The Transformative Impact of a Summer Camp on a Professor's Civic Engagement

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Abstract

This paper explored the impact of a summer civics camp on revitalizing the first author's commitment to civics instruction and fostering critical consciousness in the classroom. Through reflective journaling, individual interviews with students, and engagement as a researcher and master teacher, this author navigated the journey from disillusionment to empowerment. The paper also introduced the Advocacy Hourglass framework (Generation Citizen, 2019) as a catalyst for transformation and highlighted its alignment with youth-led activism. The interdisciplinary nature of this exploration underscored the potential for integrating innovative approaches across disciplines to enhance social studies education.

Key Words

advocacy framework, community-engaged scholarship, civics education

Preferred citation

Community-engaged scholarship (CES) emphasizes integrating academic work with community involvement to collaboratively address societal issues. This approach aligns closely with the structure and goals of summer camps designed to foster civic engagement. These camps benefit students by enhancing their leadership skills, civic knowledge, and community awareness. Participation in summer camps has been shown to improve empathy, emotional self-control, optimism, and assertiveness among youth (Kirchhoff et al., 2024). Additionally, such programs provide educators and researchers with opportunities to apply CES principles in real-world contexts, facilitating mutual learning and collaboration. By promoting mutual learning and collaboration, these programs exemplify the shared benefits of community engagement for all participants while addressing community-identified needs.

This paper explores a university professor's experiences as a master teacher and observer at a civics-oriented summer day camp for middle school students. With her experience as the impetus for this exploration, the paper centers her voice using a first-person narrative style. After a review of existing literature, her narrative begins by outlining the context of disillusionment within civic education and continues

with an examination of her reflective journals to explore the transformative journey she experienced throughout this process.

Review of the Literature

Professional development, civic education, and community-engaged scholarship are interconnected areas that play a vital role in fostering growth, collaboration, and societal impact. Professional development supports educators in refining their teaching philosophies and engaging in continuous learning, benefiting both teachers and students. Civic education emphasizes experiential and culturally responsive teaching approaches, such as the Advocacy Hourglass Framework, to empower students as critical thinkers and active participants in addressing real-world challenges. Similarly, community-engaged scholarship integrates academic work with community involvement, promoting collaborative learning and advocacy to address societal needs. Together, these areas contribute to creating transformative educational experiences that prepare educators and students to engage meaningfully in their communities.

The Role of Professional Development for Educators

Professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness and growth of teacher educators (TEs). As teacher education has become more professionalized over the past two decades, organizations like the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) have established standards emphasizing the importance of continuous learning and reflection (Loughran, 2014). ATE's fourth standard on professional development highlights that educators should engage in reflective practices, deepen their understanding of research, and use this knowledge to refine their teaching philosophy. Professional development, whether formal or informal, ensures that educators remain current in their field while also nurturing their enthusiasm and sustaining their professional interests (Smith & Tellima, 2006; Smith, K., 2003; Smith, P. K. 2010). For example, self-study, a form of on-the-job learning, allows educators to critically examine their values and practices, fostering

deeper personal and professional growth (Zeichner, 2005; Russell, 2007). By integrating formal feedback from colleagues or superiors with informal feedback from students, educators can address gaps in their practice while maintaining a collaborative and supportive environment (Smith & Krumsvik, 2007; Smith & Welitzker-Polak, 2007).

Informal feedback from students, particularly when rapport has been established, is especially valuable for professional development. Teachers who foster collaborative and supportive classroom environments encourage students to share their learning experiences openly, creating opportunities for meaningful insights (Russell, 2007). Such feedback helps educators pinpoint areas for improvement and refine their instructional strategies (Smith & Welitzker-Polak, 2007). Ultimately, professional development rooted in reflection and collaboration not only benefits educators but also positively impacts student outcomes by enhancing the learning environment.

