This chapter investigates the adult learning through civil discourse within public library settings. Crucial to the success of a working democracy, the author traces the history of libraries as locations for the development of an engaged and knowledgeable citizenry.

Promoting Adult Learning Through Civil Discourse in the Public Library

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In the late 1990s, citizens in Virginia Beach did not trust their local government. In response, the city manager hired a public engagement specialist who convened a group of city staff, citizens, and scholars who planned a civic academy at the public library. Over the next few years, citizens, and public officials worked with librarians to name, frame, and deliberate about local issues. These citizens became not only better informed, but also more capable of making choices together. In addition, they activated the civic potential of the public library.

This event in Virginia Beach raises the question: is the public library an institution capable of assuming a more active role in civil discourse? Founded in the 1850s to promote an informed citizenry, public libraries advanced both adult learning and citizenship education in the first half of the 20th century, thus becoming cornerstones of democracy. But with a more recent decline in public engagement in libraries and beyond, librarians question whether democracy requires more than an informed citizenry. In this chapter, I examine theoretical approaches to a more active, strong democracy—one that requires more than civic education in schools and universities.
Strong democracy needs libraries to provide informal learning opportunities and spaces for citizens to engage. Reflective of this view is the Virginia Beach Public Library—a library that is reclaiming its role as promoter of strong democracy—a community place where a diversity of citizens can connect across the spectrum of thought. As venues of adult learning through civil discourse, libraries are well equipped to serve as active agents of democracy where citizens can come together to make tough choices about issues of common concern.

**Civic Engagement in America**

The desire of citizens to engage on the issues of the day contributed to the election of Barack Obama. Young and old from all walks of life participated in the electoral process at a rate not seen in many years. Many experienced participatory democracy for the first time. But ever since the election, dialogue about possibilities has once again diminished as people flee the public square, frustrated with the partisan squabbling and dissonance that characterizes today’s political environment. As Robert Putnam (2000) and others have documented, declining public participation begun in the last third of the 20th century continues.

Public libraries along with other community organizations across the country hosted deliberative forums in 2006 entitled “Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming the Public’s Role.” Forum participants expressed alienation from politics and community affairs and powerless to do much about them. They felt like consumers, rather than citizen proprietors—bystanders instead of active members with a sense of ownership in their democracy. Others saw themselves as local but not national participants—like citizens of city-states rather than a national democracy. Forum participants also expressed concern about the loss of public space where citizens might meet informally to discuss community problems and political issues. In short, they saw the average
citizen as unrepresented, voiceless, and homeless. Yet, participants also felt that increased public engagement could rejuvenate hope and the public-mindedness that typifies this nation at its best. They concluded that they, after all, had a significant role to play, recognizing that democracy’s challenge is “our” problem and not “their” problem (Doble, 2006).

**Stages of Public Engagement**

What role should the public play in a participatory democracy? The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) promotes a three-stage framework for considering this question (2001). The first, the Information Stage, is a one-way relationship in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens, accessible through institutions such as public libraries. Michael Schudson (1998) refers to this stage as “monitorial” citizenship, where citizens only pay attention when things go wrong. While he believes that citizens have an obligation to know what their government is doing, they also need to “know what they need to do with what they know” (p. 311). A concept that dates back to the early days of the republic (Brown 1996), the founders considered an informed citizenry necessary to the exercise of civic responsibility. This tenet was central to the American life documented by Alexis de Tocqueville (1990)—encouraging voluntary associations, as well as promoting the printing and newspaper industries, the post office, public education, higher education, and public libraries. Barber (1984) calls this stage “Thin Democracy” where representative institutions dominate and citizens are relatively passive.

Second in the OECD framework is the Consultation Stage, which involves a two-way relationship between informed citizens and their government interacting through such means as public opinion surveys and comments on draft legislation and regulations. This stage of public participation harnesses the power of citizens to express their preferences to government
through such mechanisms as opinion polls, referendums, and primaries, and is what Barber (2003) refers to as Plebiscitary Democracy. Many libraries, such as the Pasco County, Fl, Public Library, serve as agents for this consultative form of democracy, helping citizens interact electronically with government officials in order to shape public policy and deepen the national discourse.

Third in the OECD framework is Active Participation in which citizens engage directly in the decision- and policy-making process. This stage acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping policy dialogue. Barber (1984) calls this Strong Democracy, where citizens actually participate in governing themselves using strong participatory and deliberative elements—citizen-to-citizen talk. In this stage, citizens “regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society” (Barber 2003, p. 37). Barber prescribes strong democracy as a remedy to incivility and apathy, where “active citizens govern themselves in “the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic” (1984, p. 148). He goes on to say that a strong democracy requires “a place for us in civil society, a place really for us, for what we share and who, in sharing we become. That place must be democratic: both public and free” (1998, p. 38). In communities like Virginia Beach, the public library has morphed from the institution that informed citizens to the place where they deliberate, find common ground, and make difficult choices together.

