Is Low Civic Literacy a Wicked Problem?

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Abstract

In 1973, Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber published an influential article on the nature of social problems. Titled "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," the article focused upon the difficulty of solving what the authors called "wicked problems," and it triggered an ongoing scholarly discussion about the nature of such problems and the differences between efforts to craft social policies and the "tamer," more linear approaches appropriate to the solution of scientific problems.

Given the robust literature documenting U.S. citizens' persistent deficit of civic knowledge, it is reasonable to ask whether low civic literacy should be categorized as a "wicked problem" and approached from that perspective. This article considers this question and the implications of such a categorization.

Keywords: civic literacy, civic education, public affairs

Is Low Civic Literacy a Wicked Problem?

In 1973, Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber published an influential article on the nature of social problems. Titled "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," the article focused upon the difficulty of solving what the authors dubbed "wicked problems," and it triggered an ongoing scholarly discussion about the nature of such problems and the differences between efforts to craft social policies addressing them and the "tamer," more linear approaches appropriate to the solution of scientific problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

As Rittel and Webber (1973) defined them, stubborn, or "wicked," problems are those implicating value judgments and perceptions of equity. Given the pluralist nature of contemporary democratic societies, those values and perceptions will be heterogeneous, making agreement even around policy goals a contested exercise. Furthermore, wicked problems are by definition systemic, and efforts to address them will have "waves of repercussions that ripple through such systemic networks" (p. 156).

> One of the most intractable problems is that of defining problems (of knowing what distinguishes an observed condition from a desired condition) and of locating problems (finding where in the complex causal networks the trouble really lies). In turn, and equally intractable, is the problem of identifying the actions that might effectively narrow the gap between what-is and what-ought-to-be. (p. 159)

Rittel and Webber (1973) identified 10 characteristics of wicked problems, and subsequent scholarship has elaborated on them (Conklin, 2001; Richey, 2005, 2011; Weber & Khademian, 2008). Indeed, a robust and widely diverse scholarly literature has developed in which the notion of problem "wickedness" has been applied to everything from ecological challenges and environmental degradation (Brennan, 2004; Frame, 2008; Frame & Brown, 2008; McKinney & Harmon, 2004; Rayner, 2006), to business and manufacturing (Camillus, 2008; Conklin, 2005; Powell, Kopet, & Smith-Doerr, 1996), to democracy, citizenship, and politics (Barabas, Jerit, Pollock, & Rainey, 2014; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Mathews, 2008) to public administration and governance (Agranoff & McGuire, 1998; Bardach, 2001; Evans, 2000; Feldman & Khademian, 2002; Head & Alford, 2013; Kettl, 2002, 2003; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000) to general

organizational theory (Behn, 1998; Kedia & Mukherji, 1999; Susskind, McKearnan, &Thomas-Larmer, 1999), among many others.

Particularly relevant to the problem of "wickedness" is network theory, the literature around which has grown significantly since the introduction of the "wicked problems" concept. As Weber and Khademian (2008) have documented, the study of networks has augmented—and arguably is replacing—prior scholarship focused on hierarchies and markets. Networks have come to be seen as effective means of addressing complex problems and achieving collective goals (Kickert, Klijn, & Kippenjan, 1997; Peters, 2001; Podolny & Page, 1998; Powell, Kopet, & Smith-Doerr, 1996). In this context, Weber and Khademian defined effectiveness as collaborative capacity, improved policy performance, and accountability, and argued that addressing the special attributes of "wicked problems" requires the sorts of collaboration and knowledge sharing that networks make possible.

While the literature of network theory has expanded considerably, scholarship applying the concept of problem wickedness to education in general and citizenship education specifically has remained relatively sparse. Educators and educational philosophers have begun to investigate the intersection of growing complexity and the transmission of civic knowledge (Boyd et al., 2005; Gilbert, 2005; Hipkins, 2010; Kress, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) but none has applied the lens of "wickedness" to the specific challenges of civic education.

In order to determine whether the transmission of civic knowledge is a wicked problem and whether the stubbornly low levels of American civic literacy can properly be categorized as "wicked," it is necessary to determine how many of the problems faced by civic educators match the characteristics of wickedness enumerated by Rittel and Webber (1973).