Current Trends in Civic Education

Civic education is evolving to address the complex challenges facing students in an increasingly interconnected world. One prominent trend is the emphasis on experiential and action-based learning frameworks, such as the Advocacy Hourglass Framework (AHF), which equips students with tools to critically analyze civic issues and develop actionable solutions (Generation Citizen, 2019). AHF guides students through a systematic process of identifying problems, setting policy goals, and engaging stakeholders, fostering both critical thinking and active participation. By integrating this framework into classroom activities and civic programs like summer camps, educators enable students to confront real-world issues, raising their voices to advocate for meaningful change (Magill et al., 2024; LeCompte et al., 2020).

Moreover, there is a growing recognition of the need for culturally responsive civic education that acknowledges and addresses the diverse experiences of students. Programs increasingly focus on local and community-level issues, helping students see the

relevance of civic engagement in their daily lives. Schools in New York and other regions have adopted frameworks like AHF to foster a sense of empowerment and agency among students, ensuring that civic education is not merely theoretical but deeply practical (Generation Citizen, 2019).

The intersection of professional development and civic education lies in the educator's ability to model the critical inquiry and reflection they wish to instill in their students. Self-study and core reflection practices, highlighted by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005), align closely with frameworks like the AHF, emphasizing systematic problem-solving and advocacy. Educators who engage in professional development centered on civic education gain tools to empower their students while also renewing their own sense of purpose and mission.

By equipping themselves with strategies that foster collaboration, critical thinking and advocacy, educators can create transformative learning environments that benefit both themselves and their students. This dual growth reinforces the vital role educators play as facilitators of change, guiding the next generation to become informed and engaged citizens.

Civic Engagement and Community-Engaged Scholarship

Community-engaged scholarship (CES) can be understood as the integration of academic work with community involvement to address societal issues collaboratively. Dr. Barbara Jacoby speaks of community-engaged scholarship as civic engagement. She notes the difficulty in defining the concept due to the complexity, conflation of terms like "community service" and "civic engagement," and concern about perceived political partisanship related to concepts of social justice and the common good. In her book, she indicates that civic engagement involves learning from others, valuing diversity, building bridges, maintaining civility, and promoting social justice and social responsibility. Civic engagement encourages individuals to participate actively in public life to solve problems and develop empathy, ethics, and values (Jacoby & Associates, 2009).

Another scholar differentiates community-engaged scholarship from other types of research due to its collaborative nature and breadth of design and scope. Cynthia Gordon da Cruz defines CES as scholarship that involves faculty and students in mutually beneficial partnerships with communities to address community-identified needs. She differentiates it from service-learning, writing, "CES more centrally focuses on the collaborative development and application of scholarly knowledge to address pressing social issues" (da Cruz, 2018, p. 149). Common themes across these definitions include mutual benefit, collaboration, and the integration of academic and community knowledge to address real-world challenges.

Research indicates that community-based and civic engagement in education have positive outcomes across key areas, including increased personal and social responsibility, improved intellectual and practical skills, and enhanced career-related skills (Bandy, 2011; Chittum et al., 2022). Educators also benefit from community-engaged learning, as it enhances community relations and provides valuable human resources needed to achieve community goals (Bandy, 2011). When applied in a civics summer camp setting, community-engaged scholarship principles can increase social-emotional growth, create opportunities to transfer classroom learning, and inspire deeper community engagement for both participants and leaders (Bandy, 2011; Kirchhoff et al., 2024; Martin, 2018; Sibthorp et al., 2020).

Background

While there are many deterrents to activism—lack of knowledge, lack of time, fear of retribution—this paper focuses on my own personal deterrent: burnout and disillusionment. As a former middle school teacher, I had worked with my students to plan refugee relocation plans with local organizations that benefited our incoming students. I supported my high school students in their individual explorations of injustices in the United States through a reverse chronological study

that resulted in community action and publication. When my school canceled clubs, I created the underground Dragon Club so that I could continue to offer transformative experiences to my students. The list goes on. Until it doesn't. At some point, over the course of my fifteen years of experience in education, I became disillusioned. It might have been working with my bilingual students to create a program at my university with limited success or protesting with Black Lives Matter and not seeing any substantive change, but for whatever reason, I was done!

