

Civics and citizenship education: What have we learned and what does it mean for the future of Australian democracy?

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Abstract

The ambitious project to nationalise the Australian Curriculum has prompted great interest among policymakers, academics, and civics teachers in Australian schools. The government-led citizenship education initiative *Discovering Democracy* (1997-2007) comprehensively failed to meet its objectives, most prominently the stated goal of developing active citizens. This article has twin objectives: to explore the ways in which government-directed civics education programs have fallen short; and to argue for a shift in our approaches to civics education, in terms of both content and delivery, drawing on the surplus model, which credits students with unique ideas, knowledge and experiences. We draw upon *Justice Citizens*, an alternative approach to Civics Education that foregrounds students' own interests and abilities as central to their development into active citizens as an example of the educational practices that can promote and strengthen active citizenship among school students. From this program and other research, we discuss four student-centred themes that should inform further civics education curriculum development.

Keywords

Civics, citizenship, community involvement, school-based, alternative, student-centred, young people

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Introduction

In the recent history of liberal democracies, scholars and social commentators have raised concerns about levels of civic engagement. At the turn of the century, Robert Putnam's study *Bowling Alone* (2000) identified growing civic disengagement and decreasing levels of social capital among American populations. In Australia, the findings of Michael Pusey (2003) echoed those of Putnam. More recently Lowy Institute polling presented the startling statistics that 'only 60% of Australians, and just 42% of young Australians [18-29], believe that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government"' (Lowy Institute, 2014). Nor is this an especially new phenomenon; it has been documented for well over a decade (Norris, 1999; Lowy Institute, 2014).

For those of us committed to the democratic health of our nations, such trends are concerning on both a local and international level. While this article is anchored in Australia, similar concerns are being raised across other liberal democracies (for example, Mann and Casebeer, 2016; Ridley and Fulop, 2015) and governments are scrambling to find solutions to a populace disinterested in the stuff of government. We no longer need to ask: are we seeing a fracturing of the civic sphere? Rather, teachers and researchers and policy makers alike must come to terms with – and respond to – this evident fracturing. Indeed, in the current Australian political environment it appears to be worsening. According to commentator Tony Wright (2014), contemporary Australian political culture is driven by cheap insults rather than a meaningful and visionary politics that could and should enrich the nation. Instead, toxic and divisive narratives, reproduced by the 24-hour news cycle, stymie policy development and paralyse a scandal-ridden government.

This dissatisfaction is clear at the ballot box. Increasingly, Australia is witnessing decreasing voter turnout, alongside a growing informal vote count (University of Melbourne, 2013). This is despite the fact that, almost alone among the western liberal democracies, Australia has a compulsory voting regime, with penalties for non-participation (*Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* s. 245). Revisiting the 2013 federal election results, in which 4.1 million adult Australians 'cast no valid vote', Richard Denniss (in Hartcher, 2015) told Fairfax media:

Fully two-thirds of adult Australians did not vote for this government at the 2013 election. If the disenfranchised voters of Australia could be bothered forming a political party, it would be a

major party. Or as more than one social media comment has noted, ‘someone else’ and ‘don’t know’ are polling strongly.

Decreasing polling station attendance and increasing informal votes can be understood in terms of *democratic deficits* (Arvanitakis and Hodge, 2012). Democratic deficits refer to disengagement and disempowerment among citizens. A citizen without a sense of empowerment or ‘agency’, or one who has been denied agency by the state, cannot actively participate in a participatory democracy.

Of course, voting is simply one way that citizens are engaged in their communities, and our intention is to discuss civic engagement in broader terms than simply voting. While there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes civic engagement, nor how to measure it, we believe that civic engagement should relate to all groups in society, and should have both informed and active components. With this in mind, we have adopted Adler and Goggin’s (2005) definition of civic engagement which ‘refers to the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future’.

This definition would include voting as one form of civic engagement, but would also include volunteering, activism, the work of non-government organisations and social movements, and much more. Central to this definition, and to our understanding of civics and citizenship, is a commitment to improving the community for everyone. It is upon this understanding of civics and citizenship that we have situated our arguments.

The deficits described above are often perceived to be, if not in fact, traceable to disengaged youth. A standard response is to propose school civics classes as the solution. This assumes that it is young people who are disengaged. In Australia, the Federal Government designed a program entitled *Discovering Democracy* to specifically address this problem. *Discovering Democracy* is discussed in more detail later, but it is worth mentioning that the program did recognise that there was civic disengagement and apathy across a range of age groups, and not just youth. However, such calls for action often specifically reference youth; this can be seen in the recent call for ‘a national conversation on citizenship’: ‘A national conversation about citizenship will enable us to consider whether the rights and responsibilities of citizens are well understood and how we can better promote these, including among young Australians’ (Dutton and Abbott, 2015).

Civics education is usually promoted as an investment in our democratic future. Yet for decades, successive governments have repeated the same mistakes, and relied on the same weak or false assumptions, of the past. Rather than explicitly focusing on the development of active citizenship through practice-based models, policy makers have begun with the assumption that the best way to learn to be an active citizen is by storing up knowledge about governmental mechanics and systems. There is no evidence that this develops any kind of active citizenship - or is even very effective in developing any form of civic understanding (Shermis and Barth, 1982).

