Can We Teach Civic Education and Service-learning in a World of Privatization, Inequality, and Interdependence?

Benjamin R. Barber, Dēmos

Abstract

This essay is an excerpt from a keynote speech delivered by Benjamin Barber at the 2nd Annual Summer Research Institute on the “Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education.” The speech focuses on six conditions that will impact community service-learning and voluntarism efforts in the years ahead: the ideology of neo-liberalism and privatization, multiculturalism, political polarization, widening inequality, and global interdependence.

We are all practitioners of the art of service education at this gathering, and it would be foolish of me to think I might tell you things you do not know. I certainly will not try to tell you what service-learning is. You’re all doing it and practicing it. What I can do today is to try to offer a kind of framework for our common practices. I am a political philosopher and a democratic theorist, and what I have always tried to do is see service-learning in the context of democracy: put it in a civic context so we can remind ourselves of how vital the tasks are that we engage in. I want to focus on six conditions that impact and affect the long tradition of service-learning and “voluntarism,” the long history of civic learning that de Alexis de Toqueville once described as devoted to learning “the arts of liberty” in America and elsewhere.

The first and perhaps most important condition that shapes civic learning domestically is the ideology of neo-liberalism and privatization under which the nation has labored for at least 30 years: the permanent assault on the idea of the public, on the very idea of democracy itself. It makes little sense to educate young people as citizens if you don’t believe in democracy. Why train students to understand public goods if you don’t think the very term “public” has any relevance in modern society?

The second pertinent condition is the new digital technology. The Web, social media, cell phones—what is their impact on learning generally and on service-learning more particularly?

The third condition I want to explore—multiculturalism—is regarded by some as a virtue but by much of the country as a problem, a deficiency, something that is feared and must be overcome. What the critics see is multiculturalism run amok. Too much of multiculturalism, they insist. A country torn apart by its inability to secure a common identity in the face of so much diversity is a country where you cannot teach citizenship. If no one knows what an American is, if there is no single American language, how is it possible to teach American citizenship?

The fourth condition affecting civic education is the political polarization that has seized our politicians, the incivility of our political debate and of the media. This polarization has always...

1 Benjamin R. Barber is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Dēmos, president of the international NGO CivWorld at Dēmos and the Interdependence Movement. He is Walt Whitman Professor of Political Science Emeritus, Rutgers University.
been a problem for democracy since democracy is about reconciling conflict, finding ways for people to adjudicate deep differences and live together peacefully. Too many people think democracy is about consensus, whereas in reality it is about conflict and division. In the absence of division there is no need for democracy or for politics: we would live together in natural harmony. Nonetheless, the divisions today are radical and the polarization extreme—a serious problem for those who would teach civility and citizenship. What is modeled in Washington and in Congress and the media too can only leave young people cynical about politics—angry at what they see as endless corruption and self-interested politicians.

A fifth and devastating condition of civic learning is the fundamental and widening inequality of America (and the world) based on what is arguably one of the most inegalitarian distribution of resources this country has seen at least since the Gilded Age. How can we preach to the young about political and civic equality and democracy when the country is deeply divided economically in ways that create an underclass marginalized in every relevant political way? When it appears to be ruled by an over-class that doesn’t see itself as part of an egalitarian society? When bankers earn bonuses greater than the annual income of middle class clerks and pay lower taxes than those clerks, when people working three jobs and bringing home $38,000 a year with no pension and no healthcare lose their homes to banks that have been bailed out by taxes paid by these very people—well how then can we ask the young to take democracy seriously?

A sixth and final condition is introduced by what is the most complex and problematic of these conditions: the new interdependence of the world we live in and the way in which that interdependence impacts what has long been a view of citizenship as limited by borders. From the time of the Declaration of Independence we have associated our liberty and security with the nation-state and its secure frontiers. Yet today, American citizens live in a world of interdependence where for the first time liberty, justice, and security too may depend on cross-border forces of interdependence that nation-states cannot control. It doesn’t matter so much whether you’re American, Pakistani, or Egyptian. Our world has become interdependent, but we still confront it with democratic institutions penned in by independent institutions.

