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## Community Service Learning as Democratic Education in South Africa and the United States

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*This paper describes the development of the first community service learning program for democratic education in South Africa. The Democracy Education Project, which is based on Swarthmore College's innovative Democracy Project, was designed and implemented by a Swarthmore College student working with a high school in a Black community near Cape Town. This case study demonstrates that the successful transposition of a model of community service learning from one country to another requires recognizing the complex relationships among history and culture, and theories and practices of democratic education. It is also crucial to involve the new community as an equal partner at every step of the process. Together, the Democracy and the Democracy Education Projects suggest the potential of community service learning for strengthening citizenship, and for bridging the gaps between races, in the United States as well as in South Africa.*

In 1994, South Africa embarked on its inspiring transition from apartheid to democracy. The new Government of National Unity led by Nelson Mandela has recognized the urgency of educating the citizenry in new forms of democracy, and of rechanneling the strategies of protest that helped to bring about democratic change into participation in fledgling political institutions. Schools can play a major role in educating young people about democracy, and in providing opportunities for them to practice new democratic skills through activities such as community service learning.

The first service-learning program for democratic education in South Africa was designed and implemented by Jeremy Weinstein, a Swarthmore student working with a high school in a Black community near Cape Town. The program is based on the innovative Democracy Project directed by Dr. Meta Mendel-Reyes, in the Department of Political Science at Swarthmore College. The challenge of adapting a model of service-learning that originated in the United States to the South African context raises a practical as well as an ethical question: Can, and should, a model of service-learning as democratic education for an "established" democracy be transposed to an "emerging" democracy?

The universal popularity of the term, "democracy," masks important debates about its meaning. Although the root definition of the word is simply stated as "the rule of the people," the interpretation of this phrase varies from the direct participation of citizens in political decision-making that characterized ancient Athens to the election of representa-

tives that occurs in modern democracies. Defining democracy becomes even more problematic when theory is compared to practice; for instance, Athens denied citizenship to many, including women and slaves, who would be considered citizens today. Ironically, many of those eligible to participate in the chief democratic ritual of contemporary democracy, elections, decline to do so; in the United States, voting turnout averages less than 50%, even during the most significant recent Presidential elections. The fact that turnout has been much greater in South Africa, a so-called "emerging" democracy, than in one of its "established" predecessors, is further evidence of the complexity of the concept, "democracy."<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, democracy is assumed to rest on a universal principle, the equal right of all human beings to rule themselves, with the understanding that democratic practice occurs in the context of particular political institutions and cultures. It follows that a model of democratic education ought to reflect the unique characteristics of the democracy for which citizens are to be educated. The transposition of a model of community service learning for democracy from one country to another requires more than simply taking differences in political history and culture into consideration. It is also essential to develop and implement the new program with the full participation of the students, teachers, and leaders of potential host organizations. Above all, the exchange should be understood as reciprocal, in that both countries have much to teach and to learn from

each other about community service learning and about democracy.

### **The United States: The Democracy Project**

In the United States, service-learning has been recognized as one of the most effective modes of education for democracy (Barber, 1992; Barber & Battistoni, 1993). Under the direction of Mendel-Reyes, the Democracy Project at Swarthmore College is designed to deepen students' understanding of and commitment to democratic citizenship in a multicultural society, through public service internships.<sup>2</sup> Mendel-Reyes is a former labor and community organizer who now specializes in Democratic Theory and Practice. She teaches the three interrelated core courses of the Democracy Project: "Democratic Theory and Practice," "Multicultural Politics," and "Community Politics: The Internship Seminar." All three courses, which are eligible for honors, involve community service learning; in the Seminar, students serve as interns as part of their coursework, while the other two courses include a class community service activity.

