
DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES AS LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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“Citizenship education is often inadequate in nurturing engaged and enlightened democratic citizens, and the discontinuity of representative democracy compounds the problem. There are few opportunities for people to participate in democratic processes apart from elections. Politics has become a spectator sport.”

— Daniel Schugurensky

Professor Daniel Schugurensky is not alone in realizing that Canada, like many other countries, is experiencing a democratic deficit which can be seen in low voter turnout and low levels of trust in political institutions and electoral representatives. He is, however, one of the few researchers interested in addressing this issue through a focus on the connections between citizenship learning and participatory democracy.

Daniel Schugurensky’s research focuses on the pedagogical dimension of participatory democracy. One form of participatory democracy that he has examined is participatory budgeting, where people are involved in resource allocations, not simply through consultation but through actual participation in the decision-making process. “Ordinary people are engaged in processes of diagnosis, deliberations and decisions, and what they learn from their participation enlightens their thinking about what is possible.” Participatory budgeting started in Brazil and is now being practiced in neighbourhoods, public housing units, city-wide councils and schools in over 300 cities worldwide. “We have to align the content, method, and environment for teaching citizenship in order to enable learners to incorporate the practice of democracy in their daily lives. We must also increase democratic experiences in societal institutions so people can learn democracy by doing.”

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