Justice Citizens: Contesting young people’s participation and citizenship at the start of the 21st century

Keith Heggart, University of Technology, Sydney

Introduction

Young people in Australia have been characterized as suffering from a lack of understanding of their obligations as citizens of a democratic nation. According to various senate committees, this lack can be conceptualized as a ‘civics deficit’, and efforts have been made by successive governments to address this deficit through nation-wide educational programs such as Discovering Democracy.

Rejecting this dominant ideology, this chapter instead argues that young people’s understandings of citizenship and civic engagement are variegated. Groups of young people are concerned about a range of issues, including political, social and environmental problems, and have specific knowledges and understandings based on these concerns. Furthermore, young people are worried about their place in a global society and about their own security and future livelihoods. Finally, young people are more likely to reject traditional political means of social change because they feel that such channels cannot provide the agency that they desire. Such a rejection of traditional methods can lead to feelings of disempowerment and disenfranchisement.
In the face of such disempowerment, radical approaches must be taken to ensure the health of Australian and global democracy. This chapter explores one such approach adopted in a Western Sydney High School to encourage critical consciousness amongst students, to understand their conceptions of citizenship and, to empower them to become agents of change for issues of concern in their local school and community. This approach is based on popular education and critical pedagogy, and utilises a youth participatory action research methodology where students document their lives, experiences and efforts to implement context-specific social change through the development of films and documentaries.

In the years leading up to 2000, Western democracies, including the US, the UK and Australia were reviewing civics and citizenship education in educational institutions. The reasons for these reviews have been attributed to factors such as a growing concern over the place of nations in an increasingly globalized world, or ‘millennial anxiety’ (see Kerr 1999 for an overview). However, after the year 2000 had passed, the debate about the purpose and the nature of civics and citizenship education continued unabated. In the face of a rapidly changing world, with challenges like environmental disasters, mass migrations of refugee groups and an increasingly globalized perspective, there is a clear need for a critical youth studies that explores the way young people understand the power dynamics in their lives. Civics and citizenship education is an ideal site for this exploration.

The findings of these reviews are important (for example, Kennedy 2007), but equally important is the recognition by these countries of the importance of civics and citizenship education to a nation’s democratic survival. In Australia, the Melbourne Declaration clearly states that the development of an active and informed citizenry is one of the two most important goals of the education system (Dawkins 2008).
While these countries agree on the importance of civics and citizenship education, there is a clear divergence in what is seen as the purpose of citizenship education (that is, what is a ‘good’ citizen and what is a ‘good citizen’s’ role in society) and also the pedagogies that best develop the desired traits, attitudes and behaviours of this kind of citizen. For example, some countries deliver citizenship education in discrete classes, while others encourage a model whereby the content is integrated into other subjects and flavoured by cultural context. South Korea, for example, does not encourage students to consider protest or occupation as examples of active citizenship, while countries such as Australia accept that these actions have a place in a liberal democracy (Kennedy 2007).

Civics and citizenship education is different to other subjects because the pedagogy and the environment are inextricably linked to the development of democratic ideals, yet despite the demands for a 21st century education students often continue to be told where to sit, what to learn, when to speak and with whom to associate (Alderson 1999). Another difference between civics and citizenship education and other subjects is citizenship education is explicitly moral in most cases. It deals with notions of what is good and what is correct behavior. Students and teachers discuss appropriate actions in civil society, and the importance of following laws. Students learn about what is seen as correct or valuable, and what is seen as unacceptable or not of value. In the 21st century, where young people are coming to see themselves as global citizens, and dealing with issues like global food scarcity and climate change, these previously unchallenged ideologies must now be open to debate.

**What is Civics and Citizenship Education?**
The confusion about the definition of civics and citizenship education has developed a range of schools of thought. The most common way of conceptualizing civics and citizenship education is to consider its ‘thickness’. Terence McLaughlin (1999) suggested a continuum of citizenship education, with minimal kinds at one extremity, and maximal forms at the other. This continuum identifies three aspects of citizenship education: the content, the pedagogy, and the environment. Minimal forms emphasize content, centered on civic institutions and processes, and are delivered in a didactic manner. Maximal citizenship education is based on activism and social justice, with a more democratic and student-centered pedagogy. While it is unlikely that any kind of citizenship education is completely maximal or minimal, most citizenship education programs can be placed at some point along this continuum.

