

Encouraging Civic Knowledge and Engagement: Exploring Current Events through a Psychological Lens

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Abstract: Engagement with political, social, and civil issues is a fundamental component of an educated population, but civic knowledge and engagement are decreasing among adolescents and young adults. A Psychology in Current Events class sought to increase this engagement and key skills such as critical thinking. A one-group pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was used to assess changes in key measures after taking the class. The findings indicate that the students significantly increased their civic engagement, civic knowledge, multicultural sensitivity, applied thinking skills, as well as skills such as their ability to consider alternative viewpoints, appreciate diversity, monitor current events, and think critically.

Keywords: civic engagement, civic education, current events, critical thinking, psychology.

The ideal in a democratic society is that citizens are actively involved in their own governance and that such participation is based on an informed and critical reflection of political and civic issues (Branson & Quigley, 1998). Therefore, the success of such a system is built on a citizenship that is civically engaged and informed. Indeed, philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Robert Maynard Hutchins have suggested that civic apathy may result in the death of democracy, or at least the moral and social decline of the state (Coley & Sum, 2012). Damon (2011) argues that the possibility of the country's future ending up in the hands of a citizenship that lack understanding of the benefits and duties of citizens is the most serious modern threat to America. In addition to acting as the foundation of a successful democracy and sustained future, civic engagement and knowledge impact on important civic attributes; for example, civic knowledge promotes democratic values, political participation, trust in public life/public figures, and can change attitudes on important social issues (Coley & Sum, 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2004). Other benefits of a civically engaged populous include the economic well-being of the society and the psychological well-being of its members (Coley & Sum, 2012). Finally, civic engagement and knowledge align with the attributes employers seek in graduates entering the workforce (Spiezio 2009).

Although it is widely accepted that civic engagement is important, and despite knowing what a civically engaged person “looks like” (Hatcher, 2011), the literature has not come to a consensus on how to define what it is exactly (Hatcher, 2010). Some definitions emphasize action, others knowledge, and others skills. One definition, adopted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, for inclusion in their civic engagement rubric (AACU, 2009),

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emphasizes that civic engagement is multidimensional and includes knowledge, along with skills, values, and motivation. The knowledge component is perhaps the most disagreed upon component, and may be dependent on one's disciplinary perspective (Hatcher, 2011); for example, political scientists likely prize factual knowledge concerning the political process and institutions, whereas social workers are likely more focused on advocacy and justice (Hatcher, 2011). On the other hand, civic skills may cut across all disciplines. Following an extensive review of the literature from a variety of disciplines, Kirlin (2003) listed the categories of civic skills as organization, communication, collective decision-making, and critical thinking. Similarly, other researchers have identified skills commonly observed in active citizens, including taking the perspective of others, critical thinking, and dialogue with diverse peers (Daloz, Keen, Keen & Parks, 1996; Keen & Hall, 2008). Finally, a crucial component of civic engagement is likely civic identity (Colby & Damon, 1992; Daloz et al., 1996). The precise content of such an identity is somewhat intangible, but it likely includes critical thinking and empathy for others as well as a sense of civic agency and social relatedness (Hatcher, 2011; Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

Description of the Problem

Despite the obvious importance of civic engagement and knowledge, many reports express concern about the levels of both in the U.S. (Coley & Sum, 2012). In particular, adolescents' and young adults' knowledge of and engagement in the civic process are below desirable levels (Coley & Sum, 2012; Galston, 2001). This lack of knowledge is concerning to many because, as Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor points out, "the habits of citizenship must be learned . . . But we have neglected civic education . . . and the results are predictably dismal" (Robelen, 2011). The link between civic engagement and knowledge on the one hand, and political participation on the other, means that one consequence of this disengagement is a widely documented decline in the political participation of young Americans. There has been a steady decline in voting participation in young adults between 18 and 29 between 1972 and 2014 with only 45% of young adults voting in the 2012 presidential election and only 21.5% voting in the 2014 midterm election ("Center for Information on Civic Learning", n.d.).

