compromise on problems. The implications of this distinction will be discussed further in the following sections.

**Acquiring Civic Skills: Developmental Influences**

The term “skill” implies a learned behavior. Skills have several characteristics: a) the ability to use one's knowledge effectively and readily in execution or performance b) dexterity or coordination especially in the execution of learned physical tasks and, c) a learned power of doing
something competently: a developed aptitude or ability. Skills then are behavioral, not attitudinal or normative, and they are learned through practice. Individuals are not born with civic skills, the skills must be acquired and then practiced; there appears to be a lengthy continuum from initial development of civic skills to mastery of the skills. The continuum will span from those with no skills to those so proficient that they are considered “expert”. Civic educators ought to be interested in developing sufficient mastery of civic skills to enable effective participation in political life, contributing time, money and talent effectively to causes deemed worthy by the individual. The story of civic skill development appears to begin well before high school. In fact, although the strong relationship between adolescent extracurricular activity and adult political participation (Kirlin 2002) would seem to make adolescence seem important, it appears that adolescence is really the practicing ground for mastery of skills previously acquired. The most comprehensible way to describe the development of skills is to take a single individual along the developmental path.

Mainstream developmental psychologists divide development into several stages. The following stages are useful groupings; early childhood (0-6 years), middle childhood (6-12 years), early adolescence (12-15 years) and late adolescence (15-25 years). This grouping is not meant to be absolute in terms of the activities that occur but rather is suggest of time periods in which key developments seem to occur in most children (Cole and Cole 2001).

**Early Childhood**

Communicating one’s own perspective is central to the later skill of participating in democratic decision making processes. Clearly, language acquisition is a critical milestone but successful oral communication means not simply the expression of preference as a two year old might, but the more sophisticated process of communicating with another individual in a way that allows shared understanding. Anyone who has watched the evolution of young children's
interactions from parallel play around 12-24 months to more fully engaged play by about age 36 months has watched this happen. Younger children appear to be playing together but really are simply playing near each other with little communication. Over the course of 12 to 24 months the play evolves to more sophisticated conversations, “make-believe” play where children assume roles, and more effective communication about individual desires. The communication has an early interactive quality to it.

While young children are learning about consequences of actions, the expectations about what they can remember and be accountable for remain fairly limited, a result of their more limited memory capacity. However that begins to change about age six.

Middle Childhood: The seeds of collective decision making

Middle childhood appears to be the most critical time for the development of civic skills. Three developmental spurts lay the groundwork for later action. First, around age six, most children have significant increases in their memory capacity. This means they can increasingly be trusted to act on their own; to have a plan and understand what it takes to achieve it. Researchers have noted this development across both industrialized societies, where 6 is often the age of formal schooling, and more agrarian societies where 6 is the age at which children begin to have real responsibilities in the care of livestock, crops, or other family obligations. Children begin the long process of moving towards more abstract and conceptual thinking.

A second related development is the ability to control their own impulses long enough to finish a task. This self-control expands during middle childhood and eventually becomes the capacity to delay gratification. The willingness to give something up for the good of the group (often required in democratic decision making) depends at some level on the belief that in the long run the group will also make you better off, a form of delayed gratification. This is related to the final developmental factor.
As a result of increased memory capacity (self-reliance) children begin spending larger amounts of time away from their parents in the company of their peers. This period ushers in the final developmental process -- perspective taking begins to develop. Perspective taking simply means the ability to understand that someone else can have a different view of an issue that you do. Again, this essentially apolitical skill becomes central to later democratic participation. In order to participate in a meaningful decision making process, a child must first understand that others may have a different view then their own. To carry out a decision for the common good, they must sometimes delay or compromise their own gratification for the good of the group.

These three developmental processes, increased memory, delayed gratification, and perspective taking, appear to be foundations of civic skill development. Specifically, increased memory enhances critical thinking and organization skills, perspective taking lays the groundwork for understanding that others will have different views that must be taken into account for collective decision making and finally, delayed gratification) provides the patience for organizing and carrying out longer term projects (especially when something must be given up).