Another way of conceiving of civics and citizenship education is to consider what the end result is meant to be; that is, what kind of citizen is the final ‘product’? Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have argued that there are three possible templates of ‘citizen’. There are those programs that seek to develop the ‘personally responsible’ citizen. This type of person is someone who fulfills the basic requirements of a democratic society; that is, they pay taxes, they obey laws and they vote in elections. Participation begins and ends at this instrumental level. Citizenship programs aimed at developing this kind of program are based on the rights and responsibilities of citizens. The second type of person is the ‘participatory citizen’. This citizen undertakes all the duties of a personally responsible citizen, but also has a social conscience, which manifests itself through participation in voluntary activities, like soup kitchens and charity drives. This kind of citizen can recognize that there are injustices and inequalities in their society, and attempts to address these through a kind of collective social action and involvement in charities. The final type is the ‘justice-oriented citizen’. The justice-oriented citizen is an individual who has the critical understanding required to not only
recognize the evidence of injustice or inequality, but also understand the structural causes of these inequalities. The justice citizen has the knowledges, agency and skills to take part in collective action to challenge these injustices and work towards a more equitable solution.

Although there are certain similarities between the justice-oriented citizen and the participatory citizen, there is one crucial difference: justice-oriented citizens begin with the idea of social change in mind, rather than charity. Educational programs that encourage justice-oriented citizens are generally activist in nature, emphasizing close links between school students and community individuals and critical consciousness regarding social justice issues.

**Towards ‘Discovering Democracy’: An overview of the journey**

Civics education has always been present in Australian education systems and often reflected the concerns of the government of the time (Print and Gray 2000). The 1990s saw a renewed interest in Civics Education in Australia, documented in a number of Senate reports. These reports found a 'lack of engagement' and a 'need to address the ignorance, apathy and powerlessness of young people' (Davis 2003, 15) and contributed to 'concern about how effectively Australian society was being held together by common values. The reintroduction of civics and citizenship education was seen as a possible answer' (Macintyre and Simpson, 2009, 123). In order to address these concerns the Civics Experts Groups (CEG) was formed in the early 1990s. The CEG identified a 'civics deficit' amongst young Australians, characterized by claims of a 'widespread ignorance and misconception about the structure and the function of Australia's system of government, about its origins and the ways it can serve the needs of its citizens' (CEG 1994,18.) The CEG began to develop the new civics and citizenship education curriculum, which became known as *Discovering Democracy.*
Although originally intended to be a student-centered approach to civics education, Discovering Democracy changed under the conservative Howard Government (1997-2007) to focus more on content knowledge of Australia’s democratic history. Kerry Kennedy (1997, 3) has argued that Discovering Democracy seemed to encourage the principles of knowledge and passivity and there should have been a focus on ‘the things that matter to young people, the things that can help them understand the reality and give them a stake in the future that rightly belongs to them’.

The Federal Government’s own report (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2007) noted the failure of Discovering Democracy. However, the report did identify three factors that influenced students positively. Schools that provide more opportunities for participation in either school governance or in civics-related activities performed better than those that did not. Students who took part in these activities performed better than those who did not. Students who took part in outside school civics-related activities (like environmental action groups) also performed better than their peers who did not.

Other understandings of young people’s views about citizenship education have been explored. Harris, Wyn and Younes (2008) identified that there are differences between groups of young people. Young people are both excited about the possibilities of being a ‘global’ citizen and concerned about impacts on their own livelihoods. Previously, citizenship had been understood in a national context, linked to concepts such as patriotism. These concepts were found to be less important to young people today, who were likely to have international connections, and be part of international movements. This global context is especially important as societies try to deal with issues that are much broader than national ones –such
as the movement of refugees, the destructive effects of man-made climate change and cultural relations changed by the so-called ‘War on Terror’. All of these concerns ignore national borders and have rendered traditional forms of active citizenship more problematic. Young people are also more likely to be involved in non-traditional forms of activism. Organisations like GetUp.org and Change.org are examples of this ‘new wave’ and it is not surprising that young people are disproportionately represented in these organisations.

**Critical Pedagogy and ‘Justice Citizens’**

Traditional schooling is often viewed by young people as being powerless to address the global concerns facing society in the 21st century. A possible solution to this problem can be found in critical pedagogy. This is a form of education that seeks to empower students by recognizing that they bring to the classroom their own knowledges, values and attitudes and, working in conjunction with the teacher, they are capable of addressing social injustice. For Paulo Freire (1970), one of the founders of critical pedagogy, education was literally the practice of freedom.

