

Enlightenment and engagement in adult education for democratic citizenship: Lessons from the Citizens' Forum and the Participatory Budget

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Introduction

In broad terms, adult education for democratic citizenship usually refers to all practices and activities designed to help people to participate actively and effectively in democratic life. This encompasses a variety of learning avenues, ranging from formal civic courses to non-formal workshops on specific topics and informal learning acquired through direct experience. Among the multiple goals typically pursued by this type of education, two are particularly relevant for this paper. The first is to contribute to the development of citizens who are well informed and critically aware of the issues of the day. The second is to contribute to the development of active citizens who are willing and able to participate in democratic processes of deliberation and decision-making in their own communities.

Indeed, the development of an enlightened and engaged citizenship has long been an important part of the adult education tradition. It can be further stated that these two goals should be simultaneously sought through programs in which 'enlightenment' and 'engagement' activities complement each other. But this is a normative statement. In real life, many programs promoting democratic citizenship tend to over-emphasize one of the two dimensions, perhaps assuming the second dimension will arise as a natural consequence of the first. On the one hand, then, adult education efforts that focus on the development of enlightened citizens usually do it at the expense of assisting them for active and meaningful participation in community affairs and in political life. On the other hand, programs that provide enabling structures for political participation (usually carried out by progressive local governments) do so without much concern for developing pedagogical strategies to assist those with less experience in democratic deliberation and decision-making to participate better and to critically examine broader social issues. Each one of these models takes for granted the existence of a reciprocal spillover effect that results from their programs. 'Enlightenment' programs assume that awareness of issues eventually leads to social and political engagement, whereas 'engagement' programs assume that involvement in local social action eventually raises demands for the understanding of larger issues.

In a nutshell, the argument advanced in this paper is three-fold. First, I suggest that engagement does not necessarily lead to enlightenment and that, conversely, enlightenment does not necessarily lead to engagement. Second, I contend that while each of these types of programs has a contribution to make to the development of a democratic citizenship, the field of adult citizenship education would benefit immensely by a more systematic dialogue between them. This dialogue would help to reconcile five 'separations' that permeate the field: a) the separation between enlightenment and engagement; b) the separation between

macro (international and national) and micro (local) issues; c) the separation between deliberation and decision-making; d) the separation between discussion and social action; and e) the separation between adult civic education and participatory urban planning. Third, I argue that if a program must start somewhere, local engagement is a more promising departing point to ensure long-term success than enlightenment about macro-policy issues over which ordinary citizens have little influence.

This paper explores the models of 'enlightenment' and 'engagement', using as paradigmatic examples two programs that have been considered by many observers as successful examples of citizenship education and participatory. These programs are the Citizens' Forum (CF) of Canada and the Participatory Budget (PB) of Porto Alegre, Brazil (see Selman, Welton, Wright, Abers, United Nations). After describing these models and analyzing their strengths and weaknesses, I outline possible ways to combine their main contributions for citizenship education programs, and raise two hypotheses to be explored in further research.

1. The Citizens' Forum

Citizens' Forum was arguably one of the most important Canadian contributions to adult citizenship education, and provided a methodological model that was followed by many other countries interested in using mass media to promote national debates (Lowe 1975, Selman 1991 and 1998, Welton 1998). The CF, which had as a suggestive subtitle 'Canada's National Platform', was a joint project of the Canadian Association of Adult Education (CAAE) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that began in 1943 under the leadership of E.A. Corbett and Isabel Wilson, and continued for two decades until 1967. The Citizens' Forum sprung from a similar project (the National Farm Radio Forum) carried out by the same institutions in rural areas, in an attempt to broaden the social, cultural and political issues for debate and to include urban audiences. Paradoxically, despite incorporating a broader agenda (or precisely because of it) the Citizens Forum never attained the level of participation enjoyed by the Farm Forum (Selman 1998).

The CF was part of a strategy designed by adult educators to "reconstruct" society in a context of economic depression and a world war. Its main goal was to engage Canadians in all parts of the country, through mailings and radio broadcasting, "in an informed consideration of issues in which Canadians have a common interest" (Selman et al. 1998:52). Essentially, the CF was a national discussion group program which involved printed study materials, weekly radio broadcasts and local study groups to help Canadians in all parts of the country to form their own opinions and arguments on issues of general concern through an informed and balanced consideration of different perspectives of those issues. Among those issues were the pros and cons of censorship, professionalism in sports, religious education in public schools, strikes, disciplining youth, progressive education, compulsory treatment of alcoholics, small farming, immigration policy, national planning and labour unions' political involvement.

