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## Tug of War

by JAMES B. MURPHY



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A fierce debate over civic education in America's public schools has erupted in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Broadly speaking, liberal

approaches to civic education have emphasized the need to resist jingoism and to explore why America induces such hatred in certain parts of the world. By contrast, conservative responses to 9/11 have emphasized our national virtues and the need to defend them in times of danger. Conservatives tend to caricature liberal civics lessons as the toleration of the intolerable, while liberals often criticize conservative civics lessons as a knee-jerk brand of patriotism. Yet despite this stark contrast in content, both liberal and conservative advocates continue to insist that civic education in our schools not only impart civic knowledge and civic skills but also shape our deepest values, attitudes, and motivations. My view, briefly stated, is that the attempt to inculcate civic values in our schools is at best ineffective and often undermines the intrinsic moral purpose of schooling.

What is civic virtue, and how does it relate to civic knowledge and civic skills? I define civic knowledge as an understanding of true facts and concepts about public affairs, such as the history, structure, and functions of government, the nature of democratic politics, and the ideals of citizenship. Civic skill is the ability to deploy knowledge in the pursuit of political goals—actions such as voting, protesting, petitioning, and debating. Civic virtues integrate such knowledge and skill with proper civic motivations or attitudes, such as respect for the democratic process, love for the nation, and concern for the common good.

Ideally, it would seem that civic education ought to promote appropriate virtues, not merely knowledge and skills, because without a virtuous motivation, knowledge and skills lack moral worth. After all, civic knowledge and skills routinely support all manner of immoral political conduct—including the use of deception, manipulation, and coercion—all the way to a traitorous betrayal of the nation to its enemies. Yet if civic schooling attempts to inculcate civic virtue, it can lead to the subordination of knowledge to civic uplift. So it is best for public schools to focus on what they do best: the inculcation of knowledge and skills.

### Civic Education or Civic Schooling?

For the past half-century, political scientists have been seeking to answer

some basic questions about the nature of civic education.

For instance, where do citizens acquire their knowledge, skills, and virtues? What role do schools—in particular, high-school civics courses—play in that acquisition? Studies focusing on the learning of civic competence or skills find, not surprisingly, that these skills are mainly acquired not by children in schools, but by adults in churches, labor



Schools might well encourage participation in community and life. But educators are not content with these modest contributions to the practice of citizenship.

unions, civic organizations, and workplaces. According to these researchers, schools foster skills not by directly teaching civics, but by encouraging students to volunteer in extracurricular organizations and to participate in student government.

Even if civic skills are not acquired in schools, surely civic knowledge and civic attitudes might be. After all, there is a longstanding consensus among researchers that an individual's knowledge and attitudes are best predicted by his or her years of schooling. After surveying a huge body of literature about the role of education in political socialization, political scientists M. Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi reported a broad consensus that interest in politics, the possession of political skills, political participation, and support for the liberal democratic creed all increase with years of schooling. However, there is no agreement on how to explain the simple correlation between civic virtue and educational attainment. It certainly does not appear that more education by itself automatically produces more political activity. Americans receive more schooling today than they did 50 years ago, but they are also less likely to vote or otherwise participate in politics or civic life.

Many studies find that schooling, by fostering greater verbal and cognitive sophistication, indirectly fosters greater civic knowledge and political tolerance. But what of more direct efforts at civic education, such as the civics courses that most states require public schools to teach? Do such courses, which advocates of civic education strongly support, foster desirable knowledge, attitudes, and conduct? The answer appears to be no: among other studies, influential research by Jennings and Kenneth Langton found that the high-school civics curriculum had little effect on any aspect of civic values. "Our findings," they wrote, "certainly do not support the thinking of those who look to the civics curriculum in American high schools as even a minor source of political socialization."

