

Chapter 11

Deepening of Critical Thinking Skills through the Use of Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is an underlying goal of modern education. It is also a needed skill for effectively navigating life in modern society. It is frequently however, not taught in school systems. Students are therefore left at a disadvantage. Civil engagement is the process by which people work together for the betterment of society. A pertinent skill of civic engagement is critical thinking. This chapter proposes a model for bringing civic engagement and critical thinking together to meet both educational and societal needs. This model provides effective strategies for teaching civic engagement outside of the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The essence of civic engagement involves people working together for the good of the community (Checkoway, 2013). As such, the term civic engagement is sometimes used interchangeably with community engagement. Lavitt and Boothe (2015) in discussing the concept of civic engagement indicated that the concepts of community engagement and civic engagement are often used interchangeably. The researchers, however, purported that civic engagement points more to active citizenship and a skill set that is associated with this citizenship such as appreciation of diversity and activity in community civic events. Kauffman (2011) indicated that the concept of civic engagement is elastic in nature with concepts such as social capital, citizenship, community building, and democratic participation being applied. He stated that the present scope of academic involvement in civic engagement activities is as diverse as American education itself.

Poulos, Hamilton, Jovanovic, and Moretto (2015) informed their audience that community engagement and service learning have moved out of the shadows of today's higher education and now are regarded as high impact practices and the basis of civic engagement centers. These authors further argued that for the work of community engagement to be truly effective there needs to be an alignment of community needs and academic practices. This is also the argument made for civic engagement and a point of discussion in this chapter.

Checkoway (2013) purported that the approaches to civic engagement vary and are not limited to the actions of specific age groups or academic levels. Students from elementary school to graduate and professional schools are actively participating in civic engagement activities, often embedded in their academic curriculum. He also indicated that civic engagement might take various forms like developing community based services, contacting public officials on behalf of community needs, or organizing action groups. Civic engagement, however, does not involve just a set of community activities or actions but "competencies conducive to its practice" (Checkoway, 2013 p.9). One such competency is critical thinking. This chapter explores the concept of civic engagement, discusses how it works and how it relates to the civic competency of critical thinking, and then proposes a model for enhancing students' critical thinking through the use of civic engagement.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS

Checkoway (2013) defined civic engagement as "a process in which people join together and address issues of public concern" (p. 7). He indicated that civic en-

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