

PREPARING OUR YOUTH TO BECOME CITIZENS: IT'S A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY



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The word “citizen” is heard more and more frequently in today’s vernacular. In fact, a new political party in Québec bears the name “Option citoyenne”. Demonstrations against globalization and social movements are now qualified using the word “citizen’s” which is now being used as a qualifier.

But what is a citizen or what is citizen-like behaviour? I asked myself that question last summer for a speech in front of 600 young Québécois gathered together for the second edition of École d’été de l’Institut du Nouveau Monde, a citizenship school for 15-30 year olds. I arrived at the following definition: “A citizen is first and foremost someone who cares about others. It is someone who is conscious of belonging to a community, a nation; conscious of the fact that we need the help of others to resolve problems and face and overcome new challenges that are common to us all yet beyond the ability of any individual. To be a citizen is to contribute, to take part, to say: “I am here and I refuse to cop out in front of challenges facing society as the world evolves”.

To be a citizen, as defined by Jean-Claude Guillebaud, is to rekindle, in all those who have lost it, a sense of “looking forward to the future”. This “looking forward to the future” is a desire to play a role in shaping the future. It is a refusal to let blind destiny take control, to give in to a fatalistic approach or worse, the domination of super powers, automated logic, technological determinism and marketplace laws.

The behaviour of a citizen is inevitably situated in time and in space. Before becoming a citizen of the world, we must first be a citizen somewhere.

Several recent events show the rise of a new civic consciousness. We could mention the large demonstrations against the war in Iraq, the marching of women of the world, or last winter’s impressive student strike. At the same time, unfortunately, several observers have noted the rise of cynicism, a widespread disillusionment and a distancing of the citizenry as regards all that is political. The decrease in electoral turnout at the last federal and Québec elections is only one of the symptoms of the citizenship crisis affecting the majority of Western democracies. According to surveys, the swinging mood of voters, their affiliation to right-wing groups, then left-wing groups without however making the necessary distinctions, are indications of the same phenomenon.

This dissociation by many citizens arises perhaps from the bitter taste left last year by revelations in the Gomery commission on the federal sponsorship program. There refer to broken promises, empty words, platitudes and clichés. We can also explain such disillusionment as a side effect of globalization that confers increased rights to transnational corporations, rights that seem to pre-empt those of our elected officials who often plead powerlessness when it comes to controlling the world market from their seat in Parliament.

In addition to the fact that these phenomena are marginal: Embezzlements are the exception, not the rule, and the very existence of the Gomery Commission to take Canada as an example, demonstrates that our institutions have the means to protect themselves, to react, inquire and identify those in charge and... even punish them.

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Our democracy is generally healthy, although it is far from perfect. As for globalization, it has not taken away any of the awesome powers of the United Nations to regulate activities within their territory. And when decisions are taken in international situations, it is usually within intergovernmental organizations made up by representatives of our governments who in turn, preserve their free will and their power to refuse to sign or promote any given treaty. UNESCO has just adopted a treaty on the diversity of cultural expressions following a lengthy campaign spearheaded, amongst others, by Québec, Canada and France. To date, several countries, including the United States, continue to refuse to apply the Kyoto protocol for the reduction of greenhouse gases.



One of the reasons that helps explain the disenchantment of our fellow-citizens towards institutions resides in the fact that society has changed. We live in a pluralist society characterized by a diversity of lifestyles. This diversity arises from the ability of individuals to make choices. They now refuse to have behaviour imposed on them. The rise of individualism is a characteristic of our contemporary society.

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DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

We now live in a perpetual deliberative democracy. The common good is never defined once and for all. It is constantly under debate. The discussion does not end with the election of a government. It continues in various forums. No Church can triumph definitively. Citizens refuse to allow their elected officials to hold a monopoly on the definition of the common good. The debate takes the form of a test of strength. The role of the citizen is somewhat increased and his responsibility is much more complex than ever before.

This context invites us to deploy all possible efforts in order to train qualified citizens who are aware of their personal accountability in the well-being of the community because they are conscious of the importance of the well-being of others, their neighbours and their colleagues in achieving their own desired level of well-being.

Competency is not only the ability to practice a trade or to produce an exportable good, it is also the ability to take part in the process, in the perpetual deliberation, in the constant dialogue

with our fellow-citizens so as to identify the common good and to have our concept of good win out through dialogue, exchanges and democracy.

American sociologist Francis Fukuyama observed that societies which succeed the best in globalization context are those that have the greatest self-confidence. This level of confidence in civil society is measured by the ability of its members to form and integrate groups outside the family. This spontaneous sociality encourages people to take initiatives while working cooperatively. Societies that are confident in their own ability cultivate a strong associative life, located somewhere between the individual and the State.

