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Civic Engagement in the First-Year Experience: Developing Civic Literacy

Jody Neathery-Castro

Abstract

Students often misinterpret civic engagement strategies as an alternative to political action and civic participation. This essay argues that urban universities should integrate aspects of politics into civic engagement in order to link civic service with civic change. A model from the University of Nebraska-Omaha suggests that introducing civic learning in the first year is highly effective, especially for urban university students who have strong ties to the city.

Prompted by scholars and pundits who warn of the decline of citizens in public life (Holland 2000, Putnam 2000, among others), universities have experienced a renewed interest in promoting civic engagement among their students. Such support for civic engagement has taken many forms: service-learning, political activism, and volunteerism, among others. Students are receptive to community engagement, with a record high 25 percent of incoming freshmen claiming there is a “very good chance” (and an additional 41 percent claiming “some chance”) that they will participate in volunteer or community work in college (Sax 2004). As might be expected from other urban and metropolitan universities, our data indicates that many more students at my own institution expect to engage in public or community service according to our own entering student survey. Fully 65 percent made such a claim in the 2004 entering class (Metropolitan Opportunities at UNO 2004).

But community service pedagogy for the past several years has had a largely apolitical character (Spiezio 2002). An ideology of communitarianism has grown up around this understanding, fueled by writers such as Amitai Etzioni and Robert Putnam. Communitarian theory emphasizes volunteerism in one’s own community, but not political engagement across communities, to express citizenship (Boyte 2003).

I want to argue here, as Harry Boyte (2003) and Richard Battistoni (2000) have, for putting politics back into civic engagement. Boyte argued that our students’ thinking today reflects the messages they’ve internalized from communitarianism and other similar philosophies; volunteerism and service are seen as alternatives to politics. Young people often characterize their volunteering as an alternative to involvement in formal politics, which they see as self-absorbed and unrelated to their ideals (Galston 2004). For example, Harvard’s annual study on Campus Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service (CAPPS) found in 2001, that 85 percent of undergraduates in their sample felt that “community volunteering” was better than “political engagement” for

solving community problems. Well over 80 percent consistently also believe that “volunteering in the community is easier than volunteering in politics” (CAPPS 2003). The UCLA Your First College Year survey found an inverse relationship over time between interest in politics and interest in volunteerism (Sax 2004).

These examples reflect, in part, failures of faculty to connect community service with effecting community change. The missing link is politics. Boyte (2003) noted “politics is best understood as the interplay of diverse interests to accomplish public purposes.” While we tend to think of politics as primarily the domain of the state, citizens need a working knowledge of it to address community and societal problems. Loeb noted that, “too often our students know serious injustices exist but decide they are simply the way of the world and there’s no way to change it” (Loeb 2001). Their civic resignation is also fueled by disconnect they see between ideals of democracy that they study on the one hand, and the reality they see on the other, where money is the all-important driver of the electoral and lobbying process and politicians are strategic opportunists.

Edward Spiezio and his colleagues in the “Participating in Democracy Project” at Cedar Crest College reviewed the strategies used by institutions to promote civic engagement as a learning outcome, and concluded that we instructors are largely failing to create well-informed, efficacious students ready to participate in the political process (Spiezio 2002). As a political scientist, I can say, “*Mea culpa*. We in the political science field are part of the problem.” We tend to teach the structures and processes of the political system in a way that stresses professional politicians as the main players and promotes passivity on the part of citizens. There are several reasons for this. Hollander and Saltmarsh (2000) noted that the structural organization of universities in the Cold War served the needs of the military-industrial complex. “Their structure, administration, and academic culture embraced objectivity and detachment, and elevated the role of the scientifically educated expert over ordinary citizens in public affairs.” A predisposition towards compliance with the rule-based system is codified in even older constitutional design (Spiezio 2002). Representative government was designed by James Madison and the other founding fathers to keep citizens at arms length from the process because they did not trust “passion”-prone individuals. “Madison – and by extension the Constitutional Convention – chose to disenfranchise the citizen by a series of carefully designed checks and balances, as well as by a representative government that effectively tempered the individual and is ‘mised’ enthusiasms” (DeLeon 1997).