A caveat is important here: Most wicked problems will not exhibit all 10 of the defining characteristics that Rittel and Webber (1973) assigned to wickedness. Scholars agree, however, that the greater the number of such characteristics, the "wickeder" the problem. The elements of wicked problems, as Rittel and Webber catalogued them, are: no agreed-upon formulation/definition of the problem; no "stopping rule" (i.e., solutions can always get better); solutions will not be true or false but rather good or bad; there is no immediate and no ultimate test of solutions; every solution is a "one-shot" because there is no

opportunity to learn by trial and error; there is no enumerable or exhaustively describable set of potential solutions; every wicked problem is essentially unique; every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem; discrepancies can be explained in numerous ways; and the planner (or problem solver) has no right to be wrong.

> So what is the problem that the term "wicked problem" [WPs] addresses? The common sense approach to WPs is fairly straightforward: … WPs are about people—the most "complex adaptive systems" that we know of. They are subjective problems. Everything that has to do with people and society is ultimately subjective. Above all, WPs are about people as stakeholders: competing and cooperating, vying for position, willing to reflect, and to change their positions on the basis of this self-reflection. This is why such problems do not have stable problem formulations; do not have pre-defined solution concepts; and why their course of development cannot be predicted. This is also why attempting to causally model or simulate the paths of development of such problem complexes is often worse than useless. (Richey 2005)

Weber and Khademian (2008) offered a somewhat abridged description of the elements of wickedness, summarizing the more elaborate 10-characteristic typology offered by Rittel and Webber (1973) into three major tenets: wicked problems are unstructured (their precise causes and effects are difficult to isolate, the problem-solving process is fluid, and there is little or no consensus around problem definition or solutions); they are cross-cutting (having multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives, requiring trade-offs among competing values); and, above all, they are relentless (there is no finish line).

Civic Literacy and Civic Skills

In this analysis, civic literacy refers to knowledge of United States history and governing philosophy and structures. It differs from the sort of "civic intelligence" addressed by Schuler (2014) and others, and indeed would seem far more concrete than the social impairments that work against achievement of such civic intelligence.

At first blush, low civic literacy, defined as widespread ignorance of basic civic knowledge, would not seem to be a wicked problem. If people lack information about their history and governmental structures or lack the tools to

understand the roots and/or nature of the issues they face, the solution seems simple enough: They should be educated and provided with this information and those tools, preferably in school. It is only when one looks more closely at the nature of the problem that one begins to understand the multiple ways in which the challenge presented by the deficit of civic knowledge may be wicked. To begin with, the educational process itself has multiple characteristics of wickedness:

> For example, it's often said that the education problem can't be solved until the poverty problem is addressed. These two problems are intertwined not only with each other, but with many other social issues such as crime, child care, health care, and unemployment. These entangled problems are made even more complex because they are values-laden. It's impossible for everyone to reach consensus about how they should be addressed. There is no right or wrong answer, and each attempted solution will give rise to other anticipated, unanticipated, and delayed wicked problems. Furthermore, each wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another wicked problem because of their interconnectedness. Wicked problems are never solved once and for all, just re-solved over and over again. Hence, the current state of affairs in education. (McMahon, 2011)

When scholars and practitioners focus upon education in service of civic participation, they encounter still other aspects of wickedness. Although there is significant debate about causation—regarding which comes first: lack of knowledge or lack of engagement—there is substantial evidence of the correlation between civic ignorance and civic apathy and disengagement (Delli Caprini, Keeter, & Scott, 1996; Levine, 2011).

There is also ample research confirming the existence of what has been called a "civic deficit" (Delli Caprini et al., 1996; Fleming, 2012; Galston, 2001, 2004, 2007; Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2008, 2011; Levine, 2011; Schudson, 2000; Torra & Novarro, 2008). A recent blog post from the Center for Civic Literacy summarizes some of that research:

> Only 36 percent of Americans can name the three branches of government. Fewer than half of 12th grade students can describe the meaning of federalism. Only 35% of teenagers can identify "We the

People" as the first three words of the Constitution. Fifty-eight percent of Americans can't identify a single department in the United States Cabinet. Only 5% of high school seniors can identify checks on presidential power, only 43% could name the two major political parties, only 11% knew the length of a Senator's term, and only 23% could name the first President of the United States (Kennedy, 2015).

In What Way is Civic Literacy a "Wicked" Problem?

Existing research on civic knowledge confirms that deficits in civic literacy are real; however, that research also displays the heterogeneous value commitments identified by Rittel and Webber (1973). There is no agreement, for example, on the definition, causes, or consequences of the problem. In some cases, there is disagreement about whether this lack of knowledge should even be considered a problem; a number of researchers dismiss the importance of content knowledge, asserting that cultural attitudes are more important. Others question whether low levels of political participation are in fact attributable to civic ignorance, suggesting that apathy and even satisfaction with the status quo are more likely to explain a lack of civic engagement (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Galston, 2004).