Tocqueville had noted during his famous voyage to America in the 1840's, that it is possible in a democracy to fight individualism by motivating citizens to take an active part in the management of their community. "From the moment that common affairs are dealt with, each individual becomes aware that he is not as independent as he initially believed vis-à-vis his peers and in order to gain their support, he must be willing to reciprocate."

To put it differently, democracy rests on a permanent negotiation process as regards the collective agreement. This "constitutional" contract determines the shapes, modalities, places and institutions that enable citizens to govern themselves and resolve, at least temporarily, tensions that come with democracy.

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For Maheu, democracy historically has three faces. The first is the "conquest of basic rights", linked to freedom of association, freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief. Democracy is then institutionalized into a political regime characterized by an election which delegates the power of the citizens to a minority who represent them. The third face consists in involving all citizens in the "expression and practical, active and concrete search for collective equality, justice and emancipation".

Democracy, in its most advanced form engages its citizens in a process of construction of a just society that is equitable and inclusive. It supports an active and dynamic citizenship. It protects the freedom of individuals and encourages social, political, and democratic participation of all members who make up the nation. It is a process that enables individuals to contribute to the development of the collective community and by which, a nation contributes to the development and the growth of each of its members. Thus, reciprocally, individuals contribute to the definition of a national identity and the nation in turn, allows the individuals to acquire their own unique identity.



Jacquard defines the concept of reciprocity between individuals and any democratic nation, in a society where rights prevail:

“The law allows the totality of individuals to be part of an organized structure which, as such, has powers that are not given to individuals. Simultaneously, this causality has two effects:

- By the links between them, individuals build a community more complex than any one individual and therefore richer in potential than any single individual within that community;
- This structure awakens in each individual an awareness of being, a need to become and an obligation to orient the collective adventure.

Individuals transform the community into a nation; and the community makes each individual a person. This is the best demonstration of the capacity of integrated structures to self-construct.

Democracy achieves this self-construction by the introduction of networks which all individuals are invited to join”.

► CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Political and democratic participation is the free and enlightened commitment of citizens who, in equity and friendship, contribute to the development and the formulation of a collective agreement. This is why the development of civil competencies and citizenship education are part of the responsibilities democratic nations have towards their citizens, who recognize that we are not born democratic but rather that we become democratic...

Civil competencies, essential for any citizen so he can freely and equitably exercise his rights, are acquired and developed within a multitude of institutions by means of various mechanisms of political and democratic participation. These competencies are not innate, but the fruit of countless interactions between individuals and their fellow citizens, the state and its institutions.

Citizen education definitely includes learning how institutions work as well as acquiring knowledge on rights and freedom, but it also means encouraging civic commitment. For this, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge is not sufficient. It is necessary to practice democracy. To come face to face with reality.

For Henry Milner, civil competencies call upon the “abilities and skills of citizens to understand the political world”, they also rest on their “willingness and ability to become involved in public dialogue and to evaluate the performance of those who hold political positions” (2004, p.13). Although, on one hand, the experience of participating as a citizen within the various democratic institutions contributes to “educating” citizens, more and more social and political players consider that citizenship education should be a specific program and that the development of this

program is part of the responsibilities incumbent on a democratic State. In fact, the Council of Europe named 2005 the *European Year of Citizenship through Education*, and its Internet site [www.coe.int] features the results of a decade of reflection and work on this issue.

In Québec, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (1998) highlighted the responsibility of the State and more particularly the ministère de l'Éducation, as regards the development of civil competencies in young citizens and, in doing so, outlined the objectives of a citizenship education program.

Citizenship education has a two-fold mandate: One, to harmonize social encounters and support social cohesion and, two, to motivate enlightened and responsible citizens to play an active role within democracy.

[Education in citizenship] targets the development of an ability by the citizenship to participate actively and knowingly in the evolution and transformation of society.

Educational institutions have a responsibility in this respect. Citizen education definitely includes learning how institutions work as well as acquiring knowledge on rights and freedom, but it also means encouraging civic commitment. For this, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge is not sufficient. It is necessary to practice democracy. To come face to face with reality.

► LEARNING BY DOING

For a few years now, Québec has seen the rise of several movements firmly focused on democratic development and citizenship education, such as the Mouvement pour une Démocratie Nouvelle (MDN) that is working towards voting reform; the Collectif Féminisme



et Démocratie (CFD), whose mission is to promote equity for women in politics; the Mouvement Démocratie et Citoyenneté du Québec (MDCQ) created in 2003 in the wake of the États généraux pour la réforme des institutions démocratiques, which supports the democratic participation of citizens; the Observatoire québécois de la Démocratie (OQD), whose mandate is to promote the direct participation of citizens and evaluate the quality of the means and mechanisms of democratic participation in Québec.

