

INTRODUCTION

“You can’t solve a problem if you can’t talk about it,” observes Beverly Tatum, president emerita of Spelman College.¹ Yet as our society faces a growing number of challenges, factors like loss of trust, hyper-polarization, and fraying of community bonds makes these issues increasingly difficult to discuss in a productive way. Whether trying to tackle racial injustice, climate change, violence, growing economic inequality, or other pressing issues, failure to engage in meaningful dialogue or sustained collaboration means that these challenges go unresolved—and actually grow more intractable.

These issues are examples of *wicked problems*—complex issues that can’t be solved with technical solutions or the usual way of doing business.² Wicked problems involve competing values, multiple perspectives, and tough tradeoffs. They are structural challenges without a simple cause and effect. And they are grounded in a history that reinforces the privileges of the status quo and systemically marginalizes powerless and underrepresented groups.

Responding to these interdependent challenges requires new ways of thinking and acting. It involves being aware of the historical exclusion and marginalization of many communities and tapping into the power of people who have been ignored or excluded from decision making. As Martín Carcasson notes, addressing wicked problems calls for a “deliberative mindset.” In his role as director of the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University, Carcasson finds that when people take a deliberative approach, they are able to “develop mutual understanding across perspectives, negotiate the underlying competing values, and invent, support, and constantly adapt collaborative actions.”³

The good news is that people are yearning for these kinds of relationship-based strategies, and there is a growing desire to engage in dialogue across differences. When people are invited to engage in civil discourse—sharing stories, learning from others’ perspectives, associating and organizing together, and planning for collaborative action—they become empowered to co-create knowledge, participate in joint decision making, and address wicked problems that affect us all.

The challenge has often been that most people are not sure how to get started. Practical knowledge about how to create spaces for solving problems through constructive dialogue is in short supply. Educators who are preparing the next generation of leaders to be able to facilitate civic solutions need hands-on tools to help them achieve that goal.

1. Quoted in “You Can’t Solve a Problem Unless You Talk About It: A Conversation About Race with Beverly Daniel Tatum,” *Wesleyan University Magazine*, August 1, 2017.

2. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber introduced the term “wicked problems” (as opposed to “tame” problems) in “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences*, 4, 1973.

3. Martín Carcasson, “Deliberative Pedagogy as Critical Connective.” In T.J. Shaffer, N.V. Longo, et al., (Eds.), *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement* (Michigan State University Press, 2017), p. 3.

What Is a Civic Professional?

This guide provides practical approaches and strategies for developing students' capacity to engage in collaborative, public problem solving. It provides tools for the next generation to facilitate inclusive and participatory processes that make a difference. The lessons here are designed to educate publicly engaged leaders, or *civic professionals*.

Cornell University professor Scott Peters explains, "What makes professionalism more or less 'civic' is not just the degree to which professionals' intentions can be shown to be 'public-regarding,' but the degree to which their practice can be shown to be so as well."⁴ This toolkit is meant to help future professionals learn to see themselves as actively engaged in the practice of democracy through their work.



Educating civic professionals is about democratizing professionals, not professionalizing citizenship.

As a strategy for education, this process is about democratizing professionals, not professionalizing citizenship. The aim is to help professionals learn to unleash the capacity of ordinary people and indigenous ways of knowing, and to infuse their work with public-facing, participatory engagement. ("Ordinary people" in this guide refers to those not trained as experts in a given field, although they have extraordinary talents and experiences that offer significant insight for understanding and addressing public challenges. Further, references to "citizenship" are used inclusively to describe the work of individuals who are building things of lasting democratic value, not connected to legal status.)

Civic professionals see the public nature of their work not as an add-on, but rather as a defining feature of their professional identity. Sometimes referred to as *democratic professionals* or *citizen professionals*, civic professionals make the connections between work and democratic citizenship explicit.⁵ They focus their professional energy on a public mission and use their technical competence to advance broader social purposes. They act in a deliberative way that enables them to share power, work collaboratively, and engage the public to address wicked problems.

4. Scott Peters, "Educating the Civic Professional: Reconfigurations and Resistances," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall 2004, p. 48.

