Civic Engagement through Service Learning: Assessing Present Efforts and Encouraging Future Success

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Sit in the lecture hall of an introductory course on U.S. government the week public opinion is discussed and you would likely learn about the disengagement of the American electorate. It is a truism that trust has declined, in government and in one another (see, e.g., Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University 1996; NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University 2000). Cynicism and apathy have risen (People for the American Way 1989; Bennett 1997). We know and care less about our systems of government (Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University 1996; Pew Research Center 1998). Prior to the 2004 election, voting in presidential elections had been hovering at slightly above 50% since the 1970s.

Concerns about these trends have caught the attention of many, from scholars within the academic community to policy makers (see, e.g., Putnam 1995; Loeb 1999). Professional organizations, such as the American Political Science Association (APSA), have issued clarion calls for partnerships with secondary school educators to improve and revitalize high school civics curricula (see, e.g., APSA’s “Toolkit for Service Learning in Political Science”). Within the academy, some instructors have turned to experiential and active learning approaches in an attempt to spur students to connect not only to the material but also with the world around them (Reyes 1998).

This paper is a preliminary exploration into one experiential and active learning approach, service learning, and its role in civic education. After a review of the theoretical underpinnings of this pedagogy and its relationship to our political system, we will detail our experiences in employing this technique including lessons learned about its effectiveness. We will conclude with ideas for improvement and assessment of our goals.
Civic education

The meaning of citizenship

Much of the call for civic engagement has focused on the process of civic education, or fostering citizens-in-training. Some of the attention has been focused on improving high school civics courses, as the 1997 APSA task force did. Other work has focused on the role of community colleges in socializing individuals to be productive and responsible citizens (Burger et al. 1988). In this essay, we focus on the role of civic education in four year colleges and universities.

Irrespective of the venue, a key question is: what is a citizen? In the classical liberal tradition of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, a citizen is a rights-bearing individual, able to make his or her own choices in the political, public sphere. Many have criticized this rights-based, individualistic approach arguing that it has contributed to an atavistic zero-sum mentality that has led to the break down of civil society and civic life (Battistoni and Hudson 1997, S. Giroux 2000). Some have even suggested that married with consumerism, this individualism has created a mass of student-customers who see education as service they purchase that will better enable them to get high paying prestigious employment (Barber 2002).

Many critics of this view of the citizen argue for a more communitarian approach that acknowledges and affirms the responsibilities to others that a citizen has (Loeb 1999). Others have suggested moving beyond these individual/community and rights/responsibilities dichotomies to a more practical view of agents coming together to solve problems collectively shared (Boyte and Farr 1997). Still others have focused on the shared ideas and convictions that are necessary in a society, such as agreeing to work towards common goals, to compromise from strongly held positions, to extend participation to all (Elshtain 1997).
As will be discussed later in the essay, these conceptualizations of citizens and their relationships to those around them have paramount importance to the service learning endeavor. For example, the partnership between the university learners and the community agencies they serve is critical to the success of the project (Maloney 2000). What does it mean, then, for the university to fulfill its role as a good citizen in the community? Further, the role of the citizen in the larger society is reflected in the type of relationship the students believe themselves to have with the community they serve. Are they there to help others achieve their rights? Or do they wish to fulfill their own responsibilities to society? Or simply are they completing an assigned project as a requirement of a course they wish to pass?

It is important to acknowledge that these ideals types of citizenship underpin our theoretical understandings. However, actual, active citizens “are people of imperfect character, acting on the basis of imperfect knowledge, for causes that may be imperfect as well” (Loeb 1999: 54). This means that the process of actively engaging students in the development of their own understanding of citizenship will be imperfect as well.

The role of the student in education

Just as many citizens do not spend time analyzing their own paradigms on the meaning of citizenship, most students have not explicitly grappled with the role they play in their own education. Most come to college looking forward perhaps to experiencing independence for the first time, to acquiring sufficient education to compete successfully in the workforce, or to fulfilling the expectations of those around them that college is simply what one “does” after high school. Whatever their motivations for being there, students generally have experienced (and are expecting) what some have called the banker model of education (Battistoni and Hudson 1997). That is, they wait like ATMs for the professor possessing the resources to deposit the wealth of
knowledge into their accounts. In this model, their role is passive, to receive the knowledge handed down by the professor.