These and other studies have created a lasting professional consensus that, in general, the scholastic curriculum has some effects on the civic knowledge of students, but little or no effect on their civic values. Civics courses in particular appear to have little effect on civic knowledge and even less on

civic values. Admittedly, Niemi and Jane Junn modify this consensus in their major new study, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*. They researched the effects of different kinds of civics courses on students' civic knowledge and attitudes, hypothesizing that certain kinds of teaching methods might significantly add or subtract from learning about politics. They found that, although the civics curriculum had much less effect on civic knowledge and values than did the home environment, civics courses did make some difference. Those that did the best job of enhancing civic knowledge were those that covered a wide variety of topics and discussed current events. However, as with earlier studies, Niemi and Junn found that civics courses had virtually no effect on attitudes. Indeed, while the earlier Langton and Jennings study focused on civic attitudes and the more recent Niemi and Junn study focused on civic knowledge, both studies converge on the qualified conclusion that civics courses have some small effect on students' knowledge but virtually none on attitudes.



#### Civic Virtue or Intellectual Virtue?

Curiously, leading contemporary advocates of civic education in schools, such as the philosophers Amy Gutmann and Stephen Macedo, admit that it is ineffective. Their support for civic education lies with the conviction that schooling would lack any compelling moral purpose without it. It is no accident, then, that advocates share a fundamental assumption: that purely academic education lacks an inherent

moral dimension, since it is concerned only with the acquisition of skills and information. If this is true—if academic education is merely about the three R's—then we might well ask: Why should any society make a fundamental and expensive public commitment to common schools?

If academic education intrinsically lacked a compelling moral purpose, I would agree that our students need a compensatory moral education—and an education in civic virtues might well be the most feasible in a pluralistic democracy. But, as every good teacher knows, learning mere information and skills cannot be the aim of academic education. Divorced from a virtuous orientation toward truth, information and skills are simply resources and tools that can be put into the service of sophistry, manipulation, and domination. Only when the acquisition of information and skills is combined with a proper desire for true knowledge do we begin to acquire intellectual virtue, which may be defined as the conscientious pursuit of truth.

My developmental hierarchy of the intellectual virtues begins with the virtues of intellectual carefulness, such as single-mindedness, thoroughness, accuracy, and perseverance. Having acquired these virtues in elementary school, students must then learn how to resist the temptations to false beliefs by acquiring the virtues of intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and intellectual impartiality. Finally, adults ought to strive for coherence in what they know and for coherence between their knowledge and their other

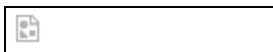
pursuits by acquiring the virtues of intellectual integrity and, ultimately, wisdom. The philosopher John Dewey thought that the aim of academic pedagogy was the inculcation of certain traits in students, among them open-mindedness, single-mindedness, sincerity, breadth of outlook, thoroughness, and responsibility. Dewey insisted that these academic or intellectual virtues “are moral traits.” In other words, academic education is itself a kind of moral education.

But what happens when schools commit themselves to civic education as well? One finds the answer in both the history and the ideas of civic education: the academic pursuit of knowledge will be corrupted if truth-seeking is subordinated to some civic agenda. The history of civic education in the United States is a cautionary tale indeed. Many advocates of civic education invoke the prestige of Thomas Jefferson, who was a pioneer in using common schools for republican civic education. What these advocates fail to notice, however, is how Jefferson’s commitment to civic education corrupted his intellectual integrity.

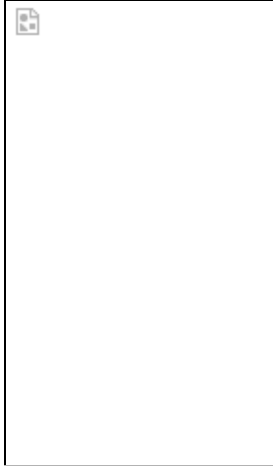
Jefferson’s initial vision of his proposed University of Virginia reflected his lifelong commitment to intellectual freedom. “This institution,” he wrote, “will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.” But Jefferson could not bear the thought of students at his university being exposed to and corrupted by politically incorrect ideas. Thus, in order to protect them from the seductive Toryism of David Hume, Jefferson spent two decades promoting the publication of a censored, plagiarized, and falsified but politically correct edition of Hume’s *History of England*. When he could find no partners in this intellectual crime, he enlisted James Madison’s support as a fellow member of the university’s board of overseers in drafting regulations aimed at suppressing political heresy.

