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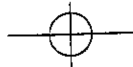


CHAPTER 6

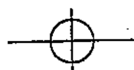
The Double Bind of Civic Education Assessment and Accountability

Roger Soder

Montesquieu pays brief but careful attention to the relationship between schools and the political regime in Book 4 of the first part of *The Spirit of the Laws*. Monarchies demanded honor, and that is what schools should teach. Despotic governments necessarily demand servility, and that is what schools should teach. But it is in republican governments, Montesquieu tells us, that "the full power of education is needed" (1750/1989, p. 35) to teach the virtues of responsible citizenship. The founders of the American republic and other concerned citizens took with great seriousness Montesquieu's assessment. They went to great lengths in exploring and advocating the connection between the preparation of a free people to maintain their freedom in a democratic society and the institutions that would be directed toward that preparation (Pangle & Pangle, 1993).

The demand for civic education has not abated over the last two centuries. The role of schools in preparing students for a democracy was a staple of political rhetoric. The demand continues in our time, as indicated by responses to the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll. For example, of seven specified school purposes in the 2000 poll, "to prepare people to become responsible citizens" was given top priority, ahead of other purposes such as "to help people become economically self-sufficient" or "to improve social conditions" (Rose & Gallup, 2000, p. 47).

Civic education—teaching students their moral and intellectual



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responsibilities as critical and informed citizens in a democracy—arguably is the central function of American schooling. Because of its centrality, civic education must be given extensive and sustained attention in any responsible system of assessment and accountability.

In what follows, I examine the rhetoric of civic education to determine the extent to which the centrality of civic education is matched by such extensive and sustained attention. I consider how past and present advocates of civic education programs have included in their advocacy either explicit or implicit approaches to assessment of those programs. I do not claim total inclusiveness; rather, I have included illustrative examples across the spectrum of ideology and approach, while expecting the reader to go elsewhere for a comprehensive presentation.[1] The question of interest here is how educators in a given classroom or school get some sense of whether students are indeed learning the lessons of civic education and are becoming prepared to be active and good citizens in a democracy.

I use "civic education" as a placeholder for the vast array of programs and curricula passing under the names of "citizenship education" and "education for democracy," as well as "civic education" itself. No specific definition for this placeholder is provided here: Defining "civic education" is in itself what constitutes so much of the arguments and claims and counterclaims.

CIVIC EDUCATION ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

Our examination might reasonably begin with a consideration of talk during the second decade of the 20th century. By this time, American public schools, particularly high schools, are beginning to enroll larger numbers of students and educators are beginning to talk of civic education in terms that might leave the founders a bit bemused.

A 1913 report prepared under the auspices of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education sounds the themes of civic education for the new century: "It is not so important that the pupil know how the President is elected as that he shall understand the duties of the health officer in his community" (Jones, 1913, p. 17). It was about this time that sociologist Franklin H. Giddings proclaimed that "high school education should make citizens not learners" (Kliebard, 1994, p. 15).

In 1926, the American Historical Association's Commission on the Social Studies began an extensive examination of social studies, involving a series of reports and publications. The commission's final report,

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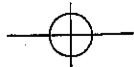


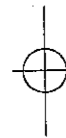
Conclusions and Recommendations (1934), took broad swings at prevailing assessment practices:

> In their efforts to measure environment, conduct, honesty, good citizenship, service, knowledge of right and wrong, self-control, will, temperament, and judgment, the testers are dealing with matters that are not susceptible of mathematical description. (p. 94)

Moreover, available tests "have provided no adequate substitute for the older forms of examination or for the living, informed, and thoughtful judgment of the competent and thoroughly trained teacher" (pp. 100–101).