"Democratic Theory and Practice" explores the meaning of democracy, by comparing democratic theory to the ways in which democracy is practiced in the United States. Beginning with the gap between the rhetorical commitment to democracy, and the fact that most people barely participate in ruling themselves, the practice of democracy in the United States raises a host of complex questions: Can people wield power effectively in a large, bureaucratic, nation-state? Is democracy simply about the institutions of government, or should it be extended to the exercise of power in, for example, the workplace, family, and school? Can political democracy occur in a country in which there are tremendous economic and social inequalities? Must political decisions be made by consensus to be considered truly democratic? When and how do political movements arise, in which people attempt to empower themselves and to bring about a more participatory theory and practice of democracy?

Following an introduction to the range of definitions of democracy, this course alternates between case studies of democratic practice and classic works of democratic theory, including texts by Rousseau, Madison, Mill, Schumpeter, and Arendt. A case study of the civil rights movement in a small town on the coast of Georgia illustrates the contrast between the participatory and representative theories of democracy. Later units focus on the Civil War as the greatest historical example of the

American struggle to reconcile the treatment of racial minorities with democratic principles, on efforts to organize Appalachian miners as an instance of the conflict between democracy and economic inequality, and on environmental politics in Montana, which illuminates the tension between democracy and community.<sup>3</sup>

In line with the dual focus on theory and practice, the course features a weeklong simulation, "Swattown" ("Swat" is a nickname for Swarthmore), about a crisis in a local high school which culminates in a town meeting. Student teams play the roles of the school board, the parent-teacher association, the student council, and a radical student group (called SWAT, for "students with attitude and time"); they are graded, as individuals and as members of their teams, on the basis of their efforts to achieve a realistic and democratic outcome. The course assignments also include a class community service project which takes place off-campus, and a theory in practice report on an activist experience during the semester.

"Multicultural Politics" investigates the ways in which racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity has shaped American democracy, past and present. Is the United States a melting pot, a mosaic, or a battleground of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences? To many people, nostalgia for an America composed of successful, assimilated, united immigrants contrasts with widespread anxiety about a nation increasingly divided between citizens and newcomers, whites and people of color, rich and poor.

This course begins with the historical experiences of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, European immigrants, and gays and lesbians, focussing on the political and economic subordination of these minorities, but also on their efforts to empower themselves. Next, students explore specific attempts of community activists and popular movements, to practice democratic, egalitarian, multicultural politics today. Lastly, they turn to contemporary issues, including immigration, poverty, environmental racism, and affirmative action, which illuminate the complex relationships among race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and other differences.

The class materials include fiction and memoirs by members of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities who have often been ignored or silenced, in addition to works of social science, history, journalism and videos, all expressing a wide variety of political perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Students also draw on their own experiences and family histories, engage in dialogues with community activists and other pre-

senters, and participate in an off-campus community service project.

The heart of the Democracy Project is "Community Politics: The Internship Seminar," which explores democratic and multicultural political practice through semester-long internships, of at least five hours/week (60 hours/semester), with local service and advocacy organizations. How do disempowered communities organize themselves to take collective action? How can individual activists, from inside and outside the community, help to achieve democratic and multicultural social change? Students explore these questions by integrating reflection and experience, primarily through their internships with organizations such as the AIDS Law Project (translating a brochure into Spanish); Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (helping a predominantly African American neighborhood fight against a trash incinerator located there); and the Domestic Abuse Project (working with children in a shelter for battered women and their families).

Through dialogues with local activists, readings, journals, reflection and community-building exercises in the classroom, students have many opportunities to bring theory and practice to bear on some of the most difficult issues in democratic and multicultural politics. Is it possible to achieve significant political change at the local level, when critical decisions are made at the national, and even international levels? How can communities have an impact on large, bureaucratic nation-states, and on multinational corporations? What role, if any, should outsiders play in community politics? How should an activist work with people who are different in terms of education, race, income, gender, etc.? Can people from one group understand, judge, or build coalitions with other groups? What type of knowledge and education is appropriate to community politics? What is the relationship between community service and community action? Does providing direct service to people undercut their political empowerment? Should community organizations be democratic in structure? Are there times when too much internal democracy makes it harder to achieve democratic political change? What is democratic leadership?

