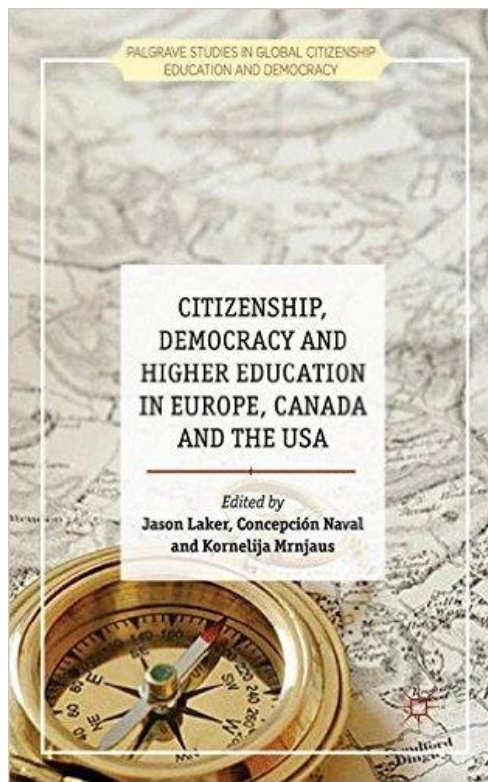


Book Review

A Comparative Look at Citizenship Education in the Western World

“Citizenship, Democracy and Higher Education in Europe, Canada and the USA” by Jason Laker, Concepción Naval and Kornelija Mrnjajs

By Kathleen A. Tobin



Preparation for good citizenship has served as a fundamental objective of education in the western world, and has been viewed as an essential component of democracy at least since the early years of the nineteenth century. Principled differences have long shaped a complex mosaic of curricular demands for those expected to lead the electorate, resulting in a

myriad of courses from philosophy to literature and history, often taught with the intention of elevating participants above the masses for the purpose of governing. As suffrage expanded, the need for a prepared citizenry appeared greater, setting the stage for pedagogical arguments advocating for utilitarian design and practical application for a larger population in an increasingly industrialized society. Much expert attention was paid to primary education in this regard, for a comparative few in stratified societies anticipated completing secondary and post-secondary programs. However, by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, attention to citizenship was emphasized in higher education—both at the post-secondary and tertiary levels.

Citizenship, Democracy and Higher Education in Europe, Canada and the USA dissects citizenship education at the university, crossing regional boundaries and cultures. Contributors with expertise in education and the social sciences examine approaches in both Eastern and Western Europe, as well as North America, allowing for significant comparison and contrast. The editors note that Canadian and U.S. societies tend to hold their democratic principles uncritically (p. 2), making this collection of critical essays more valuable. In contrast, a greater degree of conscious effort

may have influenced citizenship education in Western Europe, where it emerged from a long history of democratic evolution, and in Eastern Europe, where educators have worked in a post-socialist climate. The editors have compiled a strong collection of analyses while providing a solid context in tying them together. The book is divided into two primary sections: “Foundations and Frameworks” and “Policy Environments.” In doing so, the editors effectively introduce readers first to broad concepts and then to examinations of practice in specific settings.

Citizenship education is uniquely connected in diametric arguments placing the acquisition of knowledge at odds with utilitarianism, precisely because it includes both. Such a view is articulated in chapter 2, “Towards Inclusive and Generative Citizenship Education” (p. 11). Citizenship education is indeed comprised of teaching and learning with the common good in mind. For a century or more, programs have targeted immigrants and some have become increasingly inclusive in their nature. At the same time, especially beginning in the latter decades of the twentieth century, educators have designed more exclusive programs with the intention of preparing smaller groups of future leaders. However, these are much more democratic than programs that predate the modern age of democracy, for the students recruited into them are not born from the elite; rather, they are largely representative of students who have individually demonstrated enthusiasm and leadership qualities. Varying models have found their respective places in curricula, serving the needs of participants in governance as well as the governed, with an eye toward developing an educated populace (p. 23), but also toward promoting and expanding democracy. Matters of inclusivity in Europe have been facilitated by the Bologna Process, which created common standards and expectations from country to country, and encouraged

students to engage in more international studies on a very practical level. This process has introduced students to fundamental principles of citizenship, and it has also made possible greater comparison of curricula across borders, enriching this type of study.

While the compilation of essays and approaches shared in *Citizenship, Democracy, and Higher Education* is valuable as a whole, some chapters stand out as particularly enlightening for readers who are new to the topic. One is Rhonda Wynne’s “Higher Education Student Civic Engagement: Conceptualizations of Citizenship and Engagement Strategies.” Here, Wynne analyzes recent trends in higher education that serve to redefine the purpose of the university. Curricular cores, stated objectives, and desired competencies have placed increasing value on civic engagement, service learning, and social responsibility (p. 61). These new expectations for instruction tend to parallel contemporary initiatives in business engagement and commitment to supporting economic development by supplying intellectual capital (researchers) and prospective employees (students). They come with a price, however, and the traditional worth of gaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge is sometimes lost. This is true not only in professional majors, where a market value might be associated more clearly with certification or degree, but also in the liberal arts and humanities. These areas are essential to the preparation of good citizens, but are not taught solely for the preparation of good citizens. They are more closely identified as areas where pure knowledge is gained, and some purists may see the focus on citizenship and future civic engagement as too utilitarian in principle.

Some educators reach beyond concepts of governance and the electorate in their considerations of citizenship education and civic

preparation into areas of human rights and social justice. This is described by Alok Gardia and Deepa Mehta in their chapter “Rethinking Teacher Effectiveness in Democratic Citizenship Education for Ensuring Peace.” Gardia and Mehta cite Susan Fountain’s 1999 working paper, “Peace Education in UNICEF,” in the following definition: “Peace education refers to the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national, or international level” (pp. 90-91). They set aside debates over knowledge and application, and perhaps this is the essence of a peaceful approach to the field of education. More importantly, their analysis includes a discussion of ways in which teachers can prepare to teach peace effectively.

This discussion of practice is carried out in more detail in the second part of the book. In chapters 8 through 14, contributors provide case studies (in Slovenia, Croatia, and Spain, for example), quantitative analyses, and reports on methodology used in practice. It is here that the reader can see real life situations in which educators have implemented civic education programs in changing political environments, and tested the effects of those programs. The final chapter, “Taking It Personally: Engaging Democracy, Human Rights and Civic Participation as the Vocations of Higher Education,” is written by one of the editors, Jason Laker. Laker reflects on his personal experiences in drawing together a wide range of contributions from thoughtful experts, and somewhat laments the challenges of synthesizing such disparate accounts. In addition, he voices concern that the project

raised more questions in his mind than it provided answers. But that is often a byproduct of research for all of us, and he should not consider this a negative. His reflection alone sheds much needed light on the world of academia and educational travel, helping to make them less mysterious to those just entering the field. In addition, the work as a whole is indeed worthwhile, and its completion should be regarded as a success. Citizenship education itself is beneficial to society, and a collection of perspectives from those who have devoted significant time and attention to it can only benefit the rest of us, regardless of how complex such an approach might be.

“Citizenship, Democracy and Higher Education in Europe, Canada, and the USA.” Edited by Jason Laker, Concepción Naval and Kornelija Mrnjajus. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-137-28747-2

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