

Promoting Civic Engagement in Schools in Non-Democratic Settings: Transforming the Approach and Practices of Iranian Educators

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Established in 2011, the Online School of Civic Education (the Online School) is intended to give Iranian teachers and educators the opportunity to reflect, experiment, and create classroom experiences aimed at teaching their students how to think, rather than what to think. The Online School was developed to provide teachers and educators inside Iran with an alternative to existing top-down, ideological, and teacher-centered civic education in Iran. The Online School's approach is to encourage teachers and, by extension, their students to think independently and analytically about their surroundings through activities and reflection. We argue that it is possible to provide teachers with experiential training in democratic civic education despite and within the context of the existing civic education paradigm in Iran, which defines citizenship in terms of devotion to religious ideology. We argue that, through this model, not only can teachers gain meaningful insight into the practice of democratic citizenship, but they also can enact changes in their classroom behavior and lessons that pass such understandings on to their students.

This article has been written to examine the experiences of an online school dedicated to educating teachers of students ages 11-15 in Iran. The Online School for Civic Education[2] (the Online School) was established in 2011 to provide an alternative approach to promoting civic education through an innovative and interactive curriculum.

In this article we will argue that it is possible to provide teachers with experiential training in democratic civic education despite and within the context of the existing civic education paradigm in Iran, which defines citizenship in terms of religious ideology. We argue that, through this model, not only can teachers gain meaningful insight into the practice of democratic citizenship, but they also can enact changes in their classroom behavior and implement lessons that transfer such understandings to their students.

Societal Context in Iran

Established as an Islamic Republic in 1979,[3] the current Iranian system of government is complex, including both democratic and authoritarian components; Iran is the world's only theocracy (Chehabi, 2001). Its government is characterized by a dual system of publicly elected officials and appointed religious experts, including the Supreme Leader. Ultimate power lies with the Supreme Leader, as he is the final arbiter on matters and disputes among the various branches of government, has the power to remove the president, and has the final say on interpreting constitutional rights.

Beyond Shia Islam, the Iranian government recognizes only the religions of Sunni Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. The Baha'i faith is not recognized [4] and the 1% of the population who practice this faith are discriminated against by the government. Members of minority faiths in Iran, including Sunnis, are regularly denied rights to government jobs and access to resources.

The Constitution of Iran is openly non-democratic and gives citizens limited rights as long as they are in line with religious doctrine (Chehabi & Keshavarzian, 2012). Despite the fact that freedom of expression is granted in the Constitution, the conservative-controlled judiciary has convicted and jailed most outspoken journalists, bloggers, and students, and continues to do so. Currently, Iran is second (after Turkey) on the list of countries that have imprisoned the most journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2012).

Still, Iranians have shown resilience in their ability to carve out spaces for creativity, individuality, and sociality that run counter to the ideologies promulgated by the Iranian government. Iranian private life is characterized by broad expression, freedom, and social behavior behind closed doors. This manifests in a variety of ways, for example, the proliferation of a critical art community, underground parties, and resistance music in the form of hip hop, folk, and rock music. More subversively, various young people have begun to delay marriage and participate in years of dating and non-monogamous relationships before, if ever, choosing to marry (Tait, 2008).

Civic Engagement and Religion as the Measure of Good Citizenship

Citizenship in Iran is defined within its religious context. The good citizen in Iran is a religious person (Vajargah, 2012). Government and non-governmental materials that discuss good behavior and proper citizenship often quote popular religious leaders and imams to provide legitimacy for their claims. For instance, a brochure encouraging neighbors to be cognizant of their noise levels quotes a religious leader who declares that treating neighbors with respect is a duty to God. This message is propagated through media, public meetings such as Friday prayers, and, of course, Iran's education system. The main website for the municipality of Tehran has a section on citizenship which states that "Islam has transparent and direct commands to govern the social interaction of humans not only in regards to moral perfection but also for how to build an ideal society" (Tehran Municipality, 2013). It is important to note that patriotism and religious duty are intertwined in Iran. One Muslim adage says, "Love of one's homeland is love of God." In Iran, love of God, country, and government are inextricably linked, making separation of church and state incongruent with the main aims of the government.