For example, Jeremy Weinstein's internship during the Spring semester, 1994, helped him to understand and to practice mutually respectful relationships with members of a community very different from his own. Coming from an affluent, mostly white suburb in California, Weinstein was assigned to help African American teenagers in a housing project in Chester, Pennsylvania, to develop a youth council. At first, as he wrote in his final

evaluation,

I was scared of working with (and attempting to lead) black children because I am white...But experience proved to me that relationships are built on trust and not skin color. With each progressive meeting, the kids realized that I was around to stay....

The journey between these two points was not always smooth, but the curricular integration of reflection and action helped Jeremy to wrestle with tough issues, such as the tension between community empowerment and outside expertise. He concluded that, sometimes, "the need for sensitivity to 'what the community wants'" becomes a kind of "fear that permeates the board of the CSCCC [Chester Swarthmore College Community Coalition] and it seems to act as an excuse for many students who do not participate in activities in Chester." Near the end of the semester, the youth council sponsored its first event, "Project Jam," a dance party and fundraiser. Although he worked closely with them on the preparation, Jeremy thought he would be unable to be there himself, until the very last minute. Afterwards, he reported to the class that this was probably the best thing that could have happened, because it helped him and the students realize that they could do it themselves!

The Democracy Project recognizes that democratic education in the United States during the 1990s takes place in the context of a decline in political participation that both reflects and shapes national cynicism about democracy.<sup>5</sup> The ideal of the rule of the people has become the reality of the "rule by a few supposedly in the interests of the many," as the political theorist Hannah Arendt put it (1987, p. 269). The turn away from participatory politics affects not merely the formal institutions of national government, but also the local, voluntary associations which Alexis DeTocqueville believed to be the schools of democracy (1988). In an essay which recently captured the attention of the nation, political scientist Robert Putnam explored the erosion of the civic spirit so necessary in political as well as social communities (1996).

Ironically, the best hope for a revival of "civic America" may be found in neighborhoods and workplaces where those who have been excluded, due to the color of their skin or their lack of wealth, are fighting for their right to participate fully in politics (Mendel-Reyes, 1995).<sup>6</sup> Through community service learning, the Democracy Project offers students an opportunity to experience participation at the grassroots. The philosophy behind the Democracy Project is that democratic relationships

must be based, not on charity, but on mutual partnerships in the struggle for justice. An Aboriginal saying, popularized by the service-learning educator, Nadinne Cruz (1993), captures the spirit of the Project: "If you've come to help me, no thank you, but if your liberation is bound up with mine, then come, let us work together."

Of course, liberation has different meanings to a privileged student at Swarthmore College, ranked consistently as one of the top three liberal arts colleges in the country, and to a poor child attending a school three miles away in Chester, which has the worst public school system in the state of Pennsylvania. Yet both have a stake in bridging the deepening chasms among Americans, through the revitalization of democracy.

### South Africa: The Democracy Education Project

The South African curricular model adapts the main features of the Democracy Project to the situation of a democracy emerging from forty-six years of apartheid. Upon its installation in 1994, the multiracial Government of National Unity led by President Nelson Mandela faced a daunting historical legacy of racial injustice and economic inequality. Approximately 39% of South Africa's population is effectively unemployed. A segregated education system, with a pupil:teacher ratio of 16:1, and a per capita expenditure of 3553 rands for whites, compared to a ratio of 39:1 and 644 rands for blacks, has yielded predictably inegalitarian results. In 1991, 96% of whites passed their matriculation exams, as opposed to only 46% of blacks, who found themselves unprepared for a hostile job market.<sup>7</sup>

In order to involve its citizens in solving these tremendous problems, the new government began a major campaign to teach them how to participate effectively in a democratic political system, through voting and other forms of political action. Recognizing youth's critical role, the Ministry of Education approved a proposal for the nation's first school-based civic training program, written by Jeremy Weinstein, an American exchange student enrolled in a foreign study program at the University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town.

