

Reply

What Kind of Economic Citizen? A Response

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Abstract: In our previous work (Crowley & Swan, 2018), we extended the three citizenship categories (personally responsible, participatory, justice-oriented) created by Westheimer and Kahne into the realm of economic citizenship. In doing so, we added a fourth citizenship archetype: the discerning economic citizen. In a comment on our original article, Cameron (2018) suggested that the discerning economic citizen is not a distinct archetype, but rather a foundational aspect of all elements of economic citizenship. Herein, we provide greater foundation for our decision to separate out the discerning economic citizen.

Keywords: economics education; citizenship education

Introduction

In a speech at the Economic Literacy Conference hosted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis in 1999, Alice Rivlin, then Vice-Chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank, spoke on the importance of citizens developing fluency in the language of economics:

Without a basic understanding of how the economy works, and what the essential terms and concepts are, the average citizen is likely to feel completely left out of any conversation, whether in the media or around the water cooler, about what is happening in the economy and what to do about it.

Feeling left out is frustrating and alienating. If talk is unintelligible—if the listener is without keys or clues or a basic framework into which to fit what is being said—then it is natural for the listener to tune out and to feel powerless, ill-used, manipulated, and even feel that something sinister or nefarious must be going on from which he is being intentionally excluded.

To feel included and empowered, a citizen needs to have a basic understanding of how the world works—in this case how the economic world works—that will provide a basis for asking pertinent questions, obtaining more information, and eventually figuring out what the issues are all about and what ought to be done. [1]

The type of economic literacy Dr. Rivlin details in her speech aligns well with our description of the *discerning economic citizen*, i.e., one who “works to understand contemporary political, social, and economic issues by reading and analyzing a variety of media publications as a way of forming informed opinions about current and past events” [2].

As we constructed our economic citizenship archetypes by assessing the civic outcomes promoted by a range of U.S. economic curricular and instructional materials, we identified an agenda separate from our initial categorizations framed by Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) [3] notions of personally

responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizenship. The materials that led to our creation of a fourth category were often grounded in an inquiry-based approach, asking students to respond to economic questions by considering a variety of economic sources (e.g., charts, graphs, definitions of economic concepts, and renditions of the role of economics in current or historical events). We did not see these materials as necessarily geared toward having students adopt an economic way of thinking that promoted personal responsibility, encouraged greater civic participation, or nudged students toward a justice-oriented perspective. These materials also did not seem to have a direct connection to any aspect of civic participation other than helping students develop their fluency in economic concepts by applying their understanding of those concepts to the specific scenario provided in the materials. While this lack of direct connection to civic action might have excluded these materials from promoting any form of economic citizenship—and therefore, would have caused them to be excluded from our analysis—we saw them differently than many of the economic materials we encountered, which focused on comprehension of economic concepts in an abstract sense, divorced from application to historical or contemporary scenarios.

In our view, the curricular and instructional materials that allowed students to grapple with important ideas from the discipline of economics, even though they did not push students to take that analysis into the “real world” of civic activity, allowed them to develop a degree of discernment around economic data and competing economic perspectives. The skills of discernment could certainly guide them toward a range of civic actions along personally responsible, participatory, or justice-oriented lines, but they might also support the students’ abilities to, as Rivlin noted, partake in “water cooler” conversations.

As we constructed our four archetypes of economic citizenship, we played with numerous ways to incorporate these materials that promoted discernment of economic data. We certainly understand and appreciate Cameron’s (2018) [4] suggestion that the discerning economic citizen is not a separate archetype but is embedded within the other categories. In an earlier presentation of our work at an academic conference, our session discussant suggested that the discerning economic citizen might be reframed as the foundation for any sort of economic citizenship rather than being a parallel structure to our other three categories. Ultimately, we kept coming back to the idea that there is something about the way economics allows us to do these informal civic actions like reading the newspaper or talking with co-workers around the water cooler. We feel that having the ability to participate as an economic citizen simply by learning the grammar of economics and how to conjugate it in a variety of settings is one of many potential civic outcomes of an economic education, and one that is worthy of consideration in its own right.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

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