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We've Been Here Before: The Politicization of Civic Education
Book Review: The Rise and Fall of Civic Education: The Battle for Social Studies in a Shifting Historical Landscape

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Abstract

Civic education has historically been a lightning rod for public attention and a battleground for ideological disagreements. This review of *The Rise and Fall of Civic Education: The Battle for Social Studies in a Shifting Historical Landscape* by Michael Learn summarizes the foundational arguments that have shaped, and continue to shape, social studies curriculum and pedagogy in the United States. The book's robust historical research and emphasis on sociocultural contexts illuminate for readers the forces that molded civic education into its current iteration, culture wars, and all. While the review notes the value of this historical account for those committed to advancements in the field, it also suggests that the perspective of social studies teachers is a forgotten, but necessary, voice in the battle for civic education.

Keywords: *civic education, culture wars, learning standards, social studies*

Ya hemos estado aquí antes: La politización de la educación cívica
Reseña del libro: El auge y la caída de la educación cívica: La batalla por los estudios sociales en un panorama histórico cambiante.

Megan L. Ramlo

Resumen

La educación cívica ha sido históricamente un tema de gran interés público y un campo de batalla de discrepancias ideológicas. Esta reseña de "El auge y la caída de la educación cívica: La batalla por los estudios sociales en un panorama histórico cambiante", de Michael Learn, resume los argumentos fundamentales que han moldeado, y siguen moldeando, el currículo y la pedagogía de los estudios sociales en Estados Unidos. La sólida investigación histórica del libro y su énfasis en los contextos socioculturales permiten a los lectores comprender los factores que dieron forma a la educación cívica hasta su versión actual, incluyendo las guerras culturales. Si bien la reseña destaca el valor de este relato histórico para quienes están comprometidos con el avance de este campo de estudio, también sugiere que la perspectiva de los profesores de estudios sociales es una voz olvidada, pero necesaria, en la lucha por la educación cívica.

Palabras clave: *Educación cívica, guerras culturales, estándares de aprendizaje, estudios sociales*

*Editors' Note: Translation provided by **Karla Diaz**
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Introduction

To label something a crisis implies the necessity for immediate action. Social studies education in the United States for the past 150 years, according to Michael Learn, has been in a constant state of crisis. Each decade brings an iteration of the outcry that civic education is broken. Still, education stakeholders in the United States have yet to mobilize into lasting action on the issue. The breakdown of consensus-building and the push-pull of political demands shape Michael Learn's argument in *The Rise and Fall of Civic Education: The Battle for Social Studies in a Shifting Historical Landscape*.

Learn's passion for civic education is evident through his more than 20 years of teaching social studies and his doctoral research on institutional quality in public education with a special focus on social studies standards and assessment. For Learn, the crux of the battle over social studies education is a lack of shared definitions and a multitude of unclear outcomes. He argues that because social studies leaders have created vague standards for what constitutes quality civic education, the value of the discipline is up for interpretation. In Learn's historical account, each iteration of the discipline is shaped by the sociocultural contexts of its time, leading to incongruent interpretations of the purpose of civic education. Learn's particular fascination lies with the evolution of social studies standards both as the arbiters of this elusive, shared definition and as the mirrors of each unique cultural era.

This exhaustive research compendium proves an important resource in understanding the changes in national educational policy over the years. His summary of the discipline's pedagogical evolution is juxtaposed with the nation's reaction to change, revealing an ever-present contention between ideological factions. Learn's piece is historical in nature, but the conclusions will always be timely. He astutely argues that "the consequence of social studies' troubled history has increased doubt in the field's methodology as well as in its value in today's society," and it's this mistrust of methodology that is currently impacting researchers and practitioners alike (Learn, 2024, p. 159).

Book Overview

The 11 chapters follow a chronological history of social studies education from the 1860s to the 2020s, emphasizing the various commissions and committees leading the charge in each decade. Learn's historiography shines in its discussion of the sociocultural contexts of these standards-makers and in its explanation of the external forces that mold the perceptions of social studies curriculum.

In Chapters 1–3, the foundation of social studies education is shown as a battle between two disciplines and their respective ideologies: the humanistic view of historians, which "favored an adult-centered classroom," and the social meliorist, progressive social studies advocates who "attempted to connect history to current social and economic problems" through student-centered instruction (p. 38). Chapters 4 and 5 address the subsequent ideological conversations that emerged as a more diverse student population entered public schools. The traditional versus progressive conflict morphed into a divide between consensus, patriotic education, and pluralism, which favored a multicultural approach to history in order to fight discrimination.