A prescient observation on the implications of assessment and evaluation is provided by the Educational Policies Commission (1940) in Learning the Ways of Democracy:

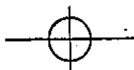
> The importance of evaluation to education is fundamental and its influence is pervasive, for evaluation is more than a technique subordinate to the purposes of education. To an extent not often realized, evaluation influences the purposes, contents, and methods of education, and sets the goals for which students strive. The teaching practices in a school almost invariably tend to follow the lead of those evaluation methods which have the greatest prestige in that school . . . the use of inappropriate methods of evaluation may seriously limit or cripple the best of citizenship programs. (pp. 379-380)



In a 1945–1950 study of citizenship education in the Detroit public schools, Stanley Diamond and colleagues used a variety of tests in trying to determine the impact of participating in the district's civic education program, including the California Test of Personality, the Mooney Problem Check List, Iowa Tests of Educational Development, and the Cooperative Test of Social Studies Abilities. He concluded that there were no measurable improvements in the quality of citizenship but stressed that the reader should use "unusual wariness in the interpretation of these test results" (Diamond, 1953, pp. 182–183).

The report of the 1977 National Task Force on Citizenship Education includes but modest references to assessment. "The superintendent is charged with maintaining the quality of the civic education program of the schools. He must regularly evaluate progress in this area and remain alert to opportunities for expanding and improving the program" (Brown, 1997, p. 11).

The notion of civic education assessment moving beyond subject-matter knowledge acquisition is also suggested by Newmann (1975; 1977a; 1977b), Mehlinger (1977), and Conrad and Hedin (1977a; 1977b).



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Participation is seen as a key factor in being a good citizen, with assessment focusing on volunteer service, internships, social and political action, community studies, and student projects to improve the school or community.

Participation as a factor in civic education assessment and evaluation is argued as critical in a larger sense by Wehlage, Popkewitz, and Hartoonian (1973) with assessment thus "concerned with measuring the ability of schools to engage students in the testing of the knowledge they learn and in the developing of an awareness of the tentative nature of these ideas" (p. 768).

Remy (1980) provides some indicators for assessing student involvement in terms of the capacity to "identify a wide range of implications for an event or condition, identify ways in which individual actions and beliefs can produce consequences," and "identify one's rights and obligations in a given situation" (p. 24). Remy notes that states are developing programs to test for citizenship competencies:

> It may be very difficult to meaningfully test large numbers of students for important citizenship competencies and to interpret test results, once obtained .... Some of the most important citizenship competencies involve human relations and social skills which are difficult to measure using paper-and-pencil tests. Yet, at present, practical considerations all but require the use of paper-and-pencil tests in minimum-competency-testing programs. As a result, some of the most important citizenship competencies—making decisions, making judgments, working with others—are difficult to reliably and validly measure. When such testing is attempted, important competencies or objectives are often reduced to trivial aspects of the citizen role. The result is that schools, teachers, and programs are assessed in terms of those aspects of citizenship competence which can be easily be measured, even though the importance of what is being measured is inversely related to its measurability. (p. 48)

Others focusing on process and participation in civic education include Morrissett (1981), Ehman and Hahn (1981), Cornbleth, Gay, and Dueck (1981), Battistoni (1985), Longstreet (1988), and Mosher, Kenny, and Garrod (1994). Little specific attention is paid to matters of assessment, although Battistoni (1985) does argue that participation aside,

> public high schools must show a commitment to providing each student with the basic foundations of a liberal education, and must back that commitment up with competency testing to make sure that students can master basic educational problems. (p. 193)

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Going counter to what I suggest is a general unwillingness to address specifics of assessment Engle and Ochoa (1988) devote an entire chapter of their volume to "assessing learning for democratic citizenship." The curriculum advocated calls for teacher–student negotiations of content and learning experiences; as such, "it would be a contradiction to impose assessment techniques that are externally determined without also permitting students to participate as fully as possible in the determination of those assessment strategies" (p. 179). That is to say,

> if teachers impose assessment strategies unilaterally, they deny the opportunity for shared responsibility and foster an authoritarian rather than a democratic relationship with students. Such procedures make it clear to students that compliance with authority is still the order of the day. Further, such practices create a climate in which democratic problem-solving becomes as arbitrary and authoritarian as practices that might be found in dictatorial political systems. (pp. 179-180)

Accordingly, Engle and Ochoa advocate teacher–student "negotiated" assessment in four areas: knowledge and intellectual skills; commitment to democracy; political and group skills; and student attitudes toward public issues and citizen participation.