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, we will briefly analyse the Australian Government's investments in civics and citizenship education since the introduction of *Discovering Democracy*, including a short review of the development of the new Australian Curriculum. We contrast these two curricular documents with research about effective forms of civics and citizenship education to identify specific areas of weakness. While we support the introduction of a national civics curriculum, our review raises concerns that the current direction of the Australian Curriculum, and especially the current version of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum will replicate the errors of *Discovering Democracy* and potentially cause more harm than good. Such analyses of *Discovering Democracy* have been conducted before (Reichert, 2016) but there is a lacuna in the research comparing *Discovering Democracy* with the Australian Curriculum and with our developing understandings of young people's own views of civics and citizenship education.

Secondly, we propose possible solutions and amendments to the curriculum and policy direction of the Australian government to address this weakness. In order to do this, we draw upon excerpts from activist examples of civics and citizenship education. One example, *Justice Citizens*, is presented in detail as an alternative form of civics and citizenship education. Other examples are drawn from the literature, to identify what makes such community-involved, school-based programs more effective than governmental models at developing active citizens. This work builds on the earlier work of McMurray and Niens (2012) who identified the role of social capital in civics and citizenship education. It is our contention that such alternative forms of civics and citizenship education more fully embrace the nature of what it means to be a citizen and a young person in Australia in the 21st century, and also have relevance to international parties. Based on our understanding of these alternative forms of civics and citizenship education, we have developed a number of principles for developing active citizenship. These principles are, we believe, an effective tool for measuring the efficacy of civics and citizenship education programs in terms of increasing civic engagement.

Such a contention is rooted in our own beliefs about civics and citizenship education and indeed, democracy as a whole. We are advocating for a civics and citizenship education that is activist, global and maximal in orientation, because it is our belief that such an approach is the most successful way of developing active citizens and democratic societies. This viewpoint is in keeping with the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) which states that one of the purposes of education in Australia is the development of active and informed citizens who ‘are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia’s civic life’ and also ‘work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments’ (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008:9).

The examples that are presented in this paper adhere to that philosophical basis and seek to demonstrate this point, although we do acknowledge that such a global view of civics and citizenship education is a product of modern times, and previous iterations of civics and citizenship, and its attendant forms of education, were more likely to focus on national and patriotic discourses (Krinks, 1998-9).

A brief history of civics and citizenship education in Australia

With the stated aim of promoting ongoing social cohesion and community engagement, the Hawke-Keating Labor (social democratic) Governments initiated renewed interest in Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) in the 1980s. During the 1990s, the Civics Expert Group (CEG) reviewed the implementation of its ‘public education on civic issues’ strategy. The CEG found that previous school-based CCE programs had failed to meet the objectives of creating ‘active citizens’ able to ‘discharge the formal obligations of citizenship [and] make an informed judgement about the extent of their civic engagement’ (CEG, 1994: 6). The CEG put forward a series of recommendations to improve this, and envisaged a timeframe of 1995-2001 to implement these. However, the timeline was disrupted by a change of government following the 1996 election.

Between 1997 and 2004, the conservative Coalition government provided over AUD\$ 31 million to implement the newly branded CCE program *Discovering Democracy* (Kemp, 1997). *Discovering Democracy* was designed not only for schools, but also for the tertiary, vocational, adult and community education sectors (Krinks, 1998-9). We critique this program in some detail below.

The next change of government (Rudd-Gillard Labor, 2007-2013) saw the establishment of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as part of the Australian

Curriculum project. Thus the most recent institutional arrangements for CCE fall under this nationalisation drive.

To bring us up to the present, schools began to roll out the new Australian Curriculum across the country in 2014. At the same time, the incoming Minister of another conservative Coalition (Liberal-Nationals, 2013-) announced a curriculum-wide review, sparking fresh concerns about the divisive nature of past ‘culture wars’ (Cullen, 2014; Graham and Bacon, 2014; Hurst, 2014; Pyne, 2014). This review was completed shortly after, and version 7.5 of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum is currently being taught in schools across Australia. The most up to date version (8.3) is being timetabled for implementation by the various state and territory governments.

Discovering Democracy

As noted, the conservative Coalition introduced the *Discovering Democracy* program with the aim of promoting a more engaged citizenry amongst Australia’s school population. Reviews of *Discovering Democracy* have generally been focused on the efficacy or quality of the curriculum (for example, Erebus Consulting Group, 1999, 2003), rather than its success at developing active citizenship. Our examination of *Discovering Democracy* takes that focus as a starting point and reveals that a great deal of federal funding, supported by substantial goodwill, nevertheless produced poor outcomes. What were the reasons for such failure? With the new Australian Curriculum currently being used in schools (version 7.5, 2015 is now use in all states and territories, with plans to move to version 8.3 in coming years) around the country, it is timely to identify what can be done differently, and what ought not be repeated.

The central plank of CCE policies has remained consistent since at least 1989: education as a method for ‘producing’ active, engaged citizens. Much of what hampered *Discovering Democracy* from the start can be understood by the disruption between its conception and delivery. Under the conservative Howard Coalition (1996-2007), the progressive Keating Government’s defining notion of *active* citizenship education was quickly diluted. MacIntyre and Simpson (2009: 125) explain the change: ‘the emphasis on developing active citizenship skills to participate in current civics issues was lessened in order that greater emphasis be placed on knowledge of the historical development of Australian democracy’.

