

When citizens bite back: Civics education as a foundation for social change. Part 2

(Edited version of Part 2 of paper delivered at the 2012 Pacific Circle Consortium Conference, Seoul, South Korea by John Gore. Part 1 appeared in the August edition))

Note: The country examples given in this paper were correct as at the 24 June 2012. Subsequent events may have changed them.

In Part 1, I outlined why citizens rebel using some current examples, what a civil society might look like and what we might want as Christians. In Part 2, I turn specifically to what school education through civics and other programs can offer to provide for a better society.

Civics education has much to offer students and our society. Schools can set a foundation for civil society that will encourage trust between non-intimates and hold governments accountable. Here are four possible contributions:

1. **Knowledge of the essentials of a healthy democracy.**

It is important that students understand that representative democracy be based on a constitution that:

- demands fair and free elections
- establishes just laws
- enforces the law impartially
- upholds the law by a separate judiciary
- holds law enforcement agencies accountable to parliament.

The importance of a cohesive relationship between parliament, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies is the basis for a workable democracy.

When applied internationally, this little check list quickly shows that some countries are democracies in name only. How do you judge?

- The military dominated Fijian regime
- The role of the military and judiciary in Pakistan or Myanmar
- The impartial administration of the law in India

While there can be some easily identifiable examples it is the undermining of these principles that puts democracy at risk. Here are a few examples:

1. Pakistan June 2012, there has been a long running battle between the judiciary, the military and the Government. To try and put pressure on the popular, but Government disliked, Chief Justice, he has been linked to corruption via his son who has been charged with corruption. The Chief Justice has decided to expel his son from his home and to hear the charges. It might have been better for him to stand down to honour impartiality in this matter. But so little trust does he have in his fellow judges under pressure that he has taken this extraordinary step. Last week he dismissed the Prime Minister for contempt of court as the Prime Minister had not followed a court order. The first choice alternative Prime Minister was so tainted by corruption that he had charges brought against him and now a second recommendation is being closely scrutinised for

corruption. Can any government politician be found that has not been associated with corruption?

2. Papua New Guinea has for a few months been in constitutional crises since the Prime Minister was voted out of power while out of the country. The Chief Justice ruled that the parliamentary move was illegal and that the previous Prime Minister should continue. After more threats, counter threats and a second court case, the Chief Justice has again ruled that the previous Prime Minister is the legal incumbent. On 25 May it was reported that the illegal Prime Minister, with the support of the police and military, has arrested the Chief Justice accusing him of being biased. Further developments have been stalled in the hope that elections planned for the 23 June will resolve the matter.
3. Egypt continues to struggle to put these essentials in place. The Chief Justice has found that one third of the elected members of the new parliament were ineligible to stand and the parliament has been dissolved. The Chief Justice was a Mubarak appointment and oversaw the Presidential Electoral Commission which was two unpopular candidates vying for President - one favouring the military and the other an Islamic State. The outcome is that the military are back in power with the new Islamic president without a parliament to support reform. The military has set up a constitutional review committee to establish a new constitution that will likely limit the power of the new President and see new elections under this revised constitution. Many citizens see the country as not making any headway to democracy.
4. A recent report from the Philippines indicates that the Chief Justice has bank accounts totalling \$28m US. He was previously the President's Chief of Staff before she appointed him as Chief Justice.

The importance of students understanding the relationship between the parliament, the judiciary and law enforcement is crucial to understanding how democracies should function. In Australia, the media likes to exploit divisions between the judiciary and politicians. This may lead to robust debate, but is often no more than trying to create a story by exploiting the prejudices of others. Students need to know and understand these relationships so that they can exercise critical judgements and hold their governments accountable.

2. Practicing democracy

Consideration could be given to the role schools play in developing democratic practices to give students a taste of these in the protected environment of the school. These practices include:

- Inclusive consultation and collaboration

School communities can reflect great diversity, often containing a range of cultural, religious and ethnic groups. A commitment to consultation and collaboration will result in students being included as key stakeholders. It is not sufficient to consult only with the student leaders or the student representative council (SRC) unless they have had the time to engage in a process of consultation with their fellow students.

Collaboration goes hand in hand with consultation. Many good initiatives have been lost because key individuals and groups have not been involved in the formative stages of developing new policy and initiatives. Students need to be involved in collaborative discussions at an early stage.

