

The Service Learner as Engaged Citizen

According to the 1993 report of the Wingspread Group on Higher Education, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*, one of the five major challenges facing colleges and universities concerns citizenship:

We challenge you to assure that the next year's entering students will graduate as individuals of character more sensitive to the needs of community, more competent to contribute to society, and more civil in habits of thought, speech, and action (1993).

A common strategy for meeting this challenge to educate students for engaged citizenship has been to adopt programs that will place them in community-based service activities. All too often, colleges and universities, especially those in metropolitan areas, have sent students out into communities with little opportunity for preparation or reflection, thinking that service alone will engage them as active citizens.

However, a growing body of evidence suggests that service and citizenship are not necessarily connected. Our students often equate citizenship with politics, which they reject as corrupt and "dirty." Many students actively involved in community service say that

they have chosen service as an antidote to politics.

On the other hand, there is evidence that, when accompanied by proper preparation and adequate academic reflection, service learning can be a potent civic educator. Preliminary studies conducted by Rutgers University's Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy indicate that Rutgers students enrolled in citizenship-based service-learning courses had a stronger sense of civic capacity and membership than students enrolled in two different comparison courses. On a civic leadership scale of 23 items, service learners scored significantly higher from pre- to post-test than those in nonservice-learning political science and journalism classes (Walt Whitman Center, 1994). In a similar study at the University of Michigan, students in service-learning sections of an introductory political science course were compared with students in more traditional sections of the same course. The study concluded that, in addition to enhancing their academic learning in political science, students' personal values and orientation to the community were affected by participation in course-relevant community service (Markus, et al., 1993).

Teaching service-learning classes and directing campuswide programs at three different metropolitan universities, I have found that engaged citizenship or civic education can be a powerful foundation and outcome for service learning. Students' essays and journals indicate that a civic education model of service learning achieves the goal of educating our students about their responsibilities in a democratic society and gets them to think about what it means to be a part of the multiple communities in which they find themselves. Listen to these themes found in samples from student journals:

"Why do I serve? I serve because...service is part of my civic responsibility. Providing a service to others...is my duty as a citizen. The readings and discussions in this class helped me to formulate this idea. If I am to enjoy the rights and privileges of American life...I must provide something in return."

"Over the course of this semester I have become a citizen of New Brunswick....A citizen must play an active role in his or her community. A citizen must work for change, and never accept the status quo...I am now aware of what is happening around me. New Brunswick extends beyond the E bus route. It is filled with people who need aid, people who give aid, people who cannot be bothered to give aid, and people, who, like me, don't realize they are citizens at all...I now see the city differently. I'm no longer scared walking to [my service site]—far from it. I feel like I know that small

portion of the city now. Now when I pass people on the street, some say hello to me, and call me by name....”

“Ten years from now I might not remember what molecule is responsible for fast-anterograde axonal transport in a ganglion cell of the central nervous system, or what the symbolic significance of the moon was in William Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” but I will recall what it means to be a responsible member of society.”

So where is the disconnection between these students’ experiences of engaged citizenship in a service-learning program and the findings of others that students have lost a concept of themselves as citizens, and that service—a personal act of caring—has replaced citizenship, a public expression of values? I would contend that much of the problem lies in our monolithic assumptions about the meaning and language of citizenship as a national identity. If we take a more pluralistic, localized perspective on citizenship in its multiple meanings for different student constituencies, we can come to see service learning as a rich source for connecting our students to the larger public world, even though they may be disengaged from politics. For example, I have students who choose not to vote but who are helping local citizens—especially those previously disenfranchised—to place their issues on the political agenda. Others have moved from direct service with local agencies to doing issue research for advocacy groups attempting to change government policy. Traditional measures of political activity will not get at these kinds of civic engagement.

We cannot hope to engage our students as citizens until we find out what kind of civic language resonates with them. Students’ written reflections are a rich resource in thinking about the variety of connections that can be made between service and citizenship. They make concrete my students’ understandings of the civic meaning of service and draw out the implications for our own practice as educators seeking to connect service to engaged citizenship. How we as faculty and program administrators subject service experiences to intelligent direction depends upon what perspective of citizenship the student brings to his or her work. I will examine four different but, I think, related themes that I have consistently found in journals and other written reflections.