The Democracy Education Project began with 80 Standard Eight and Nine students (equivalent to U.S. high school sophomores and juniors) and 17 non-governmental organization (NGO) partners, during a six month period in 1995. Zonnebloem School, which houses the Democracy Education Project, is located in District Six, a whites-only residential area since 1966, when the blacks and col-

ored people were evicted, and their homes razed.<sup>8</sup> Even today, most of the students who attend the newly integrated school commute by bus, for up to an hour, from the "informal" black and colored settlements to which their families were relocated.

The goal of the Project is to teach these young South Africans, through service-learning, how to identify and address the needs of their communities, and, building on these experiences, how to become active, effective citizens in their new democracy. "Democracy in Action," the core course, features a challenging curriculum in democratic education:

- A comprehensive needs assessment of a Cape Town community introduces students to service-learning. Students spend time in the communities, interviewing residents, to prepare for a simulation of the efforts of local government to request Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) funding from the national government. During this role-play, students provide written and oral presentations to an independent panel of judges, portrayed by real NGO leaders.
- A substantial internship with an NGO requires volunteering at least three days a week after school. In addition to providing necessary assistance to the community, the internships offer disadvantaged students their first real work experience. In class, the internship experiences help to focus discussion on the politics of working outside government to address local problems, and the challenges of achieving social change.
- A broad-based reading list acquaints students with social movements from around the world. The main text is *Democracy for All*, a democratic education piece produced by South Africans.<sup>9</sup> The students also read selected works profiling individuals and communities engaged in social action. Outside speakers, including community activists, government leaders, and educators, address the class on current social issues in South Africa.
- Written work includes a journal documenting the experience of working in an NGO. Students report on each day at their internship, recording their thoughts on the operation of the organization, their particular assignments, and any new program ideas prompted by their experiences. These journal entries are shared in class every week, to provide all the students with perspectives on the many NGOs in the community. The journals also give the students practice in writing about their experiences, in preparation for

English examinations which require them to connect their community work to democratic themes.

- A simulation of a national election, from the design of a fair process to the actual vote, concluded the course. Through this exercise, students had an opportunity to try out their new democratic skills.

The unifying focus of "Democracy in Action" is the role of individuals, especially young people, in bringing about democratic social change. In June of 1995, the Democracy Education Project received nation-wide recognition, when the Minister of Education and the Deputy Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC) attended a National Youth Day Event at Zonnebloem School. Along with the community of educators, NGO mentors, and parents, these leaders of the new government affirmed the achievements of young people who had previously been indifferent students in a school system designed to marginalize them. The Minister of Education, visibly moved by their enthusiastic depiction of South Africa's future, proclaimed his support for replicating the Democracy Education Project across the country.

### **South African Democratic Theory**

Transposing a model of community service learning as democratic education from the United States to South Africa involved four specific challenges: (1) How could service-learning curricula be designed to incorporate the emerging country's unique, if hidden, democratic tradition? (2) How could the project best work with and build relationships among schools, NGOs, and government agencies, that had been deliberately separated from one another? (3) How could pedagogy be developed to help students, who have been treated as inferiors, learn to value themselves and also to work with those who are "different"? (4) How could service-learning contribute to solving one of South Africa's most urgent problems, that of teaching young activists democratic political skills beyond the modes of protest that played such a critical role in ending apartheid? In responding to these challenges, Weinstein learned that simply exporting the Democracy Project from the United States to South Africa would not work, that he had to integrate theory and practice through the process of reflection on action at the heart of service-learning.

