

Civics and Citizenship in Australia

Discovering Democracy – A Civics and Citizenship Program for the Adult and Community Sector

Background

For many years concern has been expressed at the low levels of civic understanding found among all sections of the Australian community. It is important as an Australian citizen to understand how our society works and the democratic principles that guide us. It is also vital to understand how we, as responsible individuals, can contribute to a better future.

In 1997 to 2000 the Commonwealth Government funded a civics and citizenship education program (\$18 million) under the '*Discovering Democracy*' program. The program's objective was to help people develop an understanding of the history and operations of Australia's system of government and the principles that support Australian democracy. The Discovery Democracy program deals with civics and citizenship education. Civics education involves the kinds of knowledge and skills that are necessary for informed and responsible citizenship.

The funding provided resources and activities for adult and community education groups, schools, teachers, principals, parents and universities. In May 2000 the Commonwealth committed a further \$13.4 million to extend the program for another four years, to June 2004. The main purpose of this funding is to help embed the program in Australian schools.

All States and Territories schools now have curriculum frameworks which, in one way or another, include civics and citizenship, usually through the learning area of Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE). SOSE includes history, geography, business education, social education and environmental studies.

All Education Ministers (Australian Government, State and Territory) have endorsed National Goals for Schooling, which include the goal that students, when they leave school, should "be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life". Education ministers have also agreed to the development of student performance indicators for civics and citizenship education. Civics and citizenship will be the fourth area to be tested nationally in Australia (after literacy, numeracy and science). Assessment will be through a representative national sample survey of Year 6 and Year 10 students. The first survey will take place in 2004.¹

¹NSW does have mandatory History and Geography in Years 7-10 and in NSW SOSE is called HSIE (Human Society and its Environment) which has mandatory content in primary schools.

Civics and Citizenship Learning Circle Program for the Adult and Community Sector

The heart of any society is its people. The cohesion and vitality of that society depends on how ordinary people participate, get along together and contribute to decision making.

The learning circle approach is a discussion method based on adult learning principles and which is essentially democratic in its own right. There is an obvious connection to civics and citizenship education. The civics and citizenship learning circle program provided a way for people to lend their wisdom, ideas and experiences to the task of building Australia's future.

There are four learning Circles available for the Adult and Community Education Sector²:

1. The Governance of Australia.
2. The Three Spheres of Government.
3. The Australian Nation.
4. Citizens and Public Life.

The civics and citizenship learning circle program provided quite a bit of information on issues facing Australia. It took both an historical and contemporary approach and tried to include a wide range of views. At the completion of the learning circle program participants were asked to reflect on the impact of the learning circle on them, as individuals, and to review the nature of those discussions and activities.

A learning circle is built around the idea that everyone has something to contribute—a fundamentally democratic principle that fits well with the idea of informed and active citizenship. Learning circles are based on the idea that an informed community is essential to genuine participation and that ordinary people have the right and the ability to contribute to decision making.

The first two kits enabled participants to reflect on the historical, legal and constitutional frameworks within the Australian context. The learning circle material was developed to help learning circle participants understand the history and operations of Australia's system of government and institutions, and the principles that support Australian democracy. Content for Kits 3 and 4 was developed after initial discussions with members of the Australian community from various walks of life who participated in community meetings and who, using a learning circle methodology, discussed two key questions: what does it mean for you to be an Australian and what would you change if you could? The research writers in seeking input into the development of 'The Australian Nation' and 'Citizens and Public Life' from members of the community confirmed a democratic approach to the development of this material.

²Kits 1 and 2 were researched and developed by Adult Learning Australia who developed the initial concept of a learning circle educational program on civics and citizenship with the then Federal Labor Party in 1996. Kits 3 and 4 were produced by Real Options International Pty. Ltd.

Over five hundred groups have registered with Adult Learning Australia as civics and citizenship learning circles. However this figure is considerably higher as a number of kits were distributed to Adult Learning Australia members, schools, universities, U3A's, local government, neighbourhood and community houses. Kits are generally available free to learning circle participants and designed to be easily photocopied.