The contemporaneous literature identified three key concerns with *Discovering Democracy*. Firstly, the philosophical basis of the program was questionable. The rationale accompanying *Discovering Democracy* rightly acknowledged that citizenship entails *both* rights and responsibilities. Yet in reality,

the curriculum support materials focused on civic *obligations*. This is narrow and unbalanced, and limits teachers' capacity to present the more dynamic concepts of citizenship, such as empowerment and belonging, that are required to truly foster active young citizens. Engagement with, or exercise of, citizenship rights are hardly static over a lifetime, let alone for those yet to be formally recognised as holding such rights.

In this sense, the obligations-based approach presumes a 'citizens-in-waiting' identity on behalf of young people (Arvanitakis and Marren, 2009) rather than creating an environment in which students themselves identify and develop the kinds of civic activity in which they will *or already do* participate. The static, empty-vessel reading of citizenship, assumes young people are not active participants in community life, but passively waiting to become citizens upon reaching majority. This is demonstrably false (McMurray and Niens, 2012). Mechanical, duty-bound content is also dull and disengaging. Rather glumly, according to Adoniou et al. (2014):

[W]hat many experts in CCE research suggest is and has been wrong with our historic teaching of civics [is] what actually turns students off this subject – the focus on how government works ... instead of deep discussions about how democratic systems can be made more democratic by enhanced participation.

These limitations are again reinforced by the empty-vessel model of delivery: the teacher delivers and the students are meant to take it all in with little or no wrestling of the presented 'facts'. It is hierarchical and top-down: the teacher *broadcasts* information, rather than leads a conversation. The process reinforces authority in an oppressive pedagogy. The model assumes the purpose of education is to 'fill up' the student with approved information.

In this vein, Kennedy (1997:3) argued at the time that *Discovering Democracy* 'failed to identify the things that matter to young people, the things that can help them understand their reality and give them a stake in the future that rightly belongs to them'. It should go without saying, but does not, that if we do not seek to link our pedagogy to what matters to the audience, we face an uphill struggle to engage its members.

Another criticism, articulated by O'Loughlin (1997), was the content-heavy nature of *Discovering Democracy*, forcing as much information as possible into limited time. Again, the assumption was that this would somehow translate into the ability to navigate complex webs of rights and

responsibilities. O’Loughlin also foresaw the concerns raised by Adoniou et al. (2014): the content was staid and dull, with little relevance to the everyday lived experiences of young people. This is a miserable indictment for a field replete with stories of revolution, struggle, and a passion for equality and justice – all of which can and should be relevantly presented to people on the cusp of adulthood and of full, or formal, citizenship.

The third criticism of *Discovering Democracy* was that the delivery was poorly conceived and implemented. This problem was highlighted by the fact that different states across Australia adopted distinctive approaches to implementing CCE. In NSW high schools, the CCE curriculum was incorporated into the Australian History and Geography syllabus. The CCE section was treated as a ‘poor cousin’ and received minimal attention from most teachers. According to Mellor (2003), students were not necessarily aware of the CCE component, as teachers delivered the content in passing. [While it is true that simply because students are unaware that they are learning about CCE it does not necessarily follow that they are not actually learning about CCE, this does suggest that CCE was seen as of lesser importance than the other subjects. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority \(ACARA\) references the Melbourne Declaration \(2008\) by arguing that in order to become ‘active and informed citizens’, it is necessary to develop both the cognitive domain and the affective behavioural domain. This dual emphasis requires an understanding, by the child, of what he or she is learning.](#)

With these shortcomings, it is not surprising that *Discovering Democracy* failed to make a discernible impact at classroom level. National testing of students in 2007 showed that 46 per cent of Year 6 students and 59 per cent of Year 10 students failed to meet minimum proficiency levels (MCEETYA, 2009). After more than 10 years, this represents an abject failure across both age bands.

One of the key reasons for this dismal outcome is that the aims of *Discovering Democracy* were not consistent with its methods. The curriculum did not encourage the development of active citizens, which is what the federal and state governments claimed to be its purpose. Whether this is a matter of governmental doublespeak, insufficient teacher training, or oversight, the reality is that the goals spoke of future citizens making informed judgments and being engaged, whereas the materials focused on institutional arrangements and individual civic obligations.

The Australian Curriculum

Despite widespread recognition of its problems, there appears to have been little learnt from the failure of *Discovering Democracy*. This is highlighted by the new national curriculum offered

by ACARA. While the national curriculum project does offer some improvements in content, structure and delivery, it continues to ignore the most crucial element of all: the rich experience and knowledge of our diverse student body.

There are some areas of the new CCE syllabus that can be said to improve on *Discovering Democracy*. After reviewing both content and approach, however, it is clear that ACARA risks repeating mistakes of the former program in the key aspects of engagement and delivery. Consequently, ACARA is likely to reproduce some, if not all, of the same failings as its predecessor.