Citizenship as Better Knowledge of the Metropolitan Community of the Institution

Our metropolitan colleges and universities are often disconnected, intentionally in many cases, from the immediate neighborhoods of which they are a part. For students attending urban institutions, especially noncommuters, the town-gown disconnect is quite clear, as representative observations made by Rutgers students at the beginning of their service-learning class indicate:

“In between [campuses] lies a more harsh neighborhood of New Brunswick. Although the students ride through this area daily...it may as well be on another planet. The University community barely acknowledges the existence of this area...I am as guilty as anyone. When riding that route I barely give [it] a thought. It never occurs to me that I live two minutes from [here]—and yet I think of this place as another world.”

“[Our] school is located in the city of New Brunswick but there is little connection between the two...[M]ost students are afraid of any citizen of New Brunswick who walks by and every girl seems to be carrying mace. [The fear of c]rime...inhibits Rutgers students from talking and connecting to New Brunswick people...”

One of the more important outcomes of my service-learning courses for students who are not local residents is that they get to know the metropolitan area and its citizens in a way they would never have known them without service learning. Two seniors reported that, for the first time in their college careers, they were able to “get to know my neighbors in the larger community.” Another student wrote that his experiences made him comfortable walking, jogging, and shopping in and around housing projects that bordered the campus, greeting people he was working with on site, putting a lie to the the campus orientation program's message: “don't leave the campus.” The written reflections of three students add to this dimension of learning about citizenship:

“Now that I've been in this service-learning class, I go into those same neighborhoods many times during the week to go to the store and meet many of the people who live in the neighborhood. For me it all relates back to what Dr. King said, that you have to look past the religion or color of the person in order to see the true person.”

“I think I truly learned more clearly to understand the development of the neighborhood and its present day condition...I now do not see it as a ‘bad section’ neighborhood but rather a piece of history that should have been

preserved and maintained so that it does not lose its historical environment.”

“When I first passed by the downtown section of the city, I got lost with my family, and we found ourselves driving around an unfamiliar neighborhood...only a block away from the well-developed part of downtown, but it looked like a totally different place...my parents warned me not to be around this place...I just ignored their comments as prejudiced, but I did find myself a little surprised at seeing such a different world a few blocks away from the campus. When I read Katherine Mansfield’s ‘The Garden Party’ for this class and began my service work, I started seeing the correlation between this fiction and the reality around me, and remembered my earliest impressions of the local community. Just like the rich people in Laura’s world who continued to have the party right next to the neighborhood where one of their own workers had died, we simply don’t see the seriousness of this depravity of others and the communal separation that resulted from it...Service would only be meaningful when I really get involved with the people from the other side of town, to feel what they feel. We all have to see that we exist with them within the same neighborhood, within a short distance from one another.”

Those students who come from the surrounding metropolitan communities can obtain a better knowledge through service learning of the community with which they identify but about which they are not nearly as knowledgeable as they originally thought. One Salvadoran student wrote that the service-learning course she took made her more aware of her own community: “Even though I’m from Providence, I learned I didn’t know the community as well as I thought I did, especially the needs of racial and ethnic minorities other than my own.” An African-American woman at Rutgers testified powerfully about how, though she was from an urban area and was working with younger African-American students in a “girl’s club rap session” as part of an after-school program, she was unaware until her service participation of the differences these girls faced from the ones she had had, especially on issues around violence and sexuality:

“Many of the girls...have...brought up the topic of sex. They come in with many questions and beliefs, misconstrued at times...I tried to correct their misunderstandings, to teach them to respect themselves and others...to teach them self-reliance and self-sufficiency, but found myself ineffective because my own situation as a teenager was so different from that of these girls...now I know better what young African-American girls face in the world.”

Is citizenship about being a good neighbor? I think the following journal entries tell the story:

“If everyone involved in this community comes to realize that everyone is their neighbor, then the community may start to function a little bit better. The better the community functions, the better life everyone in it will have.”

“ [If we could see] the community of neighbors outside of the college community...as people...[with] families, lives, tragedies, feelings, and emotions...[we] could get beyond our prejudices, reach out to them, and benefit the whole community of neighbors.”

Citizenship as Self in Relationship with Others: “Community”

A related perspective that constantly emerges from student reflections on the civic meaning of their service work is that of the good citizen as an individual self in relation to others. Students report that one of the most important things they have gained from a service-learning class is this sense of their relationship and responsibility to others:

“I’ve come to think of myself as a part of the community more than previously. I’ve learned that the community is me; I’m a part of it. I need to look around me more and look at what I’m doing, what kind of positive or negative impact it has on the larger community.”