Iran's Education System and Its Dominant Paradigm

The primary motive of Iran's education system is to create loyal and obedient citizens. The primary school textbooks in social sciences and history reveal the state's intent to introduce Islamic ideals and behaviors to youth. As one textbook introduction explains:

The purpose of this book and teaching is not to memorize and answer things correctly . . . The aim is to develop from the children of today men and women who are worthy, committed, constructive, goodwill [*sic*], kind, highly chivalrous,

and God-loving. [With these qualities] and with a heart full of faith, they will stand up to spread the life-giving ideology of Islam and the Islamic Revolution, help to prosper the great Islamic country, rush to help the oppressed and struggle against the arrogant and help to move the helpless and the weak of the world. (Shorish, 1988, p. 60)

In Iran, becoming a good citizen means learning to be a devout servant of God. Among the important concepts in Islamic citizenship is the concept of *adab*, cleansing oneself of corrupted thoughts through discipline, a concept that is promoted through textbooks, families, and communities. Other important concepts are: a) *tarbiyah*, learning through direct instruction; b) *talim*, learning through indirect ways, including media; and c) *marafah*, learning through prayer and communication with God.

One review of early childhood education textbooks (Shorish, 1988 p. 61) highlights that the development of the Islamic person occurs not only through these various ways of learning but also through obedience to the teacher. The student is required to be grateful and appreciative that the teacher provides instruction about how to be good and respectful, in addition to how to read and write. This promotion of obedience to teacher, text, and religion is reiterated throughout students' education in Iran. As stated by the Ministry of Education, "The major problem which this country has had is with those people that do not believe anything" (Shorish, 1988, p. 64).

To achieve these goals, the Ministry of Education recruits and prepares teachers who adhere to the official rules and ideology. To become a teacher, an applicant must confirm the following: 1) his/her belief in the officially recognized religions; 2) agreement and compliance with the rules of Islam; 3) intention to recognize and abide by the authority of the supreme leader; 4) lack of history with political parties; and 5) being a moral person. In the interviews, Ministry of Education staff question potential teachers about their thoughts, beliefs, ideology, and political affiliations rather than their skills and knowledge in the subject areas. The main goal is to create and sustain a cohort of teachers dedicated to the Iranian Constitution and Islamic authority.

In addition to requiring teachers to be devout, the Ministry of Education also seeks to prepare teachers mainly in relation to theory. Prospective teachers who finish high school enter a two-year program in the Ministry-run teacher training center which qualifies them to teach in primary and middle schools (kindergarten through 8th grade). The main topics of this training focus on principles and methods of teaching, history of education, psychology of education, and religious education. Without any experiential or skills training, teachers begin working in classrooms immediately after graduation.

Therefore, the concept of civic education in Iran, with its preference for obedience and discipline over critical exploration, is in contrast to democratic civic education. Any civic behavior or initiative must be carried out within this rigid framework of reasoning. Civic activism or engagement cannot occur under any other premise, such as democracy, self-realization, or community building, that might run counter to loyalty to the regime and the prescribed notions of religious duty. Social capital or community-building that does not occur in the name of propagation of religious duty or promotion of the state is seen as disruptive and counter to the dominant official paradigm.

Alternative Approach: The Online School for Civic Education

The Online School for Civic Education was established in 2011 by a group of Iranians working at an international development foundation in the United States in response to the need for an alternative approach to civic education in Iran. The Online School is in the Persian language and web-based. It allows any teacher of students aged 11-15 across Iran to apply to participate in its three online courses: “Critical Thinking,” “Rule of Law,” and “Citizenship.” Each six- to eight-week course is offered twice a year. So far, each course has been offered a total of six times. Courses are offered at no charge to the participants. These online courses offered by the Online School are designed to mirror the same pedagogy that teachers are encouraged to apply in their own classrooms.

The Online School’s approach is to give teachers an opportunity to reflect on and practice democratic concepts of citizenship and civic engagement through dialogue and participation in a series of online forum discussions, chat sessions, and other online activities in the Persian language. In contrast to the official definition of civic engagement in Iran, which emphasizes religious duty and obedience to religious/government leaders, the Online School aims to promote civic engagement defined as individual activities in formal or informal settings that build a sense of connection and commitment to society (Diller, 2001). To build this understanding of civic engagement, the Online School focuses on providing a space for teachers in Iran to communicate their personal perspectives on citizenship and civic engagement concepts. Through this approach, civic engagement is not defined by duty or obedience, but rather collaboration and cooperation of citizens to influence their environment. The forum discussions within each course are facilitated to promote robust communication, mutual understanding, and small-group work among the teachers. Teachers are then encouraged to practice similar democratic forms of engagement in their classrooms, for example, promoting self-governance and decision-making among their students rather than exercising control over their behavior.

