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As a pedagogy for citizenship, service learning offers students the opportunity to experience and reflect on how citizens organize to bring their communities and their country closer to democracy.

A Pedagogy for Citizenship: Service Learning and Democratic Education

Meta Mendel-Reyes

Maria clutches the papers tightly. After over two hours of waiting through reports, announcements, awards, and other agenda items that seemed much less urgent than hers, the chance to speak has nearly arrived. She looks at the determined face of the African American woman seated beside her, one of several residents living across the street from a trash incinerator that has brought pollution, disease, noise, and rats to their quiet neighborhood. At last, they would have the opportunity to tell their story to elected officials who could do something about it. Maria glances down at the statistics that took her hours to research, hard data that would convince the county board of supervisors to act at last. As the chairman finally utters the words, “Time for public comment,” she rises to her feet. Before she can open her mouth, the chairman slams down the gavel: “Meeting adjourned.” As the supervisors file quickly out of the room, Maria stares in disbelief, her papers slipping from her hands to the floor. “We didn’t even have our say!” she sputters. “How could they get away with it? Isn’t this supposed to be a democracy?”

The scene of the county supervisors’ meeting dissolves into the classroom at Swarthmore College, where the student and other members of her team have just finished reenacting this critical incident from their service learning experience in Political Science 19: “Democratic Theory and Practice.” They point out that what happened at the meeting resembles a situation in one of the assigned readings, Gaventa’s (1980) classic, Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and...
Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley. Like the poor residents encountered by Maria, the miners in the book tried to raise their issue at a public hearing, only to be silenced. As a reading assignment, the power of a large corporation to control the political process seemed abstract, and perhaps even exaggerated, but as a lived experience, the threat to democracy could not be ignored.

After the class analyzes these two examples of power and powerlessness, the team tells them what the embattled residents did next. To ensure that their voices were heard, they marched, with the participation of the students, from the county building to their neighborhood. Local media covered the march extensively, helping to create a groundswell of support that ultimately convinced the city council to pass an historic resolution prohibiting any new waste disposal facilities that would increase pollution. The student team concludes that the residents had figured out how to make democracy work—by acting democratically.

The Democracy Project

The preceding scene occurred during my first year of teaching “Democratic Theory and Practice,” one of three core courses in the Democracy Project at Swarthmore College. The Democracy Project is designed to deepen students’ understanding and commitment to democratic citizenship in a multicultural society. “Citizenship” in this context refers to the rights and responsibilities that we share as members of a community, not to the privileged status of natives versus immigrants. Clearly, in an era of global xenophobia and ethnic cleansing, a new, less exclusionary definition of “citizenship” is needed.

The three core courses, “Democratic Theory and Practice,” “Multicultural Politics,” and “Community Politics: The Internship Seminar,” all involve what we call community-based learning (service learning that emphasizes the mutual partnership between college and community). In the seminar, students engage in semester-long internships; the other two courses include a class community service day and further service learning options. Instead of being marginalized in the way that service learning often is, these courses are eligible for the college honors program and are taught by a tenure-track professor in the Department of Political Science (Mendel-Reyes, 1997).

Ironically, at the historic moment when formerly communist countries and dictatorships all over the world have embraced the example of American democracy, Americans themselves are turning their backs on civic life in increasing numbers. The challenge of democratic education in the United States at the end of the twentieth century is to teach young people not merely the skills of citizenship but also its value. The oldest and newest democracies share a goal: to encourage greater participation in the political process. From South Africa to the United States, service learning promises to revitalize citizenship education and citizenship itself by offering students the opportunity to learn and to practice the “what, how, and why” of democracy (Mendel-Reyes and Weinstein, 1996).
Democracy and Democratic Education