**Game playing in middle childhood, a critical link**

Piaget noted that around the age of 8 children became very engrossed in the playing of formalized games, especially what we would now consider “pick-up” sports or board games. These interactions allowed children to have several socialization experiences that seem logically related to civic skill development. First, they have experiences with other people that they could not have alone. Playing monopoly alone simply doesn’t have the same allure; similarly, many sports require groups of people to work effectively. This appears to be an important step in understanding that group activities can be rewarding, allowing one to have experiences that are difficult or impossible alone. Games also require variations on the idea of taking turns; children learn that in order for group activities to be successful, you need to adhere to a set of rules. No
one gets to spend the entire game at bat, nor does any one individual get to roll the dice and take
every turn at monopoly. Not only would the game not be fun, it also wouldn’t be fair. Delayed
gratification and perspective taking are the precursors to successful participation in game playing.

Later in middle childhood, children begin to realize that the rules of the games are socially
imposed and can be amended with agreement from the players. (Remember the pot of money in
the middle of the monopoly board for those who land on free parking?) This is a critical step in
understanding democracy and collective decision making, everyone lives within the larger
framework of the rule of law but attempts to change them are appropriate. The idea that a set of
overarching rules is beneficial to the group is being learned, not through direct instruction but
through repeated rewarding experiences with peers.

The process of give and take about rules also reinforces communication skills; those who
can express their proposals for new or amended rules clearly are more likely to be understood.
Furthermore, if the speaker has sufficient perspective taking skills, he may be more proficient in
explaining why the proposal might be attractive to other players.

Importantly, the activities observed by Piaget were not structured by adults but were driven
by the interests and agreements of the children involved. I confess to having observed this
behavior in my own home as a group of children aged 4-10 devised and implemented elaborate
rules for playing with Lego and play mobile pieces. The process involved allocation of scarce
resources, concern for those who might be less able (the 4 year old), creating a “fair” system and
even a simple process for resolving disputes. This would seem to be the beginning of collective
decision-making, children have a shared goal, an overarching set of rules that are commonly
understood, and need to “work it out” together.

In sum, middle childhood may be a much more central period for the acquisition of civic
skills than previously recognized. The development of enhanced memory, self-control/delayed
gratification and perspective taking allow a child to engage in more sophisticated interactions with his peers. These interactions expose the child to the benefits of working with others towards a common goal but also demonstrate that sometimes your own desires and wishes need to be suppressed for the entire group to accomplish a goal. This is at the heart of collective decision-making for the common good.

An important implication of the primacy of middle childhood for civic skill development is that collective decision making is appropriately viewed as learned through experience, not direct instruction. Children learn that in order to participate they must take turns and consider others; children who are lacking those capacities quickly get excluded and avoided. In some cases, less skilled children will become bullies, a particularly unfortunate development. Of course, it is also possible that the bullies are in fact highly skilled and simply choose to use their skills for less beneficial ends. It appears that children are actively involved in practicing interaction skills that become central to their ability to function in democratic society.

Given all of the above, the types of activities children engage in during middle childhood become central to their civic skill acquisition. The question of where civic skills are being developed is worth a brief discussion. For many children today, the peer group activities that Piaget observed are largely absent. Board games have been replaced by video games. While many computer activities are in fact “interactive”, they do not require give and take with another individual, the computer responds to the choices made by the child. “Pick-up” sports or games are also a thing of the past, replaced by highly structured sports activities, organized and managed by adults, with no room for amending rules or sorting out what to do with cheaters. My son learns a lot about soccer but little about democracy in his organized league. Where then, are children learning to interact with their peers, voice their opinion, and work out rules for the benefit of all?

Adolescence
The above framework suggests that many civic skills are actually acquired during middle childhood, but existing empirical research points to adolescence as an important predictor for later civic and political engagement. Specifically, after income and education, participation in extracurricular activities during high school is the biggest predictor of later political engagement. It would appear that civic skills initially learned during middle childhood are then practiced and honed with considerably more sophistication during adolescence. Like other skills, civic skills acquired in one arena can be transferred for use in another arena. Skill transfer may be occurring much earlier, the skills initially learned in middle childhood may be transferred from game playing and purely social activities to more consequential activities such as school groups and club environments. By adolescence, children with lower skill sets may opt out of participating because they are no longer comfortable. Conversely, those with civic skills in place are eager to practice them further in more interesting and consequential contexts; hence, some of the self-selection we see in high school participation may be related to existing skills. An important question for researchers is the extent to which skill differences exist by the beginning of adolescence.