The practice and concept of dialogue is central to critical pedagogy. The dialogic model emphasises that empowerment takes place when oppressed peoples recognize the knowledge they already possess and re-identify themselves as subjects of society, rather than objects. This has particular relevance for critical youth studies today, because many educational institutions do not privilege the knowledges that young people possess. This lack of recognition serves to disenfranchise young people. Henry Giroux (2009), among others, has applied Freire’s ideas to contemporary schooling in the industrialized democracies. Giroux suggests that it is possible for schools to act as sites of emancipation through a form of critical
pedagogy that emphasizes conscientization. Giroux proposes teaching students to engage in a critique of power relations in order to identify sites and opportunities for resistance.

Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2008), for example, have explored the use of Hip-Hop culture in the USA as part of their critical pedagogy. Here, young people learn to identify and then overcome the challenges preventing them from becoming successful in school and then later life. They have found that by encouraging these young people to see themselves as knowledgeable about certain aspects of their lives — and that these aspects are as important as the more common content they might learn at school — the students are more likely to gain a measure of control over their lives and their communities.

Drawing on these principles, I devised a program of study called Justice Citizens. I am a high school teacher, in a medium sized Catholic systemic school in Western Sydney (Australia). Justice Citizens was an attempt to implement a critical pedagogical program with the purpose of developing active citizenship. I have drawn on principles, theories and practices of critical pedagogy to craft a program of study that is intended to develop students who were critically conscious, justice-oriented citizens.

The first of these principles is the recognition that education can be used to empower marginalized groups. Many young people are deprived of a voice in contemporary society; Justice Citizens aimed to provide them with the opportunity to find that voice and then to express themselves. The mechanism for this was to be the creation of short films about community issues. Through these films, students would have the opportunity to ‘name their world’. It was hope that the naming of their world would lead to an understanding of their own knowledge and agency, and hence the capability for action for positive social change.
Second, I recognized that students have their own knowledges and motivations, as well as their own desires. Justice Citizens sought to take this into account, and encouraged students to share these knowledges with their peers. A third theme is that critical pedagogy must retain the element of ‘criticality’ that sets it apart from studies of a more normative nature. That is, critical pedagogy is more than simply an unconscious acceptance and privileging of marginalized or popular voices; rather, these voices, as with all others, must be subjected to a critique to identify underlying ideologies. This placed Justice Citizens in direct opposition to the uncritical acceptance of Australia’s democratic past evidenced in ‘Discovering Democracy’. It was important for students to question aspects of Australia’s democracy, and whether it was fair and just to all. This active, maximal element is very different to the minimalist, didactic approach of Discovering Democracy.

Justice Citizens took place over two terms in the first half of 2012. It involved more than 130 students from Year 9 (aged, for the most part between 14 and 15) at a medium-sized (approximately 800 students) Catholic systemic school located in Western Sydney. Western Sydney is Australia’s fastest growing area – one out of every 11 Australians live there, and a very high proportion of people were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was. Furthermore, there is a large number of indigenous families in the area.

The school itself, Broadhills College¹, is located in an area that is predominantly working class. It is situated next to a quarry and a caravan park. Most of the students’ parents work in manufacturing or transport, and the average education level of parents is poor, with most not having completed high school. There is also a high level of unemployment especially amongst those under 25. Attendance at Broadhills is quite poor, as is the academic

¹ This is not the real name of the school. Pseudonyms have been used for this and other information that could potentially identify the participants.
performance of the school. Although predominantly white, the school has a growing number of ethnic minorities, including a significant proportion of sub-Saharan African students, some of whom are refugees.

The Year 9 students from this school were organized into 5 classes, and each class met for Justice Citizens once per fortnight, which meant that there were, in total, 10 hours of timetabled class time for the project. However, many students used free time to devote more time to the project. This free time took the form of after school planning meetings, excursions to visit interviewees, and more detailed editing workshops.