The word *democracy* joins the Greek words *demos*, “the people,” and *kratia*, “rule,” to form what seems to be a simple, straightforward concept: “the rule of the people.” Yet since the dawn of political philosophy in classical Greece, theorists have argued over the meaning, the feasibility, and even the desirability of self-government. Plato ([ca 377 B.C.] 1941), arguably the first professor of citizenship, rejected the form of government under which his beloved teacher Socrates had been condemned to death. In Plato’s eyes, the “people” were no more than an ignorant mob to be governed by “philosopher kings.” Plato’s best student, Aristotle ([ca 335–323 B.C.] 1971), disagreed, however, describing “man” as “a political animal,” entitled and able to rule himself. Although the two sides have adopted various labels, their debate has continued to the present day. From the perspective of citizenship, the main issue is “participatory” versus “representative” democracy.

**The Rule of the People?** In participatory democracy, also called *civic republican* or *direct*, the people rule themselves literally by making decisions concerning their collective lives. What most of us today associate with citizenship, voting for others to make decisions for us, is less meaningful than making them to the extent possible ourselves. Because this model requires the full, active participation of all citizens in politics, it gives high priority to citizenship education. Democratic theorists from Tocqueville (1945) to Barber (1992) have argued that the health of democracy depends upon educating citizens in “schools of democracy,” such as voluntary associations.

In representative democracy, sometimes referred to as *liberal* or *indirect*, the people select those who rule over them. Because this model envisions a passive role for most citizens, their education is less important than the training of an “elite” pool of potential representatives. Although some form of representation seems inevitable in today’s large nations, most theorists of representative democracy neglect the critical question of how uneducated citizens can be expected to elect their leaders wisely and hold them accountable.

American political history can be viewed as a struggle between these two models of democracy and the corresponding approaches to citizenship and to citizen education. The Constitution, written by men who were deeply suspicious of the common people, signified the ascendence of the representative vision. The new form of government, with a complex system of checks and balances and separation of powers, was designed to prevent concerted action by a “tyrannical” majority (Madison, Hamilton, and Jay, 1961). The ideal and occasionally the reality of participatory citizenship remained alive throughout American history, however, surfacing most prominently during the great democratic movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the civil rights movement and the New Left during the 1960s (Mendel-Reyes, 1995). Today, near the end of the twentieth century, the conjunction of economic distress, social fragmentation, and political apathy has brought renewed attention to “our impoverished vision of citizenship” (Sandel, 1996, p. 57).
Meaningful participation often seems limited to that of distant bureaucracies and multinational corporations, who remain impervious to the actions of most national governments, let alone individual citizens. The power of the people has been further eroded by conflicts between natives and immigrants, whites and people of color, rich and poor.

**Undemocratic Education.** These antidemocratic trends in politics reflect and inform similar developments in education. Colleges and universities continue to give lip service to the ideal of knowledge for its own sake and the common good while struggling to cope with the reality that the academy has become increasingly exclusive, specialized, and corporate. Secondary and elementary schools are even more strapped for money and vision; finding enough chairs for students to sit upon inevitably becomes a higher priority than training them to be citizens.

In practice, if not in theory, there are two tracks of citizenship education in the United States. Schools separate the future citizenry into elite and mass, and the latter into skilled, unskilled, and unemployed workers (Rhoads and Valadez, 1996). For the masses, citizenship education is boring; dry textbooks, with endless charts of the three branches of government and “how a bill becomes a law,” and rote assignments to memorize the Constitution and the Amendments are effective lessons in passivity. Despite the occasional mobility of individuals, active citizenship and economic security have become the privileges of a few rather than the rights of all.

**A Pedagogy for Citizenship**

The challenge of democratic education today is to teach students how to participate in a democracy that does not yet exist, and more, how to help to bring about that democracy. Like the pedagogy of popular education developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972), service learning connects personal and political transformation. Students transform themselves into citizens and their society into one that welcomes and promotes active citizenship.

