

# Service Learning as a Vehicle for Promoting Student Political Efficacy

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Research demonstrates young people's underperformance in the political process (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Delli Carpini 2000). For young people, "What is missing is the belief that becoming involved in public life in any way that involves politics, government, or organized collective action...is likely to be effective or satisfying" (Delli Carpini 2000, 344). This lack of political efficacy – the belief that one can make a difference in political outcomes – figures prominently among traditional college-aged students.

Notions of internal political efficacy (the belief that *I* am competent enough to make a difference in political outcomes) and external political efficacy (the belief that *the system* is responsive to political demands) are pervasive in political science literature and have been used to explain a variety of phenomena from voting turnout and protesting, to contacting public officials to rioting (Almond and Verba 1963; Campbell et al. 1964; Easton and Dennis, 1967; Lipsky 1968; Matthews and Prothro 1966). However, a number of scholars have explored the potential for the causal arrow to move in the reverse; specifically, participation in political phenomena can affect levels of political efficacy (Welch and Clark 1975; Finkel 1985; Finkel 1987). Although there is some disagreement on the extent to which and how participation positively influences political efficacy (compare Clarke and Acock 1989 and Finkel 1985), from a normative democratic perspective, this notion remains appealing. If individuals can be

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motivated to get involved in political processes, there is evidence that their attitudes about their own competence in the political realm and/or their beliefs about the receptivity of the political system itself can be strengthened. Relatively scant literature has explicitly focused on ways to increase levels of democratic participation for the purpose of improving internal and external political efficacy. This article describes how I developed a service learning course to achieve that goal.

The California Campus Compact and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching partnered in 2007-2009 to make fellowships available to faculty charged with the responsibility of creating, rolling out and assessing a service learning course geared at increasing students' political engagement. In the spring of 2007, I was selected as a California Campus Compact-Carnegie Foundation Faculty Fellow and used the opportunity to investigate the extent to which incorporating a cognitive-affective service learning-based approach could foster deeper student learning of course material and improve students' sense of political efficacy through greater participation in the political process.

I decided to redesign a course required for political science majors, entitled POLS 119: Government in Action: Public Policy. POLS 119 is an upper-level course that examines the theoretical literature on policy-making, including the roles of political actors from Congress to interest groups, policy analysis, and the nature of policy change. This course was particularly appropriate for the incorporation of the cognitive-affective service learning approach for a number of reasons. First, in my years of teaching, I have found that students have difficulty analyzing and articulating policy problems. Nevertheless, understanding the policy cycle gives students a firmer grip on understanding government overall, allowing them to negotiate their places within the system. Second, focusing on specific policy areas allows students to think more concretely about the political process and to better understand the practical implications of governmental processes. In this way, "government" can be seen as more than merely an abstraction that has no real bearing on a young person's life.

By combining deep student reflection and service in the nonprofit sector with a strong foundation in public policy theory, this service learning project sought to foster undergraduate students' improved understanding of the policy process and contributed to a greater sense of internal political efficacy. Viewed in this way, two critical components of service learning emerge. First, service learning should be considered one more important instrument in a professor's pedagogical toolkit, particularly in terms of engaging students in active learning. Second, engaging students in service learning projects presents opportunities for them "to come to recognize that individual and collective action can make a difference in the quality of civic life" (Waterman 1997, 5). I shall discuss each of these components subsequently in this paper.

### **Service learning within a multi-method pedagogical approach**

Voluminous research has demonstrated that students learn in different ways and thus respond to different pedagogical techniques accordingly (Kolb, 1976; Kolb and Goldman 1973). Work by Bloom and others has identified a hierarchy of learning in which the ability to apply, synthesize or evaluate, and create represent higher-order learning outcomes that differ vastly from mere regurgitation of information (Bloom 1956, Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). Service learning, as one of the most important forms of experiential learning, provides students with opportunities to practice skills, test ideas in a real setting, and evaluate the extent to which theoretical (book) knowledge holds up to real-world circumstances. It can help students see the practical implications of knowledge, learn content more deeply, and readily retain that information.

### **The role of cognitive-affective learning in addressing public policy**

Understanding the very complex nature of public policy in general, and community social services in particular, requires a higher level of learning and social awareness than is often required in college courses (Bloom et al., 1956; Colby et al., 2007). For community-based nonprofit organizations, scarcity is the rule rather than the exception. Amidst nearly unlimited demands, they must manage very limited resources, and often depend on grants and other insecure sources of funding to stay alive. As such, they have multiple principals to whom they must answer, often with competing sets of priorities. Within this complex web of political actors and institutions, the traditional pedagogical emphasis on mere cognitive learning falls short of providing students with the skills to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate policy problems, despite the fact that such an understanding of policy-making is a key component of developing student political engagement.