One of the antidotes for this withdrawal from public affairs is to offer youth, citizenship experiences that are exciting, stimulating, combining business and pleasure.

Among the most recent players involved in the area of democratic development, the Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM), founded in the Spring of 2004, already boasts several achievements through its École d'été (summer school) program, its *Annuaire du Québec* (Québec directory), its strategic, and its Internet site [www.inm.qc.ca]. This non-partisan organization dedicates itself to the "renewal of ideas and the promotion of public debates in Québec". As a matter of fact, the promotion of social justice, democratic values, openness, and innovation is explicitly stipulated in the goals of the INM. It is truly a school for citizenship education and democratic participation.

"The future of Québec society depends on a dynamic market economy, on a functional State that is effective and transparent and on a strong civil society that is well informed, seasoned as regards deliberation and ready to take part in decisions and bring about innovation". (*Raison d'être*, INM, [www.inm.qc.ca])

► IT'S COOL TO BE A GOOD CITIZEN!

THE INM ÉCOLE D'ÉTÉ (SUMMER SCHOOL)

It is often said that young people are apathetic and disillusioned as regards the common weal. That is partially true but mostly false. True, in that a part of our youth lives in an insular cocoon and their major concerns—other than studies and works—are entertainment and material comfort rather than social involvement. One of the antidotes for this withdrawal from public affairs is to offer youth, citizenship experiences that are exciting, stimulating, combining business and pleasure.

False however, because a good percentage of young people today are interested in public affairs, in particular as concerns environmental protection, long-term development, equity between generations, international co-operation, and globalization. These young people are silent, except during anti-war demonstrations and with alterglobalists, yet their numbers are great. Perhaps we do not listen to what we they are saying. If we close our ears to their pleas, they will eventually lose interest in further involvement. It is vitally important to provide them with opportunities to speak what is on their minds.

For this reason one of the first large scale activities organized by the INM was a citizenship school for people between the ages of 15 and 30. But this was not just any school.

In 2004, the INM first edition of summer school was called "New World University". This year, it took place from August 18 to 21, 2005 and was national in scope. The citizenship school, for youth between the ages of 15 and 30, was presented as a festive event offering educational, deliberative, play-oriented, and artistic sections whose main goal was to support the participation of young Québec citizens in the public debate and to encourage their social and political commitment.

To reach this segment of our youth population not already committed socially and politically, the École d'été offered a very appealing formula for citizenship education. We invited a large number of prestigious lecturers and well-known public figures to whom our youth can strongly relate. Among these, Alain Stanké, Jacques Languirand, Gérald Larose, Gil Courtemanche, Steven Guilbault, Dr Réjean Thomas, and others.

To interest young people in the more political aspect of citizenship and to help combat the general cynicism of a youthful fringe as regards politics, the École d'été invited several leaders within Québec society to become aware of and then disseminate the concerns of our youth in their respective environments. The presence of these politicians, entrepreneurs, and trade-union heads reinforced the feeling among participants of being part of a privileged forum, where their voices would be heard and have a real influence on society. This feeling in turn could lead them to seek even greater involvement.

Among the guests were 32 politicians from all levels of government, including: Benoît Pelletier Provincial minister, Federal deputies Jack Layton, Eleni Bakopanos, Réal Ménard and Pierre Paquette, Provincial MNAs Pauline Marois, Elsie Lefebvre,



Jonathan Valois and Yolande James, Senators Lucie Pépin and Pierre-Claude Nolin, and from the municipal level, Pierre Bourque and Richard Bergeron.

For the occasion, the Gouvernement du Québec held consultations regarding the 2005-2008 Youth Action Strategy, where participants provided their perspective on governmental strategy. A huge debate also took place on voting reform.

Learning carried out within the framework of the École d'été includes the acquisition of knowledge on citizenship and civil competencies.

To reach those who express their citizenship through the arts, the École d'été proposed a certain number of playful activities – intervention theatre, invisible theatre, political quiz, workshops on creativity and the development of creativity, etc. Through these activities, young people who were not yet involved, were able to identify with the programming of École d'été and, subsequently, were attracted to subjects dealing with public affairs and the use of rigorous scientific approaches.

For those who wish to work on concrete projects within the framework of the programming, École d'été offered the Media Project, a practical experience for forty participants who were able to learn a trade connected to journalism from a citizenship perspective. Assisted by professionals, participants could choose between putting out a daily newspaper (four editions were printed) or creating a radio-documentary and a video-documentary.

