

Summer 1997

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## Recommended Citation

Clark, Todd; Croddy, Marshall; Hayes, William; and Philips, Susan, "Service Learning as Civic Participation" (1997). *Service Learning, General*. Paper 85.

<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/85>

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## Service Learning as Civic Participation

**A** CENTRAL QUESTION IN THE SERVICE LEARNING field is how service can best educate youth for active citizenship. For more than a decade, the Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF) has struggled with this question. We have introduced and experimented with various service programs because we have seen firsthand the value of service—how it engenders personal efficacy, empathy, and a sense of responsibility.

We initially saw service as a valuable experience, in and of itself. We subsequently have come to believe that service linked to classroom learning can effectively teach citizenship. Over the years our programs have changed from volunteer service to “civic participation” programs that integrate service with strategies to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for active citizen participation.

This article traces the evolution in our thinking about service learning and citizenship education. It explains our civic participation framework, describes our programs and their components, and focuses on some of the challenges these programs face.

### **Educating for Citizenship**

A 1994 survey conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press concluded:

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The American electorate is angry, self-absorbed and politically unanchored. Thousands of interviews with American voters . . . find no clear direction in the public’s political thinking other than frustration with the current system and an eager responsiveness to alternative political solutions and appeals. (p. 3)

With these trends, schools must redouble their efforts to counteract citizen apathy, improve citizen knowledge, and increase citizen participation.

While education for citizenship in civics, government, or U.S. history courses is a common part of the school curriculum, our staff at CRF know of few such programs that link classroom study with the application of civic skills in the community. This is not surprising. School curriculum tends to be discipline and assessment driven and must respond to numerous mandates. Elementary schools tend to treat citizenship as a set of behaviors focusing on such things as deportment, work habits, and following rules. Secondary schools tend to integrate citizenship as a theme through courses in social studies, civics, government, or history.

While civics and government courses can provide a knowledge base for civic participation, we have found few Americans who, when asked to describe their high school civics or government course, do so with enthusiasm or link the school experience with active civic involvement. We posit that this is the case because most such courses focus almost exclusively on the functions and structures of national government, a domain offering

the least connection between the classroom and effective participation.

To gain the requisite civic knowledge and develop skills for effective citizen participation, young people need, in our view, not only rigorous skill and knowledge development but also quality instruction. This instruction should link the classroom with real problems and policy options and experiences. In short, if we expect students to perform as effective citizens, we must educate them through a curriculum that includes *all* steps we value of citizens. Ideally, a civics program would be relevant to the lives of the students; deal with the real issues that face society; provide practice in the skills of citizenship—e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, presentation, research—and utilize the resources and the realities of the community as a laboratory or practicum in which students apply the knowledge and skills learned (Center for Civic Education, 1994; Curriculum Task Force, 1989).

### **Service as a Solution**

In recent years, youth service has been described as a means of teaching citizenship. We have seen that community service furthers citizenship education because students can sharpen skills learned in the classroom by applying them in the community. Engaging in service of genuine value to the community helps empower young people. We believe, however, that service, though demonstrably valuable to youth and community, does not in and of itself constitute powerful education for citizenship.

Our view grows from CRF's experience with service programs. Our history has been one of gradual evolution from volunteer service programs toward "civic participation" programs that integrate service with conscious cultivation of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills essential to effective citizen participation.

In 1980, CRF created Youth Leadership for Action (YLFA), a leadership development program targeted at high school students. Two years later, we created Youth Community Service (YCS), a cocurricular collaboration with local high schools. YLFA offered off-campus training and technical assistance to students drawn from across the city; YCS operated out of individual schools with teacher-

sponsors and CRF staff support. Both aimed to train youth to plan and lead as well as participate in local service projects.

Students painted over graffiti, planted trees, and worked in soup kitchens. Others tutored younger children, played "beep baseball" with the visually impaired, and organized canned-food drives during the holidays. It was assumed that from these service projects they would learn something of citizenship.

We recognized, however, that service by itself did not constitute an effective citizenship education program. Even our most enthusiastic participants in these programs showed little understanding of the issues they were dealing with, the causes and effects of community problems, policies addressing the problems, or how the community worked.

By the late 1980s, we began to change the focus of the programs toward citizenship education. We encouraged youth to conduct background research on the issues their service projects intended to address. Those students working in the soup kitchen began asking questions about why people became homeless; those painting out graffiti began exploring the impact of graffiti on the community; those playing "beep baseball" began investigating policies related to disabilities; and those planting trees began examining how various community agencies dealt with environmental problems. With the research component, we felt we were approaching a citizenship education model.

### **Civic Participation Framework**

Drawing on our past experiences, the present framework was developed in 1993, and has been used for the design of a variety of school- and community-based civic participation programs at the senior high, middle, and elementary levels. It provides students with a structured way in which to examine community problems. Its implementation enables them to gain the knowledge and utilize the skills necessary for effective citizenship.