Developmental influences continue although for civic skills they are not as profound during adolescence as they are during middle childhood. Presuming that children have adequately developed during middle childhood, adolescence leads to another significant jump in memory and logic capacity, allowing them to move into the realm of concrete operations, the ability to solve more complex problems and consider consequences and actions more abstractly. Ideas such as fairness, justice and the abstract ideas of democracy and the common good are more readily understood. The ability to consider behavior more abstractly often leads to tensions as they sort out the behavior that has been expected from what they observe in the world around them. Acting on these concepts requires more than simply understanding them. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that critical thinking skills are further developed during adolescence.
Enhanced memory and logic capacity seem to contribute to the development of two other civic skills but in less direct ways. First, communication skills, especially written communication, should be improved with better critical thinking. But they also improve with practice, something high school students get in heavy doses. Sophistication of written and oral language can improve significantly but the core communication abilities necessary for basic political participation should be largely in place by early adolescents. The extra time spent seems to contribute to mastery, not core acquisition.

Organization skills should also improve with enhanced memory and improved critical thinking capacity, but the cognitive or planning side of organizing is only one part of the skill. The second component involves actually executing the plan, acquiring the resources whether it means marshalling people to do a task, raising money, or securing a facility. The process of making something happen is an active process of getting things done. This is improved with practice and adolescents generally have many more opportunities to organize activities for themselves than younger children do. The portion of organizing as a skill, a learned behavior, has many opportunities for development during high school.

The roots of collective decision making skills appear to have been laid down in middle childhood. The critical developmental task of perspective taking has begun and ideally young people have had many opportunities to practice collective decision making skills in informal small group settings (game playing, recess, etc.). By early adolescents children have usually had at least some close friendships, relationships in which they would willingly give something up to help the person they care about. They may also belong to a group of friends at school or in a church setting, providing more opportunities to socialize on a regular basis.

Recall that the jump in memory for 6 year olds is accompanied by an increase in time spent with peers; adolescence brings even more time with peers and correspondingly less with
adult supervision in either a classroom or home environment. Increased self-reliance means that many teens are free to choose how they spend large portions of their time. In most non-industrialized societies, adolescence is a time spent learning the tasks that will be required to be a member of the society. The learning occurs within the family or community unit or in mentoring types of relationships. In any event, the adolescent takes on increasing responsibility for tasks that have consequences, their choices and actions matter in an immediate sense to their family and community.

In more industrialized societies adolescence is spent acquiring additional formal education. This education often includes attention to the further development of communication and critical thinking skills. Opportunities for practicing organization and collective decision making skills should also be provided although this seems to happen much less frequently.

**Late adolescence**

The primary development that occurs in late adolescence is a shift from concrete to formal operational thought. This shift allows the individual to comfortably think in abstract terms. Not all individuals will reach this developmental milestone although it appears in most societies whether industrialized or not, and is always learned through some sort of instruction. While college may offer important opportunities to develop formal operational thought, student government, clubs and organizations provide additional opportunities to practice civic skills on a relatively small scale.

Operational thinking is valuable for doing the more sophisticated types of thinking but it is important to note that it is not a pre-requisite for participation in a democracy. Many individuals are adept at expressing their own perspectives and considering others while working towards a solution. This is every bit as critical as those who think conceptually about possible solutions. In this sense, it seems to me that the notion of critical thinking as central to political participation may be overstated. I would far prefer to work with a group of people concerned about the collective
welfare than a group with “rational” solutions to problems. Thus, for purposes of this paper, civic skills will include only formal operations, with an emphasis on the ability to sort out consequence of differing choices. Table 2 summarizes the relationship between development and civic skills. Table 2 here.

**Values and Dispositions of Citizens in a Democracy**

We now return to the more comprehensive model of civic education posed above and consider the role of values in relationship to knowledge/interest and civic skills. Although collective decision making for action is a skill, it is also ultimately a value or disposition and finally, it is learned. Effective collective decision making and action may involve initial “competition” as individuals assert differing ideas and preferences for obtaining a collective goal, but a successful end result, making and executing a collective choice, requires collaboration.