**Educating Citizens for Democracy**

Since the days of John Locke, political philosophers have stressed the importance of civic education to the success of democracy. John Dewey (1910) recognized that thinking and logic were related to deliberative reasoning and choice making in problematic situations. He saw discussion of problems in
small groups as a miniature version of policy formation in a public context. Unlike the lyceum and Chautauqua of the 19th century, the public forum movement that emerged in the 1920’s and 1930s was rooted in terms of educating voters through discussions that could embody democratic principles and practices (Keith 2007). Like Dewey, Lindeman articulated the need to focus education on groups or collectives, where adults fulfilled their civic function by learning through discussion (Lindeman 1935). Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) later affirmed that important role of educating citizens in order for democracy to function (p. 15).

Brookfield (2005) stressed that learning to talk together in authentic, truthful and appropriate ways is learning an “analog of democratic process” (p. 264.) He attributes this method of reasoning to Jurgen Habermas and his notion of a speech community as a democratic community, governed by rules of communicative action. Citizens pursue “the rationally motivating force of achieving understanding” (Habermas 1992a, p. 80) to seek agreement through a democratic process. He specifies rules for good democratic process that depend on hearing all relevant voices, based on everyone having knowledge of different perspectives and deferring to others with better arguments (Habermas 1992b). Brookfield (2005) considers such rules essential to judging both the effectiveness of political deliberation and the validity of adult education programs. Learning to act democratically, then, requires citizens not only to apply deliberative decision making processes but also to navigate through the contradictions and tensions of democracy. When adult education teaches citizens democratic practices, it enables what Michael Welton describes as “open, uncoerced and respectful communication amongst citizens who engage each other towards the creation of a common world able to attend to the needs of its citizens” (2003, p. 198).

Although a significant and growing body of literature in adult education focuses on informal adult learning, little is understood about the
informal civic learning required for citizens to participate effectively in the processes of democracy (Schugurensky 2006). But evidence suggests that those citizens who participate in deliberation and decision-making experience an educative effect that develops responsible social and political action, particularly at the local level. Carole Pateman observes that, “Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so” (1970, pp. 42-43). This shift from what Schugurensky calls “passivity to the feeling of agency” (2006, p. 172) helps individuals become public, and not just private, citizens. Their informal learning develops a political culture that eliminates exclusive control by political elites. Building capacity for self-governance and political efficacy is exactly what happened when citizens in Virginia Beach convened to frame the issue of redevelopment at the public library. Their informal learning experience enabled them to go beyond spectators to actors, from occasional voters to participants in the deliberative act of making choices together.

Concerns about declining civic engagement have prompted educators to consider how best to prepare more active citizens. Schools are beginning to renew their civic mission and help “young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (Gibson and Levine 2003, p. 4). Colleges and universities have also rediscovered the once vital tradition of civic education (Boyte 2000, p. 46). Many now actively promote public engagement as a critical part of their overall institutional mission, following the leadership of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Campus Compact. But John Gastil recognizes that civic engagement is just as critical for adult learners as those attending public schools and colleges. He asserts that, “Adult lives are already immersed in
rich community contexts, which are replete with (often missed) opportunities for public action” (2004, p. 309).

The Public Library as Civilizing Agent
Since their founding in the mid 19th century, public libraries have served as “civilizing agents and objects of civic pride in a raw new country” (Molz and Dain 1999, p. 3). Early on, their offerings included unrestricted access not only to shelves, but also to lectures and exhibits. Sidney Ditzion (1947, p. 74) noted that late nineteenth century public libraries continued “the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people’s university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life.” By the 1920’s, Learned (1924) popularized the idea of libraries as informal education centers, followed by an American Library Association (ALA) report establishing a Board on Library and Adult Education. (Keith 2007, p. 244). During World War II, President Roosevelt (1942) equated libraries and democracy, heralding their role in creating an informed citizenry.

After the war, librarians joined civic groups, politicians, and educators to rejuvenate the democratic spirit in the country. The New York Public Library, describing itself as "an institution of education for democratic living" ("Library Bill of Rights" 1948, p. 285), led a nationwide program of discussions about the meaning of the American democratic tradition and actions on issues of local concern. These programs were described by Ruth Rutzen, Chair of ALA’s Adult Education Board, as ideal opportunities for libraries to assume a leadership role in their communities, proclaiming, “Let us all make our libraries active community centers for the spread of reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action” (Preer 2008, p. 3). In 1952, ALA joined a
national effort to increase voter turnout by distributing election information and organizing discussion groups and other activities in public libraries. The Ad Council created a campaign slogan, “Listen, Read, Look, Talk, Argue, Think and Vote” that was well suited to libraries (Preer 2008, p. 12). As civic programs evolved in libraries, “the group setting offered an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it” (Preer 2001, p. 151). Just as important, libraries defined themselves as community spaces where citizens were encouraged to discuss important matters.