These student testimonials provide evidence that service learning can develop a deep, complex understanding of what it means to be a “good neighbor” in a community. But service alone will not produce that result. A campus must create a structure that supports such learning opportunities. This means that I, as a teacher, consciously create in my classroom, in reading and written assignments, and in class discussions, an environment that is conducive to serious reflection on the question of what it means to be in relationship with others. It also means that I must pay attention to the kinds of service sites and service work that students are offered as part of the course, and that the students are adequately prepared to do their service work in light of the civic themes upon which I want to encourage reflection.

In addition, if students are to think about citizenship as knowing geographic neighbors and being in a committed relationship with their community, the structure of the campus service-learning program as a whole needs to mirror these values. We must work toward making our institutions of higher education better “citizens” in the larger community. Much of the

disconnect between town and gown that students feel comes from the apathetic citizenship of their university or college, which is not engaged in the life of the surrounding neighborhoods. Here at Providence College, the more our students get involved in the community, the more the explicit message of the connection of service to civic engagement pushes an implicit message on the college itself to be a better institutional citizen by participating actively in neighborhood development, providing community education classes, and being an inviting place for the low-income youths who participate in service-learning projects once they graduate from high school. As our community partners ask us to be better institutional citizens, we ask them to participate more fully in the education of our students, by coming into the classroom as advisors and “co-faculty.”

Identity, Diversity, and “Pluralistic Citizenship”

One of the most important challenges in preparing students to become engaged in public life is to get them to explore questions concerning their places as citizens in a multicultural democracy. I have written elsewhere about the powerful insights connecting democracy and diversity that can come in a curriculum incorporating community service involvement. Listen to the words of a variety of students as they reveal the possibility of learning about citizenship in a pluralistic society through service learning:

“My contacts and friendships have always been with people very similar to myself...my service is helping me become a more diverse person...[by] coming into contact with people of cultures different than my own.”

“My images of race come from the media and movies mainly...Dealing with different races [through community service] provides alternative images...At [my service site] I am able to interact with all different races... Not all tutors, teachers, volunteers are white...all races occupy all roles and provide an alternative to classification and stereotyping.”

“The structure of this course...has helped me to think...[D]ifference and racism...are issues very close to me, and yet at times so distant... [A]s a student of Indian origin, I have often been at the receiving end of racial prejudice. Despite this fact, I am not too knowledgeable on this issue, for in order to know an issue well, one has to be able to discuss both sides of it. I often treat it as a closed issue, seeing myself as a victim and the rest of American society as oppressive...I listen to the way that my father and other adult [Indian] friends talk about such issues...such talk often influences my thinking

and results in a polarization of myself into my private and public selves. In public I may at times hide my particular biases in order to appease the other ethnic groups. But then in private, I see myself often as trying to justify my biases through my friends, family, and the Indian community. Why do I have this problem? Because I don't think about the issue in depth. I recognize the issues like prejudice and racism...[b]ut I do not pick [them] apart...I store them away in the cobwebs of my brain. So, I feel that by making me reflect deeply on such issues through class discussion, various readings and journals, and in my community service, where I work with African-American and Hispanic youth corps members with backgrounds and lifestyles very different from my own, it has helped me to some extent in unifying my two selves."

As this last quote reveals, the images of diversity and difference that emerge in service-learning curricula are neither simple nor unproblematic. For students of color or others in an "oppressed" minority status, community experiences can be enriching but also the source of deep conflict. I have worked with a number of African-American students for whom the language of citizenship connected to service had great power, a way of explaining how and why "I can contribute or give something back to *my* community." But it also prompted them to challenge white students doing work in communities of color, and to make observations about the segregation of students on campus.

One African-American student whose family had once received public assistance and who was in college on full financial aid was challenged as one of the privileged elite by the high school dropouts with whom he was working. A Korean woman had to deal courageously with the racism of her family as they tried to forbid her from even participating in a service-learning class. A Latino student spoke eloquently, both in class and in this journal entry, about how his service work brought his own personal story to light:

"I am a Hispanic minority...my parents worked hard and made enough money for us to live comfortably in an upper middle class neighborhood. My memories of living in an urban neighborhood...are so vague in my mind they seem as almost a movie I watched years ago...Working at [my service site] brought back these old experiences and made them a reality. It did occur to me it was not all a bad dream."

