

Spring 2002

Navigating the Shoals of Civic Education With Service-Learning: Ethical, Moral, and Political Constraints on Transformative Education

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Recommended Citation

Hill, Don, "Navigating the Shoals of Civic Education With Service-Learning: Ethical, Moral, and Political Constraints on Transformative Education" (2002). *Civic Engagement*. Paper 25.
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Navigating the Shoals of Civic Education With Service-Learning: Ethical, Moral, and Political Constraints on Transformative Education



Available from the NYLC Resource Center at www.nylc.org.

Excerpted from *The Generator*, Spring 2002.

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By Don Hill

American democracy is threatened by an accelerating trend of disengagement from the fundamental responsibilities of citizenship. This disengagement is growing in all segments of society but is most pronounced in youth and young adults which makes it even more troubling. Many thoughtful educators argue persuasively that high quality service-learning can and should become a resource for tackling this problem, that it can stimulate youth to become active democratic citizens. They are, in my judgment, correct, but navigating the shoals of civic education with service-learning is difficult.

Service-learning has potential for providing effective civic education because it asks students to apply their learning to issues that matter in the real world as well as giving them a chance to feel the rewards of helping others. School does not feel useless and boring when you are doing stuff that matters. But teachers and administrators who take the key elements of high quality service-learning seriously face extraordinarily difficult moral, ethical, and political challenges.

Most experienced service-learning teachers would agree that service-learning must honor and facilitate strong youth voice if it is to work. But what do you do when youth become committed to a project that creates discomfort in the school administration and outside community? Imagine, for example, a civics teacher who is

committed to developing students who are critical thinkers and savvy political actors. A small group of students in her class decide to study the impact of social intolerance on high school youth at their school and in their community. Their research, which includes interviews with psychologists, church leaders, and youth, uncovers the unexpected reality that gay and lesbian youth are discriminated against in hateful ways that cause deep anxiety and pressures for suicide. For the final action part of their service-learning assignment, the group develops a two-part initiative to present to the school board, calling for:

- The development of a health education unit to be taught in all middle schools to increase understanding of homosexuality and to encourage tolerance for all sexual lifestyles;
- The training of one counselor in each high school to provide informed, skilled guidance to homosexual youth.

The teacher knows that such a presentation will be front-page local news, upset her principal, infuriate the superintendent, and, therefore, possibly threaten the continuation of service-learning at her school. She also knows that her students have done an exemplary job of research, crafted a thoughtful strategy for addressing an important community issue, and become incredibly engaged with real citizen/scholar work. What is she to do? What lessons is she to learn?

Some people argue that the question is not that difficult, and they maintain that teachers must understand and make clear from the outset that service-learning can only address issues that are safe for school and community discussion. Youth voice means the freedom to help decide how to study and act on issues that adults agree are noncontroversial and nonpolitical. Since intolerance of gay and lesbians is a practice that society tacitly supports, schools must place it off limits for youth analysis and action. Their position is that, in this case, the teacher should have stopped the project at the beginning and must, at this point, prohibit the students from going to the school board meeting.

Others argue that when service-learning alarms adults by getting a thoughtful action plan into the local press and before political decision makers, it is demonstrating what real civic education is all about. They believe that to prohibit this kind of youth activity would be to make service-learning part of the problem instead of part of a constructive solution to youth apathy and civic indifference.

Let's look at the teacher's dilemma from different perspectives that touch on ethical and moral issues. Some would argue that the teacher has a moral commitment to support her students as they battle a system that is unfair, regardless of the personal and organizational costs. American democracy is grounded on exactly the kind of spirited, informed action that these students were

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demonstrating. Some who strongly support what the students want to achieve would, however, argue that they must be stopped before the "Trojan horse" of service-learning is exposed. This perspective argues that teachers have a moral imperative to camouflage the potential bias of service-learning so that it can continue to sustain bi-partisan political support. If students are allowed to tackle issues that deeply divide the political community, conservative forces will wake up and recognize that service-learning can become a dangerous teaching strategy that needs to be stopped. It is, therefore, morally necessary to stop this student group from appearing at the school board meeting to discuss the needs of gay and lesbian youth to protect the long-term viability of service-learning in schools everywhere.