Before exploring these fundamental concerns, we acknowledge what appear to be significant improvements. Before the new CCE curriculum was developed, ACARA released *Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship* (ACARA, 2012). This document was intended to serve as a platform to establish what was to be included in the curriculum and the underlying philosophy that informed the curriculum's development. This Shape paper began by acknowledging that there had been a gradual shift in what is meant by CCE. For example, the Shape paper offers a much broader understanding of what citizenship means:

Over the past two decades in Australia and internationally, there has been a broadening of the concepts, processes, and practices in civics and citizenship education. In particular, there has been an increased emphasis on the role of active citizenship, both as explicit content and as a key outcome (ACARA, 2012: 6).

This broader and deeper definition shows that the new curriculum was to contain a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of civil society, and the relationship between education and democracy, than previous incarnations. It rests on the assumption that democracy is a valuable institution, it is active, and reflects the fact that democracy necessarily reaches beyond the constitution and the legislature to genuine civic engagement.

However, the most recent version of the *Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship* (v 8.3, ACARA, 2015b) is a marked departure from this activist notion of CCE. Instead of the emphasis on active citizenship as described in the Shape paper, this version limits the curriculum to content-based aims and limits: 'The Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship provides students with opportunities to investigate political and legal systems, and explore the nature of citizenship, diversity and identity in contemporary society' (ACARA, 2015b).

This is a disappointing change and suggests that ACARA, and by extension, schools in Australia, are no longer seeking to develop the same level of active citizenship in Australian students.

Another change suggested by the Shape paper was the inclusion of a cultural dimension to citizenship, thus recognising citizenship as much more than its legal definition alone. At a deeper level, this more subtle understanding includes notions of identity and belonging, as embraced by the three components to citizenship listed: civil, political and social. That citizenship has become three-dimensional is a marked improvement on past, narrow, curricula. This welcome depth also comes with the more modern definition of citizenship: ‘A modern sense incorporates three components: civil (rights and responsibilities); political (participation and representation); and social (social virtues and community involvement). It includes governance of the country, and to what extent there is representation for them.’ (ACARA, 2015b)

While ACARA has recognised the complexity of 21st century citizenship, the above formulation falls short of acknowledging fluidity beyond the school gate. Neither students nor teachers move strictly or only between classrooms and wider school contexts. We all travel out the gate and into the community. At the same time, the community in multiple forms – non-teaching employees, volunteers, suppliers, parents, education bureaucrats, expert advisors, excursion hosts and many others, *including electoral officials* – intersect and interact with teachers, the student body, and the school as an institution.

This failure to acknowledge fluid and fractured conceptions of citizenship is likely to detract from the ultimate goal as stated by the Melbourne Declaration: the development of informed and active citizens (MCEETYA 2008). Tudball and Henderson (2013) detail the nation-building role of CCE, as well as the contradictions that arise when this agenda is contrasted with the stated desire to see a modern, active and critical *civus*: ‘At one level, studying a nation’s civic traditions through its past can be a form of national identity construction, shaped by the often conflicting influences of political conservatism and the tradition of preparing reflective citizens for a democratic society’ (Tudball and Henderson, 2013: 5).

It should be mentioned that the above authors were basing their arguments on The Shape Paper and not the final version of the Australian Curriculum. However, their comments are astute and quite rightly identify the shift in focus away from active citizenship that was to come in the final versions of the citizenship curriculum, as highlighted above. Tudball and Henderson further caution that, as with *Discovering Democracy*, the active citizenship emphasis is likely to be at least partially sidelined by

renewed emphasis on ‘values’, as championed by conservative politicians. The stated aim here is usually to remove individual teacher opinions and biases. The unstated aim is to replace innovative approaches by competent professionals with the ideology of the government of the day. As the profession (and often the bureaucracy) resist direct and indirect efforts to contain teacher creativity, the curriculum becomes increasingly disjointed and compromised. This can lead to a disheartening lose-lose situation: content that is anchored in a sanitised version of democratic citizenship, told in bland and meaningless language.

From content to delivery, we see the curriculum in fact defers the goal of agency in those young people who are the recipients of the program. Tudball and Henderson (2013:5), citing Coleman (1972), highlight the mainstream view of young people as citizens ‘always in preparation, but never acting’. Young people might be classed as ‘citizens of the future’, and not ‘citizens of the present’ - returning us to the ‘citizens in waiting’ approach highlighted above.

Another site that is only scantily contextualised is school-community partnerships. It is in these relationships that we see active forms of citizenship being played out. In formal CCE terms, it is where ‘agents’ move to establish ‘relationships of mutual benefit’. Here, student-agents are future citizens with varying degrees of engagement and empowerment (or *agency*) to, for example, organise an excursion, or become an elected office-holder.

The final aspect of the CCE as it currently stands is the less tangible, but no less crucial, imperative that young people develop *critical thinking*. [Critical consciousness or critical perspectives about democracy go beyond a fleeting reference to ‘critical thinking skills \(ACARA, 2015b\)](#). While the importance of CCE is stated, the subject has been placed behind the release of the History, English, Mathematics and Science curricula. [Although this is a brief review of the Civics and Citizenship Curriculum, and not an in-depth analysis, it appears to us that ACARA is set to repeat the mistakes of *Discovering Democracy*](#). The curriculum overlooks diverse citizenship cultures, and fails to recognise student agency in the ‘becoming an active citizen’ process.

