Enlightenment and engagement in adult education for democratic citizenship: Lessons from the Citizens' Forum and the Participatory Budget

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Introduction

In broad terms, adult education for democratic citizenship refers to the development of critical citizens who are willing and able to participate in democratic life. This encompasses a variety of learning avenues, ranging from formal civic courses to non-formal workshops on specific topics to informal learning acquired through direct experience. Among the multiple goals typically pursued by citizenship education, two are particularly relevant for this paper. The first is to contribute to the development of citizens who are well informed and are critically aware of the issues of the day. The second is to contribute to the development of active citizens who can engage effectively in democratic processes of deliberation and decision-making in their own communities.

Indeed, the development of an enlightened and engaged citizenry has long been an important part of the adult education tradition. It can be stated that these two goals should be simultaneously sought through programs in which ‘enlightenment’ and ‘engagement’ complement each other. But this is a normative statement. In real life, many programs promoting democratic citizenship tend to emphasize one of the two dimensions, perhaps assuming that the second one will arise as a natural consequence of the first. Adult education programs that focus on the development of enlightened citizens usually do not put much effort into preparing them for active and meaningful engagement in community affairs or in helping to create and sustain the political structures of participatory democracy that could facilitate such engagement. On the other hand, programs that provide enabling structures for political participation (usually carried out by progressive local governments) do not tend to pay enough attention to the development of pedagogical strategies that can assist those with less experience in democratic deliberation and decision-making to participate better and to critically examine broader social issues. Each one of these models seems to take for granted the existence of a reciprocal spillover effect that results from their programs. ‘Enlightenment’ programs assume that awareness of issues eventually leads to social and political engagement, whereas ‘engagement’ programs assume that involvement in local social action eventually raises an interest for the examination of larger issues.

This paper explores these twin assumptions by examining two successful programs of state-civil society co-determination which have become paradigmatic examples of ‘enlightenment’ and of ‘engagement’ respectively: the Citizens' Forum of Canada and the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre, Brazil. After reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of the enlightenment and the engagement models, it is argued that the field of adult citizenship education can greatly benefit from a more systematic collaboration and dialogue between them. Such a dialogue could help to reconcile five ‘separations’ that permeate this field: a) the separation between enlightenment and engagement; b) the separation between macro (international and national) and micro (local) issues; c) the separation between deliberation and decision-making; d) the separation between discussion and social action; and e) the separation between adult civic education and participatory urban planning.

The Citizens’ Forum (CF)
Citizens' Forum was arguably one of the most important Canadian contributions to adult citizenship education, and provided a methodological model that was followed by many other countries interested in using mass media to promote national debates (Lowe 1975, Selman 1991 and 1998, Welton 1998). The CF, which had as a suggestive subtitle 'Canada's National Platform', was a joint project of the Canadian Association of Adult Education (CAAE) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that began in 1943 under the leadership of E.A. Corbett and Isabel Wilson, and continued for two decades until 1967. The CF sprung from a similar project (the National Farm Radio Forum) carried out by the same institutions in rural areas, in an attempt to broaden the social, cultural and political issues for debate and include urban audiences. Paradoxically, despite incorporating a broader agenda (or precisely because of it) the CF never attained the level of participation enjoyed by the Farm Forum (Selman 1998).

The CF was part of a strategy designed by adult educators to reconstruct society in a context of economic depression and a world war. Its main goal was to engage Canadians in all parts of the country, through mailings and radio broadcasting, “in an informed consideration of issues in which Canadians have a common interest” (Selman et al. 1998:52). Essentially, the CF was a national discussion group program which involved printed study materials, weekly radio broadcasts, and local study groups to help Canadians in all parts of the country form their own opinions and arguments on issues of general concern through an informed and balanced consideration of different perspectives of those issues. Among those issues were the pros and cons of censorship, professionalism in sports, religious education in public schools, strikes, disciplining youth, progressive education, compulsory treatment of alcoholics, small farming, immigration policy, national planning, and labour unions' political involvement.