The evolution of the curriculum in democratic theory exemplifies this important lesson. Along with his clothes, he packed the books that had been

most meaningful to him, including Benjamin Barber's proposal for a "strong," or more participatory, democracy (1984) and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," which argues that racism is incompatible with the American democratic tradition (1964). However, in testing curricula at the University of the Western Cape and on the street with friends in the townships, it became clear that "foreign" democratic theory would not get the message across. Turning to South African history, he discovered a rich tradition of democratic thought that had evolved from practice, during the long struggle against apartheid.<sup>10</sup>

In the first week of class, for example, the Zonnebloem students read excerpts from Gandhi's autobiography, focussing on his life in South Africa. They learned how Gandhi, after being thrown out of a whites-only section on a train in Pietermaritzburg, established the first anti-discrimination groups in the Indian community. This example of democracy in action introduced a writing assignment, to "Describe a time in which you took or wanted to take action." The powerful class discussion which followed showed the students how much they already knew about democratic participation, from their own lives.

For instance, one student, Zola Qengwa, described the day in which he was caught in police gunfire during an anti-apartheid protest; later during the discussion, Thami regretted not taking action when her brother was murdered by militant, anti-white blacks after he brought an Afrikaner friend into their community. Other sessions in the course covered South African leaders, including Sol Plaatjies, Steve Biko, and Nelson Mandela (1994). In designing the curriculum around their country's democratic tradition, which had been hidden from them, the Democracy Education Project helped the students to better understand their own experiences as well as the possibilities for their participation as full citizens in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Connecting Student, School, Community, And Government**

The service-learning internships helped to bring together civic institutions that had been weakened and isolated during the lengthy era of apartheid. Forging partnerships between the Zonnebloem school and the local NGOs was an important educational experience, for the educators and NGO staff, as well as for the students. Most directors of NGOs were skeptical at first, expressing their concerns that students are unskilled and unreliable, and

that in a period of national transition, there is no appropriate role for young people. Slowly, however, through detailed discussions of the proposed curriculum, local branches of a number of prominent national and Western Cape NGOs came aboard, including Black Sash, which educates disadvantaged people about their legal rights; the Child Welfare Society, which runs street children shelters and an adoption center; and Project Vote, the major voter education organization in South Africa. With the assistance of the leaders of these organizations, word spread to other NGOs.

Initially, the students themselves also had to be convinced of the feasibility and desirability of service-learning internships. Because most of them commute long distances to school, they were unenthusiastic about the prospect of adding to an already long day. Student preparation included individual meetings with Weinstein, their instructor, and extensive role-playing of likely situations, such as the first encounter over the phone. The predictable awkwardness of these early student-NGO interactions was eased by writing about and sharing them with the class: for instance, because one student ran out of change, the pay phone cut him off before the end of the conversation, while another student was so preoccupied with arranging her initial meeting around her mentor's schedule that she set it for 10:00 AM, when she was supposed to be in school.

Eventually, each intern was volunteering at least four hours a week, handing in a signed time sheet and their "democracy journal" every week. The first journal entries contained "horror" stories as well as inspirational ones recounting excitement at being treated as an adult, and at meeting the challenge of undertaking "real" work. The NGOs often allowed students to initiate projects. With the support of the Parks Department, for example, Kai Collins bought a machete and poison, and recruited two volunteers to clear major areas of a local national park, where the native "feinboss" plants were being destroyed by alien vegetation.

As the class studied exemplary leaders, from Gandhi to Mandela, students were encountering their own heroes in the NGOs. The empowering impact on individual students was striking. Abie Makane, a severely troubled black student, was transformed by his placement at the Street Children Shelter, where he tutored young people very much like himself, from broken homes, cynical and unmotivated. Almost immediately, Zonnebloem teachers noticed a change: Abie began to express his desire to stay in school, and to succeed.

Despite forebodings on both sides, the internship experience turned out to be a genuine exchange.