This presents a problem for the educator who believes that active learning is one of the most effective techniques for engaging students and stimulating learning. Her orientation towards teaching can be at odds with the students’ set of expectations about learning, which are often unexamined (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Benjamin Barber (2002) suggests the scenario is even grimmer. He argues that the increasingly prevalent rhetoric of market forces and economic supply and demand (what the students demand, higher education supplies) coupled with consumerism have created a university environment where students believe they are purchasing an education. Thus their role in the acquisition of that education is limited to their (or their parents’) writing the checks that buy the education.

There is a direct connection to the previous discussion of citizenship. As students have difficulty conceptualizing their active role in their own learning and would often prefer to be told “what’s on the exam” and learn this information long enough to be able to recite it to the professor, citizens are often uncomfortable with being told of their responsibilities to others in society (indeed, this version of citizenship is contested, as we will examine shortly). Thus, service learning courses designed to improve civic education can create a confluence of factors to which students can be quite resistant.

Students are not the only ones who can be resistant to both the method and the message of civic education through service learning. While political science has been at the forefront of both the civic education reform and service learning, it has not been without its critics. Some argue that the focus prevalent in the literature on community and shared social responsibility privileges that conceptualization of citizenship over others and is an activity best left to elected
officials (Weaver 1998). Others who are supportive of service learning generally worry about the effect it has on junior faculty given the time required (Zivi 1997) and the relatively low level of importance often given it in the tenure and promotion process (e.g. Leonard 1999, but see also Bennett 1999 and 1999b).

It is against this backdrop that we attempted to integrate service learning into a section of an introductory course on U.S. Government. Our goals were both to help students understand the core issues of citizenship and to encourage their development of analysis and critical thinking skills. The remainder of the essay will detail our experiences and provide observations about our progress.

**The course**

The courses we describe here were taught in the fall of 2003 and 2004 at the University of Texas at Arlington. (See Appendix A for the course syllabus.) They were part of the American Studies Sequence in the Honors College, which is an interdisciplinary (political science, history and English) 5 course thematic curriculum, spanning two semesters with team-teaching each semester. Each year’s sequence is centered on a common theme and is designed to fulfill the equivalent of literature, two semesters of U.S. history, introduction to U.S. Government and state and local government. Each fall semester, a professor from history and one from English team to offer an interdisciplinary seminar based on the sequence theme for the year. In the political science section, the “nuts & bolts” of government (at the national and state level) are covered using the theme as exposition. Then, in the spring semester, history and political science pair to continue exploring the sequence theme. In both of the years detailed here, the theme was “the body” conceptualized as the corporeal body, bodies of people and the larger body politic.¹
The service learning element was incorporated into the political science section each fall semester. Our community partner was the Fort Worth, Texas Diocese of Catholic Charities and our students worked with their Office of Refugee Services in their English as a Second Language (ESL) and citizenship preparation classes. One option for our students was to work 25 hours over the course of the semester on-site with an ESL class in which many of the participants were preparing for the citizenship exam (as a basis for comparison, see Koulish 1998). In addition to the on-site work, students would keep weekly reflection journals, attend two reflection sessions with the instructor, write an 8-10 page paper and prepare an oral presentation for the “Democracy Summit” held at the end of the semester.

The other option students could choose was to work in small groups of approximately 5 students to prepare instructional materials appropriate for the ESL citizenship curriculum. The materials would draw on the information asked in the citizenship application process and the sample 100 questions provided by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (formally Immigration and Naturalization Services). Additionally, students were to conduct their own independent research on the various countries of origin from which the refugees originate who are served by Catholic Charities in the Fort Worth Diocese. Students were expected to produce written handouts, an oral skit or presentation as well as creative learning incentives to give away to the ESL participants. The groups would then present their materials to one of the ESL citizenship classes. In addition to meeting with the instructor before and after giving their presentation, students were expected also to write the same length paper and prepare for the “Democracy Summit” as were the students who worked on-site throughout the semester.