In addition to a general concern with engagement, knowledge, and participation, some scholars have placed particular emphasis on what has been termed the civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2010) which describes an inequity among social groups in terms of their political participation and influence. More privileged groups typically have more political voice than other groups. Among those groups that are historically and currently underrepresented in the political process are those with low income and less education (Coley & Sum, 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008) as well as recent immigrants and those with limited English proficiency (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). This empowerment gap is reflected in the civic knowledge of traditionally oppressed groups. Black, Hispanic, and Native American students perform significantly lower than their White peers on assessments of civic education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Civic Education

In response to the concerns regarding the civic engagement, knowledge, and participation of Americans generally, and young Americans in particular, there has been a call for an improved and revitalized system for civic education (Coley & Sum, 2012; Gibson & Levine, 2003). Civic engagement is multidimensional and includes knowledge, skills, and identity, all of which can be

encouraged with appropriate educational experiences. Even taking a narrower definition of engagement as a participatory action still allows for the notion that this action-oriented engagement likely starts with education. Civic education might best be described as the ways in which we prepare our young to undertake the role of citizens by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in the democratic process (Patrick, 2004). Specifically, this refers to knowledge of civic life, the American political system, the role of citizens in the American democracy, and the relationship between the United States and other nations and general world affairs (Branson & Quigley, 1998). Further aims of civic education include encouraging people to become involved in the issues that affect them and more knowledgeable about the policies related to these issues, as well as to develop associated critical thinking and empathy skills (Hatcher, 2011).

Historically, educators have been responsible for producing citizens with the requisite knowledge, skills, and sense of responsibility to be civically engaged, indeed this educational aim was a primary reason for the establishment of public schooling (Chenneville, Toler & Gaskin-Butler, 2012). Civic education has generally been tackled at the elementary and secondary school levels. However, school-based civic education has been declining at both the elementary and secondary levels. Until the 1960s, American high schools typically offered three courses in civics and government. In contrast, most high schools now only offer one course in “American Government” offered in the 11th or 12th grade years (“Campaign for Civic Mission”, n.d.). This decline is in large part due to an increased focus on test scores in reading and math which has often come at the expense of social studies curricula (Center on Education Policy, 2006). The philosophical focus of traditional education that imparts facts in a value neutral setting (Fish, 2003), and a shift in focus to value practical career-based knowledge (Chenneville et al., 2012), may also share some responsibility for this decline. This reduction in civic education has unsurprisingly resulted in lower performance in civic assessments for high school students. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) reported that only 64% of 12th graders tested at or above the basic level in civic education in 2010 with only 4% of 12th graders performing at the advanced level. These scores represent a decline in 12th grader performance since 2006.

In an attempt to address the current civic knowledge deficits, and given the limitations of the elementary and secondary school systems, American colleges and universities may once again need to play a role in educating students on how to become active citizens. Of course the extent to which civic education is already prioritized varies widely across institutions. For some it is embedded in their campus mission, and embracing civic education would represent a return to a historic core value (Sullivan, 2000). In particular, increasing the political and civic engagement of less advantaged citizens should result in their concerns and needs receiving more attention (Verba, 2003) and therefore civic education initiatives might help to address the civic empowerment gap and so serve as a form of social justice.

Review of Relevant Literature

The concerns regarding civic engagement and participation, particularly among the youth, have spurred research examining the kinds of pedagogies that can successfully increase knowledge and engagement. Approaches to instructing specific knowledge is likely to be influenced by the discipline in which the civic education occurs (Hatcher, 2011); however, civic skills known to be related to civic engagement and participation (e.g., critical thinking, perspective taking) can be encouraged with generic pedagogies. For example, classroom experiences such as discussion,

reflection, social critique, and debate increase commitment to civic engagement (Chenneville, Toler, Gaskin-Butler, 2012; Hurtado, 2007; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina & Jenkins, 2002). These discussions are especially effective when they include current local and international events, diverse opinions, and an absence of judgment (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Patrick, 2004).