The CF broadcasted weekly programs from October to April, and each program was accompanied by discussion pamphlets. Isabel Wilson, the study guide editor of the CF, produced over 300 of these pamphlets. In all of them, she displayed an extraordinary talent to summarize long and complex documents, and to translate them into simple and clear language. She was also able to develop the topic in a challenging, interesting and debatable format with a national audience in mind, and to present a balanced and fair view of both sides of an argument (Selman et al. 1998). At the end of each broadcast the discussion groups were invited to send their opinions on the topic to the program’s offices, and summaries of those opinions were aired in subsequent broadcasts and

Welton (1998:43) points out that “an educational form such as the Citizens’ Forum makes sense once we understand that Canadian adult educators were attempting to develop an adequate practice of participatory democracy.” These adult educators, indeed, were trying to enhance citizen self-understanding and political competence through the maximization of dialogue opportunities. If we understand participatory democracy as a collective process of deliberation and decision-making, and if we understand political competence as the capacity to understand issues and influence decisions, two questions can be raised. First, did these attempts to develop political competence and an adequate practice of participatory democracy succeed, particularly among the poor? Second, and more importantly, were there real and sustained attempts to develop that “adequate practice” of participatory democracy? According to some accounts (e.g. Faris 1975, Wilson 1980) the answer to these two questions is no.

Indeed, although the Citizens' Forum promotional brochure (November 1943) promised that upcoming bulletins would contain ideas for action projects, no specific ideas were included in subsequent bulletins. Unlike the National Farm Radio Forum, there is no evidence either in Citizens’ Forum or CAAE records that show any success with action groups during the first year of the project. By the second year,
action projects were neither publicly encouraged nor even discussed by forum staff. This was partly due to political and financial constraints on both sponsoring organizations. It was also the result of an internal debate in which the 'national enlightenment' approach (espoused primarily by Forum secretary Dr. K.W. Gordon from Saskatchewan) prevailed over the 'local engagement' approach (advocated by Manitoba's provincial secretary Mary Bishop, labour union representatives and some adult education leaders) prevented the Citizens' Forum from nurturing the development of social movements (Wilson 1980:68-71). In the same vein, Faris (1975:109) points out that because of the national scope of the CF audience, regional and local topics were seldom dealt with. This was a strength, in the sense that Canadians gained a wider view of issues, but also a weakness, because local issues of citizens' concerns -- those very issues that could spur direct collective action -- were omitted. In this regard, George Grant, the forum first secretary, noted that the general and diffuse nature of the topics attracted only the middle class, and that there was almost no possibility of developing action projects among the lower class unless topics were relevant to that class (cited in Faris 183, fn.85).

Summarizing, CF can be characterized as a campaign of public information and discussion about the main problems facing democracy. As such, CF did more to raise awareness of issues for personal enlightenment than it did to encourage personal or group action, or to develop a working model of participatory democracy. The role of the CF in promoting citizenship education, then, was to supply a background of information and present conflicting perspectives on the critical issues of the day. Although CF sparked a few community initiatives (such as the public housing movement in Toronto during the 1940s) in overall terms it is fair to say that public information did not result in social action (Butterwick 1998, Faris 1975, Kidd 1980, Selman 1981, Wilson 1980).

The Participatory Budget (PB)

The participatory budget of Porto Alegre (1989-present) followed a different strategy to engage citizens in democratic processes and community building. Instead of departing from an intellectual debate about national policies or international affairs, it started from a discussion among neighbours about the most appropriate and fair way to allocate municipal resources in their community. This process has been repeated every year since 1989 involving more than 100,000 people in deliberation and decision-making in Porto Alegre, and has been adopted by many municipalities in Brazil and abroad.

The PB is essentially an open and democratic process of public participation through multi-tiered meetings which enables ordinary citizens to deliberate and make decisions collectively about municipal budget allocations. This includes neighbourhood discussions and decisions about priorities regarding investments in local infrastructure (e.g. pavement, sewage, storm drains, schools, health care, child care, housing, etc.), but also forums on city-wide issues such as transit and public transportation, health and social assistance, economic development and taxation, urban development, and education, culture, and leisure. The neighbourhood meetings on local infrastructure tend to attract a majority of low-income groups, and the city-wide issues tend to attract mainly middle-class people. This should not be a surprise, since middle-class neighbourhoods have no major infrastructural problems.