The prompt for the paper was to research the goals of Catholic Charities in refugee resettlement and citizenship preparation, to identify an area in which improvement was possible
and to develop a plan to address better the needs of the community. The Democracy Summit was a course conference in which students were expected to present the findings of their research. Students were broken into “panels” which were constituted of members from several instructional materials groups as well as those participating in the on-site work. At the Summit, in addition to presenting their own work, students were expected to comment on the commonalities and differences of those on their panel, as well as to assess the feasibility of the different plans.

There are many goals for this sequence, both substantive and skill based. In terms of substance, these Honors students receive credit for two survey introductory political science courses on national, state and local (Texas) government. The state of Texas mandates that all students graduating from public institutions in the state must take these two specific courses. Thus, there are obvious concerns about covering a core set of material from these introductory courses. Additionally, the fall semester course needs to prepare students well for the team-taught course in the spring in which the issues of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are explored in great detail (e.g., suffrage for African Americans and women, the civil rights movements of the 1960s, patterns of immigration from the mid 19th century to present, etc.).

The skills the sequence endeavors to teach are those fundamental to a liberal education and more specifically to social science, critical thinking and analysis. Indeed, research shows that these are the very skills in which high school seniors are most deficient (Niemi and Junn 1998). Further, while high school students are performing community service at higher rates, their development of these skills and their understanding of the academic component (i.e., service learning) is deficient as well. However, retention of knowledge and ability to perform these skills is highest when students place importance on the information and when they can
apply it to the work around them (Niemi and June 1998: 50-51). In our curriculum, the service learning options were designed to provide further opportunities to enhance these skills.

The service learning components also were designed to advance other goals suggested by the literature on service learning and civic education. Ehrlich (1999) argues that teaching civic education is most effective when careful consideration is given to the following goals: academic learning; social learning (interpersonal skills); moral learning (understanding one’s belief system in relationship to others’); and civic learning (understanding the real applications of the political structure). In our course, in addition to the substantive material covered about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (academic learning), the small group work in the instructional materials groups, the reflection sessions and the Democracy Summit were designed to help students develop their social, moral and civic learning. By interacting with each other in a series of small group experiences, where their grade would hinge not only on their own work but also on the extent to which they cooperated and worked effectively as a group, these goals were advanced. Indeed the shared dispositions that Elshtain (1997) argues is necessary for democracy to work have the potential to be cultivated.

**Limited success and occasional failure**

When this course format with the service learning option was first offered in the fall of 2003, we experienced a great deal of success in meeting the various goals. Though initially the students were very wary and resistant to the assignments in the ways one might expect from the literature, throughout the semester they warmed to the task. The evolution of perspective and the maturation process among the instructional materials groups was especially rewarding to observe. At the first small group meetings with the instructor, many of the students were not fully invested in the project, some were anxious about their grades and others were openly
hostile. Their presentations varied from moderately well developed to horribly haphazardly designed.

However, in the short span of time from the initial meeting to the actual presentation in front of “real live refugees” (as one student put it) their projects became much better developed. The format of the presentations varied in their level of sophistication from a mock television news presentation covering basic facts of government to a more rudimentary question and answer session using poster board displays. This variation in sophistication level was appropriate as the average level of English language acquisition varied enormously across the different classes of refugees. In fact, often the most simply conceived presentations worked more effectively than the TV show model, which assumed a great deal of shared cultural capital.

The types of learning incentives our students created also varied significantly. One group devised a supplemental booklet with questions and answers drawn from the sample 100 test questions provided by the Bureau of Naturalization Services. Another group created laminated flash cards to learn key terms and concepts; they created two sets, one for those with a very basic level of English acquisition and another for the more advanced. All of the groups devised simple games such as word associations, matching and crosswords. Among the more popular learning incentives were patriotic themed items such as small flags, stickers and pencils. Red, white and blue candy was also a hit among the participants.