Politicization of curriculum became the norm, and the nation proved perpetually fascinated over *what* was being taught, *how* it was being taught, and to *whom* it was being taught. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the central role of national identity in the fight over civic education, particularly as a result of Cold War fears. Social studies curriculum that advocated for community-centered problem-solving was met with resistance because "critiquing" the state of the nation was akin to communism and, thus, a threat to a true American national identity. Building on these fears, Chapters 7–11 play out like a breaking news report of culture war fodder. The book's final chapters weave together controversies surrounding social studies education for the past 50 years, highlighting debates around American exceptionalism, consensus history, No Child Left Behind, Common Core, and critical race theory. In his final chapters, Learn paints the picture of a discipline mired in the perceptions, whims, and outcries of the public.

Connections to the Scholarly Field

In the area of service-learning and community engagement research, Learn's piece provides a theoretical understanding of the factions pressuring current stakeholders in civic education. Each era of public education showcased in this piece reflects the central conflict between progressive and traditional camps of civic education methodology. While the specifics of this conflict evolve over time, readers of this piece are left with a clear understanding that instructional and content choices in social studies will always be politicized.

Learn's historical account of the shifting civic pedagogy mirrors both Kliebard's (2004) identified curricular factions and Davis's (2018) frames of education, helping readers to understand the ideological tensions undermining current efforts of critical researchers and classroom teachers. Early advocates of a humanistic, historical approach to civic education relied on rote memorization of historical facts with an emphasis on national heroes, aligning with Kliebard's traditional faction and Davis's Standardized Education. For these traditionalists, the end product of education was a measurable output of systemized knowledge. Alternatively, Kliebard's social meliorist faction, like the social reformers seen in late 19th-century educational circles, asserts that civic education is vital for correcting societal problems. The empowerment of students to use inquiry and critical thinking to influence social structures in their communities is a sentiment shared by Davis's Democratic Citizenship Education frame.

Social meliorism's goals for engaging students beyond the classroom echo the aims of service-learning, particularly critical service-learning, with its emphasis on "justice and enacting change on the current injustice within the society" (Andrews & Leonard, 2018). Critical civic education, rather than patriotic historical education, requires an identification of societal and governmental issues. Yet, this is only possible if there is a collective acknowledgment that our national education efforts are in the pursuit of creating a more perfect union, not simply insisting that the nation has already been perfected. Traditional and social meliorist mentalities have shaped each era of social studies education, and Learn contributes to the field of research with this detailed account of the discipline's pedagogical changes. His work encourages readers to ponder which ideological frameworks are influencing current debates in social studies instruction and which approaches will mold the next iteration of civic education.

The experiences of K–12 students and teachers are particularly shaped by national and state curriculum standards determined by highly politicized commissions, leaving them caught in the middle of the ideological battle over what is deemed effective civic instruction. A March 2024 article from the nation's largest teachers' union, the National Education Association, reported that, nationally, one third of educators teach in one of the 18 states that have passed laws restricting instruction around "divisive concepts." Even for teachers who do not live in those states, over half were choosing to self-censor and limit instruction about political and social issues to avoid backlash from their communities (Walker, 2024). The present divisiveness of social topics, the maligning of identity-supportive instruction, and the push by politicians to return to a consensus history in schools are all impacting the ability of educators to make bold, culturally responsive, and experiential pedagogical choices, like service-learning.

The success of service-learning as an instructional tool is at stake when the national conversation over civic education ebbs toward a more traditional approach. The constructivist nature of service-learning puts the onus on student experience rather than on instructor (or academic standards writers') control. Dewey (1916) advocated for this as an experiential methodology, warning of a "standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life experience" (p. 10). When consensus history is championed over community activism and when the trust of public education is eroded because of politicized topics, schools and teachers turn inward as a measure of self-preservation. Learn's history of social studies education reveals that public pushback on content and instructional choices actually creates more insular and less community-engaged schools. These ideological battles directly impact the ability of educators to use service-learning as a means of bolstering student civic identity.

As the ultimate outcome of civic education, civic identity refers to the agency and social responsibility one has toward sustaining a particular community (Youniss et al., 1997). The responsibility that students

develop toward their communities through a critical civic education is rooted in a full understanding of their unique social identities and lived experiences, not just the censored history of their communities. Learn contributes to the field of civic education by using history to reveal the extent to which ideological battles have impacted the efficacy of civic instruction in producing active and engaged citizens.

