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# Community Service and Civic Education

*Advocates claim that community service prepares a self-centered generation for citizenship. Not so, Mr. Boyte asserts.*

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BY HARRY C. BOYTE



COMMUNITY service, widely touted as the cure for young people's political apathy, in fact teaches little about the arts of participation in public life. To reengage students in public affairs requires redefining *politics* to include, in addition to electoral activity, ongoing citizen involvement in solving public problems. It requires a conceptual framework that distinguishes between public life and private life. And it calls for a pedagogical strategy that puts the design and ownership of problem-solving projects into the hands of young people.

According to conventional wisdom, teenagers and young adults are deeply disenchanting with politics and public issues. The Times Mirror Center reports that, for the first time since World War II, young people show less interest in public affairs than their elders. Only one in five follows major issues "very closely."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, youths today have a complex set of attitudes about the world. More detailed probing finds a generation not so much apathetic as furious at adults' apparent inaction in the face of mounting social problems. Today's young people are jaded with Sixties-style protest and uncertain about what else there is to do. It is clear, however, that senior-class trips to Washington, D.C., or exhortations to be "good citizens" — the stuff of earlier generations' civic education — are not going to interest young people in politics.

Community service is proposed as the resolution of this dilemma. Advocates

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claim that service prepares a self-centered generation for citizenship. Thus, for instance, the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship has argued that, "if the service commitment begins early enough and continues into adulthood, participatory citizenship would become what Robert Bellah and his colleagues call habits of the heart, family and community traditions of local political participation that sustain a person, a community and a nation."<sup>2</sup>

Using this rationale, community service initiatives are on the rise. Detroit schools now require 200 hours of com-

tutoring projects and literacy campaigns. In addition, the phrase sometimes encompasses activism with regard to such issues as homelessness and drug abuse.

Service involvements can produce a number of desirable educational outcomes: connection with other cultures, experiential learning, personal growth. But service does little to connect students' everyday concerns with the political process. Nor do service projects normally teach the political skills that are needed to work effectively toward solving society's problems: public judgment, the collaborative exercise of power, conflict resolution, negotiation, bargaining,

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munity service for graduation. Atlanta issued a 75-hour minimum requirement to increase "understanding of the obligations of a good citizen." Minnesota and Pennsylvania have developed statewide financing for student service. Congress passed the National and Community Service Act of 1990 to provide federal support.<sup>3</sup>

*Community service* refers mainly to a variety of individual voluntary efforts, from working in food banks and shelters for the homeless to helping in nursing homes or hospitals to participating in

and holding oneself and others accountable.

Adults often see community service as a renewal of the political tradition of civic republicanism, in which citizens learn to "put aside" their self-interests in altruistic concern for others. To younger Americans, steeped in a culture that glorifies "lifestyles of the rich and famous" and praises the virtues of free enterprise, calls to renounce self-interest sound disingenuous at best.

Instead, young people find that service meets their needs for personal relevance and a sense of membership in a community. Volunteers usually disavow concern with larger policy questions, seeing service as an *alternative* to politics. "I do community service for myself," explained one young woman at a North Carolina college who had begun a successful mentoring program for pregnant teens. "I have a passion for it. I can't save the world."<sup>4</sup> In schools where learning seems dry and remote, service experiences create a sense of usefulness and connection. A young student from Ohio who does volunteer work with retarded children explained, "I like to see people gain from what I can do for them. I like myself better for helping them."<sup>5</sup>

**F**ROM THE perspective of civic education, the weakness of community service lies in a conceptual limitation. Service lacks a vocabulary that draws attention to the public world that extends beyond personal lives and local communities. Most service programs include little learning about the policy dimensions of issues that students address through person-to-person efforts. Volunteers rarely have the wherewithal to reflect on the complex dynamics of power, race, and class that are created when middle-class youths go out to "serve" in low-income areas.