Jefferson and Madison succeeded in passing a resolution to “provide that none [of the principles of government] shall be inculcated which are incompatible with those on which the Constitutions of this state, and of the U.S. were genuinely based, in the common opinion.” Moreover, Jefferson came to agree with Madison’s argument that “the most effectual safeguard against heretical intrusions into the School of politics, will be an able & orthodox Professor.” To this end, Jefferson and later Madison worked to ensure that only those professors who espoused a strict construction of the U.S. Constitution and the doctrine of states’ rights would be appointed to the school of politics. Jefferson’s passion for civic education in republican virtue led him to abandon his commitment to intellectual freedom at his beloved university. That such a champion of intellectual freedom should attempt to whitewash, censor, and suppress what he called “heresy” powerfully illustrates the poisonous consequences of using schools as instruments of civic education.

Textbook Cases



It should come as no surprise that in order to teach civic values, American textbook writers have systematically sanitized, distorted, and falsified history, literature, and social studies in order to inculcate racism, nationalism, Social Darwinism, anti-intellectualism, and every manner of religious, cultural, and class-based bigotry. An early text from 1796 warned of the danger posed by the importation of French ideas and persons: "Let America beware of infidelity, which is the most dangerous enemy that she has to contend with at present." The author went on to teach that Native Americans lack all science, culture, and religion, that "the beavers exceed the Indians, ten-fold, in the construction of their homes and public works." Later, in the wake of large-scale Irish immigration, school texts began slandering Roman Catholicism, describing it as an anti-Christian form of paganism and idolatry. One spelling text asked: "Is papacy at variance with paganism?" After 1870, religious bigotry gave way to racial bigotry; all non-Anglo Saxon peoples were described as permanently inferior due to their intellectual, moral, and physical degeneracy. Beginning in 1917, many states forbade any public school lessons that might be disloyal to the United States, including the teaching of the German language.



Today, in many states, creationism is taught in place of biology and geology because of the perceived moral dangers of Darwinism. Many states also sanitize American history in order to foster fealty to the American way: the Texas Education Code provides that "textbooks should promote democracy, patriotism, and the free enterprise system." The New York Board of Regents was found to have falsified, on moral grounds, most of the literary texts used in its exams; here classic literature was bowdlerized in the interests of political correctness. Systematic studies of current social studies and history textbooks find extensive evidence of American history's being distorted in order to highlight previously neglected contributions as well as the victimization of women and minorities. In response to the traditionally rosy and uplifting versions of American greatness designed to instill patriotism, we now find dark and brutal narratives of American imperialism and racism designed to covertly instill multicultural tolerance.

What again and again proves fatal to the pursuit of knowledge is the conviction that civic virtue is more important than truth. Indeed, some leading contemporary advocates of civic education frankly admit the need to sanitize and falsify history. For instance, University of Maryland scholar William Galston, a policy advisor in the Clinton administration, writes, "Rigorous historical research will almost certainly vindicate complex 'revisionist' accounts of key figures in American history. Civic education, however, requires a more noble, moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes, who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy objects of emulation."

Both conservative and progressive civic educators routinely subordinate the quest for truth to a preferred agenda for civic uplift. In English courses,

literature is selected not on the grounds of its beauty, renown, or usefulness for teaching prose style, but because it presents desirable moral lessons, such as how boys love to cook. Soviet education deployed the same techniques: “Before the Revolution, Russia had 1,000 tractors; now, thanks to Comrade Stalin, we have 250,000 tractors. How many more tractors do we have under developed socialism?”

Civic education poses a profound threat not only to the integrity of the curriculum but also to the integrity of pedagogical techniques. Much of what is known as “progressive” educational pedagogy—teaching that attempts to respond to the spontaneous curiosity of the student—has long been advocated on moral and civic grounds as much as on academic grounds. Progressive techniques, these educators argue, are egalitarian, democratic, tolerant, and caring, and they foster autonomy. John Dewey, in particular, championed many progressive pedagogical innovations because he thought they turned classrooms into laboratories of democracy. Critics of progressivism have wondered why these methods are widely adopted without much empirical evidence of their effectiveness. But the passion for progressivism, like the passion for civic education more broadly, does not rest on the conviction that it is effective but on the conviction that it is morally desirable. Civic educators are often quite frank about the need to subordinate not only truth but also academic achievement to the imperatives of civic virtue.



