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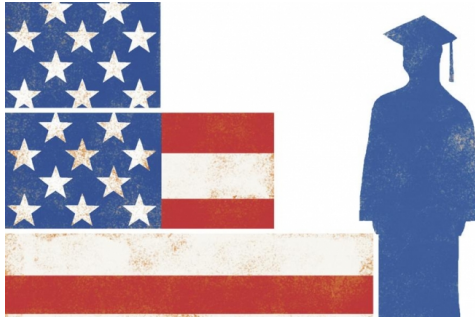
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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

A Core Curriculum for Civic Literacy



Gwenda Kaczor for The Chronicle Review

By Donald Lazere | JANUARY 31, 2010 ✓ PREMIUM

The past few years have seen an outpouring of books and reports deploring Americans' civic ignorance, with titles like *Just How Stupid Are We?*, *The Dumbest Generation*, *The Age of American Unreason*, and *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News*.

This is a problem that everyone seems to complain about but no one tries to solve

through any coordinated, nationwide effort.

National organizations have recently been formed, including the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Political Engagement Project, and Campus Compact and its Research University Civic Engagement Network. These organizations have published important interdisciplinary books, such as *Educating for Democracy*, by Anne Colby et al. (Jossey-Bass, 2007), and *Civic Engagement in Higher Education*, by Barbara Jacoby et al. (Jossey-Bass, 2009).

Many campus programs have also been exemplary, as surveyed in Charles Muscatine's *Fixing College Education* (University of Virginia Press, 2009). In *The Assault on Reason* (Penguin Press, 2007), Al Gore praised the American Political Science Association for starting a Task Force on Civic Education. That should prompt similar task forces in the Modern Language Association (my discipline) and other professional associations, along with a unifying interdisciplinary organization for secondary and postsecondary education, a National Commission on Civic Education. Liberal and conservative educators and politicians should collaborate in hammering out their differences on what should constitute a core curriculum for civic literacy. We can hope for sponsorship in this effort by both conservative and liberal foundations, as well as for support from the U.S. Department of Education and National Endowment for the Humanities.

One way to prompt deliberation here is to spin E.D. Hirsch's much-debated agenda for what every American needs to know to be culturally literate: What does every American need to know to be a civically literate, critically conscious, responsible citizen? And, as a corollary, what role should the humanities play in a renewal of education for civic literacy?

My agenda would give priority to the factual knowledge and analytic skills that students need to make reasoned judgments about the partisan screaming matches and special-interest propaganda that permeate political disputes. One source for such knowledge and skills can be the disciplines of critical thinking and argumentative rhetoric. Unfortunately, few high schools or colleges require courses with that focus, which was also shamefully ignored by No Child Left Behind.

We have all by necessity been thinking a lot lately about one particular branch of civic literacy: economic knowledge. How many among us understand how or why our personal economic fates—mortgages, retirement pensions, and our colleges' financing and endowments—are captive to booms and busts in the stock market and the occult realm of national and international high finance? In the prophetic words of the "corporate cosmology" revealed by the arch-capitalist Arthur Jensen in Paddy Chayefsky's 1976 film, *Network*, "The totality of life on this planet" is now determined by "one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multivariate, multinational dominion of dollars."

What a tragic gulf lies between most citizens' understanding of economic forces and their power over each of our daily lives and livelihoods. And what an enormous hole there is, in both K-12 and college curricula, in teaching about those forces as an integral part of general education. I am not talking about courses in formal economics, but in thinking critically about the rhetoric of economic issues at the everyday level of political debates and news and opinion—although those studies would identify oversimplifications at that level that could certainly be pursued in economics classes.

The term "core curriculum" has sadly become a culture-war wedge issue, with conservatives pre-empting it in the cause of Eurocentric tradition and American patriotism, thus provoking intransigent opposition from progressive champions of cultural pluralism and identity politics. Surely, however, we should urge the opposing sides to seek common ground in a core curriculum for critical citizenship that transcends—or encompasses—ideological partisanship.

My own immodest proposal models a core curriculum that centrally includes critical thinking about, and analysis and practice of, public rhetoric, at the local, national, and international levels. Far from being a radical proposal, it is a conservative one in returning to something like the 18th-century rhetoric-based curriculum in American education.

That curriculum, as the historian of rhetoric S. Michael Halloran describes it, "address[ed] students as political beings, as members of a body politic in which they have a responsibility to form judgments and influence the judgments of others on public issues." Halloran and other historians have lamented the modern diffusion of studies in forensics, literature, composition, and other humanistic fields, as a result of the hegemony of disciplines and departments oriented toward specialized faculty research, which have become the tail that wags the curricular dog. Those forces and a depressing array of others have caused the study of political rhetoric to fall between the cracks of most current curricula, almost to the disappearing point.