Most notably, without a conceptual framework that distinguishes between personal life and the public world, community service adopts the "therapeutic language" that now pervades society. From television talk shows to election campaigns, such public concepts as accountability, respect for public contributions, and recognition of varying interests and viewpoints have given way to a language of self-development and intimacy. Thus even sophisticated community service programs designed for high school students use personal growth as their main selling point. Educational objectives include self-esteem, a sense of personal worth, self-understanding, independence, personal belief in the ability to make a difference, consciousness of one's personal values, openness to new experiences, capacity to persevere in difficult tasks, and the exploration of new identities and unfamiliar roles. *Politics* is absent.<sup>6</sup>

A different way to teach politics is essential if we want to reengage students with citizenship — understood as playing an ongoing role in public affairs. Partly, this new approach means retrieving older definitions. The word *politics* comes from the Greek *politikos*, meaning "of the citizen." A citizen-centered politics re-creates the *concept of a public realm*, as distinct from private life, in which diverse groups learn to work together effectively to address public problems, whether or not they like one another personally. To be meaningful, public work also requires an *experience of power* that can come only from self-directed action.

Project Public Life of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota<sup>7</sup> has found that teens



"You don't need an access code — you just play with it."

and younger students alike have great interest in "problem-solving politics" in which they are central actors. The Public Achievement program of Project Public Life — undertaken with the cooperation of St. Paul Mayor James Scheibel, Minnesota 4-H, and others — is based on a pedagogy that allows youths to define their own concerns and design and manage their own projects in the context of public environments in which they learn how to work constructively with diversity.

A Public Achievement training effort conducted in the fall of 1990 with the Inner Urban Catholic Coalition — a group of 13 St. Paul Catholic schools — illustrates the approach. Principals, teachers, and students asked to participate in Public Achievement in order to lend new energy and meaning to Martin Luther King Day celebrations, which many felt had grown stale. At the outset, educators agreed to hand over authority for the project to teams of junior high school students. The students, with educators watching but not talking, received training in public skills and concepts in order to design King Day celebrations relevant to their own lives.

In the training, Peg Michels and Rebecca Breuer of the Public Achievement staff emphasized such skills as public speaking, recruiting other students, organizing meetings, analyzing problems, developing action plans, and conducting evaluations. They also structured public meetings to ensure that students would interact across school lines, delivering reports and obtaining diverse feedback.

The King Day activities that emerged from these sessions varied, but on balance administrators and teachers were amazed at the creativity, zeal, and skill that students displayed in response to being "taken seriously" and having the freedom to plan their own public projects.

The process allowed students to design events that were connected to their own lives and reflected their own capabilities. At St. Luke's Catholic School, for instance, the initial team of students who participated in the training recruited a task force from grades 4 through 8 to plan class activities that would culminate in a large public event for the school and community on January 18. Students from each grade participated in and reported on projects in which they applied to prob-

lems in their own lives the principles that King's life exemplified, such as the non-violent resolution of conflicts and the disavowal of prejudice. Jeff Maurer, a

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teacher at St. Bernard's, another Catholic school involved in the project, said, "I have developed a new appreciation and respect for my students as I watched them identify issues, devise strategies to deal with those issues, and evaluate their own progress."

The service language of "caring and community" is simply no antidote for to-

day's youthful cynicism about politics. Moreover, the predominantly one-on-one character of typical service experiences leaves little room for political learning. As this generation defines itself politically, it will focus on finding practical answers to the problems of the nation. Teaching the skills and concepts of such problem solving will require a far more public pedagogy.

1. For figures on the disenchantment of youth with politics, see Michael Oreskes, "Profiles of Today's Youths: Many Just Don't Seem to Care," *New York Times*, 28 June 1990; "An Indifferent Age?," *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 June 1990; and Rushmore M. Kidder, "Children's Moral Compass Wavers," *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 May 1990.

2. William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship, "Pathways to Success: Citizenship Through Service," in Jane Kendall, ed., *Combining Service and Learning* (Raleigh: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1990), p. 441.

3. The figures on service are from Alonzo Crim, "The Obligation of Citizenship," in Kendall, pp. 240-41.

4. Dan Conrad, "Learner Outcomes for Community Service," *The Generator*, January 1989, pp. 1-2.

5. Ernest Boyer, "Service: Linking School to Life," in Kendall, p. 100.

6. For a representative listing of learner outcomes, see, for example, Conrad, op. cit.

7. For further information on the program, write to Project Public Life, Humphrey Center, Rm. 147, 301 19th Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55455. ☐



"It's the weekend, mom. Read me one without a moral."