To participate in a course, teachers must complete an online application form in Persian that includes questions about the type of school—private, public or community-based—they teach in, the subject matters they teach in classrooms, the age group of students they work with, and their teaching and personal experience with the subject matter of courses offered by the Online School. They are also required to indicate how the course will help them address issues in their classrooms. Usually 60 to 70 applicants from across the country apply for each course. These applicants teach a variety of subjects from social sciences to sciences and arts. For each course, the top 30 to 35 applicants are selected by a committee that includes the course facilitator, the school program officer, and the course expert. Criteria for selection include a demonstrated interest in the topic areas, evidence that the applicant takes an active role in his/her teaching, and a commitment to teaching new concepts.

Teachers participating in the courses are from all the provinces throughout Iran, bringing ethnic, religious, and social diversity and interaction to the online platform. In each course, the Online School is committed to including religious minorities, such as Sunnis and Baha’is, and teachers from rural and underserved areas. More than 50% of teachers who participate in the courses are from provinces other than Tehran (the capital); these include Gilan and Mazandaran in the North, and Sistan and Baluchistan in the South. This vast geographic span is notable because ethnicities

and religions in Iran tend to be geographically concentrated (for instance, the majority of Sunnis live in the South, while Kurds and other ethnic minorities, such as the Azeris, live in the North). Course participants are also from public, private, and community-based schools that work with labor and immigrant children. Diversity along different dimensions helps to foster discussions in the online forums and provides an opportunity for teachers to learn more about other communities as well as school settings in different parts of the country. It also creates a network of teachers who continue collaborating and interacting after they complete the course. To make the courses accessible for low-speed Internet users, the resources and content are all text-based. Once logged in, the participant can download the course materials to review offline.

The Online School Approach

The Online School's approach is defined by a three-step process: 1) teacher awareness; 2) adaptation to context; and 3) classroom implementation. These steps are described briefly below:

1. *Teacher awareness.* The first step is providing curriculum on civic education subjects, such as stereotyping, diversity, tolerance, equality and fairness, conflict resolution, and citizen rights and responsibilities, with a new subject introduced every two weeks. The curriculum consists of introductory definitions of the terms and concepts. It does not aim to describe the subject matter in detail but rather to spur discussion in the forums and chat sessions. In the related forums teachers are asked to discuss the current topics using their own personal experience. For example, during the introductory week about stereotyping, teachers are asked to write about a situation in which they have been discriminated against, socially or culturally, and to express their feelings and thoughts about why this occurred. Sharing these experiences helps create a shift from personal narratives to multi-voice, where all voices are included in one platform. Once the narratives are shared, the course facilitator guides the discussion towards problem analysis and reasoning. This is designed to help teachers generalize from their own perspective and draw conclusions. An essential way for teachers to learn about each other's perspectives, the forums provide opportunities for robust dialogue among the course participants.
2. *Adaptation to the context.* The second step happens the following week when strategies, games, and methods relevant to the subject matter are introduced for application in the teachers' classrooms. The focus of forum discussions for this step is the appropriateness and relevance of the game or method in the classroom and in various Iranian contexts. At this stage, teachers are encouraged to redesign the games and activities to make them implementable based on their own classroom settings, and to report on their suggested changes and opinions in the forum discussions.
3. *Classroom implementation.* The third step begins once teachers implement the new activities in their classrooms. During this phase, teachers report in detail on the activities they implemented in their classrooms, while also sharing their analysis and evaluation of that effort. At times, teachers also share short videos, sound clips or scripts of students' reactions and/or responses with the other course participants.

Small Group Collaboration

To promote collaborative learning and engagement, teachers are required to form small groups to develop lesson plans, implement them separately in their classrooms, and report on them in the forum discussions. After the introductory week for each course, when teachers get to know each other through a series of online ice-breaking games, they form groups of three to four people.

