

3-31-2015

A Survey of Civic Engagement Education in Introductory Canadian Politics Courses


Stephanie Bell

York University, stepbell@yorku.ca

JP Lewis

University of New Brunswick, Saint John, jp.lewis@unb.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea

 Part of the [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2015.1.2>

Recommended Citation

Bell, S. & Lewis, J.P. A survey of civic engagement education in introductory Canadian politics courses.

A Survey of Civic Engagement Education in Introductory Canadian Politics Courses

Abstract

In recent years, the pressure for educators to cultivate civic participation among Canada's apathetic youth voters has been mounting. Between 1998 and 2007, a national wave of curriculum reform introducing or enhancing civic engagement education occurred at the secondary level. In this study, we explore the role and place of civic engagement in the Canadian university curriculum. We have chosen to focus on curriculum in political science programs because calls to increase civic engagement originated with the goal of increasing participation in voting by young people, and because civic engagement is widely espoused as a central value in the discipline of political science. We report the findings of a national survey of politics instructors and their course syllabi regarding civic engagement as an intended learning outcome. Our analysis of the survey data involved a comparison of instructor responses with the assessment activities identified on their course syllabi. By analyzing the real and imagined audience(s) and purpose(s) of course assignments, we find that students are required to complete assignments that situate them within academic contexts involving academic purposes and audiences. The apparent conflict between civic education outcomes and academic assessment tasks relates to broader conversations about the purposes of political science education and higher education in general.

Au cours des dernières années, la pression s'accumule de plus en plus sur les épaules des éducateurs pour que ceux-ci encouragent la participation civique parmi les jeunes électeurs canadiens apathiques. Entre 1998 et 2007, une vague nationale de réformes des programmes d'études a permis d'introduire ou d'améliorer l'enseignement de l'engagement civique au niveau secondaire. Dans cette étude, nous explorons le rôle et la place de l'engagement civique dans les programmes d'études au niveau de l'enseignement post-secondaire. Nous avons choisi de nous concentrer sur les programmes d'études de sciences politiques car les demandes pour améliorer l'engagement civique venaient de l'objectif qui consistait à augmenter la participation à voter des jeunes électeurs, et également parce que l'engagement civique est largement adopté comme une valeur centrale en sciences politiques. Nous rapportons les résultats d'un sondage national mené auprès d'enseignants de sciences politiques et de leurs descriptions de cours en ce qui concerne l'engagement civique en tant que résultats d'apprentissage escomptés. Notre analyse des données recueillies implique une comparaison des réponses des enseignants avec les activités d'évaluation identifiées dans leurs descriptions de cours. En analysant le(s) public(s) réel(s) et imaginaire(s) ainsi que le(s) objectif(s) des travaux de cours, nous avons trouvé que les étudiants devaient compléter des travaux qui les plaçaient au sein de contextes académiques qui impliquaient des objectifs et des auditoires académiques. Le conflit apparent qui existe entre les résultats de l'éducation civique et de l'évaluation des tâches académiques se rapporte à des conversations plus vastes concernant l'objectif de l'enseignement des sciences politiques et à l'enseignement supérieur en général.

Keywords

assessment, teaching and learning outcomes, civic engagement, course syllabi

In recent decades, Canada has witnessed a striking increase in political apathy among youth, mirroring trends in other parts of the Western world. The pressure for educators to cultivate civic participation among their students has thus mounted. In the four Canadian federal elections between 2000 and 2011, voter turnout—a common measure of political behaviour—remained between 20% and 45% for Canadians between 18 and 24 (Elections Canada, 2006, 2008, 2010). Even as signs of political disengagement seemed to be ebbing with “vote mobs” emerging on university campuses in the lead-up to the 2011 federal election¹, the voter turnout rate for 18-24 year olds remained stagnant at 38.8% (Maynard, 2012). While varying factors contributing to these alarmingly low youth voter turnout numbers have been identified—including alternative political activities, generational effects, and the poor reputation of modern politics (Gidengil, Nevette, Blais, & Nadeau, 2003; Howe, 2003; O’Neill, 2001, 2007)—civic education is commonly espoused as a comprehensive solution (Howe, 2011; Milner, 2002). Because political knowledge has come to be seen as a predictor of political participation (Milner, 2002, 2005, 2007), civic education at the secondary level has received much scholarly attention (e.g., Osborne, 1997; Clark, 2004; Sears, 1997, 2004, 2011; Shields & Ramsay, 2004). Less is known about the ways in which Canadian undergraduate programs are responding to the mounting pressure to foster political participation or other forms of civic engagement in light of youth voter apathy.

In undergraduate political science programs, introductory Canadian politics and government courses (ICPGs)² have traditionally performed a pseudo civic education role, informing students of the key institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and theoretical underpinnings of Canadian governance. In this study, we ask whether these introductory courses also include fostering political participation or other forms of civic engagement as distinct “intended learning outcomes” (ILO) as defined by Biggs and Tang (2011).

Research on political science teaching in Western university institutions outside Canada suggests some resistance toward the straightforward adoption of civic engagement goals. Both Mauro (2008) and Sloam (2010), for instance, reference the tension within political science education between teaching the skills and responsibilities required of democratic citizens and the academic discipline proper. Both note a dearth of service learning and political simulations in political science teaching and call for an increased use of experiential learning as a means of fostering civic engagement among students. Sloam goes so far as to argue that experiential learning, with its distinct blending of theory and reflexive practice, can function as a “bridge between political science (the discipline) and the political world” (p. 329).