The teacher faces an almost impossible dilemma. If service-learning is to really train young people to become engaged in important political activity, it needs to provide authentic opportunities for youth voice to direct the service-learning work. When the service-learning work tackles important issues that touch the raw nerves of the school or community, however, it provokes responses that threaten its existence as a teaching strategy.

Consider for a moment a variation on this case. Students notice that a new restaurant opening in town has only young, white employees. They decide to turn their service-learning civic action project into a public protest that will force the restaurant to alter their hiring policies. After talking with one employee and reading a newspaper article that criticized the hiring policies of this restaurant in another

city, they put together an appeal for students to picket in front of the restaurant on Friday and Saturday evening. When the teacher hears about the planned picketing and questions the students about their research and action plan, he realizes that their judgment is probably invalid, and the school, therefore, may be held liable for economic damages. He recognizes that the impending conflict will be a painful and long-remembered experience for not only the students who are directly involved, but for the whole school. Can he allow student voice to go this far? Conversely, can he pull the plug on this juvenile effort at civic responsibility without jeopardizing the authentic nature of his service-learning program?

Keep service-learning meek and harmless, and it will be allowed to survive and even thrive. Make service-learning strong and effective, and it will face possible extinction. The first option is hardly a strategy for meaningful civic education. The second option may be meaningful and effective civic education but also be confined to a virtual world. What is a teacher to do?

Another kind of moral/ethical dilemma stems from the practical challenges of organizing first-rate service-learning experiences. Strong programs depend on the establishment of effective partnerships with community organizations that are willing and able to work well with youth. Teacher time to set up and nurture these relationships is almost always volunteer time above and beyond the normal demands of the teaching job. It is only natural, therefore, that teachers lean to working with organizations that support their own

personal values. A teacher who is dedicated to ecological responsibility will be drawn toward the idea of setting up environmental service-learning possibilities that connect with familiar organizations. He or she will have a better chance to secure meaningful placements and also integrate materials from these organizations into a course unit. Moreover, by connecting an out-of-school passion with classroom learning, he or she will model active civic engagement and, very likely, stimulate student interest. But is it ethical in a public school setting to bring one's personal values so directly into the student's world? Can this be done without teacher advocacy tainting the instructional experience?

We can see from these three examples that service-learning gets morally and ethically messy at the very point when it becomes most powerful. Keep it neutral,

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nonpolitical, and its harmless shape keeps everyone relaxed and comfortable. Service-learning that encourages youth and adults to care for others and stay out of politics is terrific. Service-learning that encourages youth and adults to question and change existing social and economic realities is alarming.

If service-learning is going to foster active civic engagement, encourage youth to be critical thinkers who are also savvy political actors, it must move into the treacherous shoals of political

controversy. But when it moves into that turbulence, it risks capsizing. For service-learning to become a strong, ongoing foundation for effective civic education, it must secure wily, flexible paddlers who are willing to risk their careers to support youth voice in action.

Hope for this kind of leadership from teachers and administrators must be tempered by the contextual realities that all too many educators face. Johanna Elena Hadden captured this forbidding reality all too well in her Harvard Education Review article, "Voices Inside Schools," with these words:

"In schools across the country, many teachers are not free to educate: to determine curriculum, to express disagreements with each other and with administration, to create and become a part of a democratic classroom. Sadly, although these teachers entered the

profession with a firm belief in their charter to educate, in practice they find instead a mandate to train: to compel adherence to implicit and explicit behavioral norms; to demonstrate loyalty to business-promoted, state-sustained, traditional curricula; and to support bureaucratically imposed rules and regulations that include standardized testing and tracking. At the very least, these teachers are expected to remain silent in the face of their own ethical disagreements with the hierarchy that governs schools. At worst, they are forced to either abandon their projects or lose their positions."

**Hadden, J. E. (Winter 2000).
Voices inside schools.
Harvard Educational Review
70(4), 524-525.**