The CF broadcasted weekly programs from October to April, and at the end of each broadcast the discussion groups were invited to send their opinions on the topic to the program's offices, and summaries of those opinions were aired in subsequent broadcasts. Isabel Wilson, the study guide editor of the CF, produced over 300 discussion pamphlets. In all of them, she displayed an extraordinary talent to summarize long and complex

documents, and to translate them into simple and clear language. She was also able to develop the topic in a challenging, interesting and debatable format with a national audience in mind, and to present a balanced and fair view of both sides of an argument (Selman et al. 1998).

Welton (1998:43) points out that “an educational form such as the Citizens’ Forum makes sense once we understand that Canadian adult educators were attempting to develop an adequate practice of participatory democracy.” These adult educators, indeed, were trying to enhance citizen self-understanding and political competence through the maximization of dialogue opportunities. If we understand participatory democracy as a collective process of deliberation and decision-making, and if we understand political competence as the capacity to understand issues and influence decisions, two questions can be raised. First, did these attempts to develop political competence and an adequate practice of participatory democracy succeed, particularly among the poor? Second, and more importantly, were there real and sustained attempts to develop that “adequate practice” of participatory democracy? According to some accounts (e.g. Faris 1975, Wilson 1980) the answer to the two questions is no.

Indeed, although the Citizens' Forum promotional brochure (November 1943) promised that upcoming bulletins would contain ideas for action projects, no specific ideas were included in subsequent bulletins. Unlike the National Farm Radio Forum, there is no evidence either in Citizens' Forum or CAAE records that show any success with action groups during the first year of the project. By the second year, action projects were neither publicly encouraged nor even discussed by forum staff. This was partly due to political and financial constraints on both sponsoring organizations. It was also the result of an internal debate in which the 'national enlightenment' approach (espoused primarily by Forum secretary Dr. K.W. Gordon from Saskatchewan) prevailed over the 'local engagement' approach (advocated by Manitoba's provincial secretary Mary Bishop, labour union representatives and some adult education leaders) prevented the Citizens' Forum from nurturing the development of social movements (Wilson 1980:68-71). In the same vein, Faris (1975:109) points out that because of the national scope of the CF audience, regional and local topics were seldom dealt with. This was a strength, in the sense that Canadians gained a wider view of issues, but also a weakness, because local issues of citizens' concerns -- those very issues that could spur direct collective action -- were necessarily omitted. In this regard, George Grant, the forum first secretary, noted that the general and diffuse nature of the topics attracted only the middle class, and that there was almost no possibility of developing action projects among the lower class unless topics were relevant to that class (cited in Faris 183, fn.85).

Summarizing, the forum did more to raise awareness of issues for personal enlightenment than it did to encourage personal or group action, or to develop a working model of participatory democracy. The role of the CF in promoting citizenship education, then, was to supply a background of information and present conflicting perspectives on the critical issues of the day. Therefore, the CF can be characterized as a campaign of public information and discussion about the main problems facing democracy, a campaign that may or may not lead to social action. Although the CF sparked a few community initiatives (such as the public housing movement in Toronto during the 1940s) in overall terms it is fair to

say that public information did not result in social action (Butterwick 1998, Faris 1975, Kidd 1980, Selman 1981, Wilson 1980).

2. The participatory budget of Porto Alegre

The participatory budget of Porto Alegre (1989-present) followed a different strategy to engage citizens in democratic processes and community building. Instead of departing from an intellectual debate about national policies or international affairs, it starts from a discussion among neighbours about the most appropriate and fair way to allocate municipal resources in their community. This process has been repeated every year since 1989, has involved more than 100,000 people in deliberation and decision-making in Porto Alegre, and is being emulated in many cities all around the world.

The PB is essentially an open and democratic process of public participation through multi-tiered meetings which enables ordinary citizens to deliberate and make decisions collectively about municipal budget allocations. This includes neighbourhood discussions and decisions about priorities regarding investments in local infrastructure (e.g. pavement, sewage, storm drains, schools, health care, child care, housing, etc.), but also forums on city-wide issues such as transit and public transportation, health and social assistance, economic development and taxation, urban development, and education, culture and leisure. The neighbourhood meetings on local infrastructure tend to attract a majority of low-income groups, and the city-wide issues tend to attract mainly middle-class people. This should not be a surprise, since middle-class neighbourhoods have no major infrastructural problems.