The program was delivered by three teachers, all of whom contributed to the development of Justice Citizens. These teachers had volunteered to be involved in the project. They included two English teachers (of which I was one) and a Science/Mathematics teacher. All the teachers in the project said that the commitment to social justice was the reason why they wanted to be involved, as they felt that this was something that was both important to the students, and something that the school was not doing well. The aims of the project were simple; it was to explore the ways that schools contribute to the development of justice-oriented citizens. The mechanism for this project was a critical-pedagogy inspired youth participatory action research project. Students would have the opportunity to select a topic of interest, related to social justice. They would then explore that topic before compiling their findings into a brief film. The best of these films would then be shown to the wider community at a ‘Justice Citizens Film Festival’. Students were asked to participate in a number of workshops designed to assist them in their work. These workshops were led by local film-makers who taught the students film-making and research and interview techniques.
Justice Citizens was based both on Freire and Giroux’s work, but also on the work of other community cultural development organisations, like Big hART\(^2\). One method used by Big hART is FilmVoice. FilmVoice projects are, in many ways, derived from Freire’s original work with the important exception that rather than commissioned artists, in FilmVoice it is the participants who are creating the artworks. The process of creating and then presenting the artworks has been studied extensively, and is linked to the development of a greater sense of self-esteem and empowerment. In addition, the program drew on a number of other pedagogical approaches. Firstly, some of the activities were based on the Action Civics program from the Mikva Challenge.\(^3\) Finally, elements of Challenge-Based Learning, as described by Apple\(^4\) were used to provide an overall structure to the program.

Before the program could begin, it was important to establish that the program was different to other classes. This was done in two ways; first, the teachers explained to students that this was not a pass/fail course. Also, there were going to be no assessment tasks, no reports and no homework –except what they wanted to do. Finally, there would be no copying down of notes from the board. In addition, the layout of room was also changed. Rather than the rows that students were normally arranged in, the desks were pushed to one side and students sat in a semi-circle, facing the projector screen. This was potentially risky, but as teachers we were confident that the process and content would be sufficiently engaging and motivating without needing any extrinsic motivation.

---

\(^2\) Big hART is an Australian community cultural development organisation that has conducted numerous arts-based programs aimed at fostering social change amongst at risk populations, including working with young people (see, for example, Wright and Palmer 2009).

\(^3\) The Mikva Challenge is a Chicago-based non-profit organisation aimed at developing young people into active citizens and community leaders. (For more information: http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/what-is-action-civics/)

\(^4\) See http://www.apple.com/education/challenge-based-learning/)
Students began by considering their own agency. This was done in a dialogic manner, by providing students with a number of propositions like, ‘Young people can organize a national protest’. These propositions appeared on a projected slideshow, after which students were asked to consider whether they thought it was possible for young people to do this. After they had made a decision, the answer was revealed. For each of the propositions, the answer was, of course, true, and students were presented with some information regarding the proposition.⁵

Following this beginning, students began to consider what they would make a film about. The guidance here was deliberately vague: the plan was to do this so that students selected a topic that they were interested in, rather than one they felt that the teacher wanted them to do. The only stipulation was that the film should be, in some way, based upon a social justice issue and be related to the local community. To aid students in formulating their ideas, a number of special guests were invited. For example, a prominent member of the local refugee community came and spoke about his experiences. Also, a former student who had left school after becoming pregnant spoke about the challenges she had faced. This served the purpose of removing the barriers between the school and the community, and also affirming the idea that other people – including students – had important stories to tell.

The next steps involved research about their particular issue, and identifying important people in the local community to be part of that research. These steps are important for two reasons: first, by involving local community members, the project was actively trying to dismantle the walls that often exist between school and community. Instead, Justice Citizens was trying to

⁵ The course is available on iTunes U here: https://itunes.apple.com/au/course/justice-citizens/id590199414
encourage links between school and community groups. This worked very well — young people got in touch with a wide range of people related to their issue. A number of students, for example, interviewed Dharug elders, while others got in touch with the Nepean Waterkeepers, a local environmental action group. This communication was facilitated via email, for the most part, which meant that the teachers could monitor the communications to ensure that they were appropriate. Second, this idea of a free-form project is something that is quite unusual in schools. It is very rare for students to have such a wide choice in their topic area and — after the initial concerns and hesitations — this choice became one of the most important motivating factors for the whole project, ensuring students wanted to stay after class to finish their work. It is worth discussing these hesitations: a number of students originally expressed an inability to do anything at all. They commented that they ‘didn’t know what to do without the teacher directing them.’ In one example, a student demanded that she be given a textbook to work from, despite there being no textbook or much writing at all for the course! I would suggest that this demonstrates the ‘learned helplessness’ that is common in schools. Students feel that they cannot learn at all unless they are being directed by a teacher – who ultimately takes the responsibility for learning from the student. The teacher, then, becomes the repository of knowledge. What he or she knows is valuable, and anything that a student knows is valueless.

