



Teaching Civic Engagement

Clingerman, Forrest and Locklin, Reid B., eds.
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Book Review

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This collection of fourteen essays, most of which originated from a faculty workshop on Pedagogies for Civic Engagement sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, is divided into three sections. The collection represents a variety of perspectives and the authors engage that diversity through a distinct set of questions. “What is the civic relevance of the academic study of religion, considered on its own terms and in its increased diversity? What unique contributions does religious studies offer the public sphere, especially when seen as separate from the work of religious communities who concentrate on religious belonging? How might the disciplines dedicated to such study offer a distinctive shape and response to the civic mission of the contemporary university?” (xiv-xv). Further uniting the individual contributors’ perspectives are their insights offered towards the development of a model of civic engagement that answers these questions.

Section I describes the CLEA model of civic engagement. The employed acronym is drawn from the terms complexity, location, empathy, and action. The terms refer to dimensions, better still, capacities essential for civic participation emerging from the “virtues of civility, reasoned deliberation, and commitment to the common good” (xiii). The intellectual capacity needed for democratic society is evident when persons achieve awareness of the complexity of the world, especially a view of the world beyond the way the powerful control the interpretation of social reality (8-10, 14, 25). As democracy blossoms into pluralism, the person who would be a responsible citizen must exhibit awareness of his or her social location and point of view relative to that of other persons (15, 27-28). Beyond awareness of difference, he or she must have empathy, namely a sense of connection to others as all are (or should be) in pursuit of the common good (15-16, 31). The responsible citizen must act on what he or she has come to know as true (16, 34).

In Section II, various strategies for teaching civic engagement are described. Among the various methods used for teaching civic engagement is reflective writing which is summary and evaluation of different points of view relative to one's own view (49, 50-53). In critical assessment of texts and media, students learn to interrogate symbols, internet (websites), newspaper and news programs, visual and performing arts, and various forms of entertainment (49, 53-54, 88-89, 95) but also learn how they may be used responsibly (100-102). Field trips are immensely helpful aids in teaching (49, 54-55, 77-80, 119-121). Another method of teaching civic engagement is community-based learning which involves teachers and students going into the community as well as representatives from the community visiting their classroom (49, 55-56, 66-71, 110, 112, 136-137). Engagement may also be taught through students' involvement in community service projects designed to address a need or problem in a community (49, 57, 110, 112). Ascetic withdrawal, for example, in the form of abstinence from or limiting use of cell phones, smart phones, email and texting, impulse buying, consumption of fast-food, use of products made through exploited labor, may enable students to empathize with other persons adversely affected by American consumerism and to discern and cease the unhealthy habits they have formed through compulsive behaviors (93-94, 151, 155). Successful teaching requires creativity in the selection of instructional methods as well as discernment of the combination of methods, two or more, that will lead to achievement of specified learning objectives (58-59).

Section III goes further into defining civic engagement and locating it within the curriculum. Civic engagement is defined as participation in political processes such as voting, development of relationships, and collaborations or partnerships that lead to policy that contributes to the common good (165, 167, 170, 175). Civic engagement is not only local and national but also global (184). It is connected to, inseparable from, the idea of social justice (185). Also, it is connected to advocacy, not taking a political position but rather "taking a side in a debate and arguing for it" (209-210). Disagreement about the relation of and distinction between religious studies and theology is resolved in the consensus that both function best as means for analysis and critique of societal and cultural traditions that result in privilege and inequality (236). Whether in religious studies or theology, the course offered in civic engagement is an opportunity for students and teachers to practice democracy (17, 188-190, 246-247).

In spite of the charge that the described teaching methods are difficult to grade and are not academically rigorous (37-39, 218-220), this volume of essays merits consideration. It is a rich resource on instructional methods. The combined essays offer a substantive definition of civic engagement. Most importantly, the collection correlates teaching method to the cultivation of capacities needed for life in democratic society.

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