Throughout the years, the PB has promoted, among many previously disengaged citizens, a sense of community and solidarity, a general understanding of urban issues, a demystification of the budget (previously a monopoly of experts in city hall), and an interest in larger political affairs. It has reduced corruption and clientelism in local politics, and has strengthened existing community organizations and sparked the creation of new ones. The PB constitutes an unusual experiment of community-state co-determination because it succeeded in overcoming the three main hurdles of participatory democracy: the so-called problems of implementation, inequality and co-optation (Abers 2000).

In my own research in Porto Alegre, through interviews with grassroots participants and community delegates, I found that, although this model of local participatory democracy is not without flaws, the amount of political learning acquired by ordinary citizens through direct involvement in deliberation and decision-making is impressive. However, this informal learning, and the consequent gains in political efficacy among the most marginalized groups, can be characterized as incidental, in the sense that it was not a result of a deliberate educational program. Thus, the participatory budget is basically a local engagement program which may lead or may not lead to civic learning.

The pedagogical dimension of the model had not been yet seriously considered, and although it has been recognized ex-post facto, as of today there is an absence of adult education initiatives accompanying the political process. Although the PB has some municipal workers who act as regional coordinators, their role is more administrative and bureaucratic than educational. One of them, who comes from the Freire tradition, told me that they should be doing more popular education work, but he admitted that generally the

lack of training on these theories and methodologies, and the constant pressures of time, prevent them from undertaking educational responsibilities. In sum, while the accomplishments of the PB are impressive, it is my contention that the civic learning that takes place in it could be greatly enhanced and better distributed among participants if deliberate educational interventions are incorporated into the process.

3. Summary and comparative analysis

The Citizens' Forum of Canada and the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre share an international reputation of being successful and long-lasting adult citizenship education programs. These two models have been emulated by adult education and community development groups in many parts of the world, and have provided other groups with inspiring ideas to improve their own programs. Both the Citizens' Forum and the Participatory Budget are located in that area of social interaction between the state and civil society that can be defined as a 'public, non-state sphere' (esfera publica, no estatal). In the Citizens' Forum the state was involved through the CBC, a crown corporation, and civil society through the Canadian Association of Adult Education (CAAE) and local study groups. In the Participatory Budget the state is involved through the direct participation of the municipal government, and civil society through neighbourhood and community organizations. Interestingly enough, while both models provide opportunities for significant civic learning to occur, neither of them contemplate the direct interaction of adult educators with the learners. The Citizens' Forum model assumes that the content of the materials and the interaction among members of the discussion groups provides sufficient conditions for civic learning. The Participatory Budget assumes that the best way to learn democracy is by doing it, and thus it is the socialization in the democratic process, through direct participation in collective deliberation and decision-making, that constitutes the most appropriate vehicle for civic learning. Besides these and other similarities, however, there are several important differences between the two models.

Table 1: Main differences between the Citizens' Forum and the Participatory Budget

	Citizens' Forum	Participatory Budget
Range of program	national	municipal
Main outcome	enlightenment	engagement
Main topics	macro issues	local issues
Expected process	deductive	inductive
Deliberation + decision-making	no (only feedback)	yes (enabling structures)
Emphasis	discussion	social action
Guiding purpose	critical understanding	co-governance
Printed material	content	process
Empowerment	critical thinking	political capital
Main civic virtue	tolerance	solidarity

The Citizens' Forum of Canada provides a good example of a model of citizenship education that focuses on enlightenment. It is a national program that attempts to promote

the understanding of macro issues of general interest to all citizens, and open discussions about these issues. In this model, the moment of deliberation is not linked to the moment of decision-making, as no enabling structures were designed for people to participate in such process. The only participation of people in decision-making consisted in sending feedback to the program developers on the outcomes of the discussions and their opinions on the materials, and this feedback could be used by the CBC and the CAAE to improve the program. This model is essentially deductive: it was expected that the analysis of large national issues would eventually lead people to examine more critically their own local reality, and then to take action upon them. The printed materials of the Citizens' Forum -- prepared by professional writers -- deal mainly with content, which is presented from two different (usually contradictory) perspectives in order to encourage debate. In this model, empowerment is understood as the development of the learner as a critical thinker, that is, as someone who can understand an idea, a concept, an argument or a fact from different perspectives, and is able to assess the shortcomings and strength of each perspective. Hence, the guiding purpose of this model is critical understanding of current social reality. The main civic virtue that arises from this model is tolerance, as citizens who are aware of approaches other than their own are more open to recognize and value them, and to critically examine their own.