Knowledge and intellectual skills are to be assessed through student projects such as essays, debates, photographic essays, or dramatizations. Appraisal of classroom dialogue, "by the teacher, by a selected student acting as observer, by a teacher colleague, or by any combination of students and teachers" (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 183), is another part of knowledge/intellectual skills assessment. Questions to ask center on who participates, listening skills, use of evidence and reason, lack of teacher domination, and focus on major issues. It is suggested that this assessment be conducted once a month or every 6 weeks; videotaping is proposed as a useful option. Finally, the teacher can use open-ended essay test questions, working with students to determine the pool of questions and the criteria for appraisal.

Some researchers and advocates focus on making civic education broader than the school (Boyte, 1994; Dynneson & Gross, 1991; Wexler, Grosshans, Zhang, & Kim, 1991). The latter argues that what is needed is civic education for public agency, in which people "learn politics, understood as the give-and-take messy, everyday public work through which citizens deal with the general issues of our common existence" (p. 417).

Houser and Kuzmic (2001) present a critical political perspective and argue for rejection of a worldview that is "directly or indirectly

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responsible for the privileging within our society of individualism over community, of mind over body, of man over woman, and of humankind over other living and non-living organisms" (pp. 456–457). Similarly, Gonzales, Riedel, Avery, and Sullivan (2001) argue that the national standards used for the NAEP civics assessment focus on the "dominant liberal perspective" with little attention to obligations to community and group, while neglecting the "expanding role of women and minorities in civic and political life in the late 20th century" (p. 123). Neither Houser and Kuzmic nor Gonzales and coauthors discuss specifics of assessment and evaluation matters.

Tolo (1999) examined statewide civics assessments in seven states and concluded that if the state tests include assessment of some subject areas but not civic education, the focus goes to what is tested and civic education is overlooked or given a low priority. On the other hand, if the state includes specific assessment of civic education in its testing, then there is the usual double-edged sword of focus. As Tolo argues,

> perhaps the most salient issue regarding civics assessment is how one assesses civic participation and civic dispositions. Testing civic knowledge, at least at a basic level, can be accomplished through a written test. How, though, does one assess the other components of civic education? Furthermore, if one cannot effectively assess civic skills and dispositions, is it worth testing civic knowledge by itself? (p. 147)

Tolo (1999) concludes that

> a test of civic topics that does not cover all the components of civic education, including the higher-order intellectual and participatory skills so vital to effective citizenship, leads school districts to give inadequate attention to these critical components. (p. 149)

He welcomes "accountability systems and measures that ensure a curricular emphasis on civic education that addresses civic knowledge as well as civic intellectual skills, civic participation, and civic dispositions." He sees such systems and measures as "the best way for civic education to gain greater support and prominence" (p. 150).

On the basis of observations of 135 social studies classrooms in Chicago, Kahne, Rodriguez, Smith, and Thiede (2000) found that when teachers were preparing students for the Illinois State Constitution Test, preparation that "comprises a substantial portion of the eighth grade curriculum," students were less likely to engage in "higher order thinking," or in "deep and disciplined inquiry," and "had fewer opportunities

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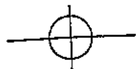
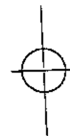


to experience democracy as a way of life." When teachers respond to the state-mandated testing policy, "they provide fewer rather than more opportunities to develop as citizens" (pp. 330–331).

Conover and Searing (2001) assessed the extent to which students are "developing the skills and motivation necessary to sustain regular political discussion" (p. 105). They asked about kinds of issues talked about, and how often; they also asked about extent of tolerance of groups students identified as one they disapproved of most. One part of the assessment focused on the role of the high school in contributing to students' sense of citizenship and nurturing their practice of it, as well as the extent that role can be changed, with attention to four elements of the school experience: "The sense of school community, the students' level of civic engagement in school and extracurricular activities, the level of political discussion at school, and the curriculum" (p. 108). Community was measured by assessing extent of identification with school community and sense of shared interests. Following notions of social networks creating social capital, civic engagement was measured by the number of groups students belong to. Discussion was measured by asking students how often they had discussions or serious conversations about political issues in school, classes, and after school, and with teachers. Curriculum was measured by asking students where they talked about civic education. Not surprisingly, students indicated most discussions were in classes in civics or government.