Ultimately, while the latest version of the Australian Curriculum is an improvement on *Discovering Democracy*, there is little innovative or creative vision. Rather, the exciting ideas expressed in the Shape Paper have failed to be translated into the curriculum documents that teachers will be using in the classroom. The discussion on ‘attitudes and beliefs’ is weak because it fails to explain why these are important. The failure to consider culture of citizenship and senses of agency is a failure to consider

not only how to engage students but how to best see them empowered for civic life. There is no point to having citizenship rights if the *civus* is not empowered to exercise those rights.

As such, the Australian CCE Curriculum continues to be built on a deficit model. The document does recognise that young people are active outside the classroom and school. Yet this static observation contributes nothing unless there are innovative pathways to bringing this knowledge into the classroom. The obvious agent to create dialogue between the student-at-school and the student-at-large is the educator, yet there is no encouragement or guidelines for teachers to make use of students' prior knowledge, externally derived knowledge, knowledge forged from lived experience.

That the discussion still treats students as empty vessels is in stark contrast to the contemporary orthodoxy of centring critical thinking across formal subject boundaries. Current understandings of critical thinking go beyond *why*. The next step must also be taken, which is to ask: *can I change this state of affairs? Should I? How?* That there is no discussion of this sense of empowerment and agency means the curriculum precludes the most fundamental citizenship imperative of all: how to make the world a better place. *Of course, by stating this as the aim of civics and citizenship education, we are betraying our own philosophical orientation. We have unashamedly adopted a view of civics and citizenship education that is maximal (McLaughlin, 1992) and justice-oriented (Westheimer and Kahhe, 2004). Furthermore, we are recognising, as have education systems around the world, that civics and citizenship education needs to move beyond the traditional locus of national borders and embrace global perspectives. For example, the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008:5) expressly recommends the development of a sense of 'global citizenship'.*

Alternative approaches

The two examples presented above are large-scale, government-led and funded interventions in the school system. Their wide range and scope makes them worthy of examination, but it is also important to acknowledge that there are other, smaller approaches to civics and citizenship that are proving to be effective. One such approach, *Justice Citizens*, is discussed at length below, but it would be remiss not to identify that these alternative programs often emphasise both local and community connections as well as more global notions of citizenship, in addition to a more maximal approach to CCE (McLaughlin, 1992). *Justice Citizens* fits into this context and draws from projects like *RUMad?* (Zyngier, 2012) and *The Global Connections Program* (Wierenga et al., 2008).

Justice Citizens

Justice Citizens was a project that was designed to explore the concepts behind justice oriented citizenship (as defined by Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) as well as to examine how such notions correlated with young people's own understandings and practices of active citizenship, both in person and online. [Westheimer and Kahne define justice-oriented citizenship as being able to critically assess social, political and economic structures to see beyond surface causes to challenge inequality and injustice.](#) This program was implemented at a Western Sydney Catholic high school in 2012. It was timetabled for one hour of class time per fortnight for the whole of the year. Although this seems like quite a limited amount of time, it is important to understand that, as the project developed, students and teachers gave up considerable amounts of their own time – often after school or during lunch – to work on their research. [There were 137 students](#), organized into six mixed ability classes, [which](#) took part in the program. Four teachers (including one of the authors of this paper) worked to deliver the course. [The students were aged between 14 and 16 years old.](#)

The aim of the course was for students to develop the skills, values and attitudes required of active citizens. In particular, it was seeking to develop critical thinking, digital literacy, research skills and collaborative learning practices. In addition, the teachers wanted to develop students' intrinsic motivation to identify issues that they were facing and then to take action about those issues in a constructive and creative way. These values, skills and attitudes were drawn from the work on global citizenship (for an example, see Oxfam, 1997) as well as the ideas of justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004).

The course was broken into three main sections. In the first section, students were challenged to consider their own agency. This was done by presenting students [with a range of questions about the ability of young people to organise and act for change \(for example: 'Young people are capable of organizing nationwide protests'\)](#). Students were asked to indicate whether they felt whether young people had the capability to undertake such an action. Once they had indicated their thoughts, students were then presented with an example and a newspaper story or film clip that explained where young people had successfully undertaken exactly that action. Referring to the example above, students read and discussed the [Chilean education protests from 2011-2013.](#)

All the statements about young people's agency were true; that is, young people had undertaken all of the propositions. The purpose of this section of this course was to lead a discussion about why

young people were capable of doing such things, and whether the participants in *Justice Citizens* could conceive of themselves doing similar. In addition, students identified the kinds of skills and knowledges that were required in order to take this form of action, as well as whether they possessed these.

In the second part of the course, students worked with journalists from the local newspapers to develop an understanding of research and interview techniques. Students also had the opportunity to speak to a range of community members about different topics that the community member felt was important. During this phase, a number of issues constantly recurred: these included racism, the treatment of asylum seekers, the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse and bullying and harassment. Students then began to research a particular community issue that they felt was of importance and they wanted to take action about. This was student-led, and the range of topics that students decided to research was quite broad. Some of these topics included the environmental degradation of a local river ecosystem, bullying in the school community, the treatment of refugees in the community, the challenges faced by teenage parents and the effects of domestic violence.