**Education for Democracy.** In terms of the working definition of service learning developed for this book, “a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service,” service learning as a pedagogy for citizenship integrates the academic study of democracy and the experience of democratic community service. The guiding principle behind the Democracy Project is that “the only truly effective education system for democracy is democracy—democratic action itself” (Lummis, 1996, p. 37). Through reflection upon the experience of democratic action, students are encouraged to expand the meaning of citizenship to include acting in a way that recognizes and promotes the citizenship of everyone.

It is important to recognize, however, that there is more than one legitimate approach to citizenship education, and that approaches need not be limited to programs that explicitly address citizenship. In fact, almost every service learning model that fits the working definition offers at least a minimal edu-
cation in citizenship by exposing students to community life and to one facet of the citizen's role, service to the less fortunate. Moreover, it would be undemocratic to insist on a single definition of citizenship; if people are entitled to rule themselves, they are also entitled to decide how they wish to exercise their rule. It may well be that some will decide not to be politically active; the point is that it should be their choice. As citizens in a democracy, each of us should have the opportunity to participate in community decision making, and no one should have to depend indefinitely upon the service of others.

**The “What and Why” of Democracy.** The courses “Democratic Theory and Practice” and “Multicultural Politics” focus on the “what and why” of citizenship, whereas “Community Politics: The Internship Seminar” emphasizes the “how.”

“Democratic Theory and Practice” explores the relationship between theories of democracy and the ways in which it is practiced in the United States, alternating between case studies, such as Gaventa's (1980), and theoretical works. The course includes two service learning assignments. Early in the semester, the class works together on a community service project, usually spending a Saturday morning helping a local group rehabilitate low-income housing. Each student also writes and presents a “theory in practice” report to the rest of the class, analyzing an individual experience of service during the semester.

“Multicultural Politics” investigates how racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity has shaped the American past and present, including the contested notion of democratic citizenship. Is the United States a melting pot, a mosaic, or a battleground of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences? The assigned texts include fiction and memoirs in voices that have often been ignored or silenced, along with history, social science, and journalism from a variety of perspectives. Students also draw on their own family histories and participate in a class community service project.

In both courses, service learning shows students the human face of controversial issues such as immigration, poverty, and environmental racism. Unlike many approaches to teaching social science, the Democracy Project does not reduce the recipients of service to the status of passive “problems” or helpless “victims.” Instead, service learning offers students the opportunity to experience the ways in which people are organizing to improve their lives and to reclaim their rights as citizens. The key to this pedagogy for citizenship is reflection upon experience, upon what service learning teaches us about democracy, about difference, and about acting democratically in a multicultural society.

**The “How” of Democracy.** The heart of the Democracy Project is “Community Politics: The Internship Seminar,” which explores democratic theory and multicultural politics at the community level through semester-long service internships. This course emphasizes the “how” of democracy: How do disempowered communities empower themselves? How can individual activists, from inside and outside the community, help to achieve democratic and multicultural
political change? Students explore these questions by reflecting upon their internships in light of the readings and the dialogues with community activists, individually through their journals and other writing assignments, and as a class through discussion, small group work, and experiential exercises.

The students choose their internship from a list of potential placements with local service and advocacy organizations, preferably composed of and led by members of the community. These groups include the Chester Community Improvement Project, which rehabilitates abandoned houses and sells them to first-time buyers; Asian Americans United, which runs a youth leadership program for the diverse and growing Asian community of Philadelphia; and Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL), the group of neighbors who have banded together to fight the trash incinerator.

At the beginning of each internship, the student, the supervisor from the host organization, and the instructor sign off on a “Community Involvement Agreement,” which spells out expectations and responsibilities, including the intern’s commitment to volunteer a minimum of five hours per week (sixty hours per semester). Signing this agreement also helps to set the tone of reciprocity—that the student does work needed by the community and the community provides knowledge and experience to the student in return (Kendall, 1990).