5. See Recommended Readings for thought leaders in this area, especially Harry Boyte on the concept of citizen professionalism and Albert Dzur on democratic professionalism in fields such as education, criminal justice, public administration, and health care.



CIVIC PROFESSIONALS AIM TO:

- 🌟 Listen to local knowledge
- 🌟 Share tasks
- 🌟 Catalyze public participation among diverse communities
- 🌟 Facilitate constructive dialogue
- 🌟 Create a sense of inclusion and belonging
- 🌟 Recognize community assets
- 🌟 Empower marginalized and underrepresented voices
- 🌟 Improvise with creative and innovative responses
- 🌟 Learn as much as teach
- 🌟 Serve the public

Civic professionals shift from acting as outside experts tasked with fixing problems *for* people to working collaboratively *with* people in local communities. Harry Boyte, a public intellectual who helped develop this concept, offers what this public work approach to professional life means in practice. Boyte finds that when professionals see themselves as citizens focused on engaging the public, those in fields as diverse as public administration, STEM, art, and the humanities “pay close attention to what their disciplines and professions can contribute to advance the well-being of communities and society.”⁶

By taking on public purposes that go beyond disciplinary knowledge, civic professionals see themselves as more than technically proficient and competent experts in narrow fields of study. As publicly engaged practitioners who act as catalysts and co-creators, they seek to enlist the lived experiences of people who are often seen as customers or clients in public life. Civic professionals find ways to meaningfully engage the people affected by an issue, seeing them as partners in deliberative processes, knowledge creation, and collaborative work.

Albert Dzur, distinguished professor at Bowling Green State University, notes that professionals who act democratically “share previously professionalized tasks and encourage lay participation in ways that enhance and enable collective action and deliberation about major social issues inside and outside professional domains.”

6. Harry C. Boyte, “Repairing America’s Roots—Citizen Professionals and the Commonwealth,” presented at the Beyond Civility Conference, Southeastern University Florida, December 10, 2020.

Along with using their “professional training, capabilities, and authority to help people solve problems together,” working democratically allows professionals to more authentically “recognize the kinds of problems they need to solve.”⁷

Acting as a civic professional, then, means regarding ordinary people’s experiences, knowledge, and judgment as critical to addressing complex challenges that are all too often seen as strictly professional issues to be solved by “experts.” Future professionals will need to grapple with the complex dynamics and tensions between technical expertise and public participation. “Decisions made through social consensus may not be technically feasible or fast,” as noted in a recent case study on public participation in climate planning for New York City; but on the flip side, “decisions made solely through appeals to ‘mechanical objectivity’ and expert judgement may find no political legitimacy and produce strong resistance.”⁸



Civic professionals need to reverse power dynamics by learning to act as experts “on tap, not on top.”

Given the tensions between expertise and public participation, democracies need to develop robust processes for decision making across multiple and competing dimensions. Using the Covid-19 pandemic as a case study, Harvard University professor Danielle Allen compares publicly engaged leaders to symphony conductors, able to “activate the different instruments needed for judgments across many dimensions simultaneously, and to weave those different instruments together into an integrated whole.”⁹ This is the work of facilitating civic solutions that we need to infuse into the education of future leaders.

7. Albert W. Dzur, “What Is a Democratic Professional?” *Kettering Review*, 35, Winter 2019, p. 14.

8. Malcolm Araos, “Democracy Underwater: Public Participation and Technical Expertise in Climate Infrastructure Planning in New York City,” *Theory and Society*, November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-021-09459-9>

9. Danielle Allen, “Democracy in a Time of Coronavirus,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, 62, 2021.

Why Now? Opportunity for Change

A civic approach to professional life is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy—the foundation of which is starting to crumble due to public distrust in government and attacks on democratic institutions. Recent studies show that just 20% of Americans trust the government to “do the right thing,” and a majority are dissatisfied with our democratic system of government.¹⁰ This distrust is especially pronounced among our future leaders: a recent poll from Harvard’s Institute of Politics found that more than half of 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed think democracy in the United States is under threat, with only 7% viewing the country as a “healthy democracy.” Further, the country has become so polarized that over a third of young people surveyed think they may see a civil war within their lifetimes.¹¹

Crisis, however, presents opportunity for change, including experimenting with new ways of practicing—and educating for—democracy. Auspiciously, there has been a growth in the use of deliberative practices in public life. Many are taking note of the idea that communities can make significant progress on wicked problems when ordinary people are at the center of decision making. This realization has led a growing number of public officials, school administrators, and other traditional decision makers to acknowledge that public problems are too complex for them to resolve alone. They are increasingly reaching out and convening diverse groups of community residents and organizations to identify issues and to develop and implement strategies for addressing them.