This research was intended to assist students in formulating the final part of their project: they would make a short film about their topic, to be shown both online and at a community film-festival, that was intended to start discussion about the topic. Students worked in small groups (chosen by themselves). The groups ranged from pairs to one group of seven. Students were responsible for ‘pitching’ an idea for their film to their teacher, then researching it. They then had to devise a script collaboratively, as well as a storyboard, before shooting their film. For many students, this was done during school time (either during the lessons themselves or during other free time) but some groups used their own personal time to meet up with participants or people they wanted to film. More than 30 films were produced, which was more than 90% of the expected number if all groups completed the task.

These films were then shown to the whole cohort, who voted on which ones they thought were the best; these films were placed on the school’s YouTube channel and also presented at a local Film Festival. The online space and the actual physical film festival were important for different reasons. The physical festival allowed students to invite prominent members of the community to see their films, and also engage in discussion about the topics, while the online space provided a chance for students to share their films with a much broader audience.

Data about *Justice Citizens* was gathered in a number of different ways. One of the authors (Heggart) undertook participant observation (Soyini, 2005) in the *Justice Citizen* classes. In some cases,

the author acted as a ‘teacher-researcher’ (Wong, 1995), a position that allowed excellent access to the students, but had its own challenges, as it was necessary to navigate the line between the requirements of being a teacher while also pursuing a research agenda. As a participant-observer, Heggart was able to listen to the ways that students spoke about issues in their own communities, watch as they interacted with each other, and to note if participation in the *Justice Citizens* course brought about any changes in either of these two factors.

In addition, Heggart gathered data through two series of interviews with 11 of the *Justice Citizens* participants. The first round of interviews took place before the program began, and the second round took place at the conclusion of *Justice Citizens*. In both cases, the same students were interviewed. The interviews were individual, with the exception of one, in which a pair of students were involved. Six boys and five girls were interviewed. The students nominated themselves for the interview process. There were no obvious common characteristics between the students who self-nominated: they were a range of different ability levels, different social and ethnic groups and had worked in different groups during the project. The interviews were semi-structured in nature.

This data was analysed. Using a mix of preconceived codes and additional codes that developed through the project, Heggart was able to identify a number of themes that contributed to the development of justice-oriented citizenship in young people. These themes have contributed to the development of the principles described in the following section. *Of course, 11 interviews is quite a limited number and it would be foolish to critique the current status of civics and citizenship education in Australia from such a small group of interviews. Instead, the interview excerpts presented below are intended to illustrate the four principles detailed below and suggest the value of alternative approaches to civics and citizenship education that are not in line with Discovering Democracy or The Australian Curriculum. These excerpts demonstrate the efficacy of alternative models of civics and citizenship education as opposed to the deficit model favoured by the Australian Curriculum and Discovering Democracy; they do not stand alone, but rather are telling examples of alternative practices.*

Principles for Developing Active Citizenship

While the preceding discussions about *Discovering Democracy* and the Australian Curriculum paint a bleak picture, there is cause for cautious optimism. *In this section, we argue that the Australian Curriculum can and should embrace the principles that are present in many alternative CCE programs, including Justice Citizens, as presented above.* In contrast to tame and tired ‘volunteer’ and ‘charity’

activities, programs like *Justice Citizens* are dynamic and designed for *co-development* (Arvanitakis and Matthews, 2014). Building a co-development element into curriculum design brings exciting potentialities.

Inspired in part by ‘flipped’ or ‘upside down’ classrooms pioneered in the USA (Lage and Platt, 2000), co-development builds capacity for fluidity into its teaching and learning. These programs start out being teacher-led: in Frierean terms, to do otherwise would be an abrogation of responsibility (Friere, 1974). The key is flux: project leadership shifts and changes throughout the process. The teacher begins by leading from the front, before moving alongside the student, and eventually ‘leading from behind’. As the student takes charge of their project and thus their learning, the teacher remains in the background, to be called on when required.

In order to demonstrate these ideas, we have identified four principles of successful alternative CCE programs. The first principle that these projects have in common is that teachers, students, school and community *work collaboratively on what should be studied and how it should be studied*. The key to success in these projects is the autonomy students had over content and process. In *Justice Citizens*, for example, the range of topics chosen by students included domestic violence, homelessness, vehicle safety, refugees, racism and teen pregnancy. It is axiomatic that their decisions reflect their interests and concerns. So some students created artistic films, while others preferred straight interviews. One group animated their film. Autonomy and leadership travel together through the project: where students make their own decisions over content, teachers can wait in the background, ready to offer advice, contacts, and encouragement.

Unlike the models perpetuated by *Discovering Democracy* and the new Australian Curriculum, students are not passive recipients of information. Here, students are centrally placed as the motivational power for civics and citizenship education. The message here is that CCE is about them. The workings of government are learned while being navigated in real time, through exploring the chosen topic. In feedback from *Justice Citizens*, students reported high levels of motivation. This can be initially explained by the fact that the students had substantive autonomy over decisions. This autonomy meant that the chosen projects were embedded in the context of individual or group lives and environments.

An excerpt from one of the students explains this well. In this excerpt and all other excerpts, students are presented with their real names. [Permission from students and their carers was granted to do](#)

this, and students wanted to use their real names, feeling that they had contributed to the research and they wished to be recognised for their efforts.