In light of this research, we predict that Canadian instructors of ICPG courses will not hold unanimous views regarding the role they might play as educators of engaged civic participants despite external policy pressures. Certainly, the challenge of defining citizenship beyond its legal and statutory definitions emerges as a challenge within political scientists’ work because the basis for acceptance can be so abstract. To test our prediction, we conducted a national survey of ICPG instructors at Canadian universities. The survey included a request for

¹ During the 2011 federal election so-called “vote mobs” emerged across Canada. The “mobs” involved university students rallying in public places, in one case where the prime minister was making a campaign stop, to indicate that they would be voting. The mobs were seen as a response from young Canadians to the criticism that they were apathetic and uninvolved in the political process (see Galloway, 2011).

² ICPG covers a number of different course names and codes in our study corpus. Here is a short list to name a few: POLI 101 The Government of Canada (UBC), POL 221 Introduction to Canadian Government (SFU), POLI 101 Introduction to Canadian Politics (VIC), PSCI Canadian Politics (REG), POLS 1400 Issues in Canadian Politics (UG), POLI SCI 263 Politics and Government in Canada (WLU), POL112 The Canadian Political Process (BIS).

submission of course syllabi. We aimed to determine how civic engagement might have been integrated into courses and whether or not it was actually assessed, since assessment is widely regarded as the key driver of students' learning (e.g. Biggs & Tang, 2011; Joughin, 2010; Boud, 1990). For the purposes of this study, we depart from more comprehensive investigations of assignments across the curriculum (e.g., Britton et al., 1975; Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010; Zhu, 2004; Leedham, 2009; Melzer, 2009) to consider in particular the rhetorical nature of assessment activities, specifically in terms of what they ask students to do (their purposes, aims, and actions) and for whom (their intended real or imagined audiences).

Literature Review

Our focus on assessment activities rather than, for instance, non-graded forms of content delivery and discovery such as lectures or in-class activities reflects the great extent to which assessment defines the curriculum for students (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Dochy & McDowell, 1997; Meyers & Nulty, 2009; Ramsden, 1992; Scouller, 1998; Scouller & Prosser, 1994; Segers, Nijhuis, & Gijseleers, 2006). Research in higher education indicates that assessment activities shape not only the scope or depth of student learning, but also the learning approaches or methods that students draw on to meet assignment requirements (e.g., Biggs & Tang, 2011; Meyers & Nulty, 2009; Scouller, 1998).

Biggs and Tang's (2011) "constructive alignment" model of curriculum design asks instructors to focus on developing assessment activities with the "positive backwash" effect of fostering intended and desired learning strategies, content knowledge, and skill sets. Biggs and Tang recommend that courses enmesh students in carefully aligned learning outcomes, teaching/learning activities, and assessment tasks. The effectiveness of constructively aligned teaching is, they claim, hinged on the consistency of the alignment; in an effective course there will be "maximum consistency throughout the system" in which "[a]ll components in the system address the same agenda and support each other" (p. 99). Within this framework, ILOs should indicate what students should be able to do upon completion of the course, what their learning should look like after they have mastered a concept or skill to the acceptable standard (p. 113).

This model of curriculum design has important implications for instructors interested in determining what students are likely learning or benefitting from the courses and programs they undertake. Biggs and Tang's theorization of backwash indicates that lists of ILOs are not sufficient indicators of student learning in isolation; assessment activities—"revealing classroom artifacts" (p. 240), according to Melzer (2009)—need to be part of the equation. Analyzing assessment activities for the integration of ILOs is, however, a difficult task. Biggs and Tang would likely set out to locate descriptions of performance criteria, explanations of the assessment activity's role in the course, as well as any identifiable connections in the assignment description to the content and skills identified in any course learning objectives. Commonly, however, assignment descriptions are undetailed and include little to no explanation of how submissions will be assessed (Graves, 2013).

Additional strategies for analyzing assessment activities for what they ask students to do and learn can be found in writing across the curriculum investigations of writing tasks that undergraduate students complete in the course of their studies (e.g., Britton, 1975; Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010; Melzer, 2009). These investigations have analyzed writing assignments for the assignment category (exam, paper, presentation, etc.), type (multiple-choice, short answer, and/or essay exams; informative, argumentative, expressive, and/or exploratory

papers, etc.), and function (expression of the writer, transaction with an audience, or poetic explorations of text and language) as well as the integration of writing-to-learn (i.e., reflective journals, personal essays) and opportunities for formative feedback throughout the writing/preparation process (i.e., in “nested” assignments that involve submissions of work at various points in the writing process). Many of these investigations also look at the rhetorical nature of assessment activities, meaning the situation or scenario into which they invite students. Rhetorical analyses of assignments focus on what students are asked to do/accomplish, the reasons they are being asked to work on the task(s), and the audiences (real and hypothetical) for whom they are to communicate results.

In one such study, Melzer (2009) analyzes over 2000 assessment activities across disciplines and finds that assignments generally ask students to write for limited purposes and audiences, namely to inform an instructor as “examiner” audience. In these rhetorical situations, Melzer reasons that students do not practice disciplinary ways of making meaning because they are asked to produce “correct” responses (i.e., the ones instructors are expecting) (p. 245). Melzer’s critique of assessment activities’ rhetorical situations aligns with rhetorical genre theory (e.g., Devitt, 2008; Freedman & Medway, 1994; Miller, 1984), which has long underscored the importance of context for educational activities. Rhetorical genre theory places an emphasis on the social nature of communication genres, directing teachers to present forms of discourse as cultural practices that embody the concerns, values, tensions, and traditions of the community in which the text type is produced. The implication for students is that assignments invite them into what Bazerman (1994) describes as the “forms of life, ways of being, frames for social action” (p. 1). This has also been documented in approaches that use activity theory to study writing assignments; Russell (1997), for instance, contends that even school assignments that closely approximate a non-school genre—a resumé and cover letter, a business proposal, a technical report, etc.—are not likely the same genre as the text type they simulate: “texts that share a number of formal features may not belong to the same genre because they are not all used to operationalize the same recurring, typified actions of an activity system...” (p. 518).