Research suggests that an open classroom climate, with discussion and analysis of the issues, might be particularly important for minority students (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfield, 2007; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Unfortunately, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) report that students of color and relatively low-income students typically receive less civic educational opportunities within the classroom. Kahne and Sporte (2008) found that for low-income students of color, classroom civic learning opportunities such as “learning about problems in society, learning about current events, studying issues about which one cares, experiencing an open climate for classroom discussions of social and political topics” (p. 746) were the strongest predictor of students’ commitment to civic participation and its impact was larger than any other factor, including prior commitment, extracurricular activities, and neighborhood and family civic engagement. Kahne & Sporte (2008) point out that their results seem to be inconsistent with previous work that suggests enrolling in civic education or government courses did not increase civic participation (see Cook, 1985, for a review) but argue that this suggests that it is not simply enrolling in a relevant class that will make the difference but rather ensuring that students engage in the kinds of activities found to be effective.

Purpose

A *Psychology in Current Events* class was designed to allow students to explore and discuss current events within society and seek to understand them using relevant psychological theories. Special emphasis was placed on introducing students to the laws of the United States relevant to the current events studied, and how they differ from other countries. The class was designed to incorporate the pedagogies known to increase students’ civic engagement. In many ways the broad goals of a psychology education are perfectly aligned with encouraging civic engagement. John Dewey—president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1899—argued that students need to struggle with social problems and consequently helped establish a progressive education pedagogy that is the basis for what we today call civic education or service learning (Chenneville, Toler & Gaskin-Butler, 2012).

Research Aims

This research aims to assess whether a psychology class incorporating pedagogies known to encourage skills related to civic engagement can significantly improve students’ civic knowledge and engagement as well as skills and attributes associated with civic engagement. Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

1. Will students demonstrate a higher degree of civic knowledge and engagement after taking the class? Specifically, it is hypothesized that the students will show a significant increase in a variety of measures of civic engagement and attributes related to such engagement, such as cultural sensitivity.
2. Can such a class significantly improve relevant academic skills known to be related to civic engagement, such as applied thinking skills? It is hypothesized that the pedagogies used in the class will result in a significant difference in a variety of related skills, including applied

thinking skills.

3. What impact will taking the class have on the knowledge and attitudes towards those topics covered in the class? We hypothesize that students will demonstrate increased knowledge of the legal issues surrounding the issues covered but make no hypothesis regarding any attitude change.

Method

Design

To assess whether students taking the class demonstrate any changes in civic knowledge and engagement, relevant academic skills, and students' knowledge and attitudes, we measured students on these components at the start of the class and then at the end, which allowed for an analysis of change. This one-group pretest-posttest (repeated measures) quasi-experimental design is common in classroom assessment research. Its strength lies in its ability to see change in the same group of participants as the result of some intervening event, in this case the class. This repeated measures approach uses participants as their own control which minimizes the impact of individual differences on the results and therefore reduces error variance. Consequently, this method is very sensitive to any effects and so statistically significant findings are possible with relatively small samples.

Participants

Participants were thirty-one female students enrolled in a *Psychology in Current Events* course at a small university in Washington, DC. Specifically, the students were from the College of Arts and Science which offers a liberal-arts undergraduate degree with a typical enrollment of approximately 1,000 students. The pre and posttests were given on the first and last day of class and so completion rates were dependent upon students' attendance. Thirty students completed the pre-test, twenty completed the post-test, and sixteen students were present for both classes and therefore completed both. The course was open to students at all levels. However, the majority of students were either juniors (n=15) or seniors (n=11). There were some sophomores (n=5) but no freshmen. On average, the students had taken 72 credit hours (approximately 24 classes) prior to the semester in which they enrolled in *Current Events*. Although not a prerequisite, all students had taken *Introductory Psychology*. In addition, all students had taken a critical reasoning class as well as foundational writing classes.

