

# Learning by Doing Democracy

## Social Education, SRCs and Statewide Representation

by Roger Holdsworth and Georgia Kennelly  
*on behalf of the VicSRC*

*There can be a huge gulf between 'learning about democracy' and 'learning to do democracy'.*

Initiatives in Civics and Citizenship Education over the past two decades have shown the importance of participatory approaches to students' learning about these important ideas. This is reinforced within the recent SEV document: 'Social Education: A Statement for Victorian Schools' which outlines the importance of education for a "more peaceful, just, democratic and ecologically sustainable world."

The Statement outlines the knowledge and skills that build students' understanding and application of concepts of civics and citizenship, and an appreciation of their rights and responsibilities as an active citizen in a democratic society. It also clearly endorses approaches in line with the Principles of learning and teaching about 'deep levels of thinking and application' and 'practice beyond the classroom', and which involve taking action and reflecting on the learning from that.

There are many avenues for implementing such approaches within classrooms and schools. One continuing possibility, though not without its challenges, is that of students' development of active representative structures. These are called by many different names in schools: Student Representative Councils (SRCs), Student Councils, Student Forums, Student Unions, Student Voice Committees and so on. (We'll abbreviate these to SRCs here for simplicity.) Where these operate well, they provide powerful opportunities for students to participate in decisions and action around their learning and around the structures, policies and approaches that form that learning.

SRCs can also be a significant and explicit component of the school's approach to Social Education. Classroom teaching can integrate with the school's decision-making structures, both to provide 'close to

home' examples, and also to enable students to have 'safe practice' in democratic processes.

Yet, we know that school practices are far from ideal here. Too often, the operation of SRCs is limited and constrained – by school structures, by attitudes of staff and students, by time . . . and by imagination. We know that many SRCs make token decisions, involve few students, have little connection to curriculum, or can be ignored within the school's decision-making processes. They spend a lot of time talking about fund-raising or socials, and little time talking about curriculum or learning or rights and responsibilities or changes . . .

Students who are actively involved in SRCs report many difficulties:

- Lack of student and teacher support – including their attendance and input;
- Divisions between students on issues, and poor knowledge about how to resolve these;
- Rejection of student initiatives by School Councils and staff;
- Poor meeting procedures;
- Lack of action outcomes . . . and so on.

Yet we also see some SRCs that have tackled these difficulties seriously and have established student bodies that:

- are directly represented within the school's decision-making structures;
- are regularly consulted about educational issues (new curriculum, student welfare, pedagogy and so on);
- seriously research and represent student views (including conveying information to students and playing a role in their education), and
- are given time and respect to carry out these roles.

Some of these SRCs are thinking seriously about how to involve a diversity of students in larger numbers – to go beyond the ‘SRC club’.

## Statewide: the VicSRC

In 2001, several hundred secondary students gathered in Ballarat and made a significant decision: to set up an on-going statewide network of students and their SRCs. The organisation that continues the implementation of this decision is the VicSRC (the Victorian Student Representative Council). The VicSRC’s intention is:

To strengthen SRCs:

- by improving the operation of student representative bodies with secondary schools in Victoria;
- by supporting networks between schools at a local level;
- by increasing the profile of student representative bodies in the community.

To be a representative body for Victorian secondary school students:

- by providing a network linking students and student representative bodies across Victoria;
- by providing a recognised and student-based structure to speak on behalf of secondary students.

To facilitate and coordinate action by secondary students at all levels:

- by supporting projects, initiatives, and any related activities that secondary students could participate in, and which would be more effective on a larger scale;
- by coordinating appropriate activities at a state-wide level.

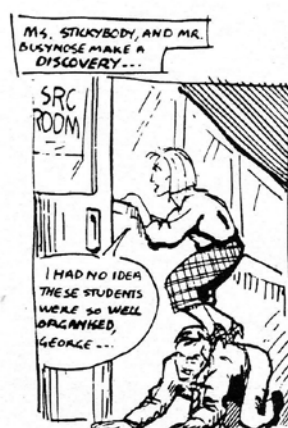
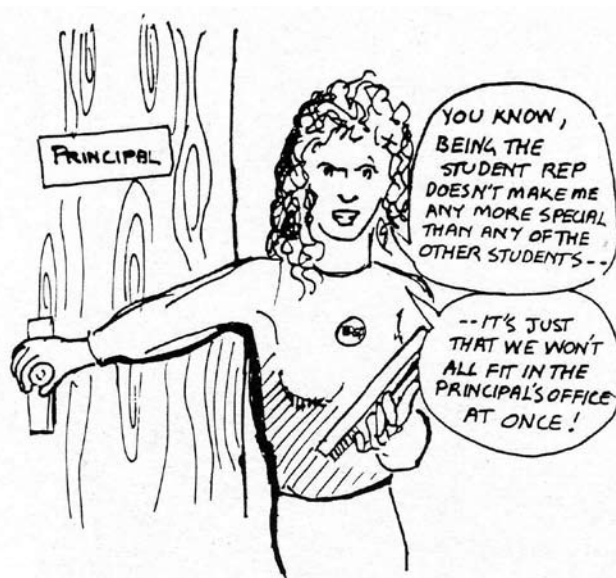
To be democratic and participatory:

- by encouraging students to understand, practise and experience democracy, by being included in decision-making at all levels.

The VicSRC exists to provide communication and links between SRCs, to inspire and support students, to encourage teachers – and to enable students to ‘do democracy’ within schools, within local areas and at a state level.