In recent years, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has adopted various position statements centering on aspects of civic education. In its 1997 statement, "Fostering Civic Virtue: Character Education in the Social Studies," the NCSS claimed that "students should both understand the nature of democratic principles and values and demonstrate a commitment to those values and principles in the daily routines of their private and public lives" (p. 225). Thus "a focus on knowledge and skills alone is insufficient for the task of civic education. Civic education must also foster civic character in citizens" (p. 226). The position statement argues for going beyond the formal curriculum. It is necessary to have a

> school environment consistent with the principles and core values of the ideal of civic virtue. . . . The hidden curriculum of the school has the potential to teach important lessons about authority, responsibility, caring, and respect. The principles and values underlying the day-to-day operations of the school should be consistent with the values taught to young people. [Moreover,] a school curriculum that attempts to teach values such as responsibility and respect is unlikely to be effective in the hands of teachers

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who are irresponsible in the performance of their professional duties and disrespectful in their dealings with students. (p. 226)

Finally, in this consideration of assessment practices related to civic education, we examined five well-known supplemental civic education curriculum programs available to the schools.

We, the People . . . Project Citizen is an issues-based civic education program from the Center for Civic Education designed for middle school students. The class works together to identify and analyze a public policy issue and then collectively presents a portfolio on findings and an action plan. The supplemental program does not deal directly with individual student assessment but rather with the entire class process. The teacher's guide "does equip teachers with evaluation rubrics for both the students' written and oral performance" (Patrick, Vontz, & Nixon, 2002, p. 103), but the major focus is on "the entire process, from identifying community problems/issues through to the reflection component," which "is in and of itself an evaluation instrument" (M. Fischer, personal communication, September 13, 2002).

Close-Up (www.closeup.org) is a 30-year-old effort to involve students in various programs ranging from a one-day individual school program to learn about local, city, and county governments to weeklong programs involving students from across the state learning about state issues. Materials for Close-Up suggest little in the way of assessment and evaluation at the classroom or school level. Rather, student feedback provides indicators of how well participants thought the program met their needs.

Street Law (www.streetlaw.org) focuses on participatory education about law, democracy, and human rights. Begun more than 20 years ago, the program provides textbooks (e.g., Street Law) for high school programs as well as other guides for teachers and students. At the state level, Street Law has developed course outlines and curriculum materials with specific competencies; for example, the learner will "assess working relationships among law-enforcement agencies at various levels" (www.streetlaw.org/ncstate.htm). From the long lists of competencies, teachers are left to develop assessment and evaluation tools.

The Constitutional Rights Foundation (www.crf-usa.org) provides on-line lessons on selected topics, including the Bill of Rights, election-year issues, sports and the law, school violence, impeachment, and the like. Each on-line lesson provides outlines of issues and resources. There are many suggestions for class, small group, and individual activities. There is no explicit attention to assessment and evaluation. Each teacher will develop assessment and evaluation tools as deemed appropriate.

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Kidsvoting (http://kidsvotingusa.org) focuses on encouraging students to become active and informed participants in the American democracy. Combining suggested classroom activities and community engagement, each of the several curricula available is designed to foster information-seeking skills, higher order thinking skills, empathy toward other people, and participation. Materials delineate learning objectives, preactivity preparation, details of activities, and questions. Assessment and evaluation tools are not provided but will be developed by individual teachers as appropriate.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerge from our consideration of civic education advocacy: (1) a general reluctance of advocates to specify detailed assessment approaches; (2) concerns about prevailing assessment practices; and (3) disjunctures between professed civic education approaches and current approaches to assessment in general.