This kind of engagement goes beyond simply asking residents for “input” or involving only select groups of people in decision making. It is intentional about seeing residents as active and productive partners in all aspects of planning, implementing, and assessing efforts to strengthen communities. A growing number of urban planning, political, environmental, and, of course, educational groups are exploring and advocating for citizen-centered approaches to a wide range of public problems, from community revitalization to environmental sustainability. Leading funders, such as the Ford Foundation, have even begun to develop deliberative processes to involve stakeholders in every aspect of funding decisions through participatory grantmaking.

In many communities, groups have convened citizen-led deliberations that have produced a set of public priorities that are now becoming more formalized. Participatory budgeting, for instance, is growing as a way to make decisions about the use of public funds, spreading to more than 7,000 cities around the world since its inception in Brazil in the late 1980s. As a result, cities and towns are opening the doors of their libraries and school gyms to bring people together to share stories, negotiate diverse interests, and identify common goals.¹²

10. Pew Research Center, “Americans’ View of Government,” 2020; “Satisfaction with Democracy,” 2020.

11. Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School, “Harvard IOP Youth Poll,” Fall 2021.

12. See www.peoplepowered.org, a global hub for participatory democracy.

Educating civic professionals is about developing the capacity of future leaders to engage in these kinds of participatory practices and mobilize stakeholders to solve problems together. By working collaboratively, experts and ordinary people take on broader public identities and develop democratic skills.



This guide is a small piece of the much larger effort to make democracy work as it should.

To meet this moment of opportunity, education institutions need a more participatory and deliberative pedagogy to guide a new generation of leaders in re-imagining professional practice. As they begin to see themselves as facilitators of inclusive and equitable public engagement, these civic professionals will be able to tap into local assets and empower communities to engage in the kind of collaborative problem solving that can be most effective at finding civic solutions.

Author and activist adrienne maree brown describes this type of collaborative, facilitative work as “holding change.” Holding change is the capacity to “hold both the people in, and the dynamic energy of, a room, a space, a meeting, an organization, a movement.” Drawing on her work with Black organizers, feminists, climate activists, and others, brown describes the importance of facilitating and mediating communities “to change the world and generate justice and liberation.” She writes that:

“Facilitation is making it as easy as possible for groups of people to do the hard work of dreaming, planning, visioning, and organizing together; and mediation is supporting people when conflicts or misunderstandings arise that make it hard for them to hear and understand each other in direct conversation.”¹³

In this spirit, this toolkit provides prompts and strategies for facilitating collaborative work, cultivating awareness of the interests and perspectives of others, and navigating situations without easy answers. This guide can thus be seen as a small piece of the much larger effort to make democracy work as it should.

13. adrienne maree brown, *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*, AK Press, 2021, p. 7.

Engaging Students through Civic Prompts

Practicing Democracy contains practical materials developed in collaboration with democratic-minded educators, student colleagues, and community practitioners. These materials serve as civic prompts, or conversation starters for deliberative dialogues and critical reflection. Significant is that students, in particular, played a key role in conceptualizing and refining these sets of resources (see “Developing This Guide” on page 12-13), as the lessons have generated enthusiastic responses in a diverse set of classroom and community learning spaces.

Students consistently engage with questions around civic professionalism with depth, curiosity, and agility. The civic prompts in this guide have inspired lively conversations and thoughtful reflections on how students can take these lessons into their professional and community lives. Two examples from widely differing higher education institutions highlight the multiple perspectives students bring to the topics presented in the civic prompts, along with the value students find in this pedagogical approach.