- Open communication

Communication and school climate go hand in hand. Probably the most significant determining factor of school climate is the openness of communications. It's about teachers closing the credibility gap by relating to students as significant adults showing consistency between words and deeds. It's about employing a pedagogy that opens students to communication between students, between students and teachers and between students and parents

- Equality of opportunity in representation

For students, the SRC or school parliament represents a significant opportunity to experience democratic practices. Some structures for SRCs are more equitable than others. If representation is a key feature of the SRC, then electing a student from graded classes may give a better representation of the school's sub-populations than year group elections. Sometimes student apathy towards their SRC can be linked to students not feeling represented by those elected.

The representatives need opportunities to communicate and consult with their constituents, the students.

- Freedom for critical reflection

To improve, and to bring about change, an environment for critical reflection is needed. Within the protection of the school community, failure has an important place. Nobody likes to fail and fear of failure can be a very depowering force. Yet we all experience failure, whether in going for a job, playing sport or establishing or maintaining relationships. In an increasingly competitive society we are likely to experience failure more often. This is especially true for many students in a more competitive school and social environment. In Australia, local clubs fail, 80% of small businesses fail, and large corporations fail. In school they need to learn to be free to make mistakes, and even fail, to learn that failure can set up new and different opportunities and that failure can signal a change in direction or a need to reassess one's goals.

Students can learn and experience how failure can lead to better performance, new pathways, new goals and new successes.

- Appropriate decision-making processes

Setting up the appropriate mechanism for decision-making is a key feature of good management.

Nobody likes to waste time and committees are experts at it. But committees allow for inclusion and collaboration, which are important factors if the decision requires wide implementation support. A school is unlikely to change the school uniform without consulting both students and parents. It is unlikely to change the time school commences and finishes without consulting students, parents and the bus companies. A crucial task of the school leader is to select the appropriate strategy to ensure a decision is made through a process that will be accepted by those that are affected by it. Decisions of convenience are likely to sow seeds of discontent that may erupt in other situations where more is at stake.

- A focus on the common good
Democratic processes are not morally neutral and need to focus on shared values about what is best for the whole school community

In providing a context for these values it is these democratic processes that facilitate the application of values in real-life situations. While debate will continue about the nature of a good society, schools remain the focus for student learning that will determine the nature of that society in the future.

As a society we want our students to learn the critical cultural heritage of their country so that they might understand their identity and better contribute to the future common good.

3. The contribution of service learning

Schools can contribute to a better understanding of the common good by engaging students in service learning. Service learning involves students in actions to help others. It links them with non-intimates in a practical way and helps them to practice civility. These activities are often curriculum related but always values focused and stress the need for students to be involved with other people in their communities. Many western countries depend on volunteers to support essential services to those with the greatest needs - the elderly, the destitute, the homeless and those with disabilities. A test of civility is how well countries (people and governments) support these citizens.

Service learning provides one avenue for students to engage their communities and work for the common good and a civil society.

4. A focus on values

Every school system advertises its values and assures its community about how they are being taught. But how are these shared values being taught? Are they taught explicitly as part of the curriculum, are they evident in the words and actions of members of the school community and are they being explored for understanding within a variety of subject contexts.

When it comes to values education, coming up with a set of shared values is the easy part. How these values operate in a variety of contexts and lead to right decision making are other matters all together. The key approach is to continually explore what these values look like in the subject matter of lessons across the curriculum. Identifying the values that motivate people and cause action will help students to understand the values. Total implicitness is not enough. This is leaving values education to chance. Explicit discussion of values within curriculum contexts will provide students with a growing understanding of the values and how they contribute to the common good. Civil society depends on our students understanding and practicing these shared community values.

As Christians, we would always want to work for a better society - one in which freedom of religion is a reality and where care for others is a fundamental principle. It must be a society with good responsible government. While we are quick to criticise Australian democratic institutions and governments we need to keep a wider perspective to realise just how fortunate we are in Australia. But complacency can easily give rise to poor government and rebellious citizens. To avoid such outcomes school education has a place to play in helping young people to both appreciate their society, to maintain it and to change it.

In summary, citizens don't rebel without a reason. Governments need to be aware of the causes of discontent and address them with appropriate policies. A civil society where non intimates relate in trust can be enhanced when schools teach the foundations for an effective democracy involving the relationships between the constitution, parliament, law enforcement and the judiciary; when schools provide opportunities for democratic practices to be engaged; when schools provide opportunities for service learning which helps students relate to the wider community and contribute to the common good; and when schools focus on shared values through classroom discussion within subjects to help students understand these values and to practice them in a variety of contexts.

From these measures students should grow up to demand from government what is for the common good and practice shared values in their relationships with non-intimates if justice is to have its way in our communities and the Gospel the space to change both people and societies.

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