Psychologists have found that competitive and collaborative behaviors of young people are malleable; they are not pre-determined but seem to be heavily influenced by cultural norms. Cole and Cole (2001) document a series of research projects that reach important conclusions about competitive and cooperative or collaborative behavior. First, urban youth are generally more competitive than rural youth, a finding that holds true internationally. Second, Americans tend to be more independent and competitive than youth from many other cultures. Finally, exposure to situations requiring cooperation changes the behavior of those who were previously competitive. Importantly, competitive behaviors emerged or where heightened when two groups were offered the chance to “play” together, cooperative behaviors only emerged after groups confronted a situation that was consequential and necessitated cooperation of the two groups to solve.

If values are learned through experience, and the benefits of working collaboratively can be learned through experience, than it is a logical step to argue that civic education models should include consequential opportunities requiring young people to work together to solve a collective
dilemma. This is also consistent with the civic skills arguments above; practice appears crucial for mastery of the skill and embracing of the values.

In a society so focused on the individual and their preferences, a value on the collective or common good must be intentionally delivered to compete effectively. The tensions between individual and community were well articulate at the founding of the country, and we have chosen to live with the tension rather than falling squarely on one side or the other. However, the “values” of democratic society are learned, as John Dewey indicated long ago, and must be learned anew in every generation. Perhaps we have neglected our responsibility to teach the value of the collective good while succeeding in teaching the value of individual freedoms.

**Toward a new model of Civic Development**

In 2003, a respected group of researchers and practitioners signed off on *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a plea for renewed attention to civic education. Included were six approaches to civic education, considered “promising” because each had at least some evidence of success. The authors were careful to note that none of the approaches alone were sufficient, that an optimal plan included repeated experience with at least several of the various approaches. This message of balance and varying but repeated experience is at the heart of the framework proposed here for civic education.

First, knowledge acquisition and interest/motivation must go hand in hand. Research supporting the role of knowledge for political participation, student voice, open classroom climates, and the benefits of discussing current events both at home and school, all support this proposition. Engagement is active -- if that is what we expect from adults we must teach students to approach learning the same way by stimulating and respecting their interests and using it to deepen more sophisticated and conceptual knowledge.
Second, civic skills are critical, learned, and developmental. Cultivating them necessitates intentionally weaving them into experiences of young people. The developmental model above suggests that civic skill development begins long before adolescence at which point, young people should be immersed in “practicing” their civic roles in environments that are of a manageable scale and consequence, most likely in their schools, clubs and other organizations.

Finally, valuing collective decision making and action comes alongside repeated experiences that demonstrate the importance of the less-than-perfect democratic process.

All this has implications for practice and research. First, the process learning to be engaged should be increasingly consequential. Political participation for adults is consequential; we are involved because we care about the outcome. People who read this journal are what I affectionately call “outliers”. We are generally passionate about politics for a host of reasons, many of them quite intellectual. It is important not to confuse our academic interest with the personal interest that drives most participatory behavior. Interest is often motivated because the consequences of a public action (or inaction) are perceived as detrimental or beneficial to an individual. While some engage because it is simply “fun”, many become involved because they are concerned about a particular issue that affects them in some way.

This seems entirely reasonable and implies that before expecting individuals to care broadly about concepts such as social justice and societal equity, they must be encouraged to express their own (sometimes self-centered) preferences in relatively safe environments. It is only through learning that others (with whom they must work) have different preferences and needs that they begin to change their own behavior. The First Amendment Schools have much to teach us about encouraging decision-making and collective behavior in elementary school children.

Second, we can not avoid conflict in our politics and we should not avoid it in our classrooms. The finding that many adults view politics as conflict and conflict as inherently bad
(Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001) provides a glimpse of what we are up against. The skill of collective decision making requires that differences be not simply tolerated but worked with and around. Conflict is an inherent part of collective life and avoiding it likely makes people even less skilled at collective behaviors. Working towards common goals despite differences in interests, skills and values is a lofty task, but it seems central to our efforts to create a more engaged citizenry.