Among those who believe that this lack of basic civic information is a genuine problem, there is no consensus on the content with which a minimally literate citizen should be familiar. American history? The Constitution? What about basic economic or scientific principles necessary for understanding current events (Kennedy, 2013)? And what about those current events? Should a civically literate American know the names and partisan affiliations of at least high-ranking elected officials? The names and locations of countries with which we are at war? The identities of sitting Supreme Court justices? Scholars are deeply divided over the value of such knowledge, with some dismissing it as trivia not reflective of or necessary to a genuine understanding of the operation of our democratic system, and others arguing that truly engaged or informed citizens will inevitably acquire such information.

Not only is there substantial disagreement on the nature of the information necessary for informed participation in the democratic process, Americans' value heterogeneity challenges efforts to even reach consensus on the meaning of that content widely agreed to be an essential element of civic knowledge. This is

especially true with respect to our basic legal structure. The Bill of Rights, in particular, is a statement of broad principles, and the proper application of many of those principles to new and emerging "facts on the ground" has historically been contested even by legal scholars. What has been called "constitutional competence" (Rosenbloom, 2000) is further challenged by partisans and outright propagandists who seek to exploit the inherently contestable nature of constitutional language in order to advance ideological or religious agendas. This means that even in areas where there is broad agreement about the sorts of basic civic knowledge citizenship requires, there is considerable dispute over the proper ways to understand those principles and the ways in which civics should be taught. In Oklahoma, for example, lawmakers in 2014 threatened to defund Advanced Placement American History courses because they deemed the new curriculum, which emphasized critical thinking, insufficiently "pro-American." Conservative critics attacked the new course guidelines, charging that the increased inclusion of negative episodes constituted "rewriting American history" in ways that undercut the purpose of teaching that history.

If one judges civic competence according to participation rather than knowledge, what should count as adequate engagement? Voting in a presidential election but not a municipal one? Working with one's neighbors to solve a problem? Attending a public hearing? Donating to or volunteering with a political campaign, or working with a nonprofit organization to solve a civic problem (a metric used in state-level civic health surveys)? Furthermore, in each of these cases, how do we assess the adequacy of engagement? Should voting and other political participation "count" more than donating to a cause or doing volunteer work for one's church? Should the amount of the donation or the duration of the volunteer effort factor into the evaluation? What "grade" is to be deemed sufficient? What about clearly uninformed or destructive participation—say, membership in the Ku Klux Klan or in a "volunteer" militia patrolling the border?

As noted above, research does support the contention that civic knowledge and civic engagement are highly correlated (Delli Caprini et al., 1996; Milner, 2002), but the relative contribution of each is speculative, as is the question of causation. Are more knowledgeable citizens more likely to become civically involved, or does civic involvement lead to a more complete and accurate understanding of the way in which our democracy works (or doesn't)?

If there is little agreement on the nature and extent of the deficit, there is even less on its causes. Critics of public education accuse schools and teachers of poor performance, of which civics is only a part; defenders point to the current emphasis on STEM subjects, No Child Left Behind, and the increasing conflation of education with job training as major reasons schools have little time for civics. Civics and social studies teachers maintain that the current emphasis on high-stakes testing inevitably means that teachers and students alike will emphasize those areas of the curriculum that are subject to testing; they note that civics is rarely one of the areas tested. Sociologists and political scientists point to socioeconomic factors; indeed, the gaps in civic knowledge between poor children and those from more affluent families are similar to the gaps that characterize disparate performance levels in other subjects (Diemer, 2012).

Still other observers focus on the fragmentation of contemporary media and its tendency to feed a popular culture that emphasizes celebrities and sports figures, rewards sensationalism, and increasingly lacks the resources to provide serious investigative reporting on matters of public concern. Recent research by the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service (home to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, a preeminent resource for research on civic learning) has focused on the question of whether and how the news media might impact broad democratic practices. Other explanations for low civic engagement include economic factors; observers note that low-income Americans are working increasing hours just to put food on their tables and lack the time to participate in civic and political matters. Although such time constraints are undeniably real, it remains true that few of those Americans are motivated to devote what leisure time they do have to civic enterprises.