Then, my colleague and friend reached out and asked if I would be interested in supporting the research team for a summer civics camp hosted at a private university. The camp is open to fifth through ninth graders to support their knowledge growth in citizenship. On a selfish level, I hoped it would revitalize me. I had begun to feel that my disillusionment was going to soon have a negative impact on my social studies methods courses, which I teach at the undergraduate and graduate levels. I decided to use this opportunity for critical self-reflection and, to that end, I collected reflective journals that I wrote to document my experiences.

Positionality Statement

My positionality in relation to the camp is shaped by several factors. Firstly, my reflections are drawn solely from my personal experiences, observations, and interactions during my time at the camp, without an intentional consideration or comparison of these experiences with my colleagues. This approach allowed me to provide an individual perspective that was not influenced by external feedback but was limited without critical discourse.

Secondly, I did not attend or graduate from the institution that hosts the camp, nor was I a full-time employee there—a marked distinction between me and my colleagues. This lack of institutional affiliation ensured that my reflections were not influenced by a perceived obligation to the university. My outsider status provided a unique vantage point to reflect on my own civic disillusionment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that informed this process are transformational learning theory and social constructivism. Transformational learning theory was first outlined by Mezirow (1978) and focuses on how adults make meaning of their lived experiences. Specifically, the learner would take an initial interpretation and revise this meaning based on an experience to guide further action (Mezirow, 1996). This theoretical framework follows six clear phases, according to Mezirow (2012): "1) a disorienting dilemma; 2) self-critical assessment of assumptions; 3) recognition through discourse that assumptions are shared by others; 4) an exploration of new ideas and relationships; 5) planning a course of action; and 6) taking action based on the new perspective developed through this process" (Mezirow, 2012 in Namaganda, 2020, p. 2).

In this scenario, I was a social studies teacher with multiple experiences of civic engagement with my students, but I had become burnt out and disillusioned. The disorienting dilemma occurred after the 2016 United States presidential election. With no intentional connection to this election, I had posted on social media what I believed to be an innocuous question: What recommendations did my social network have for how to address International Women's Day in my social studies classroom? I typically had a handful of 'likes' and less than a few comments, but this one post had 118 comments ranging from fervent support to thinly veiled disgust about my 'indoctrination' of students. Then, I had a family friend use a political slur against my sister. I logged out of Facebook and haven't posted anything remotely political since then. That moment resulted in my keeping my attempts to engage more hidden; being vocal hadn't helped. This disorienting dilemma began my phase two—a self-critical assessment of assumptions—which lasted for several years as I grappled with my own civic identity.

Looking back, it is fascinating to see how such a small moment has rippled into my current disillusionment. My step back from engagement caused me to doubt my impact as an educator and ultimately led me to this recent self-critical assessment

of assumptions, discourse, and exploration of new ideas through the camp. The process will be explained in further detail in the methods section to follow.

Additionally, this paper is grounded in social constructivism. Social constructivism is a prominent educational and philosophical framework that emphasizes the collaborative construction of knowledge through social interactions and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective proposes that individuals actively participate in shaping their understanding of the world by engaging in meaningful dialogues and exchanges with others (Bruner, 1990). Within the context of the paper's focus on a professor's transition from disillusionment to civic engagement, social constructivism offers a valuable lens. By embracing the principles of social constructivism, the professor can recognize that knowledge is not static, but rather co-constructed through dynamic interactions with students, colleagues, and the community. This perspective may help her transform her teaching approach, fostering an environment where open dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and critical thinking are cultivated. As she becomes attuned to the interconnected nature of knowledge construction, she may find renewed inspiration to engage with civic issues and instill a similar sense of active participation and social awareness within their students.