But as civic participation declined in America in the late 20th century, the public library’s focus on education for a democratic society waned. As it shifted away from the democratic process of group life toward broadening information access for a greater number of individuals, Ronald McCabe suggests that public libraries adopted a more utilitarian purpose where “usefulness is a function of effective planning that ensures responsiveness to the information needs of individuals” (McCabe 2001, p. 37). This tension between a collective and individual focus shifted the library’s stage of engagement from a more active to monitorial approach to democratic participation—a tension that remains in the balance today as reflected in a report by Public Agenda (2006). Although the study found public libraries among the most trusted public institutions, the authors recommended that libraries “look carefully at opportunities to strengthen their role in addressing serious problems in their own communities” (p. 13).

Public Libraries as Hubs for Active Democracy

“The modern public library in large measure represents the need of democracy for an enlightened electorate” (Shera 1974, p. vi.). As a pivotal community institution, the public library promotes access to a diversity of ideas and provides access to government, community and other useful information that keeps citizens well informed. But some, like Florida’s Pasco County library
system (n.d.), transcend that monitorial role by helping people transact government business, search for jobs, and file online forms for food stamps, Medicaid, unemployment, and more through the library’s extensive e-Government program (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, and McClure 2006; Jaeger 2005; Horrigan 2004). Others, such as the Salt Lake City Public Library, have built dramatic new facilities designed with “the idea that the library intended to create common ground and that the building should display that”—facilities that are considered the community gathering place where “citizens practice democracy” (Berry 2006, p. 32). As described by Ray Oldenburg in The Great Good Place (1989), libraries like those in Salt Lake City are places essential to the political processes of democracy—places that reinforce the American notion of association as described by Barber (1998).

Extending library programming into the realm of deliberation offers citizens a chance to learn together, frame issues of common concern, weigh choices for solving problems, deepen understanding about other’s opinions, and connect across the spectrum of thought. As Diana Mutz (2006) has so well documented, too few opportunities exist today that expose Americans to diverse views and engage them in authentic dialogue about pressing problems. Since the founding of the Kettering Foundation’s National Issues Forums (NIF) in the 1980’s, public libraries in communities like State College, PA; Johnson County, KS; Princeton, NJ; and Youngstown, OH; have convened and moderated deliberative forums on topics ranging from democracy and immigration to energy and health care following the NIF, Study Circles, Choices, and Conversation Cafés models that involve citizens with different perspectives in learning and participatory democracy.

Librarians in Virginia Beach and Des Plaines, Illinois, also guide the research and participatory action of citizens seeking to frame local issues for deliberation. In Virginia Beach, the one hundred citizens that worked with librarians to collect and assess community concerns about redevelopment
learned together about civic action and participated in democratic discourse for the first time. Their overall experiences with naming, framing, and moderating dialogue taught them to address diversity, build community, deal with public issues, and develop civic leadership skills (Caywood 2010). In Des Plaines, librarians joined forces with community partners to build community by framing and deliberating the question--What does it take to meet the needs of Des Plaines residents? Their community conversations resulted in greater awareness of local services and new collaborative approaches for taking further action (Griffin 2006). These examples provide useful models for the profession, but they are only a start. A critical mass of libraries must seize this civic engagement role and offer citizens across the spectrum of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation ample opportunity to engage in Barber’s strong democracy.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, social scientists have proposed new models to invigorate a weakened democracy and to encourage more active citizen involvement with governance. Joining these scholars is a cadre of librarians who urge their colleagues to reclaim their civic mission and create civic spaces for dialogue and deliberation (Molz & Dain, 1999; Kranich, 2001; McCabe, 2001; Schull, 2004). A number have participated in ALA’s Libraries Foster Civic Engagement Membership Initiative Group and have expressed interest in ALA’s new Center for Public Life, established in conjunction with the Kettering Foundation to train librarians to convene and moderate deliberative forums and frame issues of common concern. Although they are learning about possibilities through a growing professional literature on the topic (Kranich, Heanue, and Willingham 2003; Kranich 2005; Willingham 2008), they remain uncertain how to get involved (Kranich, 2008).
Repositioning libraries as informal civic learning agents fits the theory and practice of community inquiry conceived a century ago by John Dewey (1916). Dewey believed that people need the opportunity to share ideas through multiple media in order to understand and solve everyday problems together. To this formulation, public libraries bring their role as boundary spanners. Whether face-to-face or virtual, libraries build learning communities that bring people with mutual interests together to exchange information and learn about and solve problems of common concern.

Librarian of Congress Archibald Macleish (1940, p. 388) once avowed that “Librarians must become active not passive agents of the democratic process.” With renewed interest in promoting civic literacy and deliberative democracy around the country, public libraries are poised to grasp this cause, build civic space, and reclaim their traditional role. As Dewey once wrote, “democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife” (1916, p. 22). If public libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must find active ways to engage community members in democratic discourse and community renewal. For, as Putnam has stated parsimoniously, “Citizenship is not a spectator sport” (2000, p. 342)

References


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