The seminar meets three hours each week and includes a meal, which we take turns in preparing. While eating, students go around the table sharing highlights from their internships; this is also the time to ask for help. Next is usually a dialogue with a community activist, followed by a more detailed presentation from one or two students each week about their internship experience. Students are encouraged to approach this assignment as a “teachable moment,” an opportunity to convey something they have learned, or to probe more deeply into an aspect of community politics illuminated by their internships. In the last part of the seminar, we discuss issues raised by the readings, often in relation to themes that come up during the community or internship presentations.

For example, during a session with the president of CRCQL, a student expressed her reluctance to disagree with the people she encountered during her internship, since she was only an “outsider” in their community. The president responded, “Bring your brains!” because the community wants and needs the very best that volunteers have to offer. The ensuing discussion, which also brought in Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1964), deepened our reflections upon the challenge of serving in communities different from our own. As in this example, the plan for each seminar meeting is flexible and responsive to the students’ concerns, another way in which the subject matter of democracy is woven into the design of the course.

Citizenship Skills. Building on “Democratic Theory and Practice” and “Multicultural Politics,” the Internship Seminar integrates citizenship education as content with citizenship education as pedagogy. Students learn the skills of democracy—critical thinking, public deliberation, community-building, and collective action—by practicing them.
As a pedagogy for critical thinking, service learning provides opportunities for problem-posing; gathering evidence and analyzing it; and formulating, carrying out, and evaluating plans of action. In order to become critical thinkers, students must learn how to “question the answers!” (Vella, 1994, p. 28). Perhaps even more difficult, they must accept the fact that in this postmodern age there are few definitive answers to many of the most pressing questions facing communities (Rhoads, 1997).

For this reason, a pedagogy for critical thinking must also be a pedagogy for public deliberation. In the absence of certainty, political decisions are justified in large part by the quality of the process through which they were made. Through service learning, students improve their abilities to participate in democratic deliberation. The goal is more than simply learning how to express themselves verbally and in writing. Students are challenged to listen to a range of voices, to empathize with people different from themselves, and to compromise with others in the name of a common good that is often contested and tentative.

Community building, which service learning also teaches, strengthens the relationships that enable a member of a community to accept the results of public deliberation while retaining the capacity for critical thought. The Internship Seminar is designed to build community within the classroom as a way of studying community building outside of it. The shared meal, for example, helps to create an atmosphere that is less competitive than the typical classroom; it also demonstrates subtly that community does not just happen but must be built through ritual and effort. Our meals are often tasty lessons in multicultural politics because students enjoy preparing traditional meals from their own cultures.

To take collective action, the members of a community need to figure out ways to work together while acknowledging their differences, one of the most difficult lessons to learn in the classroom as well as in politics. Although they share a commitment to service, the twelve students enrolled in the Internship Seminar come from a range of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Like many of their elders, they tend to equate “community” with harmony and resist the idea that democratic deliberation does not prevent or eliminate conflict. King’s (1964) discussion of “creative tension” helps students to understand the positive uses of conflict as a catalyst for personal growth and the improvement of society. The instructor also encourages them to reflect upon how the members of their host organization resolve disputes among themselves.

Because not every “tension” is “creative,” our deliberation within the classroom is structured to promote respect as well as the open expression of ideas and disagreements. For example, we take turns serving as the “vibes watcher”—the person who keeps an eye on the “vibes” of the group. The vibes watcher has the authority to jump in and call the group’s attention to a range of feelings or behaviors that seem to interfere with learning, such as personal attacks, going off on a tangent, or even simple boredom.

Finally, service learning as a pedagogy for citizenship shows students that each of them can make a difference. Service learning increases their confidence
as citizens, but not because their every experience of collective action is successful. Practicing democracy in the community, in a community organization, and in a classroom “community” is hard work and sometimes frustrating. However, service learning teaches students and their teachers how to learn from mistakes by engaging in a continuous sequence of action and reflection. Ultimately, the success of the Democracy Project will be measured by the extent to which its graduates continue to learn through service as they practice citizenship throughout the rest of their lives.

References


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