In using prompts to explore the concept of civic professionalism, students at Providence College—mainly traditional 18- to 22-year-old students coming directly from high school—tend to demonstrate an idealism with little context from the professional world. Yet they have ample experience with power and powerlessness in institutional settings, and they are eager to re-imagine the world of work to meet the challenges their generation faces. As a result, they welcome new ways of collaborating and engaging the public, using technology to improve communication and increase transparency, and making a difference in the world they will inherit.

One Global Studies student in a capstone course that helped develop the civic prompts in this toolkit offers insight into how this experience can shape thinking about new approaches to professional work:

“If we are looking to create community based on equity and justice, we need to imagine new systems. A lack of imagination will stifle this process. Developing a capacity to draw on different strengths will be the way to empower individuals and ensure collective action; we will not make headway against the tide unless we all row together. Instead of being detached experts who talk at people, we need to find creative ways to inspire dialogue.”

Civic prompts also invite students to think about how to address the challenges inherent in attempting to change institutions, especially as early-career professionals. In discussing this issue, one student raises critical questions to peers about entering the workplace: “How can we enter a space that has become professionalized and create dialogue with other workers about democratizing the space? How do we engage in these conversations as new employees who are also new to the working world?”

At College Unbound, a newly accredited college for adult learners, students typically work full time and see their degree as a way to advance economically from low-income backgrounds. Many have firsthand experience with outside experts coming into their neighborhoods with the intention of helping but then ignoring the voices and knowledge of community members. One student, a long-time community resident who works as an administrative assistant at a local high school, reflects on having professionals arrive to “fix” community problems:

“Professional experts would come in, research and study our community, and come back with solutions they felt were the best solutions. Their conclusions and ideas were framed by a look into our community from the outside. They would talk to us, about us, without us.... It has never felt true to the feeling of what was really going on because there was never a connection with the professional coming from the outside. It felt fake.”


For these adult learners, the idea of civic professionalism offers an alternative approach that, in their words, “just makes more sense” and would be “truer to the reality we live in.” Although they have had few experiences with these kinds of participatory practices, they recognize the benefits of engaging a community that feels the direct impact of an issue. They note that this approach offers “a connection” and an “exchange of ideas and experiences,” and encourages community members “to be part of the solution and decision making.”

One College Unbound student puts it this way: “If I have lifelong experiences of situations that affect me and my community, I may also have ideas and proposals that can help solve them.” The student concludes with hopes echoed by other students across different contexts about the possibility in power sharing, reciprocity, and collaboration between community members and professionals “working together to make change.”

Using the Civic Prompts in This Toolkit

Building on these experiments with a diverse group of learners, this guide provides tools for educators to create space for reflective practice, dialogue, and learning. These civic prompts are meant to help emerging professionals and community leaders (re)imagine how identities, values, interests, collaborative strategies, and public engagement might shape new ways of addressing the complex challenges that are likely to arise in public work.

Practicing Democracy is divided into 12 lessons, along with an assessment rubric. The activities in each lesson focus on supporting the next generation of leaders in developing their own concepts and skills of civic professionalism. They are designed to encourage critical engagement and sustained dialogue among groups of students from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. The guide is unique in that it is designed to provide a pathway to civic learning for students in all majors.



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Each lesson includes guidance for an educational experience set up in 75-minute increments. These activities are part of a sequential, developmental curriculum that can be used either as stand-alone lessons or as part of a semester-long seminar. They are also designed to be used in conjunction with other learning resources, such as relevant readings, films, or other activities. The assessment and reflection rubric provided after the lesson plans may be used throughout the curriculum to gauge students' progress toward mastery of the concepts in the toolkit.

Educators using this toolkit are strongly encouraged to be creative! Facilitators should act as citizen teachers, modeling the type of engagement they hope to catalyze among future civic professionals. This entails being authentic in responding to students, adapting or expanding on the ideas in this guide, and prioritizing the lived experiences of a given learning community. In this process, no doubt, the guide will become more robust, engaging, and participatory. After all, it takes a village to educate a citizen.

Lessons are divided into sub-sections that indicate the ways the activities are responding to the broader aim of educating civic professionals. These include Shaping Culture, Developing Concepts, Building Skills, Putting It into Practice, and Assessment and Reflection.