Throughout the years, the PB has promoted, among many previously disengaged citizens, a sense of community and solidarity, a general understanding of urban issues, a demystification of the budget (previously a monopoly of experts in city hall), and an interest in larger political affairs. It has reduced corruption and clientelism in local politics, and has strengthened existing community organizations and sparked the creation of new ones. The PB constitutes an unusual experiment of community-state co-
determination because it succeeded in overcoming the three main hurdles of participatory democracy: the so-called problems of implementation, inequality, and co-optation (Abers 2000).

In my own research in Porto Alegre, through interviews with grassroots participants and community budget delegates, I found that, although this model of local participatory democracy is not without flaws, the amount of political learning and civic virtues acquired by many ordinary citizens through direct involvement in deliberation and decision-making is certainly impressive. However, this informal learning, and the consequent gains in political efficacy among the most marginalized groups, can be characterized as incidental, in the sense that it was not a result of a deliberate educational program. Perhaps the learning could have been faster and greater if adult educators had facilitated the process. Moreover, while the knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding local democracy changed dramatically among many participants as a result of direct involvement, there is no evidence that such involvement led them to a better understanding of national and international issues and policies, or to become more critical thinkers.

The pedagogical dimension of the PB has not been yet seriously considered, and although it has been recognized ex-post facto by some researchers (e.g. Pontual 1999), as of today there is an absence of adult education initiatives accompanying the political process. Although the PB has some municipal workers who act as regional coordinators, their role is more administrative and bureaucratic than educational. One of them, who comes from the Freirean tradition, told me that they should be doing more popular education work, but he admitted that generally the lack of training on these theories and methodologies and the constant pressures of time prevent them from undertaking educational responsibilities. In sum, while the accomplishments of the PB are impressive, it is my contention that the civic learning that takes place in it could be greatly enhanced and better distributed among participants if deliberate educational interventions are incorporated into the process.

**Summary and Comparative Analysis**

The Citizens’ Forum of Canada and the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre share an international reputation of being successful and long-lasting programs that have been emulated throughout the world. Both programs are located in that space of social interaction between the state and civil society that can be defined as a ‘public, non-state sphere’ (esfera publica, no estatal). In the CF the state was involved through the CBC, a crown corporation, and civil society through the Canadian Association of Adult Education (CAAE) and local study groups. In the Participatory Budget the state is involved through the direct participation of the municipal government, and civil society through neighbourhood and community organizations. Interestingly enough, while both models provide opportunities for significant civic learning to occur, neither of them contemplate the direct interaction of adult educators with the learners. The CF model assumes that the content of the materials and the interaction among members of the discussion groups provides sufficient conditions for civic learning. The PB assumes that the best way to learn democracy is by doing it, and thus it is the socialization in the democratic process, through direct participation in collective deliberation and decision-making, that constitutes the most appropriate vehicle for civic learning.

Besides these and other similarities, however, there are several important differences between the two models. The CF can be understood as a national enlightenment program that may or may not lead to social action, whereas the PB can be considered as a local engagement program which may lead or may not lead to civic learning.
The Citizens’ Forum of Canada provides a good example of a model of citizenship education that focuses on enlightenment. It is a national program that attempts to promote the understanding of macro issues of general interest to all citizens, and open discussions about these issues. In this model, the moment of deliberation is not linked to the moment of decision-making, as no enabling structures were designed for people to participate in such a process. The only participation of people in decision-making consisted of sending feedback to the program developers on the outcomes of the discussions and their opinions on the materials, and this feedback could be used by the CBC and the CAAE to improve the program. This model, which seldom includes a community project component, is essentially deductive: it was expected that the analysis of large national issues would eventually lead people to examine more critically their own local reality, and then to take action upon them. The printed materials of the Citizens’ Forum -- prepared by professional writers -- deal mainly with content, which is presented from two different (usually contradictory) perspectives in order to encourage debate. In this model, empowerment is understood as the development of the learner as a critical thinker, that is, as someone who can understand an idea, a concept, an argument or a fact from different perspectives, and is able to assess the shortcomings and strength of each perspective. Hence, the guiding purpose of this model is critical understanding of current social reality. The main civic virtue that arises from this model is tolerance, as citizens who are aware of approaches other than their own are more open to recognize and value them, and to critically examine their own.