In addition to the creativity that many students brought to the assignment, what is most striking is the level of personal growth observed among both the instructional materials groups and the students working on-site. As mentioned, many of the students, especially among the instructional materials groups, were hostile to the assignments. They were reluctant to understand why the “extra” work was necessary and to examine critically the roles they played in
body politic. However, to a person, when they got in front of the refugees and presented their materials, they “got it.”

They grew excited as they became producers of knowledge instead of merely consumers. After presenting their materials to the class (which ranged from 15 to 30 refugees), they moved from person to person working one on one helping the refugees work through the handouts and games they had created. Their enthusiasm not only for the subject matter but also for their role in working with these refugees was evident.

In the wrap up session with the instructor held the following week, the students also expressed their newfound understanding of the sorts of barriers these immigrants have in adjusting to a new culture. Concepts that had seemed abstract (like in-group and out-group, pluralism) now had a real world application and, literally, a human face. The on-site students expressed a similar epiphany in their reflection sessions. They talked of the fear they experienced going to the classes, which are usually held in the residential neighborhoods in which the refugees live, and of feeling like “the other.” They began the process of understanding the barriers of culture, stereotyping and discrimination many immigrants face in adjusting to life in the United States. They drew parallels from their experiences to the lives of the refugees, yet recognizing what they felt only a few hours once a week did not really compare to the lives the refugees lived daily.

In sum, the experiences of the fall of 2003 and the ways these experiences set up deeper learning for the team-taught section in the spring of 2004 was extremely satisfactory. The goals of community building, cooperation and shared dispositions were met. We assumed, perhaps arrogantly, that the structure was key to the success and thus naively began another installment of the sequence and the service learning in the fall of 2004. Though there were individual
successes, the large scale triumphs were not repeated. The rest of this paper will explore potential explanations as well as offer ideas for assessment in preparation for the next opportunity to teach the course.

The second installation of the service learning components described here took place in the fall of 2004. As in the previous year, students approached the project with a mix of apprehension, trepidation and antagonism. Given the past experiences the instructor assumed (falsely) that these emotions would be resolved as the semester progressed.

To a certain extent the students’ progress followed a predictable path, especially among the on-site students. Through their reflection journals and reflection sessions we learned they were struggling, as most students do initially, with reconciling their experiences helping refugees learn English with the course material. This can be a significant task as many ESL students have very rudimentary levels of English acquisition. Some are pre-literate in their native languages, perhaps not having ever held a writing utensil before the ESL class. The task of the professor is to help the university students understand how to take their observations about the differences in cultures and difficulties immigrants have adjusting and use them to make sense of the broad concepts of democracy, pluralism, representation, citizenship, etc.

The initial meetings of the instructional materials students also followed expected patterns. Like those before them, when first given their project and small group assignments, some expressed frustration and a degree of being overwhelmed by the task. The reaction of a sizable portion of the group, however, can best be described as ennui. They explained that “volunteering” was something their high schools demanded and that this was going to be just another exercise in helping the less fortunate.
This sentiment goes straight to the heart of the discussion of the meaning of citizenship and the role of service learning in civic education. Whether in calls to make service learning mandatory (Barber 2000), or to move past the philanthropic paradigm of volunteerism (Mendel-Reyes 1997) many have argued that a vital component of civic education is to show students that they have a role in the polity. That is, their participation in the efforts of the community organization is not merely helping out others. Rather, they have a set of responsibilities to the larger body politic.

Our concerns for this year’s group of students were confirmed as they gave their presentations to the refugees and in the small group wrap up sessions with the instructor. Unlike the previous group of students who, upon presenting their materials to the refugees seemed to go through a personal growth spurt, these students just seemed to be pleased that portion of the assignment was completed. In the wrap up sessions, when we attempted to direct their analysis to make connections to course material, they dutifully wrote down what we were saying but did not engage with the ideas themselves. Far from the ideal of active learning, where students take responsibility for what they learn, this dynamic was closer to the rote “tell me what to write down so I can learn it for the exam” experiences we were trying to escape.