NICK: Oh, well I'm in a group with Shanece, Lachlan, Patrick and we made a film about racism, and that. And Shanece was the – because she's from – her nationality is Samoan, I think. We thought that she'd be a good role for it and the movie was about how she came to Australia. And it was her first day and there was a lot of racist comments going around the classes, in that – and how – then what troubles they found during the first couple of weeks, in that we thought they're not being able to speak English, not being able to communicate with other people. We just wanted to find out – when we interviewed two Sudanese people and Shanece interviewed two people and during our film, we put their voices through it to make it feel more connected to it so that we tried to make each film part connect with the voice and I think we did in the end with Patrick, not being able to communicate with anyone and we put one of the voices through the end and it matched it perfectly.

There were broad directives as to content and process – choose a social issue; make a film – but within this frame the students' autonomy was limited only by formal external parameters, such as the law, safety, or school term time. In other words, students are co-creators of content *and* process, and must walk the line between autonomy and formal restrictions. This experience reflects social norms and actions to which adult citizens must conform. It is however *in contrast* to the rigid hierarchical structure, content and delivery of the traditional classroom; and the assumptions that underpin these - as seen in *Discovering Democracy* and, to a lesser extent, under the latest version (v 8.3) of the *Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship*. This is important because the alternative approaches cast students in the role of the doer – that is, they are empowered to learn how to be citizens by actually behaving as citizens (Upchurch, 2013).

The second principle is: *the context of individual students play a significant role in the development of active citizenship*. As mentioned above, previous programs assumed a homogenous student body. From the government-led and content-centred approach down, the assumption is that all schools and students can and should develop civic-mindedness in the same way. This is an anachronism and a mistake. Federal governments since 1972 have recognised multiculturalism in the context of citizenship programs. But even without invoking the diversity of non-Indigenous Australians' country of origin, the reality is that individuals have different interests and operate at different levels of engagement, empowerment, and agency.

By recognising heterogeneity, we can see that any program aimed at developing active citizenship will require multiple entry and exit points. This way, students can approach CCE at a level that is meaningful – and thus more likely to work – for them. The alternative is that the one-size-fits-all model sets up a proportion of students to fail. This in turn compounds existing higher levels of disengagement and disempowerment – further widening the gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged and doing more harm than good.

DANIEL: Well there's my film on dirt bike safety that I made while I was checking my bike. Brenton is in there too; he was checking his bike and then we done some of little wild stuff like ride around crazy.

KEITH: And why did you pick that issue?

BRENTON: Because it's like a serious matter to—especially for Daniel after what happened with his brother.

KEITH: Yeah, so you know someone who was injured?

BRENTON: I know people who've been injured twice.

KEITH: Do you think, let's say people your age who ride dirt bikes and they watch your film, do you think they would think twice now?

BRENTON and DANIEL: Yes.

Community-based programs, like *Justice Citizens* are social justice based equalisers, where students collaborate with each other and with their teachers. What they are learning and how they are learning it works outside the stressful and often dispiriting environment of a regimented timetable.

ELLI: Okay, my film was about the pollution of the Nepean River and we had this guy come in from Nepean Waterkeepers and he studied for – he was studying the Nepean River for a while and we asked him some questions and he answered them; and then we put them into a movie with some pictures and information. And then it was done, you know, it was actually pretty good.

Crucially, the success of the individual depends on the success of the group. For example, *Justice Citizens'* film festival was a group activity – students worked together to research and make their films. Their success was measured, by students themselves, in how well their film presented their point of view about their chosen topic. Also crucial here is the elevation of co-operation over competition. A considerable burden is lifted from our least advantaged students when competitive elements are

minimised or removed from the curriculum. Furthermore, we argue that students can *enjoy* learning more when the competitive ethos is replaced with a co-operative one. The link between enjoyment of learning and education attainment is a further research question for these projects.

It is important to note that the examples above emphasise process over content. This is because we cannot know what the precise content will be until we have met each cohort of students and discovered what values, attitudes, or levels of engagement they bring with them. To put it another way, these programs build on values and attitudes that will see students develop into citizens by different paths, but paths they are able to navigate with confidence.

In contrast, *Discovering Democracy* and the Australian Curriculum are often limited to a single, rigid outcome: (future) adults who have been ‘given’ information about citizenship and its processes. While we note that the draft Australian Curriculum discusses ways to develop values as well as knowledge, the cited values are vague, all-encompassing phrases: ‘[respect, civility, equity, justice and responsibility](#)’ (ACARA, 2015b). These broad and tame orthodoxies are presumably decontextualized for the unachievable purpose of pleasing everyone and offending no-one. Yet we do not have a nation of citizens who practice these values, not even in the most vague or basic sense.

Moreover, we contend that if the new implementation is anything like that of *Discovering Democracy*, even with its greater depth of definition of citizenship, the ‘doing’ will be rapidly abandoned in favour of passive exposure to dull and conformist content which erases the revolutionary nature of democracy from our shared story. It is difficult to see how young people can be expected to enthusiastically engage with their democracy on the basis of top-down classroom delivery of content that is vague, tame and dull and, given the current political landscape, grossly inaccurate and hypocritical.