Teachers from different ethnic, geographic, or cultural backgrounds are encouraged to partner with one another to bring in different perspectives on social, cultural, and educational issues. For example, in one of the rounds of the Citizenship course, a Shia teacher asked a Baha'i course participant to join one group. The Shia teacher explained: "I have never had any encounter with Baha'is in my own country. I did not even know that Baha'is have their own schools in Iran. As a citizen, I want to learn more about the lives and perspectives of other citizens of my country and this online course is the only chance I have to expose myself to learn more." Many teachers also mentioned that these small groups motivate them to introduce creativity and innovation in their way of teaching. For instance, Arezou, a math teacher in Tehran, attended one of Zahra's classrooms to learn more about her methods of teaching math. In several forums, she reported that she applied these methods in her own classroom.

Vignettes: Case Studies of Critical Praxis

This section presents three vignettes from the Online School. The occurrences portrayed took place in different courses offered throughout the year 2011-2012, and serve to show the changes that may result from the Online School's approach toward teacher development. Information for the vignettes has been gathered from forum discussions and simultaneous chat sessions. The stories are notable primarily because of the political and social context of Iran within which they occur. They are also notable given the significant limitations of providing guidance and instruction online. The vignettes follow different teachers in different contexts and courses to provide a variety of viewpoints and perspectives.

These vignettes were chosen because they demonstrate the teachers' lack of familiarity with civic engagement concepts, utilizing the definition described earlier in this paper of civic engagement as collaborative activities that build a commitment to society. The vignettes also demonstrate the depth of exchange between teachers about new topics, the shifts that occur in the teacher-student relationship, and the changes that teachers make in their classroom activities.

My dream country. The following example was chosen to highlight the lack of teacher-student interaction prior to engagement with the Online School and the change the teacher implemented in her classroom, using one of the learned activities as the basis for increased interaction. In this example, genuine engagement occurs between teacher and students that helps the teacher understand her students' lives and allows her to encourage her students' self-expression. In the first week of the Citizenship course, course participants are required to describe an ideal country that they would create if they could. Teachers reflected on the question in the online forum and then began to employ the activity in their classrooms. The following is an account of the implementation in one classroom in Tehran.

Fatemeh is a math teacher for 11-year-old girls in a public school in Northern Tehran, a more affluent part of the city. In her self-reflective forum of the week, she wrote:

I was amazed to read all different points of view of my fellow colleagues about their dream country. I could read between the lines about who they are and what they suffer from. I was interested to implement this activity with my students to read and learn about their imagination. In the last 15 minutes of the class, I gave each one of my students a paper and asked them to write about their dream

country. I was shocked how little I knew about my students though I've spent almost five hours a day with them. I also observed that these kids reflect on the social issues of their society in their writings, issues that are not directly related to them, but are out there around them and they can sense [them]. Through this activity I learned that one of my students' fathers is a political prisoner. My student wrote: "In my dream country nobody would be in jail because of his political views. I wish to live in a country [where] there is no political prisoner nor are any prisoners without a family to visit him and support him. I'd like to live in a country where everyone is free to speak up!" Another student wrote: "I wish to live in a country [where] there are no street children, no poor children and no sanctions. In my dream world children don't need to work to support their families. When I asked my parents why some people are poor, they said because they are not educated. But I think this is not a right answer. With social discrimination everywhere, poor people should not be blamed for being uneducated and poor.

Fatemeh reported that she plans to introduce the activity on the first day of school from now on so that she can learn about her students' concerns and beliefs and address their questions throughout the semester.

In a simultaneous chat session organized as part of the Online School platform/experience, another teacher said that now she feels more responsible for her students. She wrote:

I've been a teacher for more than 22 years. In the past two weeks [of engaging in this course] I came to the conclusion that being a teacher is beyond teaching; it's about the ability to make connections with your students, to understand each individual's needs and have rapport with them, not as your students but as individuals with different personalities, needs, and passion to learn.

Hurricane Sandy. This second example focuses on a teacher raising the awareness of her students about their role in their surroundings and with their peers. One part of the Citizenship course focuses on various community-service learning models for making change and engaging in society. One of the forum discussions on this matter was on community activism during Hurricane Sandy in the U.S.