The rhetorical genre perspective also underscores the importance of decisions regarding the purposes of undergraduate degree programs and individual courses therein. The pressure to include civic education in the undergraduate curriculum coincides with demands that higher education serve the economies within which it is situated and funded. Berlin (2003) traces this demand through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when liberal arts institutes transformed into research universities shaped by emergent corporate power groups demanding well-trained professionals. While the “unification” (Raffe, 2003) of vocational training and higher education has been slow in Canada, it is evident in a growing number of partnerships across Western countries between post-secondary vocational programs and institutions of higher education as well as the emergence of apprenticeship, co-operative, and experiential education programs to complement undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Bosch & Charest, 2012; Charest & Critoph, 2012). Notably, civic education in the United States has a strong tradition of experiential learning, especially with an emphasis on service learning. These experiential learning programs have included activities such as volunteering with community organizations, engaging in the electoral process and other work outside the classroom (McHugh & Mayer, 2013).

There seems to be a proliferation of calls for creative pedagogical methods of fostering civic engagement and for the use of experiential learning in particular. In the case of political science, Sloam (2010) goes so far as to argue that experiential learning, with its distinct blending

of theory and reflexive practice, can function as a “bridge between political science (the discipline) and the political world” (p. 329). Drawing on critical pedagogy, he reasons: “Following Dewey, if education becomes meaningless when detached from its social context, political science education becomes meaningless (or at least greatly weakened) if detached from real-world politics” (pp. 330-331). An investigation into Canadian instructors’ perspectives and pedagogical choices regarding civic engagement education could reveal the national pulse on the appropriate focus of undergraduate political science programs. In this study, we asked instructors of ICPG courses at Canadian universities specifically about their position on and approaches towards fostering civic engagement among their students.

Methods

Taking a cue from Biggs and Tang’s theory, which suggests that ILOs and assessment activities can together provide a window into what undergraduate students are being asked to do and learn, we designed our study not just to include instructors’ self-reports of ILOs but also the story of ILOs told by their course syllabi. Graves, Hyland, and Samuels (2010) also rely on course syllabi for a window into pedagogical approaches (specifically concerning writing) within Canadian undergraduate programs, reasoning that while syllabi alone cannot provide a comprehensive picture, they are reliable indicators of what goes on in a course; syllabi are the official means through which authoritative information about course content, teaching/learning approaches, and assessment activities are communicated to students.

Data Collection

The first step in our data collection involved identifying ICPG instructors at Canadian universities from the 2012-2013 academic year. Having identified 98 instructors, we obtained ethics clearance to send email invitations to an online survey (through *Qualtrics*) as well as a request for course syllabi. In the survey, we asked a series of (a) biographical questions regarding years of teaching experience, current position (sessional, tenure-track, tenured), familiarity with and implementation of pedagogical scholarship; (b) course-related questions regarding role in course design, the class size, and whether (why/why not) civic engagement is a course learning objective; as well as (c) civic engagement-related questions regarding personal understandings of “civic engagement,” ranked social activities for level of civic engagement, and ranked classroom activities for level of fostering civic engagement among students (see the Appendix).

Given the contested nature of citizenship and civic education (Gauthier, 2003; Jacoby, 2009), we provided instructors with the opportunity to define civic engagement in survey question 10. This question asked instructors to rank civic activities in terms of degree of “civic engagement.” The list included traditional and non-traditional activities and was compiled after consulting a number of sources (e.g., Howe, 2011; Milner, 2010; O’Neill, 2007) to create a somewhat comprehensible list of (traditional and non-traditional) civic activities for instructors to rank (see the Appendix). In particular, these responses were helpful in determining whether course syllabi featured civic engagement as an ILO.

Data Analysis

We divided the study corpus between us, ensuring an overlap of five surveys and their corresponding course syllabi as a means of assessing coding consistency. Having done this, we conducted three stages of data analysis in response to the following questions:

1. What do survey responses indicate about the instructors' opinion of civic engagement as an ILO of their own course or ICPG courses generally?
2. What do course syllabi indicate about the presence of civic engagement as an ILO?
3. What do assessment activities listed on course syllabi indicate about civic engagement as an ILO?

We drew on survey questions 12, 15, and 17 to answer the first of our research questions. We each coded emerging patterns in these explanatory responses, holding regular meetings to compare findings and discover consistent terminology.

To answer the second research question, we first looked for the presence of “civic engagement” or “political participation” in any explicit lists of ILOs on course syllabi. To avoid imposing our own understanding of civic engagement, we documented the number and location of any references to civic engagement and broadly related topics (i.e., activism, political socialization, interest groups, citizenship, etc.). In addition, we analyzed each syllabus for indications that students were required to practice the *instructor's* understanding of “civic engagement,” provided in response to survey question 10.

In order to get a broad indicator of whether assessment activities were intended to foster civic engagement, we compared the ratings of assessment activities for fostering civic engagement provided in response to survey question 10 with the total number of each type of assessment activity assigned in the corpus of syllabi. For a deeper look at assessment activities, we analyzed the rhetorical situation into which writing activities invited students. We did this by broadly categorizing writing assignments into task types, documenting the real and imagined audiences for which they directed students to write as well as the broad genre-related role (i.e., academic versus professional) into which they invited students.

