



Why COMMUNITY Matters

Connecting Education
with Civic Life

Nicholas V. Longo

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with Civic Life*

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*For Mom and Dad, Paula and Nick Sr.,
and
for Aleida and Maya*

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Preface

The idea for this book began, without my knowing it, when as an undergraduate student I was invited to participate outside what sometimes felt like the “bubble” of the college campus in several courses that included community service. I soon became immersed in community problem-solving as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student working at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota. These experiences introduced me to a new educational method as well as a different kind of politics.

The relationships I formed across age, race, class, and cultural differences with people outside the campus were different from those I had with a teacher and my peers in the classroom. Both were learning relationships, but my experiences in the community allowed me to see more diverse perspectives; they also had more public and productive dimensions.

Learning in a community context was actually very natural and powerful, especially as I began to ask people to tell stories of meaningful learning experiences, along with stories of how they formed civic identities. Most, like me, engaged in meaningful learning outside the confines of the school building. People also tend to learn about public issues in community settings, like the local pizzerias, delis, and barber shops where I discussed the issues of the day growing up in Yonkers, New York.

Simply put, I learned that it takes a village to educate a citizen. This idea is founded on the premise that schools are essential for the civic growth of children, but inadequate to the educational equation. Communities must also be educative. I’ve since realized that, as a society, we’re not doing so well at this. We rely too much on a single institution to solve all of our problems. Education has become confused with schooling. This is also true for the most fundamental of challenges: educating for democracy.

While “civic education” is now a buzzword among policy makers and educators concerned about the state of our democracy, especially the

disconnection of young people from public life, this field of endeavor is often too narrowly defined. Aside from the focus on schooling and curriculum, civic education tends to promote the easiest things to count—voting, volunteer hours, and the acquisition of civic knowledge. When this happens, civic learning is an isolated project, not part of a broader culture of democratic engagement. And, perhaps most significant, civic education becomes about getting young people to participate in the system as it is, rather than helping to create a different kind of public life.

Yet there is a great possibility for a more expansive approach to civic learning. My experience with a different type of education and politics, of course, is by no means unique. There is an emerging movement for a citizen-centered democracy in an array of fields, including education, as Harry Boyte, Peter Levine, Carmen Sirianni, Cynthia Gibson and others have documented.¹ What might be less apparent, however, is that this movement is part of a long tradition of citizens using education to build democratic communities.

This book is an attempt to introduce a conception of learning and civic life in which education for democracy is a function of whole communities. To accomplish this, I draw on both the current and historical examples that see the importance of community in educating for democracy and argue for an ecological approach to civic learning. This conception traces back to the late nineteenth century with the settlement house movement and Jane Addams's Hull House in urban Chicago, and then directly ties to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s with the educational efforts of the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee. These traditions, fortunately, are still very much alive in communities around the country, most especially on the West Side of St. Paul in a community-based civic learning experiment called the Neighborhood Learning Community.

Education as the function of whole communities is about more than standardized tests, and it involves more than preparation for the workplace. It is also about more than preparing people to be part of the system "as it is." This book attempts to tell stories that run counter the dominant political, educational, and research narratives.

First and foremost, this book invites the possibility of a different kind of politics in striking contrast with the zero-sum "politics as usual" that today has created a divisive, bitter landscape of Red and Blue America. Moving beyond a limited scarcity model toward a politics of abundance means a transformation of our public life. Public life, then, is about creative possibility and the many resources in a community.

But getting to this different kind of politics requires a change in the way we view civic education. It seems that education is the ideal arena to transform civic life. Education for democracy cannot be a passive experience; it must be engaged. And education, more than any other endeavor, allows us to see the whole as more than individual parts. Quite simply, there is much to gain by reaching beyond the schools to make education the function of the entire community.

Thus, this book makes an important claim about education policy. I examine the connection between education, community, and democracy—and provide an important alternative to the emphasis on high-stakes testing and school-based accountability measures that dominate the current national educational policy debates.

Finally, seeing the value in this different approach to politics and education requires seeing the importance of a new kind of epistemology. Learning and knowledge creation outside of the traditional classroom, of course, are a challenge to the very way we know. Like the civic actors I write about in this book, I do not attempt to present “objective” data or “quantifiable” findings; rather, this research embodies my belief that as a practitioner and scholar, my work is based on living relationships with people—I see the sometimes subtle power of people telling their own stories.

