Canadian Universities as Institutes for Civic Pedagogies

Elayne M Harris
Harris & Associates, Vancouver

Abstract
Sucked into the centrifugal force of the global economy, Canadian universities are failing the Canadian collective. Canadians want their society to be distinguished by social cohesion, social justice, and social responsibility, outcomes poorly addressed by higher education organized around disciplines and professions. A more promising approach would be a higher education initiative organized around contemporary citizenship per se, particularly participatory processes for late modernity. Institutes for civic pedagogies in Canadian universities are proposed.

Canadians and critical citizenship
Canadians are puzzling about the complex and interrelated dynamics of late capitalism and democracy. Aware that Canada is ranked as highly as any country by the UN’s Human Development Index, residents of this country are still disquieted about the quality of life—their lives and that of others. Simply put, sleeping in the Canadian outdoors during summer vacations is still thought desirable; Canadians sleeping in the doorways of 7-Eleven stores is not. Signally, Canadians yearn for an economic sphere nested within a societal and cultural sphere and are dismayed that resources for the latter seem to be scraps left over from the economic juggernaut. In the same vein, they are alarmed that Canadian technical know-how seems to be outstripping social know-how and that the Canadian ‘commons’ is—well, less common.

Constructing meaningful lives as subjects within the opportunities and constraints of historical materialism is the perennial and ubiquitous task. But the concurrency, intensity, and paradoxical nature of issues in late modernity make the formulation of any sense-making, big picture particularly labyrinthine. Nonetheless, Canadians are doggedly searching for ‘solutions’ that emerge from collectivity, solutions for which there are no handy or immediate referents. In this quest, the ‘old’ subject of citizenship—as both an analytic idea and normative ideal—acquires new relevance and urgency. Unsure about boundaries (Canadian? global? local?), nonetheless Canadians are adamant about democratic citizenship, whatever the sphere.

The unheeding university
Education—publicly-funded, democratically available—has been a structural means for Canadian society to approach common problems and realize shared aspirations. Currently, all Canadian educational institutions highlight education for individuals to compete in the global economy. Patently, education configured for individuals, competition, and economic functioning is not addressing the collective dimension of development so embedded in the Canadian psyche. Sadly, there’s a short supply of education for citizens whose desire is to find a Canadian balance between individual and collective well-being. Canadian universities, too, accentuate education
for global competitiveness and are not responding to signals about the other synchronous and compelling learning need of Canadians.

**Higher education as a technology for critical citizenship**

More can be expected of Canadian universities with respect to the ‘knowledge-based economy’ than availing of it as a Saatchi and Saatchi marketing inspiration for selling the universities’ specialty product. This paper frames a second possibility; an educational response to Canadians as a people disposed towards a ‘knowledge’ for present-day citizenship. The proposal is that universities be generators of education designed **expressly** for Canadians seeking a fitting framework for their development as reflective, engaged citizens making sense of their society and their responsibility for social justice in the here and now. Canadian universities can sculpt this innovation in education (or more precisely in **learning** as a participatory technology for citizenship in the real world)

Although novel, there is logic in Canadian universities as institutes for civic pedagogies.

**Epistemo-logic**

First, education designed to release and hone citizens’ capacities to reflect on and inquire into their shared role as makers and shapers of domestic and global society is genuine higher learning. Granted, higher in education is usually construed as the top rung of the knowledge complexity-abstraction-specialization ladder, and re-framing it as purpose and public good is atypical, but even higher education ideology can be amended. If Canadian higher education validated collective learning about the ‘commons’ as much as it validated individual learning for personal and professional ends, it might be said to be distinctive, even distinctively Canadian. If universities designed and offered education on citizenship democratically, the elitist aspect of association with a university so problematic to higher education democrats could be turned to advantage. The focus would membership, not leadership.

Second, Canadian universities already focus on the cohort of Canadian society expressing their dis-ease with conditions of contemporary times, namely adults. Canadians participating in the university’s current programme are almost all of legal voting age and in the last 10 years, universities have adapted to learners ten, twenty and thirty years beyond the minimum age of majority. Adults will make use of new learning in matters of civic literacy more immediately and more fully than youth who are not yet of an age to vote or be citizen-actors. Although the term **education** usually evokes an image of youth, that image is too limiting, as education for contemporary citizenship would focus on adults. Ignoring the present adult generation(s) and staking everything on the next/coming generation has elements of passivity and fatalism and may even be socially irresponsible.