Fostering a greater connection between cognitive and affective learning--the bridging of thinking and feeling--can result not only in deep and enduring student learning, but perhaps equally important, in increased youth political participation (Chickering, 2006; Owen-Smith, 2004; Colby et al., 2007). Indeed, scholars influenced by the work of Benjamin Bloom (1956), have investigated the manner in which "emotion was central to cognition" (Lehman 200, 12). The emphasis on both cognitive and affective aspects of learning is central to a well-designed service learning course. Through the service learning component in which students participate hands-on in the policy realm while keeping detailed journals and contributing to online discussion forums that respond to instructor prompts, students gain first-hand experience with concepts such as opportunity costs and cost-benefit ratios. For example, one student reflected on the importance of a well-voiced demand when it comes to maintaining nonprofits and social programs:

It is required for a program to have a demand by people, otherwise the funders and leaders of the organization will shut programs down. This was seen in Munger with supply and demand, but applied in real life to a public policy organization it can determine something's existence.

In the course of the semester, the student had witnessed how economic recession could hit close to home, threatening the livelihood of organizations, but also how outpouring of public support could salvage those organizations. Furthermore, it underscored how political engagement, even in the midst of challenging economic times, could turn the tides on impending program extinction. Another student wrote,

So far I have been really surprised by the amount of action that a group that is not involved in politics can make. Specifically I have seen first hand the importance of community organizing. Organizing to create change is a monumental ability that I had not known about.

It is one thing to read in a textbook (cognitive learning) about how groups can organize to influence political outcomes. It is a different thing to see collective action sustain the existence of a program facing threats, and subsequently to reflect on the implications of that group action (cognitive-affective learning). These kinds of poignant learning experiences are abundant in well-constructed service learning projects, particularly those that emphasize student reflection on experiences (Dewey 1916).

### **The service learning course framework**

The course I developed had multiple learning objectives, including:

- The development of critical thinking skills
- The development of discussion skills
- The development of research skills
- The development of writing skills, especially pertaining to research

To accomplish these objectives, it combined a traditional classroom approach with a significant service learning component in which students were required to spend 7–10 hours per week at the San Joaquin County Partnership for Families (CPF), working on a project of their choice from among a number of

initiatives CPF undertook for the underserved members of the community. A full description of the four projects from which students could choose is listed in Appendix A.

The course included common readings in the traditional public policy literature, including work by Kingdon, Lindblom, and Stone. It also featured a market-based approach to understanding the policy cycle. The benefit of emphasizing the market-based approach in a service learning course in public policy is the conceptual pervasiveness of scarcity to which students are exposed. As students began to develop their theoretical understanding of scarcity (cognitive learning) in the readings, their understanding was strengthened by experiencing first-hand the scarcity faced by nonprofits (affective learning) in the service learning portion of the course.

The course consisted of the following specific components:

- **Class Participation.** Students were expected to come prepared to class having completed all assigned reading and to actively participate in class discussions. Secondly, students contribute to an online weekly discussion forum (blog). The arguments and questions raised in the forum were typically discussed further in class, particularly when student confusion evident in blogs could be mitigated by further discussion and reflection. Two full days of class were wholly dedicated to discussing and connecting public policy concepts learned in class to real-life experiences at CPF.
- **Offsite Participation.** Students were expected to spend between 7-10 hours offsite doing work with the community partner, San Joaquin Community Partnership for Families (CPF). Students submitted weekly progress reports to the instructor and CPF, containing number of hours worked, tasks in progress/completed, and journal entries. Students wrote about significant experiences at the community partner, and reflected on the ways in which their service learning experiences confirmed or challenged knowledge contained in course texts.
- **Op-Ed Essay.** Students wrote an essay of approximately 1000 words that identified and described a particular policy problem in which a specific action was suggested to be taken by a specific party. Students were encouraged to submit multiple drafts so that the final product could be considered for submission to a newspaper.
- **Exam.** One cumulative exam was given in class toward the end of the semester.
- **Term Paper.** This 10-12 page paper focused on a policy debate other than what students wrote about in the op-ed assignment. It entailed an in-depth analysis of a particular policy pertaining to the community partner and was expected to incorporate the tools and concepts highlighted in the class.

- **Research Presentation.** Students gave an oral presentation reviewing the analysis from their term papers.