Relationships are at the core of educating for democracy, and relationships can be at the core of engaged research. Research need not be detached; it can be engaged and concerned. As engaged scholarship, my aim is to continue a conversation, rather than discover a truth. I have tried, to use Herman Blake’s wonderful phrase, to “listen eloquently” and then describe accurately and compellingly the stories that follow.²

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Acknowledgments

My experience in researching and writing this book has only confirmed for me that community matters, as I have been supported by a group of colleagues, friends, and family to whom I am deeply grateful. This book, in many ways, is a continuation of our ongoing conversations.

First, I want to thank the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) for recognizing the importance of the community dimension of civic learning and funding this project at an early stage. I especially want to thank Peter Levine for his encouragement and ongoing support, along with Abby Kiesa, William Galston, and Mark Lopez.

I was also generously supported by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation that helped this material take shape as a book, and I am especially grateful to David Mathews and John Dedrick. Kettering's vast civic network also had a great impact on my thinking about democracy, including Guillermo Correa, Carolyn Farrow-Garland, Laura Hall, Valarie Lemmie, Ileana Marin, Randy Nielsen, Hal Saunders, and Maxine Thomas.

My work with the Center for Democracy and Citizenship grounds my understanding of the central role that citizens can play in public life. Harry Boyte is a great mentor who guided me through the various stages of this book; his belief in the possibility of ordinary citizens, along with his ability to build a practical philosophy of democratic politics, continue to inspire. So, too, does Nan Skelton, a savvy and energetic organizer, who always sees possibilities for community.

Jerry Stein pushed me to strengthen my argument with warmth and generosity; his wisdom fills these pages. John Wallace introduced me to Highlander Folk School and the importance of asking questions. Others at the University of Minnesota were extremely helpful in the development of this book, especially Mike Baizerman, Jane Plihal, and Rob Shumer.

In Minnesota, I was immersed in a community of learners at the Jane Addams School, with the Citizenship Group, and then in the broader Neighborhood Learning Community. These experiences gave my ideas about the connection between education and civic life a more practical base. It is difficult to write about the genuine relationships that develop through these experiences, but I am grateful to D'Ann Lesch, Nan Kari, Kari Denissen, Kong Her, Gunnar Liden, the Ly family, Derek Johnson, See Moua, and many others for helping me to try to capture this powerful way of learning in community. Perhaps more than anything, it was my time with Mai Lor Thao and the Xiong family that helped me to understand the importance of learning outside the classroom. They have been great teachers.

Another great teacher, Rick Battistoni, fueled my interest in civic education, and provided timely advice and encouragement. I also want to thank Tom King, Hugh Lena, Keith Morton, Jim Tull, and the students and faculty in the Feinstein Institute for Public Service for introducing me to new ways of thinking about community.

John Saltmarsh saw promise in me as a scholar and practitioner, and has helped me become better at both. Chris Caruso's enthusiasm for this project has been very important, especially as he puts these ideas into practice in New York City's after-school programming; Ross Meyer helped me clarify my arguments and our collaboration on student political engagement has been essential; and Liza Pappas and Adam Reich provided many hours of spirited conversations, along with even better friendships.

Ira Harkavy has helped me see the importance of colleges and universities as vehicles for community problem-solving. I learned much from leaders in the field of civic education, especially Cindy Gibson, Carmen Sirianni, and Liz Hollander and the Campus Compact network. Joe Kahne also provided invaluable support and feedback. Lisa Chesnel of SUNYPress saw the value of this project and made it a better book.

At Miami University, Dick Nault, Denny Roberts, Peggy Shaffer, and John Skillings have shown great faith in the power of community engagement for educating the next generation of democratic citizens through the Harry T. Wilks Leadership Institute.

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Most of all, I want to thank my family. My parents Nick Sr. and Paula, a politician and a teacher, nurtured my passion for education and democracy and supported me more than I deserve or could repay. As always, Anna Marie and Alison each provided much-needed encouragement.

I owe my greatest debt and thanks to my wife, Aleida Benitez, whose efforts bring the ideas in this book alive in ways my words never could. Our relationship continually encourages, stretches, and inspires me and this work and gives it all greater meaning. Just as I was finishing this book, our daughter Maya Paula arrived, giving us immense hope for the future, a future we want to be part of making a little more democratic.

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Chapter One

Introduction *The Ecology of Civic Learning*

Now the change which is coming into our education is the shifting of the center of gravity. It is a change, a revolution, not unlike that introduced by Copernicus when the astronomical center shifted from the earth to the sun.