As others have observed, the current focus on voluntary activities as political training grounds for young people is a mixed bag. While possibly motivating young people to pay attention to the world around them, the individual level solutions that it encourages may fall far short of what is needed. They leave people without civic skills to participate in collective action themselves, encourage a negative view of conflict and government, and suggest that simple solutions are possible.

The challenge of all of this work is to conduct it in a manner that is not normative about anything but the democratic process itself. Our rush to the voluntary sector often has had a decidedly liberal bias, explicitly or implicitly suggesting that social justice is the goal of political action and that government is the problem to be fought against, not the mechanism by which to make change. Encouraging political voice and nurturing civic skill development may mean that young people choose to exercise their power in ways that run contrary to individual beliefs. In the end, as long as collective decision making processes are being learned and the common good embraced, we should not stand in the way.

One hundred years ago John Dewey suggested that democracy must be learned anew by each generation. This paper suggests that our models of civic education are inadequate. The preponderance of empirical and theoretical evidence suggests a different model of civic education may be much more powerful. Combining knowledge and interest, intentionally developing civic
skills and providing myriad opportunities to learn collective decision making skills and values seems to offer a more hopeful alternative.
References:


Table 1.
An Alternative Framework for thinking about Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Science</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>An Integrative Participation Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest/motivation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995)</td>
<td>Knowledge (Patrick 2000; Civic Mission of Schools 2003; Dudley and Gitelson 2003)</td>
<td>Knowledge and interest as related components, either alone is insufficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills (Kirlin 2003; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995)</td>
<td>Skills (Patrick 2000)</td>
<td>Developmentally related civic skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy (Kahne and Westheimer 2006, Youniss and Yates 1996)</td>
<td>Dispositions or values (Patrick 2000; Youniss and McClellan 1997)</td>
<td>Values acquired from repeated experiences that internalize them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social capital (Putnam 2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Civic Skills and Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Approximate age of acquisition</th>
<th>Discussion (Largely from Cole and Cole (2001))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oral communication</strong></td>
<td>1-3 early acquisition</td>
<td>Adolescence – significant increase in conceptual complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(persuasive speech to individuals and/or groups)</td>
<td>2-6 increase in complexity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Written communication</strong></td>
<td>5-12 years</td>
<td>Adolescence – increase in sophistication of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(letters, memos, arguments)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organize tasks</strong></td>
<td>7-10 year olds</td>
<td>Increased memory capacity also contributes to ability to consider multiple steps required to organize tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>required to accomplish strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan strategies for action</strong></td>
<td>8-10 years</td>
<td>Multiple solutions to problems can be considered in part because working memory capacity has increased significantly. This allows them to begin planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acquire resources to implement strategy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not clearly tied to a developmental influence, simpler items such as raising money can begin fairly young.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understand others opinions</strong></td>
<td>3-5 years simplest</td>
<td>3-5 yrs, early understanding that others may have different thoughts. Moral reasoning about how to treat others doesn’t appear until adolescence and develops through early adulthood. Middle childhood children begin to act taking into account others perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adolescence most sophisticated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Be able and willing to</strong></td>
<td>2 yr olds can</td>
<td>Young children show empathy and try to help, by 3-6 can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>compromise your own preferences for the collective good</strong></td>
<td>empathize and will try to help others although not at their own expense 6-8 years relative to games with rules 10-11 years in less structured contexts in personal settings Adolescence for abstract consideration of others</td>
<td>accurately interpret others feelings. Game playing in middle childhood (6-8 yrs) may be important precursor to real compromise, teaches that there are social rules, balancing your desires against the rules of the group. Learning that social rules provide a structure that makes cooperation with others possible. Golden rule morality becomes evident. By 8, understanding that fairness may not mean equal. By 9-11, understand that rules are developed by group, can be changed but only with group consensus. By 10-11, shared feelings and agreements, especially with close friends, become more important than self interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify constructive ways to improve complex situations.</td>
<td>Adolescence, 14-19</td>
<td>Significant increase in cognitive capacity for complex thinking, including hypothetical situations and thinking out of the conventional frame, formal operational thinking has begun, ability to consider multiple dimensions of a “whole” problem. However, mastery is only present if education and training has specifically focused on systematic thinking. Highly dependent on practice in appropriate contexts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>