To address this learned helplessness, we used a number of strategies. First, the community experts, as mentioned above, showed students that other people could be learners. Learning happened everywhere, and not just in schools. Second, we sought to draw students into conversations about what they knew and liked – to make them realize that they knew lots already. This was often done through the simple gambit of asking them questions such as,

---

6 The Dharug people are the Indigenous Australians from this area of Western Sydney.
‘What is your favourite YouTube video at the moment?’ or ‘What is one thing that makes you say, “That’s not fair!”’

Originally, there was some concern on the part of Justice Citizens teachers that, due to limited personal experience, the topics selected by the students would be limited to school-based issues, like uniform, homework or bullying. This concern proved to be unfounded: although a number of students did choose these topics, other groups worked on topics as diverse as domestic violence, refugees, racism, road safety and water pollution in the nearby Nepean River.

Following the research phase, students moved onto the production phase. This involved them scripting, storyboarding and then filming and editing their films. The assistance of a number of professional film-makers was invaluable here, as was the equipment they provided. The editing was done on the school’s computers using a basic film-making application. The films, when completed, ranged in length from one and a half minutes to seven minutes. Again, teachers had some concerns about the involvement of the film-makers in the class. We were worried about how students would react to having ‘non-teachers’ working with them, and we were also aware that some parents might have doubts about the academic value of such an activity. The way that we addressed this was by clear communication with the parents of the students involved in Justice Citizens. Before the project began, we held a parental information evening, which was moderately well attended. During the project, we made regular use of social media to keep the parents informed of the project, and to share news. This positive news made parents much more receptive. Students, on the whole, seemed to value the opportunity to work with experts, as opposed to teachers, with a number of students

---

7 You can see the Justice Citizens Facebook page here: http://www.facebook.com/JusticeCitizens
commenting on how they felt that their ideas were more valued, and their products of a better quality, because of the influence of the film-makers.

The final phase of the project was the presentation phase. A film festival was organised at a neighbourhood centre, and the community were invited. Eight films were chosen to be shown to an audience of more than 50 people, including local members of parliament and councillors, community leaders and educationalists. Before each film was presented, the group who made that film introduced themselves and their film. The films were also uploaded to a social media site.

To gather information about the effect that the Justice Citizens course had upon young people's knowledge and agency, ten students were selected at random and were interviewed by me both before and after the project. These one-on-one interviews (only one interview involved two students) were semi-structured in nature, and generally lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. They were conducted at the school, although in a neutral space in the library, rather than a classroom, with the aim of making the student feel more comfortable with the process and less like they were speaking to a teacher. Given my status as a teacher, there was some concern that students would feel pressured to give the answers that they felt they had to, rather than honest responses. Moving the interviews to a neutral space, and working ethically resolved this concern to some degree.

Other data-collection mechanisms were also embedded in the project. Acting as a participant observer, I recorded observations in a field journal at the conclusion of each session. These notes served to support the data gathered in the interviews. This tool was also useful because it allowed me to engage in praxis about the project as it was ongoing; that is, it was possible
to reflect and re-direct the program as and when necessary. Finally, students were also encouraged to blog about their learning and experiences in the class via an online blogging platform, although this was not popular. Blogging was envisioned as being an essential part of the students’ praxis, and I was concerned when students did not take to it. There are a number of possible reasons. First, I had overestimated the students’ capacity with the technology at hand. Although the students could be called ‘digital natives’, I would hesitate to classify them as ‘pro-users’. Most of them had never used computers for more than word-processing. Blogging, and even making and editing a film, were foreign to them. This is related to the socio-economic status of the students at Broadhills. Many do not have computers at home, nor do they have internet access, so their only engagement with technology is at school. Even in the school, before the Justice Citizens project, such engagement was sporadic. In future iterations of the project, I intend to spend more time preparing students to blog, addressing both the technical aspects as well as the methodology of reflective writing. There is real potential for the use of social media as part of this grass roots activist campaign. One need only look at the success of organisations such as GetUp or Change.org or even pages on Facebook to realize that the internet provides powerful opportunities to build collective involvement in projects like Justice Citizens.