These then are the six conditions with which, as teachers of service and citizenship, we are challenged to contend. Let me say a word about each of them since they are likely to determine whether or not democracy survives. How can we respond to these conditions and adapt service education and civic learning to the new world they have produced?

Privatization

I will say relatively little about privatization ideology because it has been a concern for decades now. You are all familiar with Robert Putman’s (2000) study Bowling Alone in which he argues that social capital—the cultural, social, and civic resources that constitute the social capital undergirding democracy—has been eroded over the last decades. The essential trust on which democracy depends is in tatters. Cresting around 1960, social capital has been in decline since then. We no longer believe in ourselves and our civic power and so distrust politicians, media puppets, and others who are themselves our own worst critics, despising the democracy they purport to embody. Their attack on bureaucracy and “big government” and political corruption becomes an attack on public goods and citizenship, on democracy itself. In shaming democracy, they disempower us as citizens. How then can we teach students that democracy means that government is us and that it is defined by our engaged citizenship?

To say that government stinks, is selfish, and is out of control is to say that democracy has failed and turns citizens into cynics. To claim that taxes are a form of theft, government stealing from you and me, yours and mine, is to claim that we have no right to pool our resources to do
together the things we cannot do alone, to pursue the public goods that define the *res publica*. There are of course many things that private wealth and the market do well that government does badly, and things that only government can do. But ever since Ronald Reagan said, “Government is the problem, not the solution” and that markets are the solution, we have refused to recognize that government can do anything, and we have insisted that markets can do everything. How can a people who believe neither in public goods nor the right to tithe ourselves to pursue public goods believe in citizenship?

A citizen is now seen as a kind of political consumer who buys politicians like so many commodities, who acquires political opinions as if they were a form of property. The main job of the consumer is to pursue private interests and subordinate politics to them. Buy the statesmen this year and throw them out as crooks next year. The citizen-consumer thinks that she is choosing between diverse private goods and that a people have nothing in common. There are no public goods, so the question is whose private interests will prevail?

The notion of a public good suggests that we need not always parse democracy in terms of majorities and minorities: there are things we share in common as Americans. The attack on public unions, on public education, and on taxation points to a fundamental misconception of the nature of government. Education (and paying taxes for it) is not a special interest service for the few; it is what constitutes the nation as a republic. Your kids may be grown or maybe you don’t have children, but schooling is what creates a successful and dynamic citizenry and is thus a public good. Not educating people (whether or not I have children) is bad for me, bad for my country, bad for my community, and bad for the economy—and I will suffer from its absence. When education is just one more special interest and teachers are deemed advocates of a special interest, we have lost our way as citizens. Unless, as advocates of civic education, we find a way to rehabilitate the idea of the public, the idea of a democracy, the idea of America, we will lose the “WE” that we stand for. In our identity, we are what we do together. Common ground is our ground, American ground. You can tell me what you want by yourself, but you can’t tell me what you *and I* and our neighbors want by yourself. You need me and I need you for us to find sufficient overlap, enough convergence, to have a public good.

Yet the way we have conceived our politics is to define it as an aggregate of what “I want” and what “you want.” Count up the various selfish wants, and the majority want wins. That leaves a lot of people understandably angry. Tea party members see government as a proxy for special interests rather than as an advocate of public goods. So do members of Occupy Wall Street. When the public good vanishes, polarization is inevitable. Without a notion of public goods, people can’t see themselves as belonging to a civic polity, where they can forge common ground with people with whom they share their communities. That leaves them alienated and filled with resentment and rage, blaming others, people who are different—building walls rather than bridges. This is natural because in the absence of common ground, fear is natural. The world of the “other” as my enemy and opposite leaves no room for common ground.

Here we are tonight in the “Commonwealth” of Massachusetts. But the idea of America as a commonwealth with common goods and common resources is largely gone. In civic education we aspire to teach the commonwealth—to teach the idea of community, that a college like this one *is* a community and *belongs* to a community. But in place of common interests we are faced today with privatization, the commercialization of absolutely everything. And where profit and private interest become the fundamental standards by which we measure things, the public interest is in trouble. Now profit is an engine of capitalism and the basis for investment and innovation, but that doesn’t mean it is an appropriate standard for everything we care about. Value is not measured by price. Commerce has become too monolithic. One of democracy’s real strengths is pluralism, diversity. I am a consumer, yes, and a producer too. But I also pray and play, I am a family person, I revel in
my work, I love art. Like all of us, I play many different roles, and I don’t want to be dominated by just one.