#### The Moral Purpose of Schooling

The obvious objection to my claim that academic education is itself a kind of moral education is to point out that the information and skills acquired in school are just as easily put in the service of sophistry as in the service of truth-seeking. But this view of academic education misrepresents the actual point of scholastic education, which is to acquire information and skills in the context of a love for genuine knowledge. In other words, good math, history,

science, and English teachers do not attempt to arm students with morally neutral resources and weapons and then hope for the best. Good teachers fuse the acquisition of information and skill to a growing desire for genuine knowledge. In other words, proper academic education does not seek merely to provide the means for whatever ends might be chosen by the student; proper academic education encompasses both the means and the end. John Dewey saw this clearly: “The knowledge of dynamite of a safecracker may be identical in verbal form with that of a chemist; in fact, it is different, for it is knit into connection with different aims and habits, and thus has a different import.”

The aim of academic education is the acquisition of those traits of character, such as thoroughness, accuracy, perseverance, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage, that make us conscientious in the pursuit of true knowledge. Our relationship with these academic virtues is fundamentally

different from our relationship with our capacities and skills. We can use or misuse them, like any resource or tool; we recognize a kind of “distance” between ourselves and our skills. Virtues, however, are not capacities but qualities or aspects of persons: virtues cannot be misused because they cannot be used at all. Virtues define who we are; they are not things to be used. Academic education aims not only to equip us with new resources and skills, but also to transform us: from people who have a curiosity for knowledge, but who are credulous and prone to false beliefs, into persons who love and can reliably acquire genuine knowledge. Academic education is as deep, transformative, and virtuous as any other kind of moral education.

Once we see that the conscientious pursuit of knowledge is the inherent moral purpose of schooling, we will not be surprised by the absence of any agreement about which civic virtues ought to be taught in schools. I strongly value a commitment to human rights, the rule of law, public service, and a love of country, but I don’t see what these noble virtues have to do with pursuing knowledge of physics, French, English, chemistry, history, and math. No catalog of civic virtues can be shown to be a prerequisite of academic excellence, a part of such excellence, or its product. The simple truth is that one can be a paragon of academic virtue and a lousy citizen. Many great scholars, scientists, and educators have notoriously lacked the civic virtues by being resident aliens, cosmopolitans, or epicureans. Trying to decide which civic virtues to teach in schools is like trying to decide which sports or which crafts to teach: since none of these is intrinsically related to academic education, there are no academic grounds for deciding these matters.

Because civic education, like driver or consumer education, lacks an intrinsic relation to the academic curriculum, it quickly comes to be regarded by teachers and students as ancillary and irrelevant. The ancillary nature of civics courses may help to explain why such courses are so ineffective. To overcome their irrelevance, many advocates insist that civic education be incorporated into the core academic curriculum, so that English, history, and social studies courses impart lessons in civic virtue. But here we become impaled on the fundamental dilemma of civic education: if we teach civic virtue in a way that respects the integrity of the academic curriculum, civics becomes ancillary and irrelevant; but if we attempt to incorporate civic education into the academic subjects, we inevitably subvert the inherent moral aim of those subjects by subordinating the pursuit of truth to civic uplift.

Indeed, there may be something paradoxical and self-defeating about the whole project of teaching civic virtue in schools. Political scientists Niemi and Junn speculate that civic education might be ineffective largely because it is so whitewashed. In the attempt to promote patriotism, our civics courses, they observe, present a “Pollyannaish view of politics that is fostered by the avoidance of reference to partisan politics and other differences of opinion.” So instead of a nasty contest between interest groups, we get “how a bill becomes law”—a presentation of civics cleansed of all politics as well as of all possible interest. They also decry the Whiggish distortions of American history, in which the “problems” of the past (such as racism and oppression)

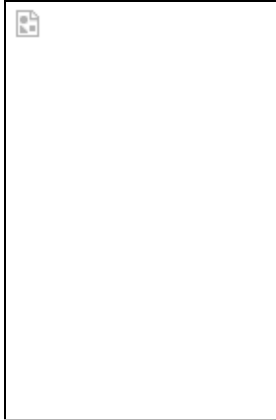
are invariably “solved” in the present. Niemi and Junn worry that these attempts to inculcate civic trust may actually backfire by creating greater political cynicism. Political theorist Christopher Eisgruber similarly observes of the attempt to inculcate values through an academic course: “How would students react to such a course? My suspicion is that any student old enough to understand such a course would also be old enough to recognize it as propaganda—and to resent it for that reason.”