To adhere to institutional guidelines and to reassure participants of anonymity, demographic information was not collected. However, the students enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences at the university are all-female, predominantly Black and Hispanic, and traditionally aged students (18-21). The course is a component of the general education curriculum open to any student. The majority of the students were psychology, human relations, and communication majors. However, other majors represented in the class included criminal justice, international affairs, business administration, mathematics, English, and biology.

Details of the Class

Psychology in Current Events is a 200 (mid-level) psychology class that explores current events using psychological theories and research. The covered topics in the class are revised each semester to ensure that they reflect the issues that are most relevant at the time. Topics covered in Fall 2013 when this assessment took place included immigration, healthcare reform, gay marriage, U.S involvement overseas, religion in politics, jury decisions, and whistleblowing. The psychological theories presented each week depended on the topic being discussed. For example, immigration was explored from the perspective of social identity theory, acculturation, and realistic conflict theory; jury decisions examined group processes and flawed decision making as well as biases in memory.

The course was team taught by one clinical psychologist and one social psychologist, although both professors were present in all classes. Team teaching allowed the topics covered to be approached from a variety of psychological perspectives and therefore allowed the class to explore many of the nuances.

Requirements of the class included weekly readings presenting the issue from competing viewpoints, reading quizzes, debates (topic and side randomly assigned), and position papers that required students to take a stand on an issue relevant to the assigned class topic and use research, evidence, and proper argumentation to support their position. The first class period of each week was primarily instructor led and students were introduced to the topic and the relevant psychological theories and findings, though we were careful to foster an environment of open dialogue and discussion at all times. The second class period of each week was primarily student led. Students presented information in support of and in opposition to a controversial question relevant to the week's topic and then led a class discussion exploring the nuances of the issue. In all class sessions, the focus was on a careful consideration of the issues, open dialogue, careful reflection, and social critique evidencing critical thinking, all pedagogies known to increase commitment to civic engagement.

Procedure

Students completed a packet of measures designed to assess multiple dimensions relevant to civic engagement and knowledge on the first day of class and then again on the last day of class. These measures were designed to assess knowledge but also skills and attributes that the literature suggests are related to civic engagement, for example, critical thinking, appreciation of diversity, and empathy for others. Completion of these surveys was voluntary and there was no course credit for doing them. The surveys were anonymous and students created their own code that allowed pre and post-test surveys to be matched. The University's Institutional Review Board reviewed the project and deemed it exempt as it involves typical and ongoing assessment of student learning within the context of a class. Since the responses were anonymous and the project deemed exempt by the institution's IRB, informed consent was not necessary.

Materials

Civic Engagement. To assess students' level of civic engagement we used four questions from a poll used by Indiana University (Purdue) to assess their service learning courses, for example, "how much do you exercise your responsibility as a citizen". In addition, two questions were included that were based on the Association of American Colleges and Universities value rubric for civic engagement, for example, "how much do you feel able to connect knowledge from your

academic studies to civic engagement (participation in civic life, politics and government)". Students responded to these items along a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Students were also asked to rate the extent to which they are engaged with political issues, social issues, and current events using a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Internal consistency was good at pretest ($\alpha = 0.86$) and posttest ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Specific Class Aims. Twelve questions addressed additional aims of the class relevant to civic knowledge and engagement including considering alternative viewpoints, appreciating diversity, analyzing the role of citizens in the political process, monitoring and understanding current events, and thinking critically about political information. Students rated the extent they felt able to do each of these things from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Internal consistency was high at pretest ($\alpha = 0.91$) and posttest ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Munroe Multicultural Attitude Scale Questionnaire (MASQUE). The MASQUE (Munroe, & Pearson, 2006) assesses multiple aspects of multicultural attitudes/sensitivity. The knowledge (know) subscale consists of seven items, for example "I understand that religious beliefs differ". The empathy (care) subscale consists of five items, for example "I am sensitive to language use other than English". Students responded to all items along a 6-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Although internal consistency at pretest (know: $\alpha = 0.71$; care: $\alpha = 0.55$) and posttest (know: $\alpha = 0.60$; care: $\alpha = 0.55$) was modest, given the number of items and sample size could be considered adequate.