So let's envision how a revived curriculum for civic literacy might be embodied in a sequence of undergraduate courses that would supplement, not supplant, basic courses in history, government, literature, and other humanist staples. These could be interdisciplinary offerings, with at least a partial component of English studies. Within English, they would follow, not replace, first-year writing—which in recent decades has focused on generating students' personal writing rather than critical analyses of readings or public rhetoric—and a second term in critical thinking and written and oral argumentative rhetoric.

The following headings correspond to chapters in my textbook for such a second-term course, but my own and other instructors' experience in using the book is that for any single course or textbook to "cover" what really demands a full curriculum is an impossible expectation. So I will break that material down, more appropriately, into four courses:

Course 1: Thinking Critically About Political and Economic Rhetoric. This would begin with a survey of semantic issues in defining terms like left wing, right wing, liberal, conservative, radical, moderate, freedom, democracy, patriotism, capitalism, socialism, communism, Marxism, fascism, and plutocracy. It would explore their denotative complexity and the ways in which they are oversimplified or connotatively slanted in public usage.

Study would then focus on defining ideological differences between and within the left and right, nationally and internationally, and on understanding the relativity of political viewpoints on the spectrum from left to right. For example, *The New York Times* is liberal in relation to Fox News but conservative in relation to *The Nation*; the Democratic Party is liberal in relation to the Republicans but conservative in relation to European social-democratic parties. Principles of argumentative rhetoric would then be applied to "reading the news" on political and economic issues in a range of journalistic and scholarly sources and from a variety of ideological viewpoints, with emphasis on identifying the predictable patterns of partisan rhetoric in opposing sources.

Course 2: Thinking Critically About Mass Media. Key questions would include: Do the media give people what they want, or condition what they want? Are news media objective and neutral, and should they be? The debate over liberal versus conservative bias in media would be approached through weighing the diverse influences of employees (editors, producers, writers, newscasters, performers); owners, executives, and advertisers; external pressure groups; and audiences. Research on the cognitive effects of mass culture would be applied to such issues as the impact of electronic media on reading, writing, and political consciousness. Implicit political ideology in news and entertainment media would be studied through images of corporations, workers, and unions; the rich, poor, and middle class; gender roles, ethnic minorities, and gays; military forces and war; and immigrants, foreigners, other parts of the world, and Americans' international presence. A final topic of study would be how the Internet has altered all of those issues.

Course 3: Propaganda Analysis and Deception Detection. Study here would begin with problems in defining and evaluating propaganda. A survey of its sources would include government and the military, political parties, lobbies, advertising, public relations,

foundations, and sponsored research in think tanks and elsewhere. The role of special interests, conflicts of interest, and special pleading in political and economic rhetoric would be examined, along with propagators' frequent resort to deceptive modes of argument or outright lying—especially with statistics. This course (or another entire one) would include topics in critical consumer education: reading the fine print in contracts, like those for student loans, credit cards, rental agreements, and mortgages; examining health and environmental issues in consumer products; and seeking out the often hidden facts of the production and marketing of food and pharmaceuticals.

Course 4: Civic Literacy in Practice. This would connect these academic studies with service learning, community or national activism, or work in government or community organizations, journalism, and elsewhere.

Two possible objections:

"What you are proposing is that English and other humanities courses take on the impossible burden of remediation for the failures of the entire American education system in civic literacy."

You betcha. It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it, and I don't see any likelier disciplines jumping into the breach, especially ones with courses that are conventionally general education and breadth requirements. (Some communication and speech departments are in schools of liberal arts, but others are not; many offer courses in political rhetoric and media criticism, but those are mostly advanced ones for majors.) An ideal solution would be for these to be offered as interdisciplinary core courses, in which humanities faculty members would collaborate with those in the social sciences, communication, and so on. If civic education at the secondary level ever picks up the slack that it should, the college humanities involvement in such instruction can be phased out.

"Mightn't your proposals just be a Trojan horse for dragging in the academic left's same old agenda and biases?"

The courses could be conceived in their specifics and taught by instructors with varying ideological viewpoints—or best of all, through team teaching by liberal and conservative instructors. In principle, this framework would "teach the conflicts," on Gerald Graff's model, not through advocacy or the monologic perspective of any teacher's own beliefs, but through enabling students to identify and compare a full range of opposing ideological perspectives (including those of the instructor and the students), their points of opposition, and the partisan patterns and biases of their rhetoric. I have found it easy to grade students on the basis of their skill in articulating those points, without regard to my political viewpoints or theirs.

To be sure, this conception runs up against the near impossibility of anyone's even defining terms and points of opposition between, say, the left and right with complete objectivity and without injecting value judgments. That problem itself, however, can become a subject of

study within these courses and in advanced scholarly inquiry. Indeed, the courses could prompt a wealth of related research and theoretical explorations, creating a fruitful arena for bridging the gap between advanced scholarship and undergraduate teaching.

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