By working through each segment of the framework, students develop a deeper understanding of the community in which they live, the problems it faces, and ways in which the problems can be addressed. More importantly, they come to see themselves as able to serve as active citizens through informed

voting, participation in the political process, or working as individuals or in groups to improve the community. In addition, students develop the communication, research, and critical thinking skills necessary for effective participation in the community or workplace. Finally, by linking the lessons of the classroom to the real-world laboratory of the community, students can see the relevance of education and the practicality of making a greater commitment to learning.

The framework consists of five segments:

1. *Community assessment.* Students study and define their community, identifying and examining its resources and problems, including causes and effects on different segments of the community.

2. *Policymaking.* Students investigate the policy processes used to deal with community problems, including local, state, and national government.

3. *Policy analysis.* Students learn to evaluate policy using a set of objective questions to determine its purposes, benefits, costs, and effectiveness.

4. *Citizen options.* Students explore what individuals and groups can do to affect community problems and develop the skills they need to address the problems.

5. *Citizen action.* Students take direct action. They plan, implement, and evaluate a project based on their studies in the community.

While of value to other disciplines, the civic participation framework has special application to the domain of social studies. In a government course, it offers a hands-on approach to learning about local government or political issues as they are manifested at the local level. In a history class, students can apply the framework to an analysis of a society or culture from the past and through analogy find equivalent issues in communities of today. A similar approach in geography can be used when contemporary countries or regions are being studied.

### **Civic Participation Programs**

To be effective, service learning must be linked to what actually goes on in schools. Utilizing the framework, modified slightly for each program, CRF has developed specific programs to meet a variety of typical educational situations. The programs are described below:

*Project ACT.* Funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, and in collaboration with the Close Up Foundation, CRF has created strategies and materials for implementing civic participation in middle and high school social studies classes. The materials consist of the *ACT Teacher's Handbook*, which features 14 interactive lessons moving students through the framework, and the *ACT Field Guide*, a manual, with versions for middle and high school, for students to use on a step-by-step basis as they navigate the framework (Berkowitz & Zack, 1995; Degelman & Hayes, 1995; Hayes & Degelman, 1994; Zack, Berkowitz, Hayes, & Degelman, 1994).

*CityYouth.* Funded by the Carnegie Corporation and Ralph B. Parsons Foundation, CRF has created a model to support middle school reform incorporating interdisciplinary curriculum for social studies, language arts, science, and math. The CityYouth curriculum contains 32 multidisciplinary lessons, which take students across the framework. The curriculum is divided into four developmental units, each containing eight lessons, which are shared among the four disciplines (Croddy, Doggett, Degelman, & Hayes, 1995).

*Youth Task Force.* Funded by a number of Los Angeles and national foundations, CRF has created the extracurricular approach described earlier that uses the framework to the extent possible in a cocurricular model. It involves students at a number of high schools through service or after-school clubs. Youth Task Force teams of students, adult sponsors, and mentors, provided through AmeriCorps, meet at schools throughout the county. Teams forge partnerships with local volunteers and community agencies, which provide support for projects.

### **Components of the Programs**

Essential to CRF's civic participation model are a number of methodological and content driven components. These include skill building, interactive learning strategies, use of community resources, and policy focus.

#### **Skill building**

Each of CRF's programs places heavy emphasis on student development of skills necessary for effective citizenship. These skills include

communication, research, presentation, critical thinking, and problem solving.

When CityYouth students interview community residents as part of a community history project, they are learning how to ask effective questions. When Youth Task Force students are soliciting donations to purchase Thanksgiving dinners for the needy, they are learning how to write letters and make presentations. When ACT students are organizing debates over policies dealing with violence, they are learning organizing skills as well as policy analysis skills.

### **Interactive learning strategies**

The classroom component of CRF's programs relies on interactive learning strategies to convey the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of active citizens. These strategies include directed discussions, simulations, and role plays.

"The Mayor's Speech," one lesson in the ACT high school materials, simulates a local government policymaking process. Students role play special-interest groups proposing programs and a government committee deciding how to spend federal block-grant money. In "The River," a CityYouth lesson sequence, students learn about the causes and effects of problems. Students role play policymakers in four different historical periods who must solve environmental and resource-use problems related to a river.

### **Use of community resources**

To develop the capacity to be effective citizens, it is important that young people be introduced to the institutions, organizations, and individuals, both public and private, that work within the community and shape its destiny. All of CRF's civic participation programs model the use of outside resource professionals in the classroom and encourage visits by students to agencies to gather information and interact with community members. For example, in a highly successful CityYouth activity, 500 middle school students and 100 Los Angeles police officers spent a morning together role playing common scenarios and discussing ways in which police and students can work together to improve relations between youth and police.