Another sentiment arose in the wrap up sessions, students’ papers and the Democracy Summit that mirrors this lack of personal accountability for learning, a sense that the refugees were not living up to their responsibilities as immigrants. Some expressed frustration that the class did not start on time, that the students brought their small children to class, or that the ESL teacher seemed disorganized and unable to manage the class. Some suggested that the refugees were not learning English quickly enough and blamed the cultural segregation in the community. ‘If the refugees would only get out of their comfort zone and speak English more away from
class…’ was a familiar refrain. When the professor attempted to draw parallels to the students’ own fear and anxiety of entering a new and culturally unfamiliar terrain, they were briefly acknowledged (because the professor said so) and then dismissed. These findings, however undesirable, are consistent with Loeb’s statement that “as their sense of connectedness and common purpose erodes, they find it easy to scapegoat others, to view the world in prejudicial and unforgiving terms, and to believe that ordinary citizens can do nothing to shape the history of our time” (p. 98).

This points up the potential for danger others have articulated. Some have suggested that the disposition springs from our larger socio-political culture that focuses on our rights in society rather than responsibilities (Boyte and Farr 1997). For example, regarding the savings and loan crises of the 1980s and 1990s, “taxpayers shouldn’t have to pay for the S&L mess. Government should pay for it” (p. 39). Others have argued that in service learning we need to be intentional about instilling the communitarian spirit embodied in the aboriginal proverb, “If you have come to help me, no thank you. But if your liberation is bound up with mine, then come let us work together” (Mendel-Reyes 1997: 21). Still others warn that service learning can run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and a shallow understanding of social and political institutions (Cone 2003).

Presently these students are enrolled in the second semester of the American Studies Sequence. We are returning to these issues of the meaning of citizenship and the historical and contemporary patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, we have the opportunity to continue to work with these themes and to attempt to guide them to a realization of their own role and responsibilities in this process. As these students mature, some progress is being made. While the structure of the American Studies sequence does allow for us to revisit these important
issues, it behooves us to examine more closely the differences from the first year to the second to
discover whether changes to the structure of the course are necessary.

There are three significant characteristics that distinguished the first group from the second. The first group was larger, more heterogeneous in terms of age and experiences (though not in terms of race and ethnicity) and it was linked to other non-Honors Introduction to U.S.
Government classes. The first group of 17 students consisted of 6 men and 11 women. Of the
women, only 1 was Latina; the rest were White. All six men were White. However, the
characteristic that seemed to influence the class dynamic the most was the diversity of their
experiences. There were two single mothers and one married woman was pregnant at the time of
the course. Four out of the 17 were not first semester freshmen and while most (13) were either
18 or 19, there were four students ranging in age from 20 to 25.

Not only were there different life stories reflected throughout our course, but also the
students who worked on site in service learning were linked to other, non-Honors sections of
Introduction to US Government. Thus, the reflection session included a diverse mix of Honors
and non-Honors students. This gave our students an opportunity to see their service through the
eyes of others enrolled in a different course environment (e.g., sections ranging from 60 to 150
students, very diverse in age, race/ethnicity, experiences, etc.). This also afforded the Honors
students an opportunity to gain additional experience working collaboratively with those with
whom they were not familiar, listening to others’ perspectives on situations similar to theirs and
providing their own insights and observations. This was an additional opportunity to develop the
shared disposition of citizenship (Ehrkich 1999) and to provide leadership among their peers.

Contrast this with the second group. In addition to being a smaller group (11 students),
they were comprised entirely of first semester college students, many of whom were still living
at home. They were more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, especially among the women. Of the 5 women, two are White, two are African American and one is Asian American/Pacific Islander. Of the men, all are White except one international student from Mexico.

They were, however, significantly more monolithic in their level of maturation. All are first year students and the age range was between 16 and 19. This is somewhat unusual at our institution, where the average student age is 26 and only approximately 16% of the total student body are residential students. Thus, even in honors introductory courses, one often finds a diverse mix of ages and experiences. However, this is changing as the university is moving towards a more residential, traditional college aged population and our experiences suggest that these changes have ramifications for civic education.