Americans know well that though religion is a way of life here; when religion dominates every part of life and becomes ubiquitous, we call it theocracy and declare it incompatible with democracy. Similarly, though politics is integral to democracy; if everything becomes political and every domain is dominated by politics, we call that totalitarianism—which is obviously incompatible with democracy. But when we allow commerce to dominate everything, permeate every sector, and appear everywhere, on our screens, the walls, the ads, the movies, everywhere we go, commerce, commerce, commerce—what do we call it? Liberty! Market freedom! There is an important and significant place for advertising, commerce, and marketing, but it can’t be everywhere and everything.

Students sometimes ask how much money I have made in the community service gig because they have been taught that money is the universal motivator. I explain I get “paid” but not in the currency they are familiar with, but the currency of satisfaction and pride. This is why we must regard privatization as a quiet ideology that washes over everything we do and makes our work so very difficult.

Digital

Jefferson and Madison had a lot of problems; Lincoln had a lot of problems, but they didn’t have to fight for the term public. They could embrace and refer to the idea of the public good of an American soul, and people knew what it was about and were moved, but when we do it, a lot of young people say huh, what? You got a Facebook page? They want to know where it fits in the private sector, so that’s the first thing we need to do. The digital technology is kind of associated with that because digital technology like all technology is a tool. It can be good or bad, but the problem is that in our country digital technology has become an aspect of a privatized, marketized commercial arena where the people who control it are in it to make money.

Back in 1984, at the very beginning of the digital age, I published Strong Democracy (Barber, 1984). In the final chapter I wrote that

the wiring of homes for cable television across America, the availability of low-frequency and satellite transmission in areas beyond regular transmission or cable, and the interactive possibilities of video, computers and information retrieval systems open up a new mode of human communications that can be used either in civic and constructive or in manipulative and destructive ways . . . (and may) make real participatory discussion and debate possible across great distances. (p. 274)

I foresaw that such innovative technologies that were lateral not vertical, not top down but bottom up, could bode well for democracy because democracy is about people talking to one another freely and without intermediaries or hierarchy. But it hasn’t turned out that way. For though the architecture of the Web is democratic, it has been shaped by the commercial market that produced it and is owned and controlled in hardware and software by monopoly corporations more interested in profits (via commerce, social media, and porn) than in civics or democracy.

The reality is that digital technology has possibilities for democratic rebellion we saw exhibited in the Arab Spring, where people were organized and rallied via cell phones and the Internet; it can bring down autocrats and circumvent traditional media and communication censorship. But in established democracies it has generally been used for purposes of democratic or civic organization. Even the “social” media, even Facebook, have an asocial if not antisocial feel—being defined by communication among people like one another or who like one another, rather that among strangers.
and people defined by difference with whom democracy must deal. The Web, all about “like,” matches likes with likes and allows people to segregate themselves around common interests and common values rather than talk to one another across differences and distinctions.

Democracy is an encounter with strangers, about dealing with people you may not like, with whom you may not be friends, people whose values you may not share, but people with whom you have to live and with whom you have to find common ground. Where are the platforms and programs that allow this? Where can we go to interact with strangers? Enemies? Those we fear or despise but who belong to our communities? What kinds of programs, social networks, multiplayer video games (such as Second Life) might allow creative uses by educators concerned with service-learning, community organization, and civic engagement? Tocqueville spoke of the need to teach the “arts of liberty.” Where on the Web is such a pedagogy available? Yet teaching liberty is hardly a discretionary activity in a democratic society. And exposure to the Web, to iPhones and television and movies, is a reality of everyday life for the young. Who are the true tutors in modern society? In college and university you have your students 3 or 4 hours a week at best. In secondary school, teachers may have pupils in home room 20 hours a week, perhaps 30 weeks a year. But the young are exposed to the ubiquitous pixels that populate their cell phones and computers and movie screens 60 to 70 hours a weeks, 52 weeks a year. American children are instructed daily by a great, alternative tutor—the media—and nothing that happens in schools and universities can match it (Bohn & Short, 2009; Whitney, 2010), which means we had better start paying attention as teachers, as civic educators, to what the young are learning about their country, about commerce, about greed, about pornography, about privatized social relations, from all those screens, small and large. As civic educators, we lose the battle unless we find ways to bring civic education to the Web. We lose the whole battle for higher education and democracy because our rival tutors in the commercial sector impelled by the profit motive own the media and have little interest in education, civic or otherwise.