As students learned about the challenges of social activism first-hand, the Cape Town NGOs received valuable assistance that helped to create and to deepen mutual relationships among the school, the NGOs, and the communities. Taking the time to build broad community support had laid the groundwork for the strong partnerships essential to effective, sustainable democracy education.

### Beyond White vs. Black vs. Colored

Zonnebloem School, like the rest of the Western Cape, is characterized by sharp divisions between the colored and black students. Apartheid separated people on the basis of race, isolating black and colored townships from each other, and from the city centers and suburbs where most whites lived. Although both were oppressed by the same laws, coloreds and blacks never fully united against the previous government; today, black and colored townships coexist side by side, with very little or no communication between them.

The community needs assessment project was the first major step in bringing the groups together through the Democracy Education Project. The assignment asked the students to imagine the following situation:

The Government has given R200 million for the Reconstruction and Development Programme in the Western Cape. An independent body of judges will be responsible for distributing the money to local communities. In groups of no more than five, you must decide which community in the Cape Town area you represent. Your group is the local council, and will be responsible for presenting a written report and oral presentation to the judges including: a description of the community, a summary of the needs, and a list of people and organizations.

When the students divided into groups, it appeared that the segregation created by apartheid would continue, even among long-time friends at Zonnebloem. Black students gathered with each other, choosing to work in the black communities of Khayelitsha, Guguletu, and Langa. Colored students also congregated, selecting their own townships: Mitchells Plain, Belhar, and Lentegeur. However, Weinstein used these divisions to begin a discussion about one of the most important goals of the exercise: to form multiracial groups to document needs and to recommend action in diverse communities.

Reluctantly, the students integrated their groups. Zola Qengwa, a black student from Langa, expressed his fear of entering a colored communit

ty: "The gangs in Belhar will come after me because I am black." Mark Lotter and Geraldine Bleekers, two colored students, were equally concerned about their reception in the black township of Guguletu. Nevertheless, over a ten day period, multiracial groups of students interviewed residents of each other's townships. Afterwards, Zola, Mark, and many other excited students told Weinstein about their positive visits to what had been "foreign" territories. A union leader in Guguletu, for instance, had invited Mark and his group to a local council meeting, to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by black workers.

The assignment culminated in formal written and oral presentations to NGO leaders who had agreed to portray the government panel in charge of allocating funds to the most "deserving" communities. Along with other observers, they were moved by the way in which black students argued vehemently for support to colored communities, and vice versa. The NGO leaders, who had only committed to donating their mornings, were so impressed that they ended up staying through the entire afternoon. Taking their roles as independent judges very seriously, they discussed the presentations in great detail for over three hours, before dividing up the government "money" to the groups which best represented their communities.

For the students, the experience of entering a community and attempting to understand the situation of its residents, prepared them well for their internships, by helping them to clarify their interests and the geographic locations in which they wanted to volunteer. Beyond the challenge and excitement of visiting new places and experimenting with a new type of assignment, Zonnebloem's students learned that their work and opinions are valuable, and that by working together across traditional divisions, young people can make a difference, in the classroom and in the community.

### **South African Democratic Practice**

Drawing on the knowledge of the communities and their issues gained through service-learning, the Zonnebloem students took part in a simulated electoral campaign designed to give them a chance to practice participating in a democratic political system. Assigned to develop a free and fair electoral process, to create their own parties, and to mobilize the entire school to participate in rallies, debates, and voting, the students challenged Weinstein to move beyond what he had learned as a political science major at Swarthmore College. Questions abounded: "Can't our party represent everybody?" "Is it OK to simply tell the people

what we stand for and stick to it?" "Why do tribal affiliations have to play a role in defining our platform?" And, "How can we give every person a voice in creating this party?"

The students formed six political parties - the People's Justice, Happy People's, South African People's, Ire Rastas', Workers', and Change Parties - and an Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to develop a comprehensive code of conduct and to monitor the election. Each step of the process became a learning experience. For example, the IEC began to register the school's "voters" by handing out forms and asking students to return them the next day. After getting only a few back, the IEC shot into action: designing explanatory materials, visiting classes to describe the election process, and registering students on the spot.