Reluctance to Specify Assessment

Many civic education advocates appear reluctant to talk in much detail regarding assessment and evaluation of what they are advocating. They are willing to outline the broad objectives of civic education in general or even the specific objectives of a particular program. To a lesser extent, advocates will talk of curriculum or learning activities or learning outcomes. But there is a reluctance to move from general goals to curriculum objectives to talk of assessment and evaluation. For the most part, when we do hear about assessment and evaluation of civic education, the talk is with a larger view, that is, national and international studies, comparisons across countries. Or the talk is with a considerably circumscribed view, with a discussion, say, of indices of tolerance. There is little said of assessment at the individual, classroom, and school levels.

What accounts for this silence? Perhaps some advocates are silent simply because they choose not to move to details. Surely we cannot expect every advocate to include an assessment discussion every time he or she speaks of civic education. Perhaps some feel reluctant to talk because they feel that assessment is not their area of expertise. Others perhaps do indeed have considerable expertise and they know that to move from generalities to specifics about assessment is to move into an

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area of astonishing complexity; within the bounds of whatever document they are preparing, there simply is not room to address that complexity.

At the very least, we can observe that there is not a great deal of discussion and exchange regarding assessment, and very little of the give-and-take that should precede adoption of any major testing and evaluation initiative.

Concerns About Prevailing Assessment Practices

Although many civic education advocates appear reluctant to detail desired assessment designs, it will be noted that over the years other civic education advocates have expressed reservations about prevailing assessment practices. In 1934, the Commission on the Social Studies (American Historical Association, 1934) argued that civic education was "not susceptible of mathematical description" (p. 94). The Educational Policies Commission of 1940 cautioned that testing would drive the civic education curriculum and that "inappropriate" methods would limit or cripple civic education. In 1980, Remy expresses concern about the tendency of mass testing to trivialize citizenship and civic education. In 1999, Tolo argues that a focus on testing civic knowledge will lead to inadequate attention to participation skills and dispositions. In 2000, Kahne and coauthors warn that state-mandated testing in civic education leads to less likelihood of students engaging in higher order thinking or experiencing democracy as a way of life.

Civic Education and Assessment Disjunctures

There are three disjunctures to consider here. First, virtually all civic education advocates speak of some minimal combination of knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a quality civic education program. But most current assessment practices focus on just one part—knowledge acquisition. Most people will agree that knowing, say, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is important. And at one level of "knowledge of the First Amendment," that "knowledge" can be assessed. Identify correctly the five elements of the First Amendment, for example. We focus on this kind of "knowledge" or "learning" because it is, of course, cheap, the resultant data are easy to aggregate, and the test outcomes can be easily explained to school boards, parents, and reporters. Assessment of skills can be done, but at a higher price, much less efficiently, and with results that are more difficult to explain;

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most school districts and states are not willing to allocate significant resources to such assessment. As for dispositions, those habits of mind, or habits of the heart, these, too can be assessed, but the costs are high and explanations to school boards, parents, and reporters quite complex, with various audiences asking just what is being measured with X tolerance scale, or with Y "portfolio," or Z "service" activity, and how does that relate to the program?

The second and third disjunctures stem from the common practice of focusing assessment and evaluation on individual student learning in the classroom.

Many civic education advocates argue that we have to measure more than student learning in the classroom. Many of these advocates will argue that a good civic education program must take place in a classroom that is democratically run, with the teacher not acting in authoritarian ways but in supportive, nondominant ways. If one accepts this argument, then one has to confront the contradiction posed by assessing and evaluating individual student learning. What learning there is must be considered part of a complex context, a network of relationships. If we as educators believe that there should be no contradictions between what we are teaching, how we are teaching, and how we are structuring our classrooms, and if we believe that there are such contradictions, then it is the extent of those very contradictions that need to be assessed, and not just knowledge acquisition.

The third disjuncture stems from the desire of many advocates to move the civic education action beyond the classroom. The classroom is important, to be sure, but it is just a part of the whole. It is the classroom plus the school, or it is the classroom plus the school plus the community that matters. We find as a common theme in the civic education literature the need for not only the classroom but the entire school to be democratically run, and for the school to be acting in concert with the community—its people and its several health, education, and welfare agencies—if we are to have a good civic education program. If one accepts the notion of moving beyond the classroom to the school, then assessment must necessarily focus in significant part on the conditions and circumstances of the school as an active center for civic education. Likewise, if one accepts the notion of acting in concert with the community in order to have a good civic education program, then assessment must focus in significant part on school-community circumstances and relations.