The commercialization of the Web has been mostly hindered by the inability of users to find ways to monetize a service that has been regarded by the public as “free” from the very outset. Monetization rather than democratization has been the obsession!

In order for us then to have a significant impact on our students, we will have to find ways to influence and utilize the Web, despite its commercial leanings. Web designers and programmers can be helpful in helping us develop civic uses of the Internet, but they must be asked. There are multiplayer video games like Second Life and Sim City and others that can model civic relationships and work creatively around civil society, but we tend to ignore them. As a result, the more popular and commercially viable games like World of Warcraft and war simulations focus on terrorism and the war against jihadists. Since so many members of our target audience, young men between 8 and 21, play video games, why shouldn’t we become creators here and players? If the young won’t come to us, it makes sense to go to them. It is apparent that new media, including their Web, social media, and video games, are having a sinister impact on normal community. Real social hangouts and the neighborhoods that support them in the vicinity of college campuses are withering because so much of college social life now takes place virtually. These challenges cannot be ignored without risking a civic and service education arena emptied of alternatives and irrelevant to real life education.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is one of America’s most striking virtues. Where other monocultural nations have struggled with diversity (and today with immigration and the “Muslim” question), the United States was founded around immigration and pluralism, with a national motto e pluribus unum manifesting its virtue, and has for the most part been more welcoming to immigrants than most other nations. Certainly there are other nations (Canada and Brazil, for example) that have
been strikingly multicultural, and the United States has had deep and enduring problems with its native American population and its heritage of slavery (since African Americans were not voluntary immigrants, their status has always been different). It is hardly an unblemished record. The Native American population less ruthlessly pushed off the land, while those who came in bondage stayed in bondage of one kind or another far beyond the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments and the formal abolition of slavery. For all those who came to America voluntarily, however, the melting pot or American mosaic, has been notably successful, especially when compared to Holland, France, Denmark, or postcolonial nations like India or Rwanda in which competing religions or tribes are forced into single “nations,” where the struggle with diversity can dominate politics and history. As an “invented” nation defined by diversity, multiculturalism has helped shaped American civic virtue and is a vital part of the civic arts of liberty and often the objective of service-learning programs. Where elsewhere, diversity can inspire fear, here it has generally been seen as a strength.

This is not to say that the politics of fear and reaction cannot turn against immigrants, pitting the most recent waves (Latinos, for example) against earlier waves (Irish, Italian, or Polish Catholics, for example). At times, dominant immigrant groups—White Anglo-Saxon Protestants—pose as “native” and try to block those who come after, as if those who arrived early from England, Scotland, or Germany were “native” to the land. But frankly, while such a strategy can succeed for a time, it has never really been a winning strategy because the fact is that America is a fluid and mobile land, and though from time to time we close it down to immigration (as happened from 1925 to 1965) and at times succumb to Nativist and “know-nothing” attitudes (we are at risk today from the Tea Party Right), diversity and pluralism are part of the national ethos and generally a first principle of civic education and service. For us, difference is less a challenge or a spur to teaching tolerance than a national strength that helps define American citizenship at its best!

The diversity to which we have always aspired is now becoming the demographic reality of the nation. We are now in our school-age population a majority of minorities. California recently became a majority of minorities; Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, Arizona, and New Mexico are all headed that way. Whether or not Spanish becomes the second language of America, Latinos in the United States comprise 38% in California, 37% in Texas, 23% in Florida and 17% in New York (Casas & Ryan, 2010). Our reality is pluralism, deep and wide. One can still regret the reality and join a Nativist party or complain with certain factions of the Tea Party, but there is no turning back. But the multicultural destiny built into American DNA is now a fact of mature America and one of the nation’s great strengths. Among other things, it propels population growth. The United States is one of the few older developed countries that isn’t losing population, due entirely to the reproductive energy of recent immigrants who in time may be the answer to how we can sustain a social security system in which so many are retired (Lee, 2011).