Creating Space for Democracy in Education

This toolkit is a timely resource to help prepare the next generation to address the fundamental challenges we face. In these times of crisis, we need to revitalize democracy by practicing democracy. With civic prompts such as readings, storytelling, dialogue and deliberation, case studies, situational analysis, team-building activities, and other facilitation materials for student engagement in a variety of settings, this guide provides ideas and resources for educators interested in creating space for democracy.

When professionals are able to think and act in publicly engaged ways, the likelihood of progress toward solving problems increases dramatically. This type of democratic engagement also has the potential to (re)build trust in public institutions, helping these powerful forces in our society become more equitable, transparent, and responsive. For citizens, communities, and institutions to be transformed, emerging leaders need the habits and skills to engage the public as democratic, civic professionals.

This toolkit is designed as a living document. It enables educators, students, and community practitioners to experiment with what works in practice when educating for democracy. It is meant to begin conversations and foster experimentation to educate a new generation of leaders with the capacity to facilitate civic solutions for the most difficult problems.

DEVELOPING THIS GUIDE

Practicing Democracy was initially inspired and supported by conversations in an ongoing research exchange convened by the Kettering Foundation, starting in 2018. This research method is known for its “devotion to framing questions, engaging everyday citizens in the work of answering those questions, encouraging them to work across lines of difference and disagreement.”¹⁴ This meant bringing together a diverse and talented group of scholars and practitioners exploring the question: How can educators prepare students to become civic-minded professionals?


The research process introduced a vast literature on civic professionalism that underscored the need for advancing a pedagogy that makes public engagement with communities possible not only in theory, but in practice. “Post-secondary professional training is often structured in ways that promote separation rather than collaboration between professionals and the public,” writes Alex Lovit, the program officer who convened the group, as a reflection of the Kettering Foundation’s research findings.¹⁵ With this insight about the importance of embedding constructive conversations into teaching and learning, this research group is building on the findings of an earlier research exchange exploring a form of civic education we have termed *deliberative pedagogy*.¹⁶

With a focus on the pedagogy for future democratic leaders, the civic prompts in the guide were developed in a series of courses, workshops, and conversations with undergraduate students, K-12 teachers, adult learners, and community practitioners. The toolkit is meant to help educators incorporate civic learning across the curriculum.

14. Sharon Davies, “A Few Thoughts on Democracy,” Kettering Foundation Blog Post (April 18, 2022).

15. Alex Lovit, “Educating for Civic Professionalism” Kettering Foundation memo for July 15, 2020 Research Exchange.

16. See the Deliberative Pedagogy Lab for resources on this civic education research at <https://www.deliberativepedagogy.org/>



This approach emerged from my work co-directing the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab, where we aim to develop a practical philosophy of “what works” to critically engage with complex issues and disputed questions with support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. I also conducted workshops as a national field leader for the Bonner Foundation around these themes, and have seen the power of collaborative approaches to community engagement through a local place-based community engagement project with Brown University and College Unbound, supported by Bringing Theory to Practice.

I saw new models of professionalism emerge in unlikely places, such as in interviews with local artists as part of an interdisciplinary action research projects on the Arts of Community Renewal, which illuminated the importance of engaging the public through the arts and creativity in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

I further refined these materials through my own experiments in teaching. This included assignments in undergraduate courses on leadership, dialogue, and community engagement at Providence College. I was also able to workshop these materials with adult learners who brought extensive community experiences to the classroom in several courses on community leadership at College Unbound.

My role as a faculty advisor for AAC&U’s Civic Prompts in the Major project was invaluable in developing this guide. This publication is also anchoring my work as a deliberative dialogue fellow at Campus Compact. Campus Compact and AAC&U have been essential leaders in higher education, and important partners who have seen the value of bringing this resource to fruition.

This guide has been a collaborative endeavor. My hope is that these civic prompts will help to catalyze constructive conversations in democratic spaces across educational settings. This co-creative process involves learning communities coming alive in new and adaptive ways—leading to a new generation of professionals filled with democratic possibility.

Nicholas V. Longo