Findings and Discussion

Profile of Participants

The response rate for the survey was 29%, including 25 English and three French instructors and a total of 33 course syllabi (a few instructors submitted multiple syllabi). Respondents represented a variety of Canadian university institutions, including one west coast institution, four in the prairie provinces, 10 in Ontario, three in Quebec, two eastern institutions, and several who opted not to disclose this information. The participant group included a relatively even mix of instructors from three teaching ranks (seven sessional, 11 tenure-track, and nine tenured professors) across a range of experience in years (four with fewer than three, 13 with between four and seven, and 11 with more than eight years of experience). The majority of

participants (57%) reported having taught eight to 15+ Political Science courses, with only one participant reporting having taught fewer than three.

Respondents were evenly split on having participated in courses on teaching or pedagogy, though 18 (64%) indicated that they do not use the literature on pedagogy to inform their teaching. The nine respondents who indicated that they do use literature on pedagogy to inform their teaching mentioned that they used it to design methods of content delivery, teaching with technology, assessment, and grading with rubrics. Two respondents mentioned learning outcomes, one of whom explicitly stated that a short course on teaching and pedagogy had helped with aligning assessment activities to learning outcomes.

The participant group did not include any instructors who taught in very small (fewer than 25) classes; 10 participants taught a medium-sized (25-75 student) ICPG course, 11 taught a large (76-150 student) ICPG course, and six taught a very large (150+) ICPG course. All but one participant designed the course independently or in combination with some inherited material. The large class size of these courses stood out as a potential determinant of assignment design choices. MacGregor, Cooper, Smith, and Robinson (2000) explain that “large-class settings have historically been heavily lecture-centered, requiring minimal student engagement and expecting little more than memorization of terms and concepts as evidence of student learning” with poor outcomes for student engagement and performance “tolerated as unfortunate realities” (p. 1).

Survey Responses on Civic Engagement as an Intended Learning Objective

Survey questions 12, 15, and 17 produced a picture of respondents’ attitudes about civic engagement as an ILO in their ICPG course(s) and in political science courses generally. Together, responses to these questions revealed that while there was overwhelming support for civic education as an ILO, there was little support for it as a *primary* objective.

In response to question 12, a vast majority (93%) of survey respondents identified civic engagement as an ILO of their course. However, only two of the positive responses included a clarification that it was a primary learning objective while 15 specified that it was a secondary objective (nine did not clarify). A number of respondents explained that civic engagement education was necessary due to civic illiteracy, apathy, and poor civic education programs at other education levels, which indicates that this strong support for fostering civic engagement was at least in part a response to pressures to curb youth voter apathy.

Interestingly, three respondents who identified civic engagement as a secondary learning objective in question 12 used the term “hope” to describe their course’s potential for fostering civic engagement:

I encourage my students to become actively involved in both traditional and non-traditional means and ultimately I hope that increased knowledge about Canadian government and politics will help them become active

I am concerned about the lack of engagement in and knowledge about Canadian politics. I hope this course can increase these things.

In the sense that it hopefully raises students’ awareness of the nature of Canadian government and politics, but it’s not an overtly stated goal per se.

The use of this term raised some question about how instructors perceived the effectiveness of their efforts or the efforts of political science programs in general to foster civic engagement. In fact, a few respondents explicitly articulated skepticism in response to questions 15 and 17:

I think the relationship between the course and engagement is quite diffuse. Knowledge can make a difference, but the drivers of engagement and non-engagement are probably found elsewhere (socialization, time constraints, political and civic campaigns, etc.).

One of the aspects that I am currently focusing on for my online courses is to introduce more social networking to the course curriculum (such as twitter, Facebook, blogging). Although this is a very successful addition, a big challenge is the subjectivity of the material for grading purposes. Therefore, there is perhaps a disconnect between the objectives of certain courses and civic engagement that needs to be addressed.

My institution also puts a great deal of emphasis on experiential learning. I do have to say however given the literature on the neoliberalization of post-secondary education I am becoming more ambivalent about what we pass off and set as criteria for 'experiential learning.'

However, in questions 12 and 15 many instructors expressed confidence that increasing students' level of "civic literacy" will prepare students for civic participation, and therefore possibly foster civic engagement among them:

I find that in general, my students lack a good understanding of Canadian political institutions and processes. I don't think that 'civic engagement' should be an 'explicit' learning objective for that reason. In other words, I think that knowledge needs to come before (or in conjunction with) action.

Learning about Canadian political culture and institutions should be the background material to civic participation.

Yes, but not as volunteerism. Rather, it should take the form of civic literacy.

Yes in terms of subject matter, not in terms of what students do outside the classroom.

This position on civic literacy rather than participation or engagement spoke to a tension between citizen training and the discipline of political science, which has also been found among other Western post-secondary political science educators (Mauro, 2008; Sloam, 2010). Other responses to question 15 suggested that instructors juggled multiple agendas, potentially indicating what Biggs and Tang (2011) might perceive as a lack of consistency in their course design:

On the one hand, training engaged citizens is clearly an important part of what we teach people to do... On the other hand, I do not make too much of it because political science is not training activists...

By this stage they ought to be learning about the discipline rather than sit through a process devoted to citizenship education.

Yes and no. I think it should be an option for students... For some students... what matters is learning and doing research to better understand the political world. For others, I think civic engagement is a way of: 1) making sense of things they see in class; 2) getting interested in politics beyond the slightly abstract things they see in class; 3) stepping stone to a career in politics.