Applied Thinking Scales. This was originally designed as an exit interview to assess whether psychology majors acquired the core skills considered important for psychology majors (Peck, Stevenson, Skattebo, Wimer, & Love, 2013). We selected eleven questions to assess general applied thinking skills, for example, "when reading books or watching shows, I am likely to wonder about opposing points of view" and a further ten questions to assess those applied thinking skills attributable to psychology classes, for example, "because of my (psychology) classes I am more likely to consider both sides of an argument". Participants responded to all items along a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Internal consistency for both subscales was good at pretest (general: $\alpha = 0.79$; class specific $\alpha = 0.90$) and posttest (general: $\alpha = 0.85$; class specific $\alpha = 0.91$).

Skills. The class emphasized specific academic skills such as participating in discussions, making speeches to a group, using numerical data to make decisions, using information from a variety of courses to write a report, writing a paper representing a point of view, incorporating feedback when making revisions, and reconsidering one's point of view based on information gathered. Students rated the extent they felt able to do each of these effectively from 1 (not able to do effectively) to 5 (able to do effectively). Internal consistency was good at pretest ($\alpha = 0.85$) and posttest ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Confidence. The students also rated how confident they felt on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very) in regards to key skills emphasized in the class: critical thinking, constructing a written argument, constructing an oral argument, presenting evidence, and organizing a paper around a thesis. Internal consistency was good at pretest ($\alpha = 0.77$) and posttest ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Legal Knowledge. Students indicated how much they knew about the legal issues surrounding the topics covered in the class: immigration, drugs and alcohol, healthcare, gay marriage, gay parenting, religion in politics, and gun control. Students rated their knowledge for each topic from 1 (not very much) to 7 (very much). Internal consistency was high at pretest ($\alpha = 0.90$) and posttest ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Opinions. Students were also asked to rate their opinion on a 7-point scale from 1 (very against it) to 7 (very in favor) on the topics covered in the class: the DREAM act, the legal drinking age, healthcare reform (“ObamaCare”), gay marriage, adoption by gay couples, stricter gun control, and US involvement in other countries. Since each of these represent distinct issues, these items were not combined into a single scale but rather were analyzed separately.

Data Analysis

Cronbach’s alphas for all measures at both pre and posttest were calculated to ensure they had adequate internal reliability and could be used in further analysis. To compare students’ civic knowledge and engagement, related skills, knowledge and attitudes at the end of the class to these same attributes and skills at start of the class, a series of paired samples (correlated) t-tests were performed. In addition, as a measure of effect size, Cohen’s *d* was also calculated. Effect size is increasingly preferred to simple reporting of alpha and significance because it is considered more informative. While significance (alpha) values tell us whether something affects people, effect size tells us by how much it affects them. In other words effect sizes inform readers of “the magnitude or importance of a study’s findings” (APA, 2010). Effect sizes for Cohen’s *d* can be interpreted as small (<.3), medium (0.4-0.8) and large (>0.8) (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Our first research question asked whether students would demonstrate a higher degree of civic knowledge and engagement after taking the class. Students showed a significant increase in almost all measures of civic knowledge and engagement (see Table 1). While students rated themselves quite highly on civic engagement at pretest, they were significantly higher at posttest. Likewise, students’ responses to the items assessing the specific class aims such as considering alternative viewpoints, appreciating diversity, monitor and understand current events, and thinking critically were significantly higher at posttest. Although students rated themselves well above the midpoint on both the knowledge and caring aspects of multicultural attitudes/sensitivity at pretest, they were significantly higher for knowledge at posttest. Furthermore, the effect sizes for all significant findings were medium to large, suggesting that the class has an impact on these components of civic knowledge and engagement.