And a gay student was forced to confront and overcome the homophobia of minority children in an urban after-school enrichment program:

"I wear two earrings in my left ear, and one in my right ear. In the first 15

minutes I had a swarm of kids around me asking me why I had earrings in both ears, because only gays did that...it made me feel very uncomfortable having [being gay]...an issue in my first 15 minutes on the job...This was very hurtful for me, but I swallowed it, removed the earrings, and pressed on...It got better though. The spirit, enthusiasm, and openness of the kids swept me away. I could not believe how friendly and forward they were, virtually fighting over me to check their homework. It was really great.”

Too few educators pay attention to service learning as a powerful way of teaching and learning about citizenship within a pluralistic society, or to how service learning might be tied to other campus initiatives on diversity and multiculturalism. But to make these connections requires extensive coordination and class preparation.

Democratic Citizenship and the Service-Learning Classroom Itself

“Usually, [in lecture classes]...I don’t feel involved with the class and material we are covering...In this [service-learning] course I get the chance to express my views and experiences to the rest of the class. I also hear my classmates’ opinions and views on certain topics. I enjoy this because I often don’t talk to my peers about social prejudices, community service, or democracy, even though these are big concerns of modern times. By hearing other college students’ beliefs on these topics it helps me understand my own feelings and come to terms with them.”

So far, my discussion has focused on the content of civic lessons learned. But equally important for my students has been the impact created by the nature of the classroom interaction. When the service-learning classroom is itself a democratic community, where equal participation is invited and expected, students and faculty gain a better sense of the civic meaning of group responsibility, reciprocity, interdependence, and intercultural cooperation or conflict. Hear again the voices of the students:

“[The classroom] format is extremely beneficial to each of us because we are encouraged to express our thoughts, opinions, and beliefs as a group. It helps us to create a community within the classroom. We all come together as a unit responding to all of the issues we face relating to community....”

“[D]emocracy is key in understanding the work that is performed by the participants of [service-learning] classes...The class itself is considered a small group community whose goals it is to bring about a sense of friendship and

trust within its participants...This free class structure is conducive to interactive learning with my peers...which tended to continue outside of the classroom.”

The creation of a democratic service-learning classroom is not an automatic consequence of service learning; too often even the service-learning classroom mirrors traditional academic hierarchy. Service-learning classes involve greater time and effort spent on coordinating and structuring activities and class discussions than a traditional class. In addition, a successful democratic class may cause students cognitive dissonance, especially if such pedagogy conflicts with the school's academic culture.

Beyond Theory: The Practical Skills of Engaged Citizenship

If we are to make a strong case about the connections between service learning and an empowered citizenry, we must be able to show that service learning builds our students' concrete civic skills in a unique way. Here I will focus on three general areas: intellectual understanding, communication and public problem solving, and the development of civic attitudes of judgment and imagination.

Intellectual Understanding

As in other areas of the curriculum, intellectual understanding comes first. The “thinking citizen” is certainly an important aim of civic education. We want to develop citizens who can use a variety of methods, theories, and models to examine the world and evaluate facts in order to reach conclusions. Service learning can enhance the development of students' critical thinking skills, and experiences in the community can reveal challenges to their working assumptions regarding human nature, society, and justice. As the excerpts quoted above should indicate, students' abilities to analyze critically are enhanced by confronting ideas and theories with the actual realities in the world surrounding them. For example, students working with guests in homeless shelters were both able to put a face on “the poor” and to test their own and others' theories about poverty, public policy, and democracy against their actual observations and the real life stories of those with whom they interact in the shelters.

Communication and Problem Solving

Intellectual understanding, while essential to democratic citizenship, must be accompanied by what I would call “participation skills”—those of com-

munication and problem solving—that can be developed through service learning. From Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam, many have emphasized participation in community-based organizations as essential to maintaining democratic institutions and to educating people for citizenship. Communication skills are essential to effective civic participation. In addition to clear thinking about public matters, democratic citizenship involves the communication of our thoughts and actions, both vertically, to our leaders and representatives, and horizontally, to our fellow citizens. Speech, argument, and persuasive communication are all important elements of democratic literacy. Perhaps even more important is the lost art of listening. Citizens of a democracy need to be able to listen to each other, to understand the places and interests of others in the community, and to achieve compromises and solve problems when conflict occurs.