Meanwhile, the political parties prepared detailed platforms, and participated in debates over such issues as the death penalty, affirmative action, federalism, abortion, the legalization of marijuana, and taxes. In order to simulate the experience of running a campaign more effectively, the parties were required to develop mobilization efforts for two distinct groups: informed and uninformed voters. The "informed" voters were registered students who participated in the debates. The vast majority of Zonnebloem students, however, were considered to be "uninformed." Political parties developed creative mobilization techniques: bringing guest speakers to campus, marching through the halls during class with posters, and approaching students individually to discuss their concerns.

However, the challenge of engaging citizens in a democracy became painfully obvious on the day before the election. Each Presidential candidate was invited to address the student body during a lunch time assembly. Without faculty supervision, the assembly would have been a challenging audience for even the most experienced politician. As the first candidate, Ricardo Ronganger of the Change Party, rose to speak, he was greeted with cheers of support for other parties. His prepared text was barely audible above the cheers and "boo's" of the audience. Each candidate faced the same situation, and many students returned to class angry that their leaders were not afforded the opportunity to address the electorate freely and fairly.

But, the political parties re-grouped, plotting new strategies to recruit supporters before election day. Thanks to the thorough IEC, which prepared a detailed voter's roll, the election itself went smoothly, with the South African People's Party winning the victory. By building on the students' community studies and internship experiences, the



simulated election combined service and civics, preparing them for their roles as citizen activists in their communities and as future leaders in government.

### From Protest to Participation

In an emerging democracy, community service learning has the potential to help students move beyond the culture of protest that is often so instrumental in overturning the previous regime. During the late 1980s, young South Africans, particularly blacks, participated in the ANC's campaign to making the apartheid nation "ungovernable." Even after the free election of a multiracial government, protest remains the only form of democratic citizenship that most of these students have experienced.

Although the new government moved quickly to try to integrate the schools and to equalize spending, there were widespread expressions of student frustration. For example, in the Western Cape, during the first term of the 1995 school year, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) brought education to a standstill for a week, to protest anti-integration efforts in the area. According to Peter Skei, himself a young activist:

This is a group of people becoming impatient, angry at the system. They've fought the old system but now find themselves in a system with not much more opportunity than in the past (Raghavan, 1996, p. 24).

In response, President Mandela called for students to join in the next stage of nation-building. Addressing the COSAS national conference, Mandela said:

When you mobilized against apartheid and its education system, you refused to succumb to it because you knew that you had a role to play in the building of a democratic and non-racial society. Development requires proper education and training. We depend on you. The reconstruction of this country depends on the involvement and development of our youth.<sup>11</sup>

What makes it so difficult for youth to respond to this plea is the fact that their demands are often legitimate, and directly related to the building of a democratic, multiracial society. Like other new democracies, South Africa is coping with a gap between the expectations aroused by the successful struggle to overturn an oppressive regime, and the capacity of a fledgling government to meet them. Moreover, the transfer of political power has barely dented the control of the economy by multinational corporations and businesses owned by many

of the whites who benefitted from apartheid. So, there are very real limitations to the ability of the new government to resolve, on its own, such pressing issues as poverty and unemployment.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, the democratically-elected leaders rely on the culture of protest that not only brought them to power, but also enables them to pressure those institutions blocking economic and social transformation. On the other hand, excessive unrest could weaken the fragile democracy, making it even harder for the leaders to satisfy the demands of their followers. As Mandela suggests, the key may be the rapid transition toward a culture of participation, in which citizens work together constructively, to build a democratic society of genuine equality.

In a similar vein, using language that recalls that of the American political scientist Robert Putnam, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa has proposed a "well-organized and vibrant civil society that is able to check the power of government, hold the leadership accountable, and promote a strong sense of citizenship among the public" (James, 1996, pp. 60-61). Democracy education through community service learning promises to contribute to the creation of this civil society by helping students to understand and to practice a new form of democratic citizenship.