Multiculturalism as a strength needs to be taught and is a foundation of civic education and service programs. In places with a great deal of diversity, like New Mexico, Arizona, and California, there is fear to deal with and, in states like North Dakota, Idaho, or Iowa where diversity is far less in evidence, there is ignorance to deal with. It is easier to gain acceptance in cities than in the rural hinterlands. So our work is cut out from us in this domain: showing that what too many see as a threat is actually a strength and a virtue, a vital component of our civil religion and our civic faith in America.

Political Polarization

Although immigration is the source of diversity, and diversity is a virtue, diversity has occasioned two “problems” that are challenges to civic education: polarized politics and divisiveness, and burgeoning inequality. As civic educators focused on practice, we need to think deeply about both. Polarization is a dramatic feature of our current politics, although it has been ameliorated by an
important and well-documented but not widely known fact. According to polls, the media and our politicians are far more polarized than the American people at large. Neighbors of differing views can talk to each other and respect each other far more easily than politicians in Congress. Even when in disagreement, ordinary folks rarely display the sneering, smug, and snarky attitude that is regularly found on Fox, MSNBC, or in the Halls of Congress. I happen to be a liberal, so I prefer what is said substantively on MSNBC, but I despise the attitude. Such disdainful affect spells trouble for democracy because it undercuts tolerance and mutual regard in the face of difference and can pave the way for a politics of hate. Suddenly it begins to feel like brown shirts, red shirts, and black shirts fighting one another in the streets and burning one another out of their offices, more like Germany in the early 30s than America today.

Such radical political polarization is bad enough, but coupled with distrust of immigrants and disdain for ethnic and religious and racial “others,” it is downright toxic. Although at odds with the country’s multicultural essence, this kind of divisiveness is all too common today. At the same time, the deeply symbolic election of an African American to the presidency, though it inflames a minority of racists and nativists, signals that the United States has come of age and that race is no longer a bar to the highest office. The “minorities” problem is now an issue only for a reactionary minority that, demographics show, hasn’t much of a future. It is the media that most need taming—a civility agenda of the kind President Obama has pressed on to a reluctant Congress, and for which comedian Jon Stewart has argued—for once, with serious gravity—on the media.

A greater problem lurks behind polarization, however. Incivility is understood to be a problem, but the deeper issue of economic inequality has received less attention and is an even more serious threat to democracy.

Inequality

O ur task as civic educators is to teach young Americans the value of equal voice, equal votes, and equal opportunity. But these forms of equality depend on an underlying socioeconomic equality that is being undercut by what amounts to the most radical acceleration of inequality the country has seen for almost a hundred years. When the richest American makes not 20 times or 40 times the average worker but 400 times, or in the case of the very richest 4000 times, what the average worker makes, there can be no excuse based on incentives or entrepreneurship. More even than greed, it is a kind of narcissistic obliviousness. It is banks being bailed out by taxpayers and then refusing not only any kind of meaningful regulation, but refusing to make loans to homeowners or businesses in trouble, even as they pay their executives millions in bonuses. It is millionaires pushing hard against any efforts to increase taxation on the richest one percent of Americans even as they pour dollars (courtesy of the Supreme Court decision in Citizens United to treat corporations as “persons”) into elections to assure they can buy government’s complicity in their greed.

How can any young person who witnesses these shenanigans be anything but utterly cynical about democracy? No wonder Occupy Wall Street has the sympathy of a majority of American voters, including a large number of Republicans! The young who we are to educate in the virtues of democracy shout back at us impatiently: “Don’t be naive! Democracy? Don’t you see, democracy is just a cover for rule by the rich? You ask us to be ‘good citizens’ while big money makes a mockery of citizenship?” What are we to say back to them? A civics lesson drawn from paper truths about a democracy ruined in practice by rank inequality won’t do it. If we reproach their cynicism, we look either like fools or rationalizers of corruption, which suggests before we preach equal citizenship as an ideal, we need to confront economic inequality as a reality.