The Participatory Budget is a good example of a model of citizenship education that focuses on engagement. It is a municipal process of co-governance that privileges social action on local problems, that ensures community projects and that links the moment of deliberation with the moment of decision-making through enabling structures of participatory democracy. This model is basically inductive: it is expected that active participation in local issues will generate the need for learning in order to better understand the different causes of problems and to study possible solutions. It is also expected that successful local participation will eventually nurture the political confidence and the necessary skills to undertake bigger projects, and the need to better understand larger social, environmental and political issues. The main printed materials of the Participatory Budget deal with its rules and regulations, which are developed collectively by participants and city representatives, and are subject to change every year. Other printed materials include regular newsletters describing some of the public works undertaken as a result of the participatory budget, and comments from participants (generally laudatory) about the process and its outcomes. In this model, empowerment is understood as the development of the political capital of the poorest sectors of society, that is, their capacity to influence political decisions. The main civic virtue that arises from this model is solidarity, as participants must openly confront their own needs with the needs of other people who may be in more difficult situations. Moreover, the process of ranking priorities for budget allocations help people to move from their own narrow interests to the wider concerns of the collective, and generate dynamics of mutual help and support.
Conclusions

One of the assumptions of the enlightenment model is that critical awareness constitutes a departing point of a process that eventually will lead to social action. Likewise, the engagement model tends to assume that once people are actively engaged in local governance, they will feel confident to undertake larger challenges and they will become interested in larger politics. In short, while one model assumes that the awareness acquired through learning leads people to undertake social action, the other assumes that the challenges of social action lead people to undertake learning projects. A scientific test of the relative validity of these two parallel assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper, but the available evidence emanating from the two case studies suggests that there is no 'natural' leap that takes place by itself. This is confirmed by a recent large international study on citizenship and education, in which it was found that there is not necessarily a positive correlation between civic knowledge and engagement. For instance, samples from Colombia, Portugal and Chile showed low civic knowledge but high civic/political engagement. Conversely, samples from Finland, Norway and the Czech Republic showed high civic knowledge but low civic/political engagement (Torney-Purta 2001). This prompts me to suggest two theses.

The first thesis is that, since the 'natural leap' does not always occur spontaneously, the cross-fertilization and interaction between enlightenment and engagement can be improved through intentional and proactive interventions. This thesis may seem like a truism, but unfortunately the dialogue and collaboration between adult educators and urban planners has not been plentiful. Coming back to our examples, the participatory budget can greatly benefit from adult education, and the Citizens’ Forum could have been significantly enhanced by community development strategies. True, the CF had a golden opportunity to include direct local action as early as 1946, but Mary Bishop’s proposal in this regard did not receive any serious consideration.

A question that arises from this first thesis relates to the most appropriate balance in adult citizenship education programs between micro and macro affairs, between enlightenment and engagement, between deliberation and decision-making, and between discussion and social action. Following John Dewey, the challenge is to find the best ways to integrate political engagement in local communities with a larger cosmopolitan vision. This is about acting local and thinking global, as well as connecting local dynamics to larger issues. Considering the lessons from these and other experiences, it is possible to argue that a citizenship education program can be more successful in promoting an active and informed citizenship if it is able to link the moment of deliberation with the moment of decision-making, and if it is able to connect awareness with social action. At an abstract level, this is a sensible statement. It makes sense to say that programs should always pursue simultaneously enlightenment and engagement. At the practical level of implementation, however, programs must start somewhere.

Based on the relative success of the Farm Forum vis-à-vis the Citizens’ Forum, on the lessons of the Antigonish Movement, on Freire’s literacy work and on my own observations and interviews in Porto Alegre, a second thesis arises: engagement is more likely to lead to enlightenment than the other way around. This is not necessarily new, but in light of the continued presence of many adult citizen education programs that still begin and end with 'enlightenment strategies, it is a point worth reiterating. This thesis, which has concrete practical implications, suggests that the immediate, known and local is a more appropriate space to initiate adult education projects for democratic citizenship than the more distant realm of national policy and international affairs, too removed from everyday life and over which ordinary
citizens have little influence except on voting day. At the same time, the feeling of confidence and the subsequent increase in political efficacy that comes from small collective achievements can become a powerful engine for larger social enterprises, and for further learning about the social world.