Taken together, survey responses to these questions indicated that while most instructors wanted their course to foster civic engagement among students, the group was also somewhat ambivalent about whether they should (or should have to) focus on civic education. These responses indicated that this selection of instructors resolved the tension between pressures to provide civic education and disciplinary enculturation by placing civic engagement as a secondary learning objective that would “hopefully” be supported by increased levels of civic literacy.

Course Syllabi on Civic Engagement as an Intended Learning Outcome

Despite the fact that 93% of survey respondents indicated in question 12 that civic engagement was a part of their course, it appeared just twice (4%) as a topic and theme to be explored (namely “political participation” and “political engagement”) in the 50 explicitly listed ILOs in the corpus of syllabi. Eleven of the 33 course syllabi (36%) in our study corpus included a distinct section for teaching and learning objectives. These lists outlined desired ILOs that can be separated into three broad categories: knowledge of political science theory and disciplinary concerns, knowledge of political institutions and mechanisms, and skill development (see Table 1). The repetition of “develop an understanding of” in outcomes that had to do with political institutions and mechanisms indicated a civic literacy focus. Likewise, the teaching directives included verbs such as *introduce*, *provide*, and *assist*, creating an image of instructor as disciplinary gatekeeper responsible for helping students find interest in politics and the study thereof, while the learning directives positioned students as initiates, featuring verbs such as *improve*, *develop*, and *become*. This approach is likely related to the introductory level of these ICPG courses.

Table 1
Explicit Learning Objectives on Course Syllabi

Knowledge Areas	Directives		Number of Mentions
	Teaching	Learning	
Theory and culture of the political science discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • introduce students to questions • provide students with understanding of • expose students to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • master vocabulary of • explain and clarify • show familiarity with 	20
Political institutions and mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide with understanding of • stimulate interest in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquire an understanding of identify and interpret • develop strong foundation • develop deeper understanding • develop basic understanding 	19
Skills, including: critical analysis, essay writing, reading, debating, library research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assist in the acquisition of skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop and foster skills • develop the capacity to • become able to • improve ability to • practice 	26

When we looked at the course syllabi in their entirety, we found that 50% of them made reference to “civic or political engagement” or “political, citizen, or electoral participation.” Of these mentions, the majority (58%) occurred on the weekly schedule of topics and readings; a sprinkling of mentions were distributed in course descriptions (21%), assignment topics (13%), and learning objectives (8%). Given the ambiguity of the concept, however, we took a few additional approaches to identifying the presence of civic engagement on course syllabi. First we looked to see whether topics and tasks related to civic engagement and political participation were present on the course syllabi. We found that while all course syllabi included lectures on Canadian political institutions and processes, topics such as social movements, political socialization, political participation, activism, and lobbyists featured as an object of study on a majority (77%) of course syllabi, mostly as distinct topics on the course schedules. We also looked to see whether civic engagement featured as a required activity and found that no courses required that students become engaged in a community (including the wider university community) outside of the course. One syllabus did note a service learning option, connecting students to the pertinent university department that would help facilitate the process.

Assessment Activities and Civic Engagement as an Intended Learning Outcome

We also attempted to use the respondents’ own definitions of civic engagement as a measure for whether their course featured civic engagement as an ILO. We did this by comparing respondents’ understandings of “civic engagement” in survey question 10 with

assessment activities assigned on their syllabi. Understandings of civic engagement fit into three general categories: 5% of survey respondents defined civic engagement as “knowledge/awareness” of political mechanisms, institutions, events, and theoretical principles; 55% described it as “doing/participating” in a variety of civic activities at community, municipal, provincial, or federal levels; and 40% identified it as “knowledge plus action” involving both awareness and participation. When we compared both the high percentage (95%) of instructors who included action/participation in their understanding of civic engagement and the vast majority (93%) of instructors who said that civic engagement was an ILO with the fact that no course syllabi included assessment activities that required students to participate in political activities outside of the classroom, a lack of alignment between the civic engagement learning objective and assessment activities appeared. This finding suggested that civic engagement was a secondary learning outcome, perhaps considered to be an incidental effect of learning about the Canadian political scene and system.

In order to gain a deeper sense of whether civic engagement was an ILO of assessment activities, we compared responses to question 11 (which asked respondents to rank assessment activities in terms of demonstrating levels of civic engagement) with the presence of those assessment activities on course syllabi (see Table 2). This comparison also indicated that civic engagement was not an ILO of these courses. For instance, the highest rated activity for fostering civic engagement, simulations of political processes, was among the least assigned. Similarly, tests and exams were given a low rating for fostering civic engagement and were assigned in all courses. As previously noted, the reliance on essays and exams over simulations and forms of experiential learning might have been connected to the large class sizes reported in our study corpus.

Table 2
Rating of Assessment Activities for Fostering Civic Engagement

Assessment Activity	Percentage coverage in corpus of syllabi	Average (1-3) rating for fostering civic engagement (rounded to nearest whole)		
		Low (1)	Med (2)	High (3)
Papers & writing assignments	94%		x	
Exam/Test	100%	x		
Tutorial/Class participation	73%		x	
Presentation	9%		x	
Attendance	9%	x		
Simulation	6%			x
Online Participation	3%	x		

Next to tests and exams, writing assignments were the most assigned assessment activity, appearing in 94% of course syllabi. Essay assignments received a modest rating for fostering civic engagement. We looked closely at the rhetorical nature of these writing tasks to gain a sense of what Bazerman (1994) described as the “forms of life, ways of being, frames for social action” (p. 1) that they offered students. Of the 43 writing assignments in the study corpus, no details were provided for 18 term papers. Due to the variance in assignment names (also found by Graves, Hyland, & Samuels, 2010), we divided the remaining assignments into six descriptive categories (see Table 3). We also coded for the “real audience” who would read the students’

work and the imagined or real “specified audience” to whom students were directed to write as well as the general genre-related “position” or role that assignments situated students within.