Students would develop their writing skills through weekly “Status reports” containing common reporting templates employed in the workplace as well as a reflective component in which students would be required to draw upon their experience working with the community partner. These weekly journals contained free-form and structured responses to prompts. Students were continually asked to reflect on their experiences and link them to theory. Their writing and research skills were sharpened by producing a final report handed in to both the community partner as well as myself.

Oral communication skills were practiced frequently throughout the course. Class sessions were heavily discussion-based, with me acting as a presenter of questions and stimulator of discussion. Outside of the classroom, students further honed these skills by directly interfacing with the community nonprofit and its clients. This aspect of the service learning component helped students develop their professional presence, given that college students are so often accustomed to practicing communication at a “student level” alone.

In the final phase of the semester, as critical thinking and problem-solving skills were sharpened, students submitted a research paper proposing a solution to a single public policy problem facing one community using data they collected. The level of political engagement this project required far surpassed that which a traditional class setting provides. Witnessing an entire policy cycle is unique for most students.

### **Service learning attitudes and political efficacy outcomes**

The course was generally positively received by students who reported a number of favorable outcomes as a result of their experiences. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire at the beginning and again at the end of the semester, gauging a number of attitudes about service learning and political efficacy. In the post-semester survey, students answered a battery of questions pertaining to their beliefs about the service learning portion of the course. Students’ attitudes about the service learning component ranged from 0 (the most negative belief about service learning component) to 1 (the most positive belief about service learning component). On average by the end of the semester, students were more likely to agree than not that they:

- Know more about the community
- Can reflect on their own biases and prejudices
- Believe serving the community is an obligation
- Feel personally empowered to make a difference

Given the very small sample of students in this analysis (and therefore very high standard deviations), this result was impressive.

Furthermore, there were significant increases in average levels of student political efficacy over the duration of the semester. Another portion of the questionnaire contained an index of political efficacy in which students were asked to mark their level of agreement (five point scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) with the following statements<sup>1</sup>:

- I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics.
- I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing the country.
- I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as other people.
- I think that I am better informed about politics and government than other people.
- Public officials don't care much about what people like me think.
- People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
- Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't understand what's going on.

Students could earn a score of political efficacy from 0 (lowest level of political efficacy) to 1 (highest level of political efficacy). Interestingly, every student increased his/her level of disagreement with the statements "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" and "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't understand what is going on" from the beginning to the end of the semester. Although students learned the important lesson that not all instances of collective action lead to their intended outcomes, they also learned the more critical lesson that individual and collective action *can make* a difference.

## Conclusions

Given the small number of students enrolled in the service learning course, I am hesitant to make grand conclusions about the generalizability or scale of findings obtained in the foregoing analysis. Nevertheless, this study has provided some evidence that engagement in the political sphere can in fact lead to improved political efficacy. That said, two important lessons can be derived and hopefully applied to future iterations of service learning courses aimed at increasing student learning and enhancing student political engagement. First, the instructor should be intentional from the beginning of the semester to the end about the link between class-based and service learning-based content. This

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<sup>1</sup> The measurement of self-reported political efficacy has evolved and improved over time. These seven items represent the standard measurement in the literature since the late 1980's and are posed in the National Election Study surveys conducted before and after each American presidential election (Niemi et al. 1991).

lesson can certainly be applied in all service learning courses, but is particularly salient in service learning geared toward political engagement. Students who don't see how the service is relevant to the coursework are far less likely to have the breadth and depth of learning that is the hallmark of service learning. But more importantly, it is critical that the instructor continually helps students make the connection between political engagement and increased efficacy through effective scaffolding. For instance, during reflective sessions, I asked student to give examples of experiences at the community partner site that made them feel empowered. When students would share such experiences, I would ask other students to "debrief" and repeat what they had heard.

Finally, do not assume that student reflection will take place by virtue of having a service learning component. Instructors should schedule class time and journal exercises to give students opportunities for consistent reflection. Building these components into the syllabus encourages student learning and signals to students that the instructor is committed to service learning. Reflection exercises should stretch the students' imaginations and encourage them to go beyond mere reporting of their duties on-site. For instance, one challenging reflective exercise would be to have students read a short study that demonstrates the causal link between political action and political efficacy. Students would then be asked how this study is relevant to their work at the community partner site, or how it is particularly relevant to youth who tend to be less engaged in politics. Despite initial hesitation, students tend to rise to such intellectual challenges, and the depth of learning that they achieve is particularly gratifying for the instructor as well.

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