Methodology

I adopted a qualitative approach, as I sought to explore the intricate processes of transformational learning and social interaction within the educational context. I hoped to answer the research question: How does participation in a summer civics camp impact a professor's journey from civic disillusionment to revitalized civic engagement, and what are the implications for pedagogical practices and social studies education?

The study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing the subjective experiences and meanings constructed by individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The primary data collection methods included reflective journaling on my experiences, reflective journaling on my one-on-one interviews, and participatory observation.

1. Experiential Reflective Journaling as Master Teacher: I maintained a reflective journal throughout the study period to document my personal thoughts, emotions, and evolving perceptions. This approach aligns with Mezirow's (1996) transformational learning theory, as it encourages critical self-reflection and the examination of assumptions, fostering my cognitive and emotional growth.

2. Reflective Journaling on One-on-One Interviews: I conducted semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of students in my role as a master teacher. These interviews delved into students' experiences and any observed changes in their own civic engagement. I took these interviews, with a focus on the student, and reflected upon them through the lens of my own civic awakening.

The collected data underwent thematic analysis. This process involved identifying recurring patterns, themes, and connections within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Mezirow's transformational learning theory guided the identification of cognitive shifts and emotional transformation evident in my reflective journaling. Concurrently, Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978) informed the analysis of interview data, focusing on the collaborative nature of knowledge construction and the potential influence of my engagement on students' civic awareness.

My involvement as both an observer and a master teacher is vital to understanding the nuances of my journey and the classroom dynamics. This engagement aligns with social constructivist principles, as I actively participate in the educational context, interacting with students and colleagues to comprehend the collaborative processes shaping civic engagement within the classroom.

By employing a qualitative methodology grounded in transformational learning theory and social constructivism, this study aimed to shed light on the intricate interplay between personal transformation, social interaction, and civic engagement within the

educational realm. Through reflective journaling, one-on-one interviews, and professor engagement, the research sought to uncover the potential for my transition to inspire a revitalized spirit of civic engagement both within myself and among my students.

Findings and Discussion

In the pursuit of understanding the transformative journey from disillusionment to a revitalized spirit of civic engagement, several noteworthy themes have emerged from the data analysis. The results were positive and critical, both of which were necessary for me to consider my reimagined citizenship/activism. Each of these themes will be explored below with evidence from the data.

Advocacy Hourglass Framework: A Pathway to Renewed Civic Engagement

A pivotal theme, "Advocacy Hourglass as a Positive Framework," emerged as a potential solution to the challenges of disillusionment and disengagement. The reflective journal entries consistently highlighted the impact of exposure to the Advocacy Hourglass model, framing civic engagement as a gradual and incremental process. The Advocacy Hourglass, developed by Generation Citizen (2019) for the National Council for Social Studies, began with students identifying the issues in their community. It continued by creating a space for further refinement of the focus issue and ultimately identifying the root cause that the student group would attempt to address. These three steps (identification, refinement, and root cause) allowed students to practice consensus-building and research skills. The bottom of the hourglass continued with students identifying their goals and developing a targets (stakeholder) contact list. After these were determined, the students identified actionable tactics they could take to impact the root cause.

My journal entry reads, "The Advocacy Hourglass has reshaped my perspective. It acknowledges that change takes time, and every small effort counts." This framework provided me with a renewed sense of purpose, encouraging me to embrace small steps towards change and view setbacks as inherent to the process.

Reciprocal Dynamics: Student Engagement as a Catalyst for Professor Transformation

One salient finding was the phenomenon of "Student Excitement Transference to Professor." Within the reflective journal entries, there was a discernible pattern wherein I absorbed the enthusiasm and active participation exhibited by students. This dynamic suggested a reciprocal relationship, wherein students' heightened engagement became a catalyst for my own revitalization. One journal entry poignantly encapsulated this phenomenon, where I reflected, "Witnessing my students' passion for community issues has reignited a spark within me that I thought was lost."