Table 3
Essay Assignments by Category

Category	#	Example	Real Audience	Specified Audience	Position
(A) Analyze a problem & recommend solutions	9	<i>Analyze electoral systems. Research the issue of voter turnout.</i>	Instructor	Unspecified	Academic (political scientist)
(B) Review scholarship	7	<i>Compare 3 articles on the same issue. Assess the state of research on a topic.</i>	Instructor	Unspecified	Academic (political scientist)
(C) Connect course topics with current events	4	<i>Relate a current event to course themes. Connect lectures to the theme of political engagement.</i>	Instructor	Unspecified	Academic (political scientist)
(D) Describe an aspect of the political system	3	<i>Explain how legislation is made.</i>	Instructor	Unspecified	Novice (potential for civic educator depending on context)
(E) Simulate being involved in the political system	2	<i>Write a cabinet memo. Write a briefing paper.</i>	Instructor	Cabinet minister	Professional

In line with Melzer's (2009) findings, this picture of writing assignments suggested that students typically wrote strictly for their instructor; on only two occasions in category "(E) Simulate being involved in the political system" did it appear as though students were explicitly asked to write for an imagined audience – a cabinet minister. Most frequently, students engaged in tasks specific to the academic discipline of Political Science, such as in categories "(A) Analyze a problem & recommend a solution" and "(B) Review scholarship." Students were also commonly asked to perform as learners in categories "(C) Connect course topics with current events" and "(D) Describe an aspect of the political system." The two simulations in category (E) did more to take down the walls between the classroom and the political scene. Interestingly, the simulation assignments asked students to conduct some of the same tasks required in category "(A) Analyze a problem & recommend solutions," but in a professional genre directed at political actors.

For the most part, these writing assignments asked students to take on academic roles, writing both as students to demonstrate learning and as political scientists writing about current events and the workings of political institutions. Twenty of the 25 assignments for which we had some details asked students to theorize, analyze, critique, and make recommendations as academics at a distance from democratic activities. Other than the two simulation exercises that asked students to imagine writing for a cabinet minister, students were not asked to participate or imagine themselves participating in political processes. Take for instance the assignment in category (A) that required students to "research the issue of voter turnout and make recommendations." To complete this assignment, students might have investigated factors contributing to voter apathy and motivation, obstacles to voting for various demographic groups, vote suppression tactics and related laws, as well as recommendations that have been proposed to curb these negative forces and increase voter turnout rates. Students likely would have produced an academic essay reporting on this research. To personalize the issue of civic engagement for students, this assignment could have positioned them as political actors if it had asked students to produce a professional genre (e.g., a government report or a letter to local representatives) or a personal genre (e.g., a reflection or a personal action plan). In contrast, the two simulation exercises in category (E), which asked students to write in the style of professional genres to hypothetical readers who were not the course instructor, invited students to imagine being involved in the political system. While these simulation assignments did not require civic engagement per se, they did suggest to students that they might aspire to such positions.

Like the simulation assignments, the three assignments in category (D) that asked students to describe an aspect of the political system might have positioned students as civic participants rather than academic political scientists. Unfortunately, we did not have full details for these assignments, though the unspecified audience suggested that students were likely writing to demonstrate knowledge for their instructor-as-evaluator. It is possible, however, that these assignments positioned students as "citizen experts" taking on civic education roles not unlike that which a Wikipedia contributor might do.

The majority of writing assignments in our study seem to have positioned students as either academic political scientists or novices being evaluated. Both positions involved students in activities at remove from political participation or other forms of civic engagement. This trend suggested a process of learning the discipline, corresponding with the image of student as initiate that the lists of ILOs also seem to establish. Civic engagement did not appear to be the primary ILO of these assignments.

Conclusions

The survey responses describing civic engagement as a secondary learning outcome aligns with the findings of our analysis of course syllabi. While civic engagement was an object of study both in course lectures and essay assignments, it was not an activity required of students. Instructors acknowledged this on the survey, giving the assessment activities they assigned most frequently—tests and essays—relatively low ratings for fostering civic engagement while rating highest a type of assessment activity—simulations—that they rarely assigned. We suspect that the large class sizes reported by respondents contributed to determining the type of assessment activities assigned. In addition, an analysis of the rhetorical context of essay assignments revealed that students were most often writing as political scientists for academic or educational purposes. While the sort of assessment activities that would best foster civic engagement remain undetermined, academic essays written for an instructor-as-evaluator and disciplinary gatekeeper are not chiefly designed to do so.

Responses about whether ICPGs should seek to foster civic engagement among students revealed a lack of consensus. Respondents provided a multitude of reasons for and against including civic engagement as an ILO, some that resonate with trends in other communities of Western post-secondary political science educators. Indeed, along with references to the problems of political apathy and a dearth of civic education at lower levels, the tension between disciplinary enculturation and civic education was raised. This tension might be cast in terms of an academic research community resisting forces pulling it into the service of vocational and citizenship training—a narrative with which many academic disciplines are familiar.