—John Dewey, *The School and Society*

Education is seen as the only road to a flourishing democracy. We rely on education to prepare citizens for an ongoing commitment to public life. And yet, “American democracy is at risk,” according to a new report from the American Political Science Association’s first Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement, echoing many previous studies on civic participation.¹ Perhaps part of the problem lies in the way we conceptualize education.

“There is a fundamental problem in the progressive theory of education that I think bears scrutiny by those concerned with the politics of education in contemporary America,” begins Lawrence Cremin in his 1975 lecture to the John Dewey Society. Cremin, the former dean of Columbia University’s Teachers College who has written extensively on the history of American education, defines the problem as “the tendency to focus so exclusively on the potentialities of the school as a lever of social improvements and reform as to ignore the possibilities of other educative institutions.”² A narrow educational focus still plagues us today, if anything, it has only gotten worse.

Education has become synonymous with schooling. Since the U.S. Department of Education’s National Commission on Excellence in Education warned of the deterioration of American education in *A Nation at Risk*

in 1983, the crisis in education has become a national priority for people across the ideological spectrum. But it is common for policy makers, educators, parents, and youth to articulate their concerns with the state of our educational system solely in terms of the school. The bipartisan No Child Left Behind federal legislation, for example, set out to improve educational achievement and accountability through the standardization of American schooling.

Efforts to improve civic education among our youngest citizens have also been focused on the classroom. Increasing concern about America's civic health throughout the 1990s culminated in a report entitled *A Nation of Spectators*, issued by the National Commission on Civic Renewal in 1998. The bipartisan commission warned that citizens were becoming apathetic and disengaged from public life and that "in a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators."³

In response, an array of reports and initiatives has appeared calling for an increase in the participation of young people in public life. Most proposed interventions, however, have used schools as the primary platform for civic renewal. For example, a diverse group of more than sixty distinguished educational scholars and practitioners convened by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the Carnegie Corporation issued *The Civic Mission of Schools* and launched the subsequent Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, urging that K–12 schooling become the primary venue for increasing civic education among our nation's youth.⁴

On the surface, this seems to make sense given the time and resources American society devotes to schooling and the social investment we make in schools as instruments for democratic socialization. As *The Civic Mission of Schools* rightly observes, "Schools are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every person in the country."⁵ Yet schools cannot educate in isolation. Equating education with schooling relieves the rest of society from the responsibility of taking part in the education of young people. It also misses the central issue because what happens in schools reflects what happens outside the classroom. Educational successes and failures are mostly the products of communities and families: underachieving schools simply pass along the inequality of resources from families and communities, while high achieving schools pass along family and community privileges.⁶ Finally, limiting education to schooling overlooks important assets for improving our educational system and preparing young people to contribute to our democracy—our communities and community institutions.

"Why is it that we have Boards of Education, but they only hire the superintendent of schools?" Lawrence Cremin often asked.⁷ He did not

mean that boards of education should oversee all aspects of learning in society. He was asking us to imagine what would happen if we broadened our definition of education to reach

beyond the schools and colleges to the multiplicity of individuals and institutions that educate—parents, peers, siblings, and friends, as well as families, churches, synagogues, libraries, museums, summer camps, benevolent societies, agricultural fairs, settlement houses, factories, radio stations, and television networks.⁸

This insight offers new hope both for academic and civic outcomes. Specifically, this book explores why community matters in educating for democracy.

Protesting a Restricted View

Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, Chicago's famous settlement house, once described the settlement movement as "a protest against a restricted view of education."⁹ This aptly describes the approach to education explored in this book. A more expansive view of education is founded not only in the theory and practice of the settlement movement, but also in the writings of the educational philosopher John Dewey, the experiments with social centers, folk schools, and citizenship schools earlier in the twentieth century, and today's efforts to create community schools, neighborhood learning communities, and engaged colleges and universities.

The three case studies presented in this book illustrate a comprehensive, community-based approach to civic education. Two cases—Hull House and Highlander Folk School—reveal a subterranean tradition of outstanding civic education that is rooted in communities. These cases laid the philosophical and practical groundwork for a third—the Neighborhood Learning Community, a remarkably innovative contemporary example of education for democracy.

My aim is to examine the ideas and practices that define these innovations and explore how they can help us find new ways to address the educational challenges that confront us: the spread of unfettered marketplace (as opposed to democratic) values; decaying inner-city neighborhoods and schools; the loss of local culture in the age of globalization; continued widening inequalities of wealth and power; and the increasing disempowerment of ordinary citizens over the decisions that affect their lives.¹⁰ In this context, perhaps more than ever, looking at the many institutions that educate for democracy is vital.