Perhaps one of the few pieces of good news to result from the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks is that students appear to be more interested in understanding and participating in politics in their wake. From a record low of 28 percent in 2000, the proportion of new college students who feel that “keeping up to date with political affairs” is a very important life goal has risen each of the past three years to 33.9 percent in 2003 (Sax 2004). That number had been on a general decline since it peaked at over 60 percent of freshmen surveyed in 1966. But Harvard’s CAPPS survey also found that 85 percent of undergraduates agreed with the statement, “I feel like I need

more practical information about politics before I get involved” (CAPPS 2003). So, we as faculty need to take advantage of this “teachable moment” to facilitate students’ understanding of and access to practical politics.

Furthermore, civic commitment efforts should start early. My campus is one that is heavily involved in service learning, but I have noticed that most of the service-learning courses are offered at the junior or senior level. We faculty expect that only when they’re upperclassmen do students have the maturity and academic background to handle the out-of-class experiences in the community that characterize most service-learning classes. We also expect that predominantly urban commuter students may have a limited ability to juggle the often-greater time commitments of service learning (Zlotkowski and Patton 2004).

My own experience with service learning exemplifies the dilemmas I’ve discussed above. The students in my course, Gender and Global Politics, acted as tutors/mentors for Sudanese refugee girls in a local high school. Background on several new topics, including the civil war in Sudan, assimilation problems faced by refugee populations and even some basic vocabulary in the Nuer language, was added to the more standard readings for an upper-level political science and women’s studies course. At the same time we added extra readings, our work in the community meant we were spending less time together in the classroom. It added up to a higher workload and more independent work for students than was found in most courses. It’s therefore not surprising that like most service-learning courses, mine was targeted at the junior/senior audience. Lacking a basic knowledge about politics and gender issues, I believed that less experienced students would be overwhelmed with the intensive reading requirements and lack of classroom structure entailed. I worried they might not have the cultural competency to work in the field with the Sudanese high school girls. I also expected them to lack the sophistication about the world to engage in structured discussion and reflection at an appropriate level of sophistication.

Civic Literacy and First Year Students

Because they lack the fundamentals of both practical politics (acquiring and using power) and citizen action (how to affect social change in communities), new college students seem to be a challenging target for civic engagement efforts. But Loeb (2001) cautioned us not to set the bar for our students too high:

“Particularly on issues where they’re likely to take some heat, most students doubt their knowledge and question whether the risk of speaking out is worth critical judgments from their peers.... Students caught in this mindset feel that before they act, they need perfect confidence about their passion for the issue, perfect motives for taking it on, and the certainty that it’s the best cause imaginable.”

I’d like to endorse using the first year of college to engage students in the discovery of the political tools they will need – knowledge and confidence – to become active

citizens. While they may be under-prepared for extensive service-learning in their first semester, they are at the perfect stage to start gathering the “tools” for their “activist toolbox,” such as information and background about community policies and needs. Following the model of Milner (2001, 2002), I call emphasizing this type of information and the skills to use it “civic literacy.” My use of the term “civic literacy” is unconnected with the use of this term by a few ideological conservative organizations such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and the Heartland Institute. These organizations use the term not to promote the process of inquiry leading to political knowledge and understanding, but rather as nostalgia for supposed values of the founding fathers and to promote conservatism, curricular reform including advocacy of the Western Canon, limited government, free market economics and Judeo-Christian moral norms.

A First Year Experience class is an ideal environment to develop civic literacy for a number of reasons. The FYE movement includes all intentional activities that universities take to improve the learning, success, engagement, retention, and graduation of first year college students (Gardner 2003, 13). FYE courses have an explicit purpose to connect students with the institution, instructor, and fellow students, so it makes sense to extend that connection to the community or wider communities by learning the community needs. With typically small class sizes and collaborative learning, students can interact in furthering their collective wisdom on course topics. Urban and metropolitan universities are particularly well suited to be of the community, rather than merely in them, with student bodies typically comprised of the citizens of these same communities, rather than from other places. So rather than being abstract issues to them, students own these challenges in a way not often found in a more traditional land-grant or private university. The guru of FYE courses, John Gardner, has endorsed the idea of using these courses as the foundation for civic engagement (Gardner 2003).