A third congruence between universities **per se** and an articulated ‘course of study’ in the competencies of contemporary citizenship is embedded in the pedagogical penchant of universities. The university is a learning environment which venerates the notion of dialogue, a respect implicit in the frequent resort to symposiums, colloquiums, roundtables and other variants of group discussion. True, scholarly authority, verbal adeptness and yes, positional power, have been known to dilute the ideal but the principle of the university as a learning community of peers still has resonance. As it happens, the only ‘method’ appropriate to animate
a fruitful exchange of ideas, thoughts, assumptions, hopes, and concerns about contemporary Canadian society is dialogue. A programme for Canadian citizens about citizenship and contemporary democracy can be guided, structured, deliberate, planned, organized, and designed, but unless the communication flow is predominantly horizontal and reciprocal, neither the last 50 years of research on adult learning nor participatory democracy will be taken into account.

The logic of expertise
Beyond the hip-bone-in-the-hip-socket fit outlined above, other rationales pointing to the university emerge when the contours of an appropriate programme in participatory citizenship are sought. The primary one is that the collection of resources required for the new programme is already within the academy. (Throughout this paper, programme is used in stead of program to invoke its connotation as proclamation or large-scale organizing plan, not merely sequenced collection of specific activities and procedures).

Programme development expertise
Shaping a technology for citizenship requires designers and innovators whose training and forte is education outside the box. These designers would be familiar with a full range of educational methodologies, cognizant of the significance of embeddedness, situatedness, and contextuality in adult learning, attuned to the interplay between cognitive and aesthetic knowing (rational and arational communication), know learning as a psychological process and a socio-cultural phenomenon, hold a critical perspective, and able to work with the hybrid forms of discourse that span culture, learning and everyday practice. A few Canadian universities graduate such specialists under the opaque term ‘adult educators’, as do some graduate programmes of social work, community planning, international development, critical communication, and rural development. Designing learning for citizens not pursuing any credential is so unlike designing instructional and curriculum for a programme of credits and degrees that experience in the latter may not transfer to the former.

Content expertise
The programme design team would avail of content expertise early and often. Although not every Canadian academy has programme specialists in civil society education, every Canadian academy already has substantial content-and-subject-matter expertise. Given the centrality of (participatory) democracy as a framework, political science is one obvious source of subject matter, although the newer and most exciting scholarship on citizenship and democracy is cutting across many disciplinary boundaries, and indeed across social science and humanities. Rich work is coming from cultural studies and communication. The idea of citizenship as tied to the nation-state is obviously up for review and an appropriate ‘curriculum’ would situate that and all allied themes—participation, civil society, the public sphere, media, social capital, identity, social interaction, public culture, dialogue chances, public policy, and public good(s)—in the context and ‘reality’ of late modernity.

Expertise in advanced media
An appropriate learning process for large numbers of people will make adroit use of media technologies, while eschewing media practices associated with assembling an audience for advertisers. Universities already house faculty and professional staff investigating open and
distributed learning. Most universities have departments dedicated to delivering courses, events, and degrees by making use of communication technologies; an enterprise that has spawned scholastic inquiry on the circumstances in which new media can enhance the learning process. Although this sort of university expertise is now limited to applications in formal educational programs, it is a relevant platform for analogous explorations of new and old media in the context of civic pedagogies. Architecture of learning for large numbers of people grappling with deliberate democracy in an intentional and time bounded way, modelling a participatory process while exploring it as content, is very much a work-in-progress. In the hyper-mediated and commercially colonized public sphere of the twenty-first century, learning architects need both a critical perspective about the electronic commons and enough imagination to design new media for democratic communication.

**Research and development expertise**

The fourth resource necessary for a programme of civic pedagogies is scholarship and research. Many Canadian (and international) scholars are engaged in highly relevant studies, but a programme in civic pedagogies calls for its own tailored research plan. Although there are other providers of education in Canada, the university alone has expertise in teaching and research as the two faces of the same coin. A programme in civic pedagogies at any institution can start without a complementary research track, but its development, growth, and vitality will be tied to an articulated research agenda based in both individual disciplines and new interdisciplinary frames. Key components will be fuller investigation and study in (1) social learning theory and social movement learning (2) critical communication, especially technologies of communication, exploration of the contemporary public sphere, domestic and international communication policy and (3) pedagogy for public education, the public good, and for large numbers of people. This early naming is meant to open, not shut, the door for a more comprehensive consideration and does not speak to the desirable weight or mix of even the three mentioned.