Urging the young to volunteer to feed and house the homeless can’t address the systemic inequalities that lead to widespread joblessness, home mortgage defaults, and deepening inequalities.
A national service corps can help develop habits of service and responsibility in the young, but those habits cannot of themselves overcome a nation that allows a fifth of its children to live in poverty and nearly 50 million of its citizens to live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), that allows four million to lose their homes and tens of millions more to fall into permanent unemployment so systemic that they no longer appear on the unemployment roles (you have to be looking for a job to land there!). The dirty little secret is we need democracy to work to forge legislation that battles greed, inequality, joblessness, and corporate irresponsibility, but we live in times when those processes don’t work because democracy is not working. I don’t want to suggest you have to be radical to teach civic education, but I want to say you have to be honest, which may mean acknowledging a radical critique of inequality. Young people have not been volunteering as they once did, but [after this paper was delivered in its original form last spring], they have been drawn to protests like Occupy Wall Street with an enthusiasm that shows they will embrace responsibility and citizenship when they think they make a difference. In times of economic stress and clear-cut injustice, civic education must address the real issues and not simply preach the virtues of citizenship. Today that means we must attend first of all to the forces that make democracy impossible, for history shows that when inequality becomes dominant and greed paramount, democracy itself is likely to succumb.

This is a lesson with ancient antecedents. In the 4th century B.C., Aristotle argued that a stable democracy required a large middle class—a bell shaped curve for wealth distribution on which the rich and poor at either end were relatively diminutive and the bulk of people occupied the bell top center. But our wealth distribution looks more and more like an inverted bell, with a large population of the poor on one side, a diminishing middle class in the middle, and a few very wealthy on the other side who, however, weight and, hence, control the system. Around two or three percent of Americans control more than 70 percent of the income in the United States, and the top one percent controls a majority of wealth (hence, Occupy Wall Street's slogan “we are the 99%”; Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). No democracy can survive these numbers in the long run, and the young know it. If we want to instruct them in the virtues of democratic citizenship, we need to show them that it can address these brutal disempowering economic realities.

Interdependence

Occupy Wall Street has [since this lecture was delivered] made clear that the young are still powerfully concerned with a just and democratic nation. But it has also reflected a certain parochialism that typifies our media, our politics, and our private lives. The last concern that needs addressing in this survey of a “new” civic education is interdependence, not as an aspiration but as the brute reality of our new millennium. We face a world of interdependent challenges in ecology, global markets, terrorism, diseases, crime, communications (the World Wide Web), and trade. Yet the institutions with which we respond to these challenges, and that hold our democratic aspirations, are all national—sovereign states contained within territorial borders and defined by sovereign independence. This is understandable since, for the last 300 years, the best chance for securing liberty, justice, and safety has been the nation-state, which has also been democracy’s vessel and guarantor. From the time of the American Declaration of Independence, autonomy has been the key to security and equality. The vaunted American exceptionalist dream was built on the belief in independence as the key to liberty and justice for all.

Beginning with President Washington’s warning that a free nation must not meddle in foreign alliances and must maintain its independence from all foreign entanglements, the United States tried for more than a century to stand aloof from the world of empires, corruption, war, and empire. Independence was the road to purity. To this day, when nations seek freedom and democracy...
that walk the road of independence (as in Iraq or Afghanistan or, now, in the countries of the Arab Spring), whether in Somalia, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, or Egypt, the formula for securing democracy is to create an autonomous sovereign state.

Yet interdependence means this dream can no longer be realized. Democratic nations, one by one, cannot address the collective challenges of an interdependent world. One hundred eighty-four nations at Copenhagen explaining why their sovereignty does not permit them to respond to global climate change evinces the bankruptcy of democratic sovereignty in a world of interdependence.

We are at the end of the era of sovereignty. Sovereign, independent states with their noble Declarations of Independence can no longer guarantee freedom and security to anyone. America is the most powerful country in the world today (bipolarity vanished with the fall of the Soviet Union), but never has so powerful a nation had so little capacity to control its own destiny. This most powerful country in the world can no longer control its public health, its crime, its drugs, its pandemics, terrorism, or much of anything else on its own. It can’t even stop American corporations from picking up lock, stock, and barrel and going abroad in search of lower wages and less formidable government regulation. Nor will the coming century belong to China; there will be no succession in the powerful. It will be the century of all or the century of none, nations working cooperatively or the demise of nations. The age of Hobbes and Grotius is over; sovereignty no longer is a friend to democracy.