### The Barbarism of Civic Virtue

Schools, especially public schools, have an indispensable role in civic education. Public schools must impart accurate information about the history, structure, functions, and ideals of our democratic institutions. Given how little Americans know about their government and politics, even civic education that is focused merely on civic knowledge faces formidable challenges. In addition, schools might well encourage participation in student government and in community and civic life. But our civic educators are not content with these modest contributions to the practice of American citizenship; they insist that public schools must attempt to teach the proper moral attitudes required for civic virtue. Nevertheless, it is precisely the attempt to teach full civic virtue that has consistently proved to be both ineffective and subversive of genuine academic schooling.

Since public schools are regulated and funded through democratic politics, they seem to be the ideal locale for education aimed at democratic citizenship. At the same time, however, public schools depend on a widespread civic trust: families send their children to common schools with the expectation that no one gets to impose his or her own sectarian religious or moral values at school. However, liberal and conservative civic educators cannot agree on proper civic virtues, turning our public schools into just another front in the culture wars. Thus, inherently partisan civic education undermines the trust necessary for vibrant common schools. Moreover, even if we could all agree about the proper civic virtues, the very attempt to inculcate them undermines the integrity of the academic curriculum. The quest for truth is quickly subordinated to civic uplift when teachers see their role as fostering certain civic dispositions in their students.

I believe there is much wider agreement concerning the intellectual virtues than there is regarding the civic and other moral virtues. However, one might well ask: What about the heated disagreements over how to teach reading and math, American history, science (evolution or creationism?), and health and sexuality? Aren't the intellectual parts of the curriculum just as contentious as civics courses? That there are bitter disputes over how and what to teach in the academic curriculum is undeniable. But these arguments are fundamentally moral, not academic, in character.





Let's consider them in turn. Progressive educators reject the practice of drilling phonics and multiplication tables on moral and civic grounds; they argue that these methods are undemocratic. These debates are driven by contrasting moral visions of the proper authority of teachers and the proper docility of students. Traditionalists accuse progressivists of fomenting anarchy, while progressivists accuse traditionalists of fomenting authoritarianism. These debates are very rarely academic debates concerning the efficacy of whole-language or phonics instruction as revealed in experimental studies. Debates over whether public schools should teach creationism or Darwinian evolution are also fundamentally moral. Many advocates of creationism argue that teaching Darwinian evolution undermines Christian faith and morals. Darwinians argue that creationism is not about science at all, but a religious and moral doctrine masquerading as science. The controversies over sex education are also transparently moral in nature: no one is arguing over the scientific facts about reproductive biology; they are arguing about competing moral visions of proper sexual conduct. These debates, far from suggesting that the intellectual curriculum is just as controversial as the moral, merely illustrate the poisonous effects of subordinating knowledge to moral uplift. In the context of our highly moralistic culture, every debate about knowledge is twisted into a debate about morality, just as every debate about art is twisted into a debate about the moral message of the artist.

The essential aim of schooling is not the mastery of a historically specific body of knowledge, but the acquisition of the dispositions that make us conscientious in the pursuit of knowledge. Perseverance, thoroughness, accuracy, intellectual honesty, intellectual courage, and intellectual impartiality are the preconditions for all conscientious pursuit of knowledge. The content of schooling will always evolve, but the essential aim of schooling remains constant. To say that these intellectual virtues are the essential aim of schooling does not imply that they are the only proper aim of schooling. Some moral virtues in students, such as temperance, courage, honesty, fairness, and friendship, might well be prerequisites for their acquisition of intellectual virtues. And some moral vices in teachers, such as bigotry, sexism, favoritism, or cruelty, might undermine the acquisition of the intellectual virtues by students. Some kinds of moral education are prerequisites for intellectual virtue, some are its parts, and some are its product. An education in the intellectual virtues is not a substitute for a moral education; it is an academically principled way to focus moral education in schools. Schools properly aim at making us good students, not good citizens or good persons.

*—James B. Murphy is a professor of government at Dartmouth College. This essay is adapted from a forthcoming article in the journal Social Philosophy and Policy.*

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