**Justice Citizens – What has been learnt?**

The findings from Justice Citizens suggest that the reality of young people's relationship to civics, citizenship, politics and political matters is far more complex than simple ignorance or apathy. The reality is that young people have a variety of different knowledges and agency. While the project is still in the early stages of its development (it is envisioned that the project will grow over the coming years to include other local schools and community groups), it is
proving to be a valuable exercise in helping to explore young people’s perceptions of their own agency, sense of social justice, and capacity to take action in a collective manner.

The pre-project interviews confirmed many aspects of the literature concerning young people and democratic engagement. They showed that young people are distrustful of mainstream approaches to social change, and feel that politicians often fail to achieve anything of value. Although not all of the young people interviewed were disparaging of politicians, they did, almost unanimously, identify that politicians didn’t seem to be achieving anything that was helping their local communities. Adam, a 14 year old young male in the project said that:

*There’s a lot of bullying between the Labor and the Liberal parties, trying to fight to get into the lead. With the elections coming up soon, they’ve been trying to make stuff badder. So the labor party’s been saying, we’re going to cut taxes and that, and the liberal party is saying, we’re going to cut taxes and give people more money, instead of taking it away, so they’re just trying more and more to get in front.*

The pre-project interviews also identified that there were levels of alienation amongst young people. This was expressed though a recognition that they had little influence upon the decisions made in their schools and in their communities. Some young people did acknowledge that perhaps it was ‘better this way’, suggesting that they felt they did not have the skills or maturity to be a part of the solution to problems in their community. This is interesting in its suggestion that young people seem to expect that, at some time, they will be told how or when to participate. The education system — through programmes such as Discovering Democracy — appears to do a poor job of providing these skills. This alienation was also expressed through a feeling of helplessness: many young people expressed a desire to assist others in the community, but were unsure how to do so. This helplessness was
expressed as a personal attribute; while the participants could acknowledge that young people were capable of doing something, in a very broad sense, they, as individuals were not capable. In some ways, social action and active citizenship were things done by other people. For example:

Caroline (a 15 year old female): *An active citizen is like what I just said. Getting involved in things. And yeah.*

Interviewer: *Are you an active citizen?*

Caroline: *Um... I don’t know. I don’t think so.*

A further finding from the pre-project interviews is that young people in Australia are not a homogenous group when it comes to their understanding of issues related to active citizenship. Although hardly a startling revelation, it is important to acknowledge this because so much of education policy assumes young people to be a precisely that. Thus, all young people are assumed to have a ‘civics’ deficit, rather than a recognition that different groups have different levels of understanding about particular issues. The pre-project interviews showed that different young people have a range of different interests, and attendant upon these different interests are different knowledges. For example, students who were interested in assisting the homeless, or who were already involved in assisting the homeless, demonstrated different knowledges to young people who assisted at their local church. A student involved in the project, Edward (14 year old male), spoke about a multicultural day that his father had helped to organize, and what he learnt from that:

*My dad and his other friends were going to like do that, they were going to like, going to have like a multiculture day, and every team from a different culture, with a massive field with all the Fijians, the Samoans, the Cook Islands, and they’d have like all the dance what the culture do. They’d have the food, and like everything like that. The rules and that stuff. Show*
them how to cook the food and do stuff like that. That’s what they were going to do. That’s what they’re trying to do as well.

Before the project there was a very limited level of critical thought involved in some young people’s ideas of social justice. Although most of the young people interviewed agreed on the importance of working to resolve social justice issues, very few had thought about the causes for these issues. The reasons they provided were often simplistic and seemed to take little account of macro-economic factors or structures. Thus, homeless people were homeless because they were drunks or drug abusers — other factors such as economic cycles and social issues were not considered. Young people are maturing in a world that is increasingly challenging for many reasons, including but not limited to changes in economic climate and security, the climate, and the mass movements of refugees. Yet the pre-project interviews indicate that, in mainstream schooling, students are not being equipped with the skills to critically interrogate the world around them.