If we hadn’t learned this before 9/11, then 9/11 should have taught us the lesson. Here was a country that hadn’t been touched by foreign invasion since 1812 when the British tried to burn Washington. Yet here, just 10 years ago, the Pentagon and World Trade Towers were under assault—but not from the outside, from foreign invaders—but from the inside, from “residents”—they had been here for 2 years, studying, working, and conniving their attacks from within. They needed no foreign weapons; they contrived bombs from American civilian airliners. They did not enter illegally, but were fully documented . . . terrorists!

We couldn’t stop the attack, not because we lack the firepower and acumen to defend our borders, but because “borders” don’t matter in an interdependent world where terrorists belong to no nation. Al Qaeda was, in effect, a malevolent NGO. Our formidable armed forces can destroy nations but not interdict individual terrorists who belong to no nation. This deep asymmetry is typical of a world of interdependence. Similarly, the best public health system in the world (not the one we have to be sure!) could not prevent the next pandemic from an infection of our people. Nor do tariffs prevent trade in goods made by children or protect American jobs. Borders are not relevant because HIV doesn’t carry a passport. The World Wide Web doesn’t have a national home base. Technology is ubiquitous and universal. Every challenge we face, from markets to war to crime to health to environment, is interdependent in its origins and demands constructive interdependence solutions.

Yet democracy remains tethered to the nation-state protected by the nation-state. And when we teach our students about “American democracy” and “the civic American community” that are our civic tradition’s subjects, when we talk about American exceptionalism, we speak in a language of independence and sovereignty no longer pertinent to our new conditions. We are constrained in teaching democracy, the public good, the commonwealth, and multiculturalism to find a way to put those issues, and inequality too, in the context of interdependence. Even were we to achieve perfect equality in the United States, inequality elsewhere in the world would persist and infect American social and economic relations. That’s also interdependence.

The aspirations of the Arab Spring are also being hampered by the one-state-at-a-time approach as if democracy for Yemen, Libya, or Egypt is possible without a regional approach. Once upon a time, the yearning was for a pan-Arabic league across the region. Today it is a pan-democratic Arab civic movement that is likely to allow success across the region, but it is easier said
than done, however, because real and ineluctable as it is, interdependence remains an abstraction to most people at a great distance from their everyday lives, lived out in neighborhoods, cities, and nations. This makes the challenges of teaching interdependence particularly daunting—but all the more necessary.

These then are the half dozen crucial challenges we face today as civic educators wedded to democracy but compelled to understand its new context. It suggests we can't go on in the same manner as we did in the 1980s, 1960s, and before. It suggests that if we cannot set democracy and citizenship in this new frame, we are unlikely to make much headway from the cynical, discerning, and stubborn young. It is not just our pedagogical community of course but, more generally, the wider university of social scientists, ecologists, and anthropologists who need to figure things out. But perhaps we can model for them what a relevant civics, and thus a relevant social science, really looks like in this brave new world of inequality and interdependence.

Schools of education, unfortunately the last places that welcome change, also need to get on board and grasp the new conditions of and framework for civic learning—the realities of inegalitarianism that give the lie to our supposedly “democratic” institutions of the polarization that's tearing us apart at the very moment we should be trying to help young people come together and to rediscover the public in the face of a pernicious privatization that leaves us without a sense of commonality and common ground. It is a formidable task to take on these challenges, but I can imagine no better place to start than with the pedagogy of experiential education and education-based community service, for it grounds the abstractions in practice and at the same time brings the practical dilemmas into the classroom where they can be treated critically and dispassionately. Traditional liberal arts teachers can perhaps get away with irrelevance; we cannot, for our task is to help introduce the young, not just to the arts of liberty and responsibilities of citizenship, but to the issues and problems that make this so problematic in the new millennium. With them, we can help to reclaim our colleges and communities, reclaim our country, and reclaim our democracy, not just for some, but for all.

References