TO INFORM, DISCUSS, PROPOSE

The educational approach used by École d'été can be summarized in three words: inform–discuss–propose. École d'été:

- uses conferences and documentation that is clear and detailed;
- supports debates by allotting time for discussion at the end of conferences and by placing teamwork at the heart of its programming;
- proposes, in a spirit of true democracy, its citizenship project whose goal is to formulate solutions in the form of concrete projects focused on problems identified by the participants.

During the plenary session at end of the École d'été session, participants present their projects and become aware of the soundness of an approach that combines quality information, open debates, and concrete and realistic proposals. They return home convinced of their ability to take part in public debates simply by following this easy formula.

Given that École d'été is an opportunity for many participants to discover a citizenship “calling”, the programming of the 2005 edition revolved around the Carrefour de l'engagement – *Prends ta place!* in partnership with Forum jeunesse de l'Île de Montréal. More than 50 national organizations of all types were present to inform participants about their mission statement in the hope of enlisting their active involvement within the community. Learning carried out within the

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DOCUMENTATION

École d'été provides participants with various types of documentation to encourage their participation in the activities and to underscore the importance of quality information in the exercise of citizenship. Several weeks before the start of activities, the INM provided on its Internet site, material for consultation, a documentation centre containing an average of 20 annotated texts, webography and bibliography on hundreds of items as well as a lexicon of more than 200 words.

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Upon their arrival at École d'été, participants each received the *Annuaire du Québec* (a thematic collection of articles that identify social, cultural, economic and political aspects of Québec today), the book *La démocratie: ses fondements, son histoire et ses pratiques* and the *Cahier du participant*, that included texts and references meant to deepen the knowledge of subjects discussed at the conferences and various projects of École d'été. They also received a copy of the newspaper *Le Devoir* and the *Quotidien de l'École d'été*, containing in-depth articles and reports written by participants in the program.

ACTIVITIES

École d'été activities were structured to transform knowledge into competencies and to enhance “knowledge” with “know-how”. École d'été participants develop competencies relating to debate and the exercise of citizenship, such as the



ability to express oneself, analyze speeches and form a critical judgment.

In addition to the conferences, the participants had access to approximately fifteen round tables in which they were invited to become involved in debates opposing experts on specific questions and thus to speak in public on topics involving citizenship.

WORKSHOPS

Workshops, genuine toolboxes intended for small groups of 15 to 20 participants, were opportunities to acquire precise competencies on specific aspects of citizen participation. The 22 workshops offered a range of diversified themes including: "Making a film on a 3-cent budget", "International involvement", "How to complete a request for financing", "How to become an elected politician".

INVOLVEMENT

Participation in École d'été was varied and representative. Of the 612 registered youth with École d'été:

- 54% were women, 46% were men;
- 43% were from Montréal and 57% from other areas of Québec;
- 47% were students, 27% were from the labour market, and 22% were somewhere in between;
- 10% were between 14 and 17 years of age, 21% between 18 and 20 years of age, 27% between the ages of 21 and 24 and 39% between the ages of 25 and 30;
- 15% were born abroad, or their parents were.

Thanks to partnerships with organizations, companies and worker associations, participants represented all social classes and ethnic communities in Québec.

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THE INM WITHIN THE CÉGEP

Several cégep students took part in the INM École d'été (dates are chosen according to collegial schedules), but some École activities are pursued in certain colleges.

- Teachers use texts found in the *Annuaire du Québec* as reference documents for research work or to initiate the reading of scientific-type articles, tables and graphs, lexicons and bibliographies. Some students recreated a mini École d'été at their college within the framework of the Semaine des sciences humaines (Humanities week), proposing conferences and a citizenship project during which they formulated proposals on the society in which they wish to live tomorrow.
- A philosophy professor used the "50 proposals for the Québec of tomorrow", adopted during the 2004 École d'été session, as the subject for an analysis relative to the philosophical principles being taught to students.
- Colleges sponsored some of their students (paying for the cost of registration, transportation and lodging), provided that upon their return, they presented a report on their participation at École d'été at the beginning of the school year to their colleagues at college.

Teachers can use the success of this increasingly popular activity to teach and to apply a number of principles adopted by the INM: An informational approach that includes debates and proposals through which the young person assumes responsibility for the path chosen; numerous adapted information tools; a festive yet rigorous atmosphere (to be a citizen is not a hardship and can even be very pleasant, especially in light of potential meetings); the presence of well-known adult role models; putting the results to good use (in particular through their dissemination to the general public).

The INM is hoping to develop partnerships to adapt its tools to the needs of teachers, notably those at collegial level. It will proceed as soon as it has the adequate means. In the meantime, the material used during École d'été, including audio-video conferences, is available on the Institute's Internet site. ◀

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