

From Reflective Volunteerism to Civic Activism: Advancing Service Learning Pedagogy through Civic Engagement

Dean Stover, English/Humanities Faculty, GateWay Community College, Phoenix, Arizona

Introduction

Most recent literature on civic engagement calls for the educational system to do more to promote democracy at all levels. However, service learning instruction in recent years has focused more on “reflective volunteerism” – community-based learning coupled with episodic or on-going reflective assignments – as opposed to involving students in direct civic activism, in the spirit of Paulo Friere. With the aim of increasing my GateWay Community College students’ civic literacy and knowledge about political processes, I designed a series of civic engagement assignments and measured the impact on my English/Humanities students’ attitudes. Hahn’s (2001) ten-year study of 14-19 year olds in five countries, including the U.S., indicated that curriculum can encourage civic engagement by letting students discuss controversial issues in a safe environment. My findings add support to this claim and demonstrate significant impact on my students’ attitudes about civic engagement and citizenship.

Service Learning Pedagogy and Civic Engagement

In 1995, Robert Putnam called attention to our society’s alienation toward politics or, as he called it, our civic disengagement in *Bowling Alone*. The general decline in voter turnout does reflect increasing apathy and cynicism about politics. Research on Generation X shows that only 17% of 18-29 year-olds voted in the 2000 elections, the lowest rate since 18 year-olds were given the vote in 1971 (The Democracy Project, 2002). Some research, including Putnam’s, may overstate the claims of a declining democracy because an international study measuring 90,000 14 year-olds in 28 countries showed that 14-year-olds *do* know about democratic principles and have moderate skills in analyzing civic information. In addition, the study also points out that students see traditional political activities as less important than addressing environmental issues or volunteering in the community (Torney-Purta, 2001). Knowing my students were likely to be politically disengaged, I developed assignments specifically designed to focus their attention on the impact they could have on local or national civic issues.

Over the past decade, there has been a movement to integrate service learning into the

curriculum in hopes that community service would help promote active citizenship. K. Edward Spiezio's 2002 article, *Pedagogy and Political (Dis)Engagement*, provides an overview of the research on service learning models and political engagement. Spiezio uses Mary Hepburn's review of service learning programs to show that service learning can connect academic knowledge to real life problems and enhance personal growth and citizenship, but that most current service learning models do not include political activities. Although great strides have been made in active citizenship through service learning, very limited emphasis has been placed on student participation in political activities. Richard Battistoni's study published in 2000 points out that service learning grounded in one content or skill area, such as volunteerism, will not necessarily promote knowledge and skills in another area, such as political involvement, unless the experiential education is embedded in political activities. Supporting this disconnect between service learning and political or civic engagement are the results from a survey by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University that show that volunteerism is at an all-time high and political participation of first year students is at an all-time low; almost 80% of students prefer volunteering over political engagement (in Spiezio, 2002). Mounting evidence suggests that educational institutions are failing to provide students with the information they need to participate in the political process (The Democracy Project, 2002). Service learning and/or civic engagement activities need to include political activities if students are to make the connection to civic engagement and activism.

Methods

Since I was most interested in seeing if I could impact student attitudes about civic engagement, I developed a series of assignments that did not include any volunteer work in the community but focused on the missing piece of most service learning activities: civic engagement, or civic activism. I designed two different approaches: one for two, first-year composition courses; and one for a humanities course on mythology. In my composition courses, students wrote three essays (out of five) about a local, national or global civic issue important to them. The first essay was an informative report based on one, five-to-seven page article about that issue. The second essay in this series required students