It stands to reason that instructors can continue delivering disciplinary enculturation rather than vocational or citizenship training by identifying civic engagement as a secondary or intended “incidental” learning outcome of any form of civic literacy education. Yet research in civic education provides much supportive evidence for this move towards disciplinary enculturation. For instance, it is because political knowledge has been identified as a predictor of political participation (Milner, 2002, 2005, 2007) that civic literacy has gained support and attention as part of the curriculum at the secondary level. Milner (2005) argued that “it becomes evident that, more than ever, addressing the decline in turnout means enhancing political knowledge.” However, political knowledge and political participation are different learning outcomes that curriculum design theory like Biggs and Tang’s (2011) constructive alignment model would suggest are aligned with different assessment activities. The question that arises from surveys that show “civic illiteracy” (Milner, 2005) or a lack of political knowledge among Canadians is whether knowledge of historical political facts and events make individuals valuable, more engaged or more productive citizens. Curriculum design research suggests that the educative solution to low levels of civic engagement will need to be more specific than an incidental outcome of increased political knowledge.

References

- Bazerman, C. (1994). Systems of genres and the enactment of social intentions. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (pp. 79-101). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Berlin, J. A. (2003). *Rhetorics, poetics, and cultures: Refiguring college English studies*. Indiana: Parlor Press.

- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does* (4th ed.). Berkshire, England: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Bosch, G., & Charest, J. (2012). Vocational training: International perspectives. In G. Bosch & J. Charest (Eds.), *Vocational training: international perspectives* (pp. 18-43). New York: Routledge.
- Boud, D. (1990). Assessment and the promotion of academic values. *Studies in Higher Education*, 15(1), 101-111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079012331377621>
- Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2), 151-167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713695728>
- Britton, J., Burgess, T., Martin, N., McLeod, A., & Rosen, H. (1975). *The development of writing abilities (11-18)*. London: Macmillan Education.
- Charest, J., & Critoph, U. (2012). Vocational training in Canada: The poor second cousin in a well-educated family. In G. Bosch & J. Charest (Eds.), *Vocational training: international perspectives* (pp. 75-105). New York: Routledge.
- Clark, P. (2004). The historical context of social studies in English Canada. In A. Sears & I. Wright (Eds.), *Challenges and prospects for Canadian social studies* (pp. 17-37). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- Devitt, A. (2008). *Writing genres*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dochy, F., & McDowell, L. (1997). Assessment as a tool for learning. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 23(4), 279-298. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0191-491X\(97\)86211-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0191-491X(97)86211-6)
- Elections Canada. (2006). Report of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada on the 39th General Election of January 23, 2006. Retrieved from http://www.elections.ca/res/rep/off/statreport2006_e.pdf
- Elections Canada. (2008, March). Estimation of voter turnout by age group at the 39th federal general election, January 23, 2006. Working Paper Series. Retrieved from http://www.elections.ca/res/loi/rep39ge/estimation39ge_e.pdf
- Elections Canada. (2010, February). Estimation of voter turnout by age group at the 40th federal general election. Working Paper Series. Retrieved from http://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/estim/estimation40_e.pdf
- Galloway, G. (2011, April 18). Voting-mob mentality has young people running amok. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-notebook/voting-mob-mentality-has-young-people-running-amok/article613588/>
- Gauthier, M. (2003). The inadequacy of concepts: The rise of youth interest in civic participation in Quebec. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 6(3), 265-276. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1367626032000138255>
- Gidengil, E., Nevette, N., Blais, A. & Nadeau, R. (2003). Turned off or tuned out? Youth participation in politics. *Electoral Insight*, 5(2), 9-14.
- Graves, R. (2013). Assignments in pharmacy, physical education, nursing, political science, and community service learning. Unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing, Victoria, BC. Retrieved from <http://prezi.com/tnbmpjb6bojh/assignments-in-pharmacy-physical-education-nursing-political-science-and-community-service-learning/>
- Graves, R., Hyland, T., & Samuels, B. (2010). Undergraduate writing assignments: An analysis of syllabi at one Canadian college. *Written Communication*, 27(3), 293-317. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0741088310371635>

- Howe, P. (2003). Where have all the voters gone? *Inroads*, 12, 74-83.
- Howe, P. (2011). *Citizens adrift: The Democratic disengagement of young Canadians*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Jacoby, B. (2009). *Civic engagement in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Joughin, G. (2010). The hidden curriculum revisited: A critical review of research into the influence of summative assessment on learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 335-345. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602930903221493>
- Leedham, M. (2009). From traditional essay to “Ready Steady Cook” presentation: Reasons for innovative changes in assignments. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(3), 191-206. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1469787409343187>
- MacGregor, J., Cooper, J. L., Smith, K. A., & Robinson, P. (2000). Editor’s notes. In J. MacGregor, J. L. Cooper, K. A. Smith, & P. Robinson (Eds.), *Strategies for energizing large classes: From small groups to learning communities* (pp. 1-3). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mauro, R. M. (2008). Political science education and the conceptual analysis of ideology: A pedagogy and curriculum of understanding. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1), 55-72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822255>
- Maynard, M. (2012, Feb 2). Declining voter turnout: Can we reverse the trend? *The Hill Times*.
- McHugh, M., & Mayer, R. (2013). The different types of experiential learning offered in a Political Science department: A comparison of four courses. In A. R. M. McCartney, E. A. Bennion, & D. Simpson (Eds.) *Teaching civic engagement: From student to active citizen* (pp. 353-367). Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.
- Melzer, D. (2009). Writing assignments across the curriculum: A national study of college writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 61(2), W240-261.
- Meyers, N. M., & Nulty, D. D. (2009). How to use (five) curriculum design principles to align authentic learning environments, assessment, students’ approaches to thinking and learning outcomes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(5), 565-577. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602930802226502>
- Miller, C. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(2), 151-167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686>
- Milner, H. (2002). *Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Milner, H. (2005). Are young Canadians becoming political dropouts? A comparative perspective *IRPP Choices*, 11(3), 1-28.
- Milner, H. (2007). Political knowledge and political participation among young Canadians and Americans. Montreal, QC: IRPP.
- Milner, H. (2010). *The Internet generation: Engaged citizens or political dropouts?* Medford, MA: Tufts University Press.
- O’Neill, B. (2001). Generational patterns in the political opinions and behavior of Canadians. *Policy Matters*, 2(5). Retrieved from <http://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/research/strengthening-canadian-democracy/new-research-article-7/pmvol2no5.pdf>
- O’Neill, B. (2007). Indifferent or just different? The political and civic engagement of young people in Canada: Charting the course of youth civic and political participation. *Canada Policy Research Network*. Retrieved from http://www.cprn.org/documents/48504_EN.pdf