The post-project interviews were conducted in the weeks following the film festival, and were intended to allow students a chance to reflect upon their experiences taking part in the project and consider what they might have learnt by being part of the project. The finding most regularly mentioned by participants in the post-project interviews was that they had enjoyed the experience and had learnt a great deal by being a part of it. When pressed about why they enjoyed it, students said that it was because it wasn’t like ‘normal’ school, and the fact that they had so much freedom about what to do was particularly motivational. Linked to this idea of motivation was the fact that students were engaged in what they saw as ‘real’ learning and ‘real’ work — that is, not the artificial work that they felt categorized most of their work at
school. This was supported by the fact that there was a real audience to whom they were going to present their films.

Second, students said that, by taking part in the project, they had begun to understand how they might, as individuals and as groups, work to effect social change. The showing of their films, and the discussions that happened after with members of the public, gave students a sense that their ideas and thoughts had value. A number of students commented that they were surprised at how seriously their ideas were taken. In addition, based on the connections that they had made through the filming process, a number of students have become involved in community organisations, including the Nepean Waterkeepers and The Community Kitchen.

Yet, there was only limited evidence of students developing a deeper understanding of the causes of social injustice. Originally, the project was designed with the aim of raising the consciousness of students to a critical level. In this respect, the project has not been the success it was hoped it would be. Although there is some clear evidence that students, through their research and film-making, think about the world differently to how they did before the project started, this development of their consciousness is limited in nature. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) speak about the importance of students engaging with the macro-economic causes of social injustice; the participants did not reach this level. A number of the participants seemed to still be working at the ‘charity’ level — too few of them had reached the ‘change’ level. There are probably a number of reasons for this, but the primary one is most likely related to the short nature of the course. The program only had 10 scheduled lessons; it would be interesting to see that, if it had been able to run over a longer period of time, whether more students might have developed a higher level of critical consciousness.
Closing reflections

The Justice Citizens was a valuable project for a number of reasons. First, the project enabled us to explore a number of theories regarding active citizenship amongst Australian youth, as well as highlighting the limits to the dominant ideology of a ‘civics deficit’. Second, the project started to identify the ways that maximal forms of citizenship education can be a tool for developing the agency, knowledges and skills required for active citizens if they are to participate fully in a social democracy like Australia. The Justice Citizens project explored the feelings young people have about citizenship and democracy. In particular, the intersection of global issues and movements with national conceptions of active citizenship, have proven to be messy and difficult to make clear. In this environment, it is not surprising that young people struggle to engage with the mainstream political apparatus, and also feel that they have little agency to effect meaningful social change.

Justice Citizens suggests that a new way of categorizing young people’s understandings about active citizenship is required, and provides a number of tools for doing so. Currently, young people often feel helpless when faced with social injustice – many would argue that ‘they can’t do anything about it.’ This learned helplessness needs to be challenged, and the site for this challenge needs to be in classrooms and schools. This challenge, and the development of a critical understanding of the world and how young people can work towards positive social change, needs to be the content of civics and citizenship education in Australia. The tools for this come from a maximal, activist pedagogy addressing those topics and issues that are of importance to young people.
Rather than classifying young people as having a ‘civics deficit’, it makes more sense to classify their understanding as being ‘slippery’ and ‘variegated’. Their understandings are variegated because young people are not homogenous; rather, they are conspicuously and notably different from each other, and have different knowledges, skills and agencies. In order to develop a young person’s ability to become an active citizen, educators need to begin with a model of pedagogy that respects these differences. Critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on equality, justice and empowerment, provides a number of powerful principles and concepts. The limited success of Justice Citizens indicates that this model is worthy of further study.

Furthermore, young people’s knowledges are slippery because they are constantly changing due to context. The environment influences a young person’s understanding of their own agency and ability to effect social change. For example, within a school, a person might feel that they have little agency to address any issues of social justice. However, that same young person, involved in their local community, might feel more capable of taking action. It is important that educators take into account the environment in which they work with young people, to ensure that it affords the participants with the opportunities to develop active citizenship.

Finally, a more personal note. My own reflections on Justice Citizens include a recognition that my pedagogy has changed considerably over this period as I have moved towards a more student-centered pedagogy. I have paid less attention to the powerful demands in education for greater accountability and instrumentality. By letting go of some of the control I have in the classroom, I have allowed students to regain a measure of control over their own education. This ‘letting go’ is one way, I suggest, to explore the limits and possibilities of a critical youth studies for the 21st century.
Works Cited


Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. 1989. “Education for Active Citizenship Education in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations”. Canberra: AGPS.