So what does a civic literacy FYE course look like? Consistent with the argument above, it need not employ service learning; in fact the course I teach does not. Each FYE course in the new model developed at the University of Nebraska-Omaha is a team-taught venture between academic and student affairs staff which aims to meld the college success skills formerly taught in a stand-alone course with the rigor and pedagogy of an academic discipline – in this case, political science. It features learning materials and activities designed to promote political knowledge and action, including:

Daily Newspaper Reading

The New York Times is one of our course texts, which opens students’ eyes to the political issues of the national and global communities. I post a few headlines from the New York Times on our class website each day, and students are responsible for that material in our weekly news discussion.

Different Forums For Dialogue on Controversial Issues

We use Blackboard for online discussions, often break into small group in class, and write a series of short issue reaction papers. Lectures are minimized in accordance with the findings from UCLA's annual Your First College Year survey. First year students claim that they are most likely to experience the lecture method in their courses, which is also their least preferred pedagogy. Evidence suggests that discussions of controversial issues enhance democratic thinking (Hess 2004).

Required Politically Relevant Campus Activities

Students are required to attend at least three on campus events, such as lectures and rallies. Deconstruction of these events in short written assignments presses students to comment on the purpose and relevance of their topics.

Class Field Trips

As a class, we make some out of the classroom field trips that emphasize political and social positions. We've visited an art exhibit and a campus play this semester, both of which were discussed as different forms of political/social commentary.

Multiple-Stage Research Projects on Contemporary Political Issues

Each student selected an issue important to him or her and kept an issue notebook with news clippings on the issue. A series of four papers were written and an oral presentation made which identified the relevance of the issue for students, different positions on the issue and eventually the student's own arguments for policy solutions to the issue. The goal was to learn how to research an issue and work through the community and political system to address it.

An Emphasis on the *Process* of Politics and Social Change

Loeb (2001) recounted his students' complaints that college teaching lacked an emphasis on the nuts and bolts of change: "They teach the conclusions: 'Lincoln freed the slaves. Women got the vote. Some unions were organized.' We never learn how change actually occurred." Following his directive, our class examined contemporary case studies of young people making a difference (the American university antiapartheid movement in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the Northwestern journalism students whose research helped free an innocent death row inmate, women's legal rights activists who formed a volunteer domestic violence court watch program to provide oversight in county courts prone to giving lenient sentences to domestic abusers, local artists making political speech by challenging society's power structure and social norms).

Conclusions

The literature reports that most of our current ways of teaching are not promoting civic engagement. I have detailed the way that several elements conspire against such promotion: the structure of the academy itself, our own fallback pedagogies, and our

failure to make important connections between community service and community change. However, a number of scholars have blazed the way to achieve change and increase our odds of activating student citizens, and some innovative programs are achieving success. Multi-campus initiatives include the Democratic Academy, Participating in Democracy and AASCU's American Democracy Project (in which my own institution participates). In addition, some pioneering institutions have become known for turning out thoughtful, active citizens: Portland State University, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), University of Vermont, University of Southern California, and Trinity College.

Starting early with these efforts is important, preferably in the first year, in order to empower students to build their information base and action skills. As Loeb (2001) argued, we need to give students relevant models to inspire them and to model what is possible. One way to do this is to select local activists and have the students get their personal stories so students discover that ordinary people like themselves can effect social change in their own communities. One potential model could be to fill the "toolbox" with information and strategies in a first year experience course, then perhaps introduce service learning in a sophomore experience course. Another new model for addressing the student information deficit, which also includes service learning, is presented by the interdisciplinary service-learning project at the University of Nebraska - Omaha. Several course "teams" have tackled different aspects of the community need for safe, affordable housing and pooled their efforts to provide long-term partnership with local agencies such as the Family Housing Advisory Services. In this model, no one class need become experts on the larger social issue, but each can tackle some subset while all the groups pool their cumulative knowledge at the end of each semester. Such creative models serve the mission of urban and metropolitan universities (Borden, et al 2004), and serve as a counterbalance to the growing "commodification" of education. Both altruism and self-interest can be powerful motivators for students in urban institutions to become active in their communities (Hollander and Saltmarsh 2001).

Civic engagement is a product of knowledge, opportunity and passion. FYE courses can promote civic engagement for new students by providing a safe classroom environment to explore controversial ideas and by teaching the models students need to take action. Politics need not be seen as antithetical to community service, but rather as one of the "tools" needed to promote successful long-term societal change.

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