Our second research question was whether the class would significantly improve relevant academic skills known to be related to civic engagement. Students showed significant increases in a range of skills that were emphasized in the class that are pertinent to civic knowledge and engagement (see Table 1). General applied thinking skills were rated higher at posttest than pretest. Likewise those applied thinking skills attributable to psychology classes also showed a significant improvement from pretest to posttest. Students indicated that academic skills such as participating in discussion, arguing a point of view, and reconsidering one’s point of view based on information were significantly better after the class compared to the start of the semester. Likewise, students expressed a higher level of confidence in their skills such as critical thinking and forming/presenting an argument at the end of the semester compared to the start. Again all effect sizes were medium or large.

Table 1. Results of t-test and descriptive statistics for knowledge and skills

| | <i>Pretest</i> | <i>Posttest</i> | <i>Paired</i> |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>t-test</i> |
| Civic Knowledge and Engagement | | | |
| Civic Engagement | 4.86 (1.00) | 5.52 (0.71) | $t(15) = -3.79, p < .01, d = 0.76$ |
| Specific Class Aims | 4.72 (1.05) | 5.38 (1.04) | $t(15) = -2.36, p = .03, d = 0.63$ |
| Multicultural Attitudes (knowledge) | 5.56 (0.42) | 5.79 (0.69) | $t(15) = -2.66, p = .02, d = 0.40$ |
| Multicultural Attitudes (caring) | 4.51 (0.87) | 4.73 (1.00) | $t(15) = -1.04, p = .32, d = 0.26$ |
| Relevant Skills | | | |
| Applied Thinking (General) | 4.74 (0.72) | 5.65 (0.78) | $t(15) = -6.07, p < .001, d = 1.21$ |
| Applied Thinking Skills (Psychology) | 5.49 (0.96) | 6.09 (0.81) | $t(15) = -2.64, p = .02, d = 0.68$ |
| Academic Skills | 3.66 (0.71) | 4.08 (0.63) | $t(15) = -2.49, p = .03, d = 0.63$ |
| Confidence | 5.23 (1.24) | 5.87 (0.84) | $t(15) = -2.17, p = .05, d = 0.60$ |
| Relevant Knowledge | | | |
| Knowledge of Issues Covered | 4.42 (1.31) | 5.57 (0.97) | $t(15) = -3.79, p < .01, d = 0.99$ |

Table 2. Results of t-test and descriptive statistics for attitudes towards specific issues covered in the class

| | <i>Pretest</i> | <i>Posttest</i> | <i>Paired</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>t-test</i> |
| DREAM Act | 5.81 (1.42) | 6.63 (0.72) | $t(15) = -2.66, p = .02, d = 0.73$ |
| Lowering the US Drinking Age | 2.81 (1.94) | 4.34 (2.56) | $t(15) = -2.67, p = .02, d = 0.67$ |
| Adoption by Gay Couples | 5.75 (1.77) | 6.16 (1.63) | $t(15) = -2.28, p = .04, d = 0.57$ |
| Gay Marriage | 5.81 (1.80) | 5.94 (1.77) | $t(14) = -1.00, p = .33, d = 0.25$ |
| Healthcare Reform | 5.93 (1.44) | 6.20 (1.15) | $t(15) = -0.85, p = .41, d = 0.22$ |
| Stricter Gun Control | 5.75 (1.34) | 5.91 (1.34) | $t(15) = -0.34, p = .74, d = 0.08$ |
| U.S. Involvement in Other Countries | 3.38 (1.63) | 4.06 (2.23) | $t(15) = -1.10, p = .29, d = 0.28$ |

