

**OVP129 CRITICAL ISSUES IN DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

Autumn 2021, Monday 12:00 (first lecture September 19)

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**OBJECTIVES/PURPOSE OF THE COURSE**

This course is designed to engage graduate-level teacher-scholars in critical issues centered around the place of schooling in a robust, deliberative democracy. We will take into account the national climate of extreme political polarization, attacks on the nature of the public sphere, race and class segregation as determinants of what kind of civic education students will get, and the challenges of teaching controversial issues. We will explore theoretical, political, and educational perspectives, while maintaining a focus on classroom teachers and the difficult work they do to prepare students for participation in a vibrant civic culture. My additional goals are to facilitate your use of this body of work to inform your own scholarship and teaching; to enhance your ability to write coherent, thoughtful, and scholarly essays; and to support your skills and confidence in facilitating and participating in scholarly discussions with peers. I am also available to help you develop a scholarly research agenda if you are considering further advanced graduate studies at the EdD or PhD level.

**CLASS FORMAT**

Class discussions forums will be structured around the readings and other resources in each module (week of the semester). We will take turns leading discussions, and we will focus on synthesizing ideas and themes within and across readings. We will also talk about how you can apply new ideas to your own work and experience in education.

**OUR OVERARCHING GUIDING QUESTIONS**

You will see the guiding question(s) for each week at the top of the module for that week. (In the IS MU)

Ultimately, our goal is to explore a variety of models for critical perspectives on democratic citizenship education, so that you can draw your own conclusions about what you want your model to look like in your own classroom.

## **CLASS THEMES**

- What makes a "good" citizen in a democracy?
- What contextual issues in U. S. society are putting democratic citizenship education at risk?
- What does some of the research say about how teacher beliefs shape democratic citizenship/civic education?
- What are some ethical concerns to be mindful of in framing and selecting political issues for classroom discussion? What are some ethical concerns to be mindful of about teachers' withholding and/or disclosing their political views?
- What are some issues related to the civic identities of young people?
- How/what do students learn and experience in a civics classroom?
- How might we think about moving towards a critical pedagogy for democratic citizenship education?

## **USING A SOCIAL JUSTICE LENS TO VIEW DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

- I believe that democracy is not an end goal in and of itself. Rather, it is a means for achieving social justice.
- I believe that this course provides an appropriate forum to discuss social justice issues from a critical pedagogy standpoint. When I use the word "critical," I do not mean that we are going to condemn or disparage every idea that comes along, with no apparent purpose in mind except to be negative. On the contrary, I find that critical pedagogy can be exciting and illuminating.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy is a teaching approach which attempts to help students question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate. In other words, it is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness. Critical pedagogic educator Ira Shor defines critical pedagogy as:

*Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional cliches, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.*

In this tradition, the teacher works to lead students to question ideologies and practices considered oppressive (including those at school), and encourage liberatory collective and individual responses to the actual conditions of their own lives. The student often begins as a member of the group or process (including religion, national identity, cultural norms, or expected roles) they are critically studying. The next behavior encouraged is sharing this knowledge with the attempt to change the oppressive nature of the society.

### **Social Justice Teaching**

We are all socialized in a culture that normalizes and justifies inequitable power hierarchies, such as racism and classism. Using a social justice lens requires us to challenge these hierarchies in favor of more just and equitable outcomes. For this reason, teaching is an inherently political act; to not challenge or recognize these hierarchies is to support the status quo. New teachers perceive social pressures from their administrators, parents, and colleagues to implement politically palatable curriculum and instruction.

Given these pressures, it is important to ground our social justice lens in academic research. Official curricular structures in place, such as pacing guides, textbooks, and standards, do not often center social justice concepts. For this reason, one of the main objectives of this class is to critically examine existing structures, while finding ways to integrate citizenship/civic education concepts that spark reflection and action both inside and outside of the classroom.

Pedagogy that supports social justice encourages students to challenge and analyze the knowledge they are presented with. More often than not, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to define knowledge as “remembering things” or “doing pages in our workbooks”, whereas students from affluent schools define knowledge as “thinking of new ideas” and “figuring things out.” By teaching learners of all backgrounds in ways that promote critical thinking and inquiry, teachers are enacting social justice. Democratic social justice does not only require the integration of important social issues into the curriculum; it also requires that teachers facilitate the construction of student knowledge through inquiry, collaboration, critical examinations of master narratives and counter-narratives. This class promotes social studies teaching that is aligned with these goals, deliberative problem solving, and social action learning.

### **To Keep in Mind Throughout the Course**

- This is not a methods course. This is an advanced graduate course in which you will be reading a variety of research studies that are very descriptive. They feature scholarship that comprises theory, quantitative methods, and qualitative methods, from informative longitudinal survey data to fascinating case studies of classroom teachers.
- I curated readings that I think have a good story to tell. Most of these readings are based on research in “real world” classroom settings, where the voices of teacher and student participants are prominent. For the readings that are more

theoretical/conceptual, you will be able to discern interesting implications for the classroom.

- I do not claim an exhaustive coverage of democratic citizenship issues. I selected some exemplars that have emerged in the research literature on democratic citizenship/civic education because they are interesting. They are not meant to be the “last word” on the subject – just some great food for thought and hopefully a challenge for your thinking.
- In thinking about what to include, I may have neglected to include something important. If you notice anything, please reach out so that I can address it.