Inspired by this forum discussion, Negar, a history teacher for girls aged 10 to 12, decided to show her class some photos of community engagement after the hurricane that were published in newspapers in the United States. She reported:

There were six students of 10 years old in my class yesterday. I used a laptop to show my students pictures of the community engagement after the Sandy storm, such as some neighbors distributing food and drinks in the streets, some providing electricity, etc. I showed the pictures on my laptop instead of the projector intentionally. For each picture, I asked the students to describe what they see and what the people in the picture are doing. I asked them if they have ever experienced working together for a good cause and how they felt about it. In the

beginning, the students were struggling and pushing each other so that they could better see the photos. Some of them were unable to see because there was not enough room for the whole class to clearly see the monitor. Gradually, as we opened the discussion about cooperation and collaboration of communities and individuals to overcome the hurricane damage, I noticed that students who were in front tried to open a space for those in the back and let them in the circle around the monitor. In the end of this 40-minute activity, I asked my students to reflect about today's experience. Three of them said that in the beginning they only thought about their individual selves and how they could get access to the photos, but by the end, they felt that they should contribute to this activity by providing space for those who were in the back and could not see the photos.

This is an example of how the teacher learned from the exchanges and discussions with fellow teachers in the Online School forums and then created an activity to raise awareness in the classroom. By using photos, discussion, and physical space, the teacher was able to raise student awareness. Rather than having the focus on the teacher or the curriculum, the dynamic interaction as a result of the physical space and presentation of the discussion allowed students to experience citizen engagement rather than simply reading or memorizing it.

Rule-Makers. In the final example, a teacher decided to remove herself from a process to give students an opportunity to go beyond simple awareness and instead increase their sense of responsibility, taking ownership of their surroundings, and creating change around them.

In the beginning of each course, the Online School provides teacher participants with activities and games to help teachers engage their students with the concept of rule of law and collaborate in designing their class rules for the semester. Sara, a literature teacher for elementary and high school students, decided to implement an activity based on what she observed in her students. She reported:

We had an exhibition in our school and had to create something for it. I combined my high school and elementary classes and asked them to collaborate to come up with their plans for the exhibition. I noticed that the high school group ignored the elementary students. At first I tried to facilitate the interaction to give each group a time to speak up, but then I realized I've been the center of the discussion. I decided to step aside. I told both groups that I would leave the class for 15 minutes, and that they would have to come up with the plan and let me know once I came in. If they didn't succeed, I told them, then we wouldn't be able to take a part in the exhibition. After 15 minutes when I came in, there was a white sheet of paper on the wall with each [student's] responsibilities. They told me that they tried to use the method from the first day of class when we came up with the class rules for the semester. I realized that I should not underestimate my students' ability to collaborate with each other. What I can do is help them understand the tools they can use to work together and empower them to believe that they can.

This method of teachers getting out of the way is a novel approach to education in Iran. Because the education system is teacher-centered and focused on memorization of concepts, students

rarely have opportunities to interact with peers and thereby experience concepts of citizenship and leadership. Allowing students to determine the rules of engagement changes the level of responsibility. In a country where rules and policies are determined at the highest levels by political/religious leaders and then disseminated in a top-down approach, this methodology reverses citizens' roles from rule-followers or rule-breakers to becoming rule-makers.

Conclusion

Within the context of Iran, simply engaging teachers and students in dialogue about their lives, their challenges, and their roles as citizens is a substantial divergence from status quo and a positive step towards countering the norms that block democratic development. The results from the Online School for Civic Education demonstrate that it is possible to change classroom activities that can move a society, even a non-democratic society, toward building a citizenship that is critical, engaged, and independent. Through self-awareness, risk-taking, and small-scale activities, participants in the Online School's courses are increasing their commitment and actions to change the values, practices, and thinking of future generations of Iranians across the country. The Online School brings into account multi-vocality and diverse points of view which, in turn, foster awareness, collaboration, and engagement among teachers in Iran to redefine the meaning of citizenship and civic education in their classrooms.

Notes:

- [1]. This article does not represent the views of Eurasia Foundation.
- [2]. For privacy purposes, the name of the school is not mentioned in this article; it is referred to as "The Online School for Civic Education."
- [3]. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty (known for its authoritarian and secular agenda), gave birth to the Islamic Republic with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader.
- [4]. According to the Iranian government, the Baha'i belief system is heretical to Islam, particularly because of the Baha'i belief in prophets that came after Mohammad.

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