Challenges in Civic Education: The Impact of Unrealistic Goals

Conversely, a pervasive sense of "Frustration with Unfeasible Targets" emerged as a significant barrier to my transformation. In observations, I noted that the tactics being discussed and reinforced by the camp counselors were not feasible within the scope of time and availability of resources and connection with stakeholders. For example, students were hoping to solve mental health issues at their middle school and planned to build an outdoor garden space. While grounded in research as a potential solution, it did not teach students about feasibility. The process was more about thought than action.

These unattainable targets seemed to reinforce the existing state of disengagement. A journal entry exemplified this sentiment, remarking, "It's hard to stay motivated when the goals seem so distant and unattainable. It's like they're setting themselves up for disappointment." This theme underscored the importance of setting realistic and achievable milestones to sustain the momentum of transformation.

In sum, the analysis of reflective journaling and student interviews has illuminated these critical

themes. The embracing of the Advocacy Hourglass framework, the transference of student excitement, and the recognition of unfeasible targets as demotivating factors, collectively provide valuable insights into the professor's journey from disillusionment to revitalized civic engagement. These emergent themes hold implications for pedagogical approaches, emphasizing the significance of fostering a reciprocal relationship with students, setting attainable goals, and adopting frameworks that foster gradual change.

Implications and Future Research Opportunities

Summer camps offer a unique opportunity to implement CES principles to cultivate active and engaged citizens by teaching participants about advocacy and leadership. Through hands-on activities like group projects, simulations, and guest speaker presentations, students gain practical experience in addressing real issues in their local communities (Martin, 2018). An opportunity exists to conduct future research on topics related to civic engagement and community-engaged scholarship within the parameters of summer camp participation. By researching community problems and developing projects to tackle them, participants learn to connect classroom concepts with meaningful action, fostering leadership skills and a sense of civic responsibility.

Community engagement benefits the students by helping them develop critical thinking, teamwork, and a deeper understanding of their role in society (Sibthorp et al., 2020). For the educators and researchers involved, camps can provide a platform to apply and refine their teaching strategies and serve as role models while gaining insights into the civic interests and challenges faced by young people. This collaboration creates a dynamic learning environment where both students and instructors grow through shared experiences (Martin, 2018; Sibthorp et al., 2020).

Universities interested in implementing community-engaged scholarship, civic engagement, or service-learning programming, whether as a summer camp or other implementation, should first seek to define these terms for themselves. Jacoby noted, "it is important that each institution choose the term, definition, and approach that best suits its unique mission, culture, and traditions" (2009, p. 10). To embrace the spirit of community-engaged scholarship, the definition should be created with input from a variety of stakeholders, including educators, administrators, students, and community members.

Conclusion

Through reflective journaling and student interviews, I have uncovered the profound potential for transformation—not just within my students but within myself. This journey has shown me that moments of disillusionment can become opportunities for growth when approached with intentional reflection, realistic goal-setting, and collaboration with others. The reciprocal relationship between my students' enthusiasm and my own renewed civic engagement has reignited a spark I thought I had lost. This symbiotic relationship between student excitement and my renewed enthusiasm serves as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that classroom dynamics can have on personal transformation (Volman, 2021). Their passion reminded me of the powerful impact we can have on each other, proving that education is a dynamic, shared journey of inspiration and growth.

While challenges, like setting unrealistic goals, have tested my resolve, they have also taught me valuable lessons about adaptability and perseverance. By focusing on small, achievable victories (Venturanza, et. al., 2022) and embracing frameworks like the Advocacy Hourglass, I've learned to see progress as a series of steps forward, no matter how small, rather than an all-or-nothing pursuit (Budziszewska & Glód, 2021). This experience has transformed the way I approach civic engagement and teaching. I feel more hopeful and committed to empowering my students to become active, engaged citizens. Together, we can create meaningful change in our communities, one small step at a time. This journey has reminded me that hope is not just something I teach—it's something I live and share with those around me.

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