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Saving democracy in the classroom

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For this nation to survive as a self-governing republic, we need to motivate our public-school students to become active, knowledgeable, critical-thinking citizens.

Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (a renowned education foundation), frames the challenge: "Today's students must experience, debate, understand and argue about what it means to be a citizen. There is no better place to transmit the ideas -- and the challenges -- inherent in our democracy.

Showing what it takes for this to happen in schools is Diana Hess, a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In "Discussions That Drive Democracy," she insists: "Discussing controversies about the nature of the public good and how to achieve it is essential if we are to educate for democracy."

Among the examples she gives: "Should the federal government grant amnesty to people living in the country without legal documents? Should my state guarantee health care to all its residents?"

These kinds of interactive discussions cannot come into being by teaching only for standardized tests. These are town meetings, of which there ought to be many more for adults, as well. In the classroom, Hess continues:

"Often, highly debatable issues are directly linked to the lives of students in our classrooms. Students need to recognize that their views matter -- not because there is something special about young people, but precisely because there is not. Their views matter because all views matter in a democracy."

She then emphasizes why now in America there is a special need for students to think about and express their views and become aware of other students' questions and convictions.

American adults, she writes, "increasingly interact and socialize in ideologically homogeneous communities. ... People increasingly talk primarily with people who

already share their views, access media that reinforce what they already believe, and ruminate on what they hear within an echo chamber of like-mindedness."

When I was teaching graduate-level journalism at New York University, I would begin by telling the students: "If you are a reader of *The Nation* or *The New Republic* or similar liberal publications, you must also become familiar with the views and news analyses in *The National Review* and *The Weekly Standard*."

I also gave each student pocket-size editions of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence because both of those founding documents should often be in the rhythm section of the symphonies that are our classroom discussions and debates.

Were I still teaching, the required-reading list would begin with the book "Controversy In The Classroom" (Routledge, 2009) by Diana Hess. In her introduction, she tells of visiting a U.S. history class "at a public charter school in a large Midwestern city." Involved in a debate on whether abortion should be legal or illegal in the United States were 19 juniors: "Half were African-American, the other half Latino -- a composition that mirrored almost exactly the student population of the school. Almost all of the students were from poor families with only one parent or guardian at home.

"The students were not engaging in the class discussions to win over or beat up on their peers." Speaking of their teacher, one student told her: "Mr. Dunn really gives us a chance to say what we believe and he gives us space to voice our opinions. His classroom gives us space so our opinions aren't shut out ... (and) where we can all work together and figure out a problem. ... I enjoy it a lot."

As rocky as our economy is and will continue to be for some time, there is no financial cost in bringing active democracy into public- and private-school classrooms.

In "Discussions That Drive Democracy," Hess shows the way for teachers and school systems -- through their students -- to nourish the self-identity of this self-governing republic:

"I encourage teachers to take up the challenge of teaching students how to deliberate controversies by creating a climate of respect, holding students accountable for norms of civil discourse, and teaching the skills at the root of civil exchanges. Each teacher will find his or her own best way to accept this challenge, depending on the unique community and -- possibly -- local obstacles.

"But each must start by showing respect for students and for the intrinsic relationship between controversy and democracy."

Abraham Lincoln, not yet president, described in 1858 the root of "our own liberty and independence. It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. These are not our reliance against a resumption of tyranny in our fair land. ... Our reliance is the love of

liberty. ... Destroy this spirit, and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors." (my book, "Living the Bill of Rights," University of California Press, 1999).

Students experience the love of liberty by learning to be actively engaged citizens in their classrooms. And as they come to vote in our elections, they will invigorate our democracy through their knowledgeable independence.