**Institutional logic**

Over and above the identification of relevant expertise within Canadian universities, the number and distribution of universities throughout Canada are also appropriate to establishing the new programme as a pan-Canadian initiative. Impact on Canadian society as a whole will increase with each participating university. Although many universities are urban-based, new technologies for communication and information offer means for including Canadians in rural constituencies in the provincial and regional footprint of every university. As a conscious exercise in democracy in education and education for democracy, congruency across theory and practice is paramount, and will rests with practice that affirms the value of collaboration among many ‘ordinary’ people, and will be undone by practices that reinforce existing social and economic inequities.

While the university sector is pan-Canadian, the flow of public funds from taxpayers to universities through provincial governments ensures each university is at liberty to structure its degree credit programme in light of its unique reading of regional and national needs. So too can universities in regions of Canada decide the character of its programme in civic pedagogies. Generic programme parameters might not stand when the particulars and context of each institution are factored in, including the two which follow. (1) To support the desirable degree of
reflection and exploration about matters as fundamental as a desirable Canadian society, a programme of civic pedagogy will need learning activities distributed across a minimum of six months. (2). Since the programme is to engage adults in a natural extension of their role as citizens, their participation will be concurrent with execution of their other adult responsibilities, permitting a maximum engagement of four hours a week. As with design specifications, it is premature to recommend administrative arrangements, although major financing to permit participation in the programme without individual registration or tuition fees is axiomatic.

Even though new, the civil pedagogy programme is not proposed as an offshoot, thread, or extension of the university’s already well-established programme in credentialing and continuing education. It is proposed as a teaching and research function as appropriate to a contemporary Canadian university as teaching and research for graduating professionals. The programme has implications for the university’s community service mission, but is not proposed as community service. A second major programme in the university firmament, it is not proposed as secondary.

Alternatives

The universities are not the only Canadian educational institution that could host a programme of civic pedagogies for adults. University colleges, community colleges, polytechnic institutes, and some school districts are other educational institutions that focus on adults. Community colleges are even more numerous and better distributed than universities, and attract a wider diversity of socio-economic groups than universities do. In the past, other publicly funded Canadian organizations, including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the National Film Board, and provincial educational broadcast authorities have played vital roles in generating and enlivening the Canadian public sphere. CBC has the best pan-Canadian presence of course, and highly apropos programming from CBC Radio One and Radio-Canada. (CBC Radio Three is showing promise). The potential for community cable channels to function as citizen television took a blow when Canadian-Radio and Television Commission allowed the cable industry to divert its community channel funding to production, although community radio still lives and breaths. Sensitive explorations of Web/Internet as an electronic commons have also begun. Canada has venerable non-profit and non-governmental organizations too, that focus directly on citizen engagement; Frontier College, the Couchiching Conference, the Dominion Institute and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, to mention just four. Suggesting a partnership among these is easy enough, but many pro forma partnerships have been de-vitalized by the doughnut effect—being air and puffy dough around a centre consisting of a hole.

The clarity of vision and strength of leadership needed for institutes of civic pedagogy is more likely in the context of a new special-purpose institute than in a partnership among already existent bodies. Many adult educators and other thoughtful iconoclasts in Canada would verily thrill to build a pan-Canadian organization for double democracy—that is education in democracy and democracy in education. To begin without prejudice as to ultimate forms, formats, or media except for workability in the context of late modernity in Canada would revive many a flaneur and cynic.

Starting afresh, away from the hide-bound reflexes of all established institutions and the conservatism of universities has much to recommend it. The formal and informal system of
checks and balances within the academy has ground many potent ideas to mince-meat; peer
dialogue and intellectual sabotage can be used to devastating effect. On the other hand, many in
the academy are deeply uncomfortable with the spectre of education for Canadians as domestic
and global workers/consumers eclipsing education for Canadians as citizens. Some will welcome
an institute for civic pedagogy within their university as a stalking or Trojan horse with the
potential to restore something of the academy’s original purpose.

Conclusion
Publicly funded institutions are obliged to read the society of which they are part. Canadian
universities have responded to Canadians’ present-day apprehension about and hopes for
economic well-being by adjusting their traditional programme to reinforce student capacity for
employment “success”. Canadians universities are now called to respond to Canadians’ present-
day unease about declining social justice at home and abroad, and establish a complementary
programme to enhance capacity for active citizenship. In doing so, universities would be
endorsing a learning society in which knowledge is flow and process—an active creation—rather
than a knowledge-based economy that reduces knowledge to a commodity or stock.
References


4. Saatchi & Saatchi is an award winning ‘full-service’ international marketing company.