There’s an annual VicSRC Congress, with student representatives from across the state. This provides opportunities for students to identify the issues that are important to them, to share information about these – and about action they are already taking – and to make decisions about policies or actions they want their state organisation to have and take. There’s a formal, parliamentary-style Congress session in which proposals are debated and decisions made. This annual Congress also appoints a Student Executive to implement its decisions and to take initiatives during the next year. This Executive, with membership from metropolitan, regional and rural areas, meets approximately monthly throughout the year.

In the last twelve months, the VicSRC has made representation to Inquiries on School Uniforms and on School Councils. It has responded to media queries about P-plates and teacher salaries. It has provided information to SRCs about their organisation, and has supported the start of several cluster groups. It has published five newsletters that have gone to all secondary schools, sharing information about its actions



and about local and statewide initiatives – including follow-up to the topics raised at Congress.

## Local Clusters and Conferences

The VicSRC is supporting the development of local clusters of SRCs – building local networks where SRCs are able to come together more regularly to share their ideas and concerns, to assist each other, to coordinate resources and training – and just to know they’re not alone. Local clusters can be supported by youth services, by teachers, by LLENs, by School Focused Youth Services and so on. They’re slowly being ‘rolled out’ across the state, and depend very much on local enthusiasm, need and support available. (If you’re interested to be

involved, or want to find out more about your local cluster – or can help support one – please contact the VicSRC urgently (tel. 03 9267 3744). Your assistance would be most appreciated.)

In Term 2, 2008, the VicSRC also aims to hold a series of Regional Student Conferences across Victoria. These will bring together larger numbers of students from SRCs and similar groups to share information, to learn about tackling issues, to begin defining items they wish to bring to the statewide Congress, and to hear about initiatives that they and others are taking. Further information will be on the VicSRC website ([www.yacvic.org.au/vicsrc](http://www.yacvic.org.au/vicsrc)) and information is being sent to SRCs in all secondary schools.

## Working with the Department of Education

At the start of 2008, the VicSRC entered into an agreement with the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to develop effective student voice across Victoria. Within this agreement, the VicSRC will, amongst other things, convey information to the Department about issues defined by students, coordinate student responses to policies and programs of the Department, assist in the development and documentation of effective models for student voice and participation, and link with LLENs and their transition issues.

The relationship also means that the Department recognises the VicSRC as the body that can support, network and speak for students and their school-based groups across the state. This is extremely important, as it provides student with direct access to policies, programs and personnel in an area that is of every-day concern to them.

This agreement provides the VicSRC with funding support for two years, which enables the appointment of a part-time Project Officer to support its work. The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), the peak youth body in Victoria. YACVic houses the VicSRC, is the formal partner with the Department in the service agreement, employs the Project Officer and supports the work of the VicSRC in a partnership arrangement.

## Implications for Social Education Teachers

The existence and operation of the VicSRC can enable an important focus for all students around Social Education – Civics and Citizenship in particular. It provides a missing part of the ‘democratic structure’ – a way in which students’ voices and participation can channel through to state structures. It links the experience and learning of students in classrooms to their school organisation (their SRC) and then beyond. It is part of providing that purpose of learning about democracy.

Secondly, the VicSRC potentially plays an important role in strengthening the operation of democracy within schools and local areas. Through its development of examples, stories and resources (including access to the publication *Connect*, which is provided as part of VicSRC membership), the VicSRC can build the effectiveness of SRCs.

Thirdly, the VicSRC provides an avenue for some students to extend their direct experience of democracy through participation in clusters, conferences, Congress and the Executive.

Opportunities then exist for all Social Education classes (and their teachers) to integrate their learning about Civics and Citizenship with practical experience in democracy. At least, it supplies these classes with opportunities to study and critique student-led structures (at various levels). It enables discussion about the nature and work of representatives – linking this both to classroom elections, but also to occasions for reporting back and gaining input. Beyond that, it provides all students in the classes with opportunities for direct involvement, both as individuals and as a class group. In some schools, it has been a formal ‘project’ of a class (within an experiential Social Education curriculum) to establish and/or support operation of an SRC – using an ‘inquiry’ or ‘action-research’ approach. In others, students have set up sub-groups of the SRC through their curriculum studies, to carry out specific initiatives (eg in environmental areas, in local safety, around values and so on), and using Student Action Team approaches. The SRC has provided school-wide access, involvement and impact for something that would otherwise be restricted to one class.

More widely, the SRC and its involvement within the school, with a local cluster or network, and with statewide structures such as the VicSRC, needs to be seen as part of the integrated Social Education curriculum of the school. They need to be seen as contributing to and being part of learning that “begins with students’ prior knowledge and experience and moves through a deliberate process wherein knowledge, understandings, values and skills are extended, challenged and refined.” (Social Education, p 6)

The challenges remain for all teachers within this (and other) areas:

- How do you see the SRC as part of the school’s curriculum – rather than it being ‘co-curricular’ or ‘extra-curricular’?
- How do you link students’ experience with the ‘lived democracy’ of the SRC to what you are teaching them?
- How do you support students to experience ‘better democracy’, to reflect on it, and to learn lessons that apply both inside and outside the school?
- How do students in your school ‘do democracy’ – and how can the VicSRC enable us all to do that better?

## Further information

See: [www.yacvic.org.au/vicsrc](http://www.yacvic.org.au/vicsrc)

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*The VicSRC is also a membership-based organisation and, while participation is not restricted to member schools, all SRCs are encouraged to become members and contribute to their organisation in this way.*