Service-learning programs that employ appropriate and varied reflection strategies heighten students' communicative abilities. Through reflecting on their service experiences, students are called upon to give an account of themselves and their thoughts in classroom discussions, in oral and artistic presentations, and in their writings. Two brief excerpts from Rutgers student journals demonstrate the importance of in-class reflections on service in enhancing the students' speaking and listening skills, all as part of their civic education:

“Not all things...can be learned from going to [a service site] only once a week. We must be willing to talk to each other, tell each other our lives and stories, and believe each other so as to tear down that wall which seems to separate all cultures—ignorance.”

“I think that the university should be civic as well as academic and social...such change would no longer promote individualism and would allow students to relate to themselves in the context of the larger society in order to promote democracy...[F]or this to happen, we need a model for listening and speaking. This has been my experience in the classroom. Because of that, multiculturalism is a reality for me. In listening, I also tell my stories and realities so that people can become aware of what black and other people experience.”

As many of these student's writings indicate, the community service experience itself also teaches students to listen to the stories and needs of others. When tutoring, visiting an elderly person, serving overnight in a homeless shelter, or doing an oral history, our students learn, in a tangible way, the

art of listening. But once again, for these skills to be most effectively developed, time and effort must be spent structuring both the service and classroom experiences to maximize student dialogue and listening opportunities.

The other participation skill I want to stress is the ability to identify and solve public problems. Identifying public problems is important because, as Harkavy points out elsewhere in this issue, too often community service and service-learning programs overemphasize the service activity, leading students to conclude that their service, and what they learn from it, is an end in itself. This is illustrated by the infamous example of the student who told her service-learning director that her service experience was such a meaningful experience that she hoped her children would also have the opportunity to work in homeless shelters. Only when service leads students to identify and examine the underlying concerns and problems beneath their community work, and then explore possible solutions with fellow citizens, have we done our best to make service an education for citizenship. A Rutgers student makes this point clearly:

“Community service is nothing new to me. I’ve always done it wholeheartedly and thought of it as something useful and necessary. However, [in this class] I began to realize that helping individuals is only part of the solution. The scope of the problem was wider social problems, economic problems, social neglect and apathy, political neglect, and without addressing these, nothing could fix the problems individuals face....”

Service learning can not only help students identify the problems that underlie the need for service, but it can enhance their ability to solve them. In countless situations, I have witnessed student teams working through service site problems such as organization, effective use of their time, or creative programming.

Once again, for this to happen, both the service activities and the service-learning program need to be organized so that public problem solving will be one of the outcomes. This is best done by organizing students into service teams, as opposed to individual placements, and by giving students themselves an active role in the design and structure of the campus service-learning program (see Barber & Battistani, 1993; Battistani, 1996).

Civic Attitudes: Judgment and Imagination.

A service-learning program aimed at civic education should also develop students’ moral dispositions of civic judgment and imagination. I define civic

judgment as the ability to apply publicly defensible moral standards to an individual citizen's judgments about how to choose and to act in the political world. The practical experience gained by students in a citizenship-oriented service-learning program can develop their capacities for public judgment, and may cause them to modify their assumptions about the world they observe and with which they interact:

"I think this class has really opened a lot of people's eyes to what they are like, and what their communities are like. I also think it has made people more aware of the different perspectives we all have."

"I learned a lot more about the views which I differ from. And in fact I have changed some of my previous beliefs after reading, hearing, and experiencing the 'other side.'"

Also crucial is imagination, the ability to think creatively about public problems, and to put oneself in the place of others. Imagination is also present in the ability to project and embrace a vision for the future, to think about oneself and one's community in ways not tied to the past, to "dream things that never were and say, 'Why not?'" as George Bernard Shaw put it. Students' imaginative abilities can be enhanced through service learning, by enlarging their sense of who they are and enabling them to use their imaginations in joining together to work toward a common goal with people who have different backgrounds, values, and life stories.

Conclusion: Making the Connection Between Service and Citizenship

I have attempted to demonstrate that service learning can be a powerful method of citizen education, but only if we understand the two conditions I have laid out here. The first is that we must assume a diversity of perspectives on what it means to be a democratic citizen. Narrow or rhetorical definitions of service and citizenship will not draw college students and others who have walked away back into public dialogue. We must make room in our practices and our service-learning curriculum for a conversation where people name for themselves what they are doing and its connection to community, citizenship, and democratic society. We must also use these broader definitions of citizenship to develop new ways to measure "civic impact" on service-learning participants. The second is that service alone does not automatically lead to engaged citizenship. Only if we construct our programs

with the education of democratic citizens—in the broadest sense—in mind can service learning be the vehicle by which we educate for citizenship and reinvigorate our rapidly deteriorating public life.