Further complicating the issue of low civic literacy is the fact that all of these explanations, and many others that have been proposed, are interrelated. Economic inequality sends children to schools of very uneven quality. Our inability to agree on the content, methodology, or institutional arrangements leading to effective public education produces very different results even in schools serving so-called "privileged" communities. The lack of a sound educational grounding drives media choices, and media outlets competing for "eyeballs" offer entertainment and (often) propaganda intended to appeal to increasingly segmented audiences—a problem exacerbated by the increasing use

of sophisticated algorithms to deliver "relevant" information over the Internet (Pariser, 2011) and by America's persistent thread of anti-intellectualism.

Wicked problems have multiple stakeholders representing multiple and frequently inconsistent values. This is certainly the case with civic literacy; stakeholders include the aforementioned public school teachers and administrators, education reform activists, lawyers, political pundits, elected officials and public managers at various governmental levels, journalists, and citizens working for particular policy outcomes or to redress perceived grievances. Many of these stakeholders represent disciplines utilizing specialized languages and professional terminologies, thereby complicating communication. Furthermore, value diversity means that solutions—or at least improvements—acceptable to some stakeholders will be unacceptable to others. In the Oklahoma example cited previously, stakeholders presumably agreed that "American exceptionalism" should be taught, but they disagreed profoundly on its definition and importance.

Additionally, as Rittel and Webber (1973) noted, professionals of various fields laying claim to superior knowledge or expertise can expect considerable resistance from members of the general public, or laity, who tend to be resentful of such claims and suspicious of "elites," especially academic ones. This heterogeneity of stakeholders is further complicated by the structural relationships among them.

Civic literacy deficits exhibit three other elements of "wickedness": There are no "stopping rules" because the problem of a civically illiterate population cannot be definitively solved; solutions are unlikely to be true or false, only better or worse; and there is no immediate or ultimate test of a solution.

What To Do

"Tame" problems can be solved by employing linear processes: One defines the problem, identifies potential solutions together with their strengths and weaknesses, and chooses the remedy that seems best. With efforts to improve civic literacy, however, proceeding in that fashion leads to what has been called "analysis paralysis"—that is, repeated studies that simply confirm the widespread lack of civic knowledge. Stakeholders can't act to address the problem until there is more information, but that information isn't available until someone acts. In the case of civic literacy, analysis paralysis has resulted in a copious literature

confirming the existence of a deficit and a less robust literature offering theoretical approaches to remedying that deficit, not to mention actual programmatic efforts.

If civic literacy is a wicked problem, researchers and educators have no choice but to act, to try different solutions that will help to better understand the nature of the problem, and evaluate the results of efforts to address it. This is not a risk-free strategy; as Ritchey (2005) has written, "*every* implemented solution is consequential. It leaves 'traces' that cannot be undone … And every attempt to reverse a decision or correct for undesired consequences poses yet another set of wicked problems." This is self-evidently true of any individual program or attempted intervention. However, a new approach to content delivery in a classroom, a new state standard for civics instruction, an effort to improve public understanding of local government, or similar efforts can be immensely instructive—whether it succeeds or fails. It is here, I argue, that civic literacy differs from many other wicked problems and arguably becomes less wicked. Rittel and Webber (1973) noted that "one cannot build a freeway to see if it works." Yet civic education is not comparable to a freeway or a newly designed car (a metaphor used by Conklin [2005]). Proposed solutions need not exclude other potential solutions, nor do they require the expenditure of massive amounts of money. Pilot programs can be conceived and their results evaluated; those with promise can be adapted or replicated.

A central insight of Rittel and Webber (1973) was that substantially wicked problems can only be approached through an iterative process that sheds needed light on the nature of the problem at the same time as it is tries to improve the situation. The nature of the civic deficit allows for the use of a wide variety of approaches employing such a process.

In order to engage in this trial-and-error methodology, however, one must address the elements of wickedness that have led to the current analysis paralysis. At a minimum, stakeholders must work together to first create a shared and much more widespread and public understanding of the problem and its consequences. Then they must foster a shared commitment to the broad goal of improving civic knowledge, all while recognizing the partial and tentative nature of that understanding and the high probability that the goalposts will move—probably more than once.

Rittel and Webber's (1973) original identification of wicked problems, and their enumeration of the thorny challenges such problems represent, was not intended to dissuade attempts to solve social problems. It was not a counsel of surrender. It was an analytic tool distinguishing between different kinds of challenges, confirming the contours and difficulties of certain of those challenges, and warning us away from obvious pitfalls.

If the literature on wicked problems confirms anything, it is that most social problems are wicked to a greater or lesser extent. Recognizing that fact does not relieve anyone of the obligation to work for their (more-or-less) satisfactory resolution.

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