In one task force project, students in a predominantly Latino Los Angeles high school worked

to rebuild a Japanese garden that vandals had destroyed during World War II. Students sought out Japanese-American alumni who had been sent to internment camps during the war. Students also involved landscape architects, a local museum, other teachers at the school, and local businesses and non-profits.

### **Policy focus**

To be effective citizens, individuals must understand how society makes policy to address problems and have the capacity to evaluate public policies that are proposed to deal with community problems. All CRF civic participation programs focus on the processes of legislative, administrative, and judicial policymaking and equip students to analyze, evaluate, and develop alternatives to policies.

In Jackson, Mississippi, ACT students explored a variety of policy options related to different aspects of violence—e.g., domestic, racial, gang—and presented them to their state legislators. Task force students discussed policies for dealing with youth offenders with local police and city officials.

### **The Challenges to Civic Participation**

Any educational change faces challenges. Teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, and the public must be convinced that the change is valid and worthwhile. Civic participation, in particular, may invite challenge because it requires changes on a number of fronts—in how teachers teach, how students learn, and the relationship between the classroom teacher and the community. We believe our model works and is worth the effort to make these changes. Educators should be aware, however, of challenges they might face in implementing a civic participation program. The following are some challenges we have encountered and some of the ways we have addressed them.

### **Ideological challenges**

Civic participation may be seen as unnecessary or even distracting by individuals with reservations about involving students in the real world of the community or by persons who believe service learning takes time away from other learning. Service learning should be presented as a way to

link the community to the classroom without replacing the development of critical thinking or basic skills. It can be emphasized that the program can serve to strengthen academic instruction, not take its place. Teachers should also build support for a new program by incorporating the following steps.

First, develop administrative support. Without this, no new program can survive concerns or complaints by a parent or community members.

Second, make sure the classroom-community connections are scrupulously nonpartisan and balanced. On occasion, ACT teachers have sent home permission slips and letters if they think that the topic is "hot." In one high school class in Omaha, for example, as part of their study of drugs in the community, the teacher invited speakers to discuss legislation to legalize marijuana. He assured parents that the discussion would be balanced and fair. Not a single parent objected.

Third, students should be provided with alternate assignments if parents do not want them to study an especially sensitive topic. In our experience, we have found it rare that parents make such a request. When these activities become part of what happens in a social studies class and are not viewed as peripheral to the curriculum, students seldom object. In our experience, the students who object do so because they worry that the activities will interfere with a job or outside activities, not for any ideological reasons.

#### **Control challenges**

Teachers often worry if students are not under strict control, both in and outside of the classroom. What will happen if the classroom becomes too noisy or if students make a bad impression in the community? Teachers must model appropriate behavior in the classroom and prepare guidelines for what a project is and is not. While the teacher must be the overall director of the project, the teacher must stress that each student is responsible for his or her actions. The consequences of irresponsible behavior should be discussed in advance.

It is best to begin with small, manageable, time-limited projects. We have found that as teachers become more familiar with the process, their concern over control eases. At all costs, teachers should avoid the experience of one high school teacher who began by allowing every student to

select her or his own project. Keeping track of these projects proved almost impossible. The following year, the teacher had the class choose one project and all went well.

#### **Pedagogical challenges**

The civic participation classroom is student, not teacher, centered. Teachers who are uncomfortable with such an institutional strategy may not even venture into such untried territory. Teachers who prefer lectures, reading, and recitation or discussion might move toward service learning more slowly than those already engaged in interactive instruction using simulations, mock trials, debates, and role playing activities.

By demonstrating that civic participation both engages students and is academically challenging, such teachers can win over dissenters. But the process may be slow and is best undertaken recognizing its limitations.

#### **Time and curriculum challenges**

Teachers are under increasing mandates to teach certain subject matter. Many may recoil from civic participation because it seems to add time-consuming activities that take away from "teaching." This can be answered in several ways. First, service is a requirement in many places, a part of the curriculum. Civic participation is a way of "killing two birds with one stone." It takes care of the service requirement and it links to the curriculum. More importantly, civic participation is a captivating way to get the curriculum across. It offers students a stimulating way to learn about government by "doing government."

ACT students in a government class in Las Vegas, for example, learned how government worked by organizing a successful campaign to construct a stop light at a busy intersection near their school. Local government, after all, is the only layer of government that is truly accessible to students. It should not be overlooked.

#### **Conclusion**

Our experience has shown that service can be an invaluable component of citizenship education. But service must be integrated with structured, interactive classroom instruction. This instruction must teach the content and skills of citizenship,

which students can apply in the community. This type of learning, which we call civic participation, requires changes in the way teachers teach, how students learn, and the relationship between schools and the community.

These changes may never appeal to every teacher nor will they come easily. But they are well worth the effort. Civic participation programs offer an exciting, engaging approach to citizenship education. They can help invigorate citizen participation in the democratic process. In short, they can help invigorate democracy itself.

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**TIP**