Chapter 2
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.

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 engagement is public work done for public good and not activity performed for its own sake or to promote personal benefit. Ehrlich (2000) further purported that civic engagement involves the work of making a difference in one's community and in the civic lives of people. It involves the development of skills, knowledge, motivation and values that promote such difference. This statement is supported by Checkoway (2013), who posited that civic engagement helps to develop civic competencies that are conducive to its goal; competencies such as critical thinking, effective communication, cultural awareness, and civic values.

In the twenty-first century, there is a broad expansion in the number and types of educational institutions participating in various levels of civic engagement, from community clean-up and hunger-relief activities to broad-based community research projects. It is noted that that there is no single format that depicts civic engagement. Academic institutions' civic engagement activities include service learning, field placement, practicum, internship, experimental learning, community service, and community-based research projects (Kauffman, 2011). Bringle, Hatcher, Jones, and Plater (2006) also pointed to the idea that civic engagement is not contained by geographic boundaries. It may be utilized by any sector of society and in local, national, and international settings.

Academic instructions may differ in the extent of their civic engagement efforts and in the format emphasized, but most provide some level of civic engagement opportunities to their students and faculty (Kauffman, 2011). Programmatically, academic institutions promote civic engagement through curricular and co-curricular/extra-curricular formats. The most commonly utilized format is service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Checkoway, 2013; Kauffman, 2011). Service learning is a credit-bearing, course-based, academic experience that allows students to participate in organized community service based on identified needs of the community. Service learning incorporates service objectives tied to the objectives of the course with students participating in reflection activities concerning the service performed (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). This civic engagement format is identified as both a theory of learning and a teaching/learning methodology that takes place over a designated time period and provides interaction between students and community (Corporation for National and Community Service).

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