When distilled in the context of our deficit model, critique, the co-creative approach reflects a third principle: *that a surplus rather than deficit model be applied*. Rather than treating the students as empty vessels, the surplus model begins from the position that the young people have experiences and knowledge that allows them to make a valuable contribution to the classroom, to the school community, and beyond. The programs described understand that the students come to class with interests that are formed through previous engagements and experiences – and these are valuable contributions to the learning process.

However, as stated earlier, both the Australian Curriculum and *Discovering Democracy* ignore this: instead, students are considered to be ignorant or disinterested in politics. While this might be true for most students if one takes a narrow view of politics, it is patently not true if one takes a broader, ‘thicker’ approach to democratic education. Good civics and citizenship education programs recognize what young people bring to the classroom, and make use of it in order to develop active citizenship.

One example from *Justice Citizens* serves to illustrate this. As part of the program, students were asked to share their thoughts on ‘civics deficit’. Here is one student’s reply:

KEITH: Sometimes young people, people your age are classified as being ignorant or not caring about political issues. Do you think that’s true?

SHANECE: Not really. Because I know for a fact that everyone...a lot of people do care about politics and we do agree and disagree with some people. We actually do talk about who would be better to run our country like Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott or something. And we do put out points “why?” So I think that’s actually a wrong statement.

A final principle, which is more of an overarching observation, is *the central importance of community engagement today*. Students benefit exponentially from opportunities to put learning into practice in the ‘real’ world, rather than being confined to the somewhat artificial world of school. There is particular relevance for this approach in CCE, where students have the opportunity to engage with their communities about issues that they feel are important – thus practicing the exact principles of active citizenship demanded by the Federal Government – and much more could be made of this in the Australian Curriculum. [For example, in version 8.3 of the Australian Curriculum \(ACARA 2015b\), students are required to undertake an ‘inquiry and skills’ strand which ‘involves students working collaboratively, negotiating and developing strategies to resolve issues, and planning for action’ \(ACARA. 2015b\). This is promising, but as was suggested earlier in this article, it does not go far enough. Why do students only plan for action? Why do they not actually take action in their own communities?](#)

It is well known by educators (although often ignored by curriculum writers and policy makers) that students engage well with study areas where they already know something about it. This operates at both neurological and psychological level. New information must be processed, and the key referent we (all) use to turn information into knowledge is previously stored information (Tasker, 2005). This links to the surplus model: students bring with them to the classroom a surplus of knowledge, values and skills learnt outside the classroom.

These four principles outline a framework for the development of a curriculum and pedagogy that supports active citizenship amongst young people. However, it would be remiss not to identify that embracing such a pedagogical approach is not without its own difficulties. Primarily, teachers would be required to significantly alter the way that they approach teaching in their classrooms. Programs like *Justice Citizens* operate from a shared model of authority; this is alien to many secondary teachers. In addition, the student-led aspect of the curriculum would prove to be uncomfortable to many teachers who are more used to having a set, government-dictated curriculum to follow. Finally, it should be noted that the development of programs like *Justice Citizens* requires significant investments of time and resources. Schools need to build connections with community groups, and also invest in equipment for the making of films or the hosting of events related to the program.

Conclusion

There is little value in rote learning in CCE. Curriculum documents in Australia call for the development of active citizenship and research by Zyngier (2010), for example, suggests that the best way to develop this is through hands-on activities. To do the opposite and simply stand and deliver, in an autocratic way, dull and disengaging information about parliament, or the Constitution, or to perpetuate debasing charity models as 'model' citizenship, is not to teach CCE at all. As stated at the beginning of this paper, it is our contention that citizenship is about being immersed in democratic values and democratic doing, and learning to challenge the status quo. This 'justice-oriented' approach is a revolutionary act in the tradition of democracy itself. Reciting a string of facts about the Constitution and the Governor-General is not preparing students to reach a considered position on whether Australia should retain a foreign head of state or vote to transition to a republic. A student who is taught to fundraise for poor people will not learn about the perpetual criminalisation and impoverishment of Aboriginal people by the state. In fact, they may well become part of the problem. A visit to the local courthouse on the other hand, particularly if producing a documentary film about what happens there, is an eye-opener for citizens of any age.

If we are serious about teaching democracy and active citizenship in schools, then we need a project-based curriculum that sees students not only celebrate but also feel uncomfortable. By this we mean that CCE should be an opportunity to discuss and debate the more radical elements of democracy, to reconcile revolutionary democracy with the destructive agents of imperialism, to question whether the *civus* is in fact willing to see democratic rights and freedoms diluted in return for dubious claims about terrorism and national security.

Teaching democracy is about complexities, successes and failures – ones we have made in the past and ones we are making now. As citizens of a democracy we should be celebrating the openness of our society and challenging our governments to justify its political claims and its debasement of the polity. Certainly, there are plenty of issues that are of concern to young people and would offer interesting starting points: from heavy-handed surveillance strategies to discarding the 1951 Refugee Convention to the effects of climate change.

Unless we create the spaces for young people to contribute in these debates, as well as others that they identify as important and meaningful, then no matter how much money is thrown at CCE, it will continue to fail. The four principles we present above challenge us as educators: they push us to take the journey with our students. Without such an approach, the value of our democracy will be undersold, and continue to be undermined.

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