Discussion

The Rise and Fall of Civic Education is a valuable resource for those looking to understand the intricacies of civic education policy; yet, its presentation of the research could leave readers stymied. The book itself reads as if you are watching a championship football game, with a constant back-and-forth and little yardage gained. A barrage of initiatives from one faction is fumbled and recovered in the other side's territory, only to be returned as unrecognizable curriculum standards or entire policy reversals. This effect perpetuates Learn's assertion that "Social studies [has] become a political football between pro-America civics and multicultural pluralism" (p. 113). Caught in the middle of this fight for American national identity, social studies education takes the brunt of the blame while simultaneously being lauded as the answer to the crisis. Any movement toward a discernible solution has been, and will continue to be, stalled without an answer to the essential question: What is the purpose of social studies education? (p. 121).

Before reading, educators and educational leaders should curb any expectations that the book is outwardly prescriptive. Teachers will not find instructional strategies, and leaders will not find clear policy suggestions for the future. The book is largely a traditionalist historical account of the commissions responsible for each set of social studies standards, and the seemingly unending laundry list of acronyms may alienate the average layperson. Ironically, this mirrors the very conflict that Learn asserts has always plagued social studies education, the questioning of the discipline's value because of its public relations strategy. The image crisis in civic education has led to repeated culture wars because, when working definitions are not universal or created equitably, every disagreement becomes an existential crisis.

Learn concludes that there is a fundamental misimpression among the public of what civic instruction looks like in the classroom, along with a general lack of understanding about the purpose of historical research and argumentation. In Learn's estimation, the conservative faction of the United States desires a return to consensus history for the sake of a united, national story, despite the reality that "historians have never agreed on all historical facts" (p. 108). Learn takes perhaps the boldest stance in his research by elucidating historical methodology. He clarifies that

Historians do not use records to test a hypothesis, support an argument, or develop a theory; they raise questions from evidence and continually reframe questions as new evidence is discovered. Historians explore changes over time, especially the notion of chronology. They focus on exploring the perspective of historical actors and relationships between causes and effects. (p. 160)

His explanation of this process is clear and strategic. In these few sentences, he emphasizes both the reality of historical inquiry and, consequently, what constitutes unsatisfactory social studies pedagogy. History is not stagnant, and neither is the instruction of it.

Learn importantly weaves into his historical account an emphasis on whose voices were, and were not, at the decision-making table when creating social studies standards. The theme throughout the discipline's history is a lack of teacher authority in social studies curriculum. While at times subtle, Learn comes closest to making a policy suggestion for the future of social studies education when he questions how educators are consulted. He asks the reader, "if teachers do not have a voice in creating policy, can they still effectively teach students to be citizen advocates?" (p. 158). It's in this question that he reveals two strong positions: (1) teachers deserve a say in policy, and (2) civic education is based on an active citizenship, not a passive one.

Conclusion

As a practicing social studies teacher myself, I can attest to the complexity of my work as a public educator. The balance struck between curriculum mandates, effective pedagogy, and public scrutiny is not for the

faint of heart. Yet, the future of the discipline relies on expert practitioners finding ways to articulate that complexity to the public. Learn's best suggestion for solving the crisis of civic education is to mend the chasm between factions of the U.S. population who are passionate about *what* is taught and factions with the expertise on *how* best to do this.

The book's publication also coincided with a new iteration of civic education culture wars. The ideological faction in political power at the time of the book's publishing has declared that "celebration of America's greatness and history is proper" (Executive Order: Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling, 2025). Social studies curriculum with any semblance of criticality is, once again, scrutinized as being detrimental to the formation of a patriotic, unified national identity. This leaves civic educators wondering where their voices are in the conflict and how they can continue nurturing their students into informed, engaged, and empathetic citizens amid the vitriol. Heeding Learn's advice, educators deserve a say.

Learn's *The Rise and Fall of Civic Education: The Battle for Social Studies in a Shifting Historical Landscape* is recommended as a historical primer for practicing social studies teachers who seek an informed voice at the table and for allies of the field who want to understand the complexities of the discipline beyond culture war headlines. Social studies is often a powerful weapon used for political gain, but Learn's work is here to remind us that we have seen this before, and we can learn from our history.

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