Why Action Civics is Transformative for Environmental Education

From the very beginning, environmental education has been a means to engage people in solving environmental problems. According to environmental education’s founding document, the Tbilisi Declaration, the ultimate objective of environmental education is to provide the “opportunity to be actively involved at all levels in working toward resolution of environmental problems.”

Research supports this focus. In what might be the most cited research on environmental education, Hungerford and Volk (1990) argue that environmental educators often overlook the importance of how these elements work together, especially in relation to the need for student action projects. They argue that too often environmental educators assume a direct relationship between the acquisition of knowledge and taking action. In contrast to that assumption, Hungerford and Volk assert that while issue inquiry, field experience, and drawing conclusions are antecedents to stewardship, it is when students are asked to apply these experiences to develop and implement action projects that public engagement takes root. A 2014 evaluation of NOAA’s B-WET program demonstrated similar outcomes. Zint, et al. (2014) found that B-WET students who engaged in “environmental actions also scored significantly higher in a greater number of environmental stewardship characteristics than students who did not have these experiences.”

Despite the support for student action among researchers, the implementation of civic action projects continues to be a major challenge for environmental educators. In 2017 Earth Force conducted a survey of current environmental education practitioners to better understand the challenges they are facing. Nearly 75% of those we met with reported that the largest single hurdle they face is creating and implementing student action projects. Through our discussions we identified a range of challenges educators face in implementing student action projects, including the need to teach to standards, find administrative support, and ensure that schools have the resources to support action projects. To anyone who has or does work in environmental education, the refrain from educators (and program directors) that projects take too much time, cost too much money, or just are not supported by the school district is all too common. These issues have become substantial barriers to providing a full environmental education experience to students. Specifically, being unable to ensure that all students participate in civic action related to the environment threatens to undermine environmental education’s progress toward creating a populace prepared to solve significant environmental problems.

To ensure that students get the experience necessary to engage in environmental problem solving in the public sphere, Earth Force has been a leader in the field of Action Civics. Action Civics is a student-centered, project-based approach to education that develops the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st century democratic practice. It is an iterative process where participants analyze and reflect as they move forward towards a policy or practice goal. Often referred to as “Guided Experiential Civic Education”, Action Civics encourages all voices, concerns, and perspectives to the fullest extent possible. Students build both a solid knowledge base and skill set through this experiential learning method. It begins by students identifying an issue in their community that is relevant to them. They then research and analyze root causes,
develop a plan of action, speak to community legislators and stakeholders, put their plan into action, and then reflect on their experience (generationcitizen.org; Levine and Kawashima-Ginsburg 2015). This is a way of teaching to equip students for the 21st century. Action civics is just one of many forms of “authentic” teaching, all of which have been shown to demonstrate greater student learning and increase student motivation and content retention compared to traditional methods (Levinson 2014). Research has consistently shown that when Action Civics opportunities reflect student interests, they increase students’ participation in our democratic society (Levinson 2014; Levy and Zint 2013).

The ways in which students experience civics education has been shown to matter in their levels of engagement (Matto et al. 2017). Active learning has been demonstrated to increase motivation, which has been shown to stay with students later in life (Matto et al. 2017). Many studies show that if students participate in Action Civics while they’re young, they’re more likely to participate in the political process when they’re older (Almond and Verba, 1963; Ballard et al., 2016; Beck and Jennings, 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995).

Levinson (2014) said it best, “What excites these young people, at least initially, is not the civic engagement itself; rather, it is the achievement of goals that are personally important to them, for which civic engagement turns out to be the means. By achieving their goals through civic action, however, these youth remain civically engaged and are motivated to continue participating.”

Along with motivation and civic participation later on in life, many learning gains have been documented in the shorter-term as a result of Action Civics instruction, such as an increase in civics knowledge, retention, and self-efficacy, as well as general political knowledge (Ballard et al. 2016; Matto et al. 2017). This methodology has been shown to build citizenship, and help students become more tolerant of people not like themselves (Morgan and Streb 2001). Finally, Billig et al. (2005) found students who participate in active civic learning report a higher intent to vote compared to their peers.

Taken together, this research demonstrates that the incorporation of Action Civics strategies into environmental education would enhance its ability to increase participation in activities that lead to the resolution of environmental challenges. Action Civics creates citizens who are equipped with the tools to participate in democratic societies: who vote, engage politically, who are educated in their decision making. The pinnacle of Action Civics is when students’ efforts result in real world policy changes. While these changes are less frequent than practitioners would like, we are seeing an uptick in the number of student projects that lead to real world change (Gingold 2013).

Action Civics is a good tool to meet the goals of environmental education, but how does it overcome the resource challenge that educators identify as the reason they can’t support projects? In Earth Force’s interviews with organizations that are attempting to implement student action projects we found an interesting twist. We found that organizations that believed that student action projects were an important element of environmental education were also less likely to say that the resource challenges were a substantial barrier to doing projects. In short, if educators approach environmental education assuming that the student action project was an essential part of the student experience, then the barriers to student action projects were less significant. Why does a project-central approach lessen the barriers?
• Standards: Educators introduce concepts related to the study of the environment and then ask students to conduct deeper analysis as they attempt to understand the problem. This structure closely matches new educational standards (NGSS, VA SOL, etc.) that tend to emphasize process as much as content.

• Fitting within the school schedule: Since learning is more directly embedded within the development of the project, students spend less time “away” from their studies. The project becomes a way for students to study the interaction between humans and their environment - a central piece of new educational standards.

• Time: There is a time trade-off. Rather than spending time identifying a location, as well as partners and funds to support a project, educators focus on guiding a learning process. and Students lead the process of identifying what their project will entail and how they will complete it. Thus the project approach entails a different use of time rather than additional time.

An Action Civics orientation places student project development at the center of teaching about the environment. In doing so, it focuses educators on not just guiding students to learn about how they impact the environment, but also on how they can impact the environment through civic change. This process of students developing the tools for action is central to young people gaining what Hungerford & Volk (1990) call the Empowerment Variables (deep knowledge, intent, efficacy, and locus of control). These variables are what make the difference between an environmentally conscious person and an environmentally engaged citizen.

At Earth Force we have tested many other means to create engaged citizens. What we have found is that the intense process of civic engagement is necessary to create the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that young people need to become environmental citizens.

LITERATURE CITED