It is difficult to see how these three disjunctures can be dealt with effectively. But if these disjunctures cannot be resolved, then civic

education is in a double bind. If civic education is to be a significant part of the curriculum and a significant part of what happens in the school, then civic education has to be part of the regular district and state assessment and evaluation program, part of what is going to be tested. This would appear to be a reasonable proposition, given what educators see every day as to its proof: What gets tested gets attention, what does not gets the crumbs or under-the-table attention. So to even be a part of any significant action, one has to buy into the mainline district- and state-level tests. But if civic education testing takes place at the district and state levels, that testing will in all likelihood focus on knowledge acquisition, with little attention paid to skills and dispositions. As such, what civic educators have to accept is a loss of what makes civic education valuable—the emphases not just on knowledge but on skills, dispositions, attitudes. Civic education advocates, then, are faced with a double bind. If they don't buy into district- and state-level testing, they lose. If they do buy in, they lose. And—the third part of a double-bind situation—they cannot choose not to play.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Civic education advocates are in a difficult spot in determining how to respond to the demands for assessment of their endeavor. It appears that four response options are available.

First, as we have already noted, civic education advocates can refuse to join in the high-stakes assessment at the district or state (or, possibly, national) level. The disadvantage of the option is that civic education becomes marginalized and starved for resources: Only those subjects and areas being tested will be on the agenda.

Second, civic education advocates can participate in high-stakes assessment. The disadvantage is that civic education becomes trivialized with a narrow focus on knowledge acquisition—just one of many parts of a good civic education program.

Third, as an extension of the second option, advocates can in effect make a pact with the devil, acceding to high-stakes testing but on a sub-rosa basis, attending to the many other parts of a good civic education program as best as they can. This option appears to be popular; many advocates, recognizing that schools are loosely coupled organizations, continue to do what they deem necessary. The difficulty here is that advocates are not being direct in making their case for civic education. There is a perennial struggle for resources, and there is ample opportunity for misunder-

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standing, with school boards, state education people, and the public continuing to view civic education in a narrow sense—the sense defined by the high-stakes tests—and advocates going in quite a different direction. The Machiavellian strategy of appearing to acquiesce while in fact subverting might be effective for a short period, but over time it will not provide a sound basis for civic education program advocacy.

The fourth option is the development of a conceptually solid, easily understandable means of assessing the kinds of civic education programs that most advocates have in mind, with a focus not just on knowledge acquisition and retention but on all of the other aspects of civic education as well—skills, attitudes, dispositions, "habits of the heart," and the like. To plump for this option will be difficult, as indicated by the silence we have noted on the part of many civic education advocates when faced with assessment challenges. But if these challenges can be met, if advocates can find persuasive yet nondemagogic ways of talking about their endeavors, then civic education can at last be put on a solid footing. It should not be necessary for all advocates to come to consensus as to program objectives and pedagogy. If one wants to make a case for heavy emphasis on an issues-oriented approach, then make the case and make the persuasive argument for the appropriate means of assessment, and likewise with a participation approach or any other way of framing a good civic education program.

The fourth option, then, would seem to be the most reasonable and ultimately the most persuasive option for civic education advocates.

If civic education is as central to school as is claimed, and if civic education is to be taken seriously, then we must have a responsible system of assessment and accountability based on all the complexities of civic education. If we do not choose to invest the attention and resources in such a responsible system, we must acknowledge that our claims for the centrality of civic education are just so many words not to be taken seriously.

NOTE

1. In Soder (2002), I provide more detail. Also useful for me have been Butts (1980; 1989), Hertzberg (1981), Parker (1996a; 1996b; 2001; 2002), and Shaver (1981).

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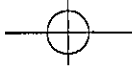

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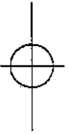

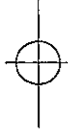

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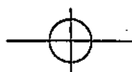

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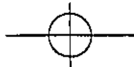

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