The kits were promoted at conferences, workshops, and launches. At the national launch of the program held in Parliament House in Canberra twenty learning circle groups (a total of ninety people) discussed what it meant to them to be an Australian citizen. Participants included young school students, visitors from overseas attending university courses, adult migrant students from the Canberra Institute of Technology, older learners and senior staff from government departments. The material was successful in encouraging open dialogue and the consensus was, at the end of this event, that this was an excellent process in educating the community on civics and citizenship issues.

In the case of specific women's groups the civics and citizenship learning circle kits were promoted to participants at the 2002 and 2003 Women's Constitutional Conventions. In fact, participants attending the 2002 Convention ***Trust the Women*** each received a CD copy of Kit 1 and Kit 2. This Convention was particularly important in that it celebrated the Centenary of Women's Suffrage and the 40th anniversary of Indigenous Women's Suffrage.

Whilst Adult Learning Australia does not have specific statistics on how many women worked through the civics and citizenship learning circle material however the database reflects a majority of female participants (almost 75%). A recent evaluation report on learning circle programs developed by ALA generally found that the highest users of learning circles are over 55 and female, thus confirming the fact that generally learning circle programs attract a higher interest from females.

Learning circles rely upon the formation of interest groups. This is a key factor to their success. Without a group there is no learning circle. A major recipient of the material was the University of the Third Age which has a number of active networks that reach Australians with interest and commitment to group or community activities.

Comments have been received from a number of the civics and citizenship learning circles but primarily participants agreed they had formed a deeper understanding of the issues and a feeling of being more confident about communicating and commenting on the issues. Other action/impact included:

- A learning circle group in Mudgee (all women) after commencing and working through Kit 1 made contact with their local council community development officer to pass on their local concerns. They also wrote to their federal member after discussing issues of national concern in their learning circle. This group incidentally included a blind member – demonstrating the flexibility of the process to meet the needs of different members. In this case group members read out some of the factual material to assist informed discussion.
- An Aboriginal group in Darwin used the material as a resource in their development and research into governance issues for Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.
- A range of workshops using the civics and citizenship learning circle material has been conducted for teachers and students within the Discovering Democracy program.
- The material and the concept have been used to promote the idea of leadership both within schools and local government staff working with youth.

Women and Citizenship in Australia

In her 2001 Centenary Article – '*Women and government in Australia*' Dr Marian Sawyer concludes:

'A hundred years after Federation not all the aspirations of the suffragists have been met. Women have taken up the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and have entered government, overcoming a range of obstacles. They have not, however, succeeded in making the kind of difference to politics which was both desired and feared at the time of Federation, when it was thought that women would be a purifying influence on public life and create a new and more moral world.'

The above comment makes the following statistics on Australian women in decision making institutions interesting to reflect upon particularly as Australian women celebrated in 2002 the centenary of Australian women's right to vote (with the exception of Aboriginal women in some States):

- As at 3 June 2003, there were 60 women in the Commonwealth Parliament or 26.5% (22 Senators and 38 in the House of Representatives). This is a significant increase from just 14% in 1995 and almost double the international average of 15% (IPU figure as at 23 December 2002). (See attached report for composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender, as at 3 June 2003).
- Women hold 33.9% of Commonwealth Board positions under Commonwealth control (Appoint, June 2002).
- In the private sector, the number of women holding director positions is 9% (Korn Ferry Report 2002). Currently women hold 1% Chair, 2% hold Deputy Chair and 9% hold Director positions.
- Women hold 8.4% of private sector managerial positions as at November 2002 (EOWA).
- Women hold 8.2% of all board seats in Australian companies from Australian Stock Exchange top 200 as at November 2002 (EOWA).
- As at 30 June 2002, 28.4% (501 women) of senior executive ongoing staff in the Australian Public Service were women.
- As at November 2002, in Local Government women make up less than 30% of all elected members, 15% of mayors and 10% of senior executives.
- 25 women have been appointed as Heads of Australian Foreign Missions during the Howard Government terms. Currently 9 women hold of Head of Missions and 2 women hold Heads of Posts.
- Currently 33% of Australia's small business operators are women.
- For Queen's Birthday Honours 2003, 196 or 37.1 per cent of Honours under the General Division of the Order of Australia were received by women.

[Source: C'wealth Office for the Status of Women 9 September 2003.]