Finally, we asked whether taking the class would affect knowledge and attitudes towards those topics covered in the class. Students showed a significant increase in knowledge surrounding the key issues covered in the class at posttest compared to pretest and the effect sizes were large (see Table 1). In addition, although it was not an explicit aim of the class, students also evidenced a change in attitudes on some of the issues covered (see Table 2). Specifically, they were significantly more in favor of the DREAM act, lowering the US drinking age, and adoption by gay couples at posttest, compared to pretest. There was no significant change in their attitudes towards healthcare reform, gay marriage, gun control, or US involvement in other countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

A successful democracy depends on engaged citizens (Branson & Quigley, 1998), in part because civic engagement and knowledge result in civic participation. However, the level of both knowledge and engagement is lower than ideal and is declining (Coley & Sum, 2012). This is particularly the case for young Americans. A revitalized focus on civic education is one possible solution to this problem. As middle and high schools increasingly focus on reading and math skills the task of civic education may fall to higher education. In addition to an overall increase in civic engagement, education may also serve to level the playing field for young Americans whose homes and communities might not emphasize civic engagement, and therefore help to close what has been termed the civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2010).

Many of the goals of a psychology class are well suited to the developing the skills needed for civic engagement (Chenneville, Toler, Gaskin-Butler, 2012; Hurtado, 2007). In addition, studying issues about which the students care has been shown to enhance civic learning opportunities (Kahne and Sporte, 2008). Therefore, a *Psychology in Current Events* class provided an ideal classroom setting in which to emphasize the knowledge, skills, and attributes important for a civically educated student. The pedagogical approach of the class was informed by literature which has assessed the efficacy of civic education courses, and consequently the class focused on social problems and engaging current events that were relevant to the students and critically explored them using open classroom discussion, debates, and critical reflection. Students gained experience critically examining issues, debating positions, and forming arguments.

Students showed a significant increase in their self-reported civic engagement. They also rated themselves as more able to consider alternative viewpoints, appreciate diversity, monitor and understand current events, and think critically. Students also reported improvement in other skills pertinent to civic knowledge and engagement, including applied thinking skills, participating in discussion, arguing a point of view, and reconsidering one's point of view based on information. Students reported a higher level of confidence in skills such as critical thinking and forming/presenting an argument. Finally, there was an increase in knowledge of those social issues explored in the class. This initial evidence suggests that a course offered by the psychology department focusing on current events provides an opportunity to engage students with political and civic issues and to develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes that allow them to be engaged and active citizens.

There are a number of limitations to the current assessment. First, it is of course important to note that the data presented is self-report and so future work should assess whether there is any actual change in students' skills and attributes. Second, and perhaps most crucially, future research should assess whether the changes reported here result in any sustained behavioral changes, for

example, higher levels of civic participation. In addition, there are some limitations inherent in a one-group design; despite the significant findings with medium to large effect sizes, without a control group, we cannot be sure the observed changes are due to the class and not some other unaccounted for factor. Future research replicating these findings using a non-equivalent control group design would strengthen confidence in the value of this kind of class. Further, this study relied upon a relatively small convenience sample with students who elected to take the course. As such, both sample size and self-selection issues may impact on the ability to generalize and replicate the key findings. Similarly, there was some attrition in our sample, only 53% of all enrolled students were present in both classes to complete the pre and posttests. The benefit of a paired samples t-test is that significant results are possible even with such a small sample available for final analysis, as was the case in our data. Furthermore, the effect sizes add confidence to these findings.

We have argued that a psychology class provided the ideal setting to encourage a change in students' civic engagement, and that we implemented it at an institution which serves a student body for which such change may be transformational. The characteristics of the University and the relationship between the students and the faculty may make this course especially effective in this setting. However, the course was designed to address the noted deficits in civic education and there is a need for all our young citizens to be more engaged and knowledgeable and so it is likely that this course could be widely adopted in many institutions with the same end. In addition, although we offer the course via the psychology department, it is certainly possible that it could be successfully implemented in other social science courses using the same curricular components presented here.

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