- Osborne, K. (1997). Citizenship education and social studies. In I. Wright & A. Sears (Eds.), *Trends and issues in Canadian social studies*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Raffe, D. (2003). Bringing academic education and vocational training closer together. In J. Oelkers (Ed.) *Futures of education II: Essays from an interdisciplinary symposium* (pp. 49-65). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education*. London: Routledge.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203413937>
- Russell, D. (1997). Rethinking genre in school and society: An activity theory analysis. *Written Communication*, 14(4), 504-554. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0741088397014004004>
- Scouller, K. M. (1998). The influence of assessment method on students' learning approaches: Multiple choice question examination versus assignment essay. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 35(4), 453-472.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1003196224280>
- Scouller, K. M., & Prosser, M. (1994). 'Students' experiences in studying for multiple choice question examinations, *Studies in Higher Education*, 15, 474-481.
- Sears, A. (1997). Social Studies in Canada. In I. Wright & A. Sears (Eds.), *Trends and Issues in Canadian Social Studies* (pp. 18-37). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Sears, A. (2004). In Search of Good Citizens. In A. Sears & I. Wright (Eds.), *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies* (pp. 19-106). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Sears, A. (2011). Historical thinking and citizenship education: It is time to end the war. In P. Clark (Ed.), *New possibilities for the past: Shaping history education in Canada* (pp. 344-364). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Segers, M., Nijhuis, J., & Gijseleers, W. (2006). Redesigning a learning and assessment environment: The influence on students' perceptions of assessment demands and their learning strategies. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 32, 223-242.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2006.08.004>
- Shields, P. N., & Ramsay, D. (2004). Social studies across English Canada. In A. Sears & I. Wright (Eds.), *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies* (pp. 38-54). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Sloam, J. (2010). Introduction: Youth, citizenship, and political science education: Questions for the discipline. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 6, 325-335.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2010.518085>
- Zhu, W. (2004). Writing in business courses: An analysis of assignment types, their characteristics, and required skills. *English for Specific Purposes*, 23(2), 111-135.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(02\)00046-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(02)00046-7)

Appendix Survey Protocol

Survey Text

Section 1 Teaching Experience and Course

1. How long have you been teaching at the university level (number of years)?
 - a. 1-3 years
 - b. 4-7 years
 - c. 8-15 years
 - d. 15+ years

2. What is the size of the department you teach in?
 - a. Small
 - b. Medium
 - c. Large

3. What is the size of the university you teach at?
 - a. Small
 - b. Medium
 - c. Large

4. Please select your teaching rank
 - a. Sessional Instructor
 - b. Tenure-track professor
 - c. Tenured professor
 - d. Other _____

5. How many courses have you taught in political science (approximately)?
 - a. 1-3
 - b. 4-7
 - c. 8-15
 - d. 15+

6. Please select one of the following options concerning the course content/curriculum
 - a. I designed the course myself
 - b. I inherited a majority of the course content
 - c. I did a bit of both (design and inherit)

7. How many students are in the most recent Introductory Canadian Politics and Government course you taught?
 - a. Under 25
 - b. 25-75
 - c. 76-150
 - d. 150+

8. Have you completed any courses on teaching or pedagogy? If yes, what kind of course/program?

- a. Yes (text answer for description)
- b. No

9. Do you use the literature on pedagogy to inform your teaching? If yes, please explain how it helps your approach to teaching.

- a. Yes (text answer for description)
- b. No

Section 2

Views on Civic Engagement

10. How do you define civic engagement?
(open text response)

11. Rank the following activities in terms of demonstrating levels of civic engagement?

	None	Low	Moderate	High
Voting in an election				
Joining a political party				
Reading an article about politics				
Volunteering				
Joining a community group				
Attending a public meeting				
Signing a petition				
Tweeting a political comment				
Posting something political on Facebook				
Boycotting a product				

Section 3

Views on civic engagement and your course

12. Is civic engagement a learning objective of your course? If so, it is a priority or primary learning objective or one that's more secondary?

- a. Yes (text answer for description)
- b. No

13. Even if civic engagement is not a primary learning outcome of your course, would you say that any of the course assignments might promote, foster, contribute to civic engagement among students? If so, do they do so implicitly or explicitly?

(open text response)

14. Does your department identify civic engagement as a learning outcome?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I don't know

15. Do you think civic engagement should be featured as a learning objective in an introductory Canadian government and politics course? Please explain why or why not.

(open text response)

16. What aspects of your course do you think best promote civic engagement (0-no impact, 1-low impact, 2-moderate impact, 3-high impact)?

	None	Low	Moderate	High
Writing an essay				
Completing an exam				
Participating online				
Participating in class				
Presenting a project				
Participating online				
Participating in class				
Participating in political simulation (ex. mock parliament)				
Attending lecture				
Other				

Section 4

17. Please let us know about any other comments you have concerning the relationship between the course and civic engagement.