**Conclusions and thoughts on the future**

Two points of data do not a trend make. It is entirely possible that this year’s group of students is an anomaly and that the structure of the course assignments is, on average, sufficient to meet the goals of the class. However, it would seem prudent to examine potential avenues for change in anticipation of the next opportunity to teach the course.

Moreover, the group of characteristics distinguishing the first group from the second is out of the control of the instructor. It would seem that our university will continue its trend towards a younger and more homogeneous student body and this will likely have a disproportional effect on Honors College enrollment as well. This means that, as instructors, we will need to be more sensitized to the predispositions of this changing population. In addition, changes in the number of instructors within our department who wish to offer their own service learning/civic education sections is also relatively unpredictable. However, this can also be turned to an advantage through greater cooperation and analysis of differing models and
approaches. Therefore, what can be done to work within these changing parameters to maximize the likelihood that students will engage themselves fully in the process of becoming citizens is a continually evolving process.

First, we suspect that the curriculum needs to be adjusted to expose students more explicitly to the concepts of both rights and responsibilities of citizens. As others have suggested (Zivi 1997), this is challenging given the substantive demands in a semester’s syllabus. This is especially true in the American Studies Sequence as the essence of two courses (Introduction to U.S. Government and Introduction to State and Local Government) is distilled into a single semester. However, given the predisposition of both students and instructor to think and talk in terms of “our” rights and “others’” responsibilities, this is imperative. This supposition is further supported by the limited findings from the non-Honors section employing this model in 2003, where it was found that the instructional-material group project reinforced the students’ understanding of rights, but not responsibilities.

Also, more formal and structured assessment of the model underlying these efforts would be helpful in ascertaining whether the use of this model assists the students in internalizing the appreciation for citizenship and in developing the skills we seek. This is vital in that given the discrepancies between what transpired in 2003 and 2004, we need to be open to challenging the very model that we have designed, and not just the outcomes we seek and the concepts we teach.

In 2003, the students who participated in the on-site service learning were surveyed on their perceptions of their experiences and we made initial attempts to understand the effects of the instructional materials presentations on the refugees. However, these analyses focused on the end results of the model only. It is evident from these experiences and the mixed outcomes seen over 2003 and 2004 that we do not yet fully understand the efficacy of this combination of
service learning options on the degree of students’ development of civic engagement. The lessons that these experiences have taught us, though, are that (1) we can make no assumptions regarding the initial dispositions and understanding of citizenship, nor the goals that the students bring to their participation in service learning, and (2) to achieve the desired educational outcomes, we must connect the structure of the service learning model with the students’ predispositions.
References


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1 The creation of this sequence was completed under the leadership of Carolyn Barros, then Dean of the Honors College. Integrating service learning into the curriculum was supported by two seed grants from Center for Community Service Learning at the University of Texas at Arlington. The authors would like to express their appreciation to the Center and its Director, Mary Ridgway, for critical support as we developed this program. Ellen Lazarus Mooney also contributed significantly to the early stages of the project.

ii In an earlier study (as part of a pilot program in 2002 that gave rise to the model discussed herein) conducted on students participating in on-site service learning only an effort was made to assess the students’ predispositions, level of political knowledge, skills, and maturation, both before and after participation in the service learning project. We also assessed, prior to and after, the expectations of Catholic Charities and their perception of the experience. We found that students experienced a deeper appreciation and understanding of diversity, communication with others, identification with the role of an immigrant in society, and civic pride. For other analysis regarding the importance of assessment see Walt Whitman Center 1996, and Hatcher and Bringle 1997.

iii As part of another study (2003), refugees were give pre and post tests of their knowledge in conjunction with the instructional materials presentations. However, this study was quickly altered when the investigators realized the disparity between the instrument and the wide dispersion of English language acquisition within the class. Also, we did not anticipate the degree to which the refugees would become anxious at being “tested” and the negative interaction with our students’ instructional materials presentations.