### Conclusion

The principle guiding the transposition of the Democracy Project from the United States to South Africa is that service-learning programs, wherever they are located and whatever their focus, must take into account the complex relationships among history and culture, and theories and practices of democratic education, and be designed, implemented, and evaluated in cooperation with the community. Students participating in such programs should be encouraged, through curriculum designed to integrate reflection and experience, to be active in their service and theoretical in their engagement.

Four specific lessons can be drawn concerning the adaptation of a model of community service learning as democratic education: (1) service-learning must reflect and draw upon the newly liberated country's own democratic tradition; (2) service-learning involves working with existing institutions while also helping to construct and to strengthen relationships among schools, NGOs and government agencies, that have been kept apart; (3) service-learning helps students to recognize and value their individual differences and the distinctiveness of their own communities, and simultaneously provides concrete experiences of working

together to solve shared problems; and (4) service-learning promises to help young activists make the transition from a culture of democratic protest to one of democratic participation.

In a period in which democracies around the world are struggling to emerge or to sustain themselves, the lessons of the Democracy Education Project reach beyond the borders of South Africa. This project, inspired by the American example of the Democracy Project, also has much to teach the oldest democracy, where voting rates decline as racial tensions rise. Both "emerging" and "established" democracies need active citizens if democracy is going to mean more than the "rule by a few supposedly in the interests of the many." Because the democratic spirit must be continually nurtured, community service learning as democratic education could help to reinvigorate civic America as well as "civic South Africa." Ultimately, the future of multiracial democracy in the United States and throughout the world will depend on the participation of young people, such as the South African students whose enthusiasm for service-learning concludes this essay:

I found that...we as teenagers, can really make a difference.

I love these lessons of democracy...learning about life in its truest form.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Useful summaries of the major debates over the meaning of democracy can be found in Arblaster (1987), Barber (1984), and Dahl (1989).

<sup>2</sup> A fuller discussion of the Democracy Project at Swarthmore College will appear in Mendel-Reyes, "Teaching/Theorizing/Practicing Democracy" (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Most of the political theory texts used in this course are contained in the excellent anthology edited by Philip Green (1993). The case studies mentioned are: Greene (1991), Gaventa (1980), and Kemmis (1990).

<sup>4</sup> The central text used in this course is Takaki (1993).

<sup>5</sup> Political scientists Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen (1993) have traced the decline in political participation in the United States to five major causes: a younger electorate, weakened social involvement, declining feelings of efficacy, weakened attachments to political parties, and a decline in voter mobilization efforts.

<sup>6</sup> On the history and contemporary examples of par-

ticipatory democracy in the United States, see Chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> For a good general history of apartheid South Africa, see Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (1990). On the South African education system, see Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (1990). The most detailed report on the recent elections is Andrew Reynolds, *Election '94* (1995).

<sup>8</sup> The Government of National Unity has targeted District Six as a major priority for redevelopment. Their plan calls for bringing families back from the townships and creating a model multicultural community.

<sup>9</sup> *Democracy for All* (1994) was produced by the Street Law Programme (South Africa) in partnership with the National Institute for Citizen Education in the Law (NICEL, United States).

<sup>10</sup> On the South African tradition of struggle for democracy, see Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994); Jurgen Schadeberg, *Voices from Robbin Island* (1994); Rian Malan, *My Traitor's Heart* (1990); Mahatma Gandhi, *Autobiography* (1957).

<sup>11</sup> President Mandela, during a speech to the national convention of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), 1995.

<sup>12</sup> In a recent issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Adam Przeworski and his collaborators (1996) argue that three variables are crucial to the sustainability of new democratic governments: a parliamentary political system, the economy's potential to generate a per capita income of over US\$5000, and a favorable external environment.

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