

ACTION CIVICS LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, an insufficient number of Americans are graduating High School without the analytical skills and civic efficacy and proficiency (the ability to participate as a responsible member of a community) to be prepared for life in the 21st Century (Bitter and Loney 2015). Youth are entering the post-secondary education world without the capability of participating in society at a level that is necessary to create change. This calls for a shift in our K-12 education system.

Action Civics is a student-centered, project-based approach to education that develops the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st century democratic practice. It is an iterative process where participants analyze and reflect as they move forward towards that action goal. All voices, concerns, and perspectives are encouraged and valued to the fullest extent possible. Students build both a solid knowledge-base and skillset through this experiential learning method. It begins by students identifying an issue in their community that is relevant to them. They then research and analyze root causes, develop a plan of action, speak to community legislators and stakeholders, put their plan into action, and then reflect on their experience (generationcitizen.org; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsburg 2015). This is a way of teaching to equip students for the 21st century. Action civics is just one of many forms of “authentic” teaching, all of which have been shown to demonstrate greater student learning, and increase student motivation and content retention compared to traditional methods (Levinson 2014). These action civics opportunities that reflect student interests can help build students’ participation in the democratic society in the future (Levinson 2014; Levy and Zint 2012).

The ways in which students experience civics education has been shown to matter in their levels of engagement (Matto et al. 2017). Active learning has been demonstrated to increase motivation, which has shown to stay with students later in life (Matto et al. 2017). Civics education should be open-ended, allowing students to form their own views, and to deliberate with others (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg 2015). Many studies show that if students participate in action civics while they’re young, they’re more likely to participate in the political process when they’re older (Almond and Verba, 1963; Ballard et al., 2016; Beck and Jennings, 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995).

Levinson (2014) said it best, “What excites these young people, at least initially, is not the civic engagement itself; rather, it is the achievement of goals that are personally important to them, for which civic engagement turns out to be the means. By achieving their goals through civic action, however, these youth remain civically engaged and are motivated to continue participating.”

Along with motivation and civic participation later on in life, many learning gains have been documented in the shorter-term as a result of action civics instruction. It’s been shown to increase civics knowledge, retention, and self-efficacy, as well as general political knowledge (Ballard et al. 2016; Matto et al. 2017). This methodology has been shown to build citizenship, and help students become more tolerant of people not like themselves (Morgan and Streb 2001). Remy (1979) went so far as to identify seven learning competencies that improve with civic education. This paper, with these 7 competencies (acquiring and using information, assessing involvement, making decisions, making judgements, communicating, cooperating,

and promoting interests) was clearly ahead of its time. These are essentially the 21st Century Skills that are heavily emphasized in education today, all of which are improved with effective civics education (Remy 1979; Billig et al. 2012).

Similarly to learning gains, attitudinal shifts have also been reported. Melchior (1998) saw a significant increase in students' acceptance in cultural diversity, service leadership, and personal/social responsibility after participating in action civics projects. The openness and discussion-based (versus traditional lectures) format has been shown to be particularly important in shaping political engagement in students (Matto et al. 2017). The open class climate has been shown to develop essential skills for democratic engagement and help students express their opinions (Matto et al. 2017). Billig et al. (2005) found that students were reporting a higher intent to vote compared to their peers.

This research shows that civics instruction should be active. It should involve student voice and investigation, engage them in their communities, spur discussions, and create change. This method creates citizens who are equipped with participating in democratic societies: who vote, engage politically, who are educated in their decision making. The pinnacle of action civics is when students efforts result in real world policy changes. While these changes are less frequent than practitioners would like, we are seeing an uptick in the number of student projects that lead to real world change (Gingold 2013).

Action Civics transforms both individuals and communities, building essential civic leadership skills in youth who are actively improving their communities.

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