The Participatory Budget is a good example of a model of citizenship education that focuses on engagement. It is a municipal process of co-governance that privileges social action on local problems, and that links the moment of deliberation with the moment of decision-making through enabling structures of participatory democracy. This model is basically inductive: it is expected that active participation in local issues will generate the need for learning in order to better understand the different causes of problems and to study possible solutions. It is also expected that a successful local participation will eventually nurture the political confidence and the necessary skills to undertake bigger projects, and the need to better understand larger social, environmental and political issues. The main printed materials of the Participatory Budget deal with its rules and regulations, which are developed collectively by participants and city representatives, and are subject to change every year. Other printed materials are regular newsletters describing some of the public works undertaken as a result of the participatory budget and comments from participants (generally laudatory) about the process and its outcomes. In this model, empowerment is understood as the development of the political capital of the poorest sectors of society, that is, their capacity to influence political decisions. The main civic virtue that arises from this model is solidarity, as participants must openly confront their own needs with the needs of other people who may be in more difficult situations. Moreover, the process of ranking priorities for budget allocations help people to move from their own narrow interests to the wider concerns of the collective, and generate dynamics of mutual help and support.

4. Conclusions

One of the assumptions of the enlightenment model is that critical awareness constitutes a departing point of a process that eventually will lead to social action. Likewise, the engagement model tends to assume that once people are actively engaged in local governance, they will feel confident to undertake larger challenges and they will become interested in larger politics. In short, while one model assumes that the awareness acquired through learning leads people to undertake social action, the other assumes that the

challenges of social action lead people to undertake learning projects. A scientific test of the relative validity of these two parallel assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper, but the available evidence emanated from the two case studies suggests that in only in a minority of situations the expected 'leap' takes place by itself. This prompts me to suggest two theses.

The first thesis that emerges from this analysis is that the spillover effect does not always happen naturally, and therefore the cross-fertilization and interaction between enlightenment and engagement can be improved through intentional and proactive interventions. This may seem like a truism, but unfortunately the dialogue and collaboration between adult educators and urban planners has not been plentiful. Coming back to our examples, the participatory budget can greatly benefit from adult educators, and the Citizens' Forum could have been significantly enhanced with local community development. Only imagine if Mary Bishop had been taken more seriously by Professor Gordon in those initial years!

A question that arises from this first thesis relates to the most appropriate balance in adult citizenship education programs between micro and macro affairs, between enlightenment and engagement, between deliberation and decision-making, and between dialogue and social action. Following John Dewey, the challenge is to find the best ways to integrate political engagement in local communities with a larger cosmopolitan vision. This is about acting local and thinking global, as well as connecting local struggles to larger struggles.

Considering the lessons from these and other experiences, it is possible to argue that a citizenship education program can be more successful in promoting an active and informed citizenship if it is able to link the moment of deliberation with the moment of decision-making, and if it is able to connect discussion with social action. At an abstract level, this is a sensible statement. It makes sense to say that programs should always pursue simultaneously enlightenment and engagement. At the practical level of implementation, however, programs must start somewhere.

Where to start, then? Based on the relative success of the Farm Forum vis-à-vis the Citizens' Forum, on the lessons of the Antigonish Movement, on Freire's literacy work and on my own observations and interviews in Porto Alegre, I would propose a second thesis. In a nutshell, I suggest that engagement is more likely to lead to enlightenment than the other way around. This is not necessarily new, but in light of the continued presence of many adult citizen education programs that still begin and end with 'enlightenment' strategies, it is a point worth reiterating. This thesis, which has concrete practical implications, suggests that the immediate, known and local is a more appropriate space to initiate adult education projects for democratic citizenship than the more distant realm of national policy and international affairs, often removed from everyday life and over which ordinary citizens have little influence except on voting day. At the same time, the feeling of confidence and the subsequent increase in political efficacy that comes from small collective achievements can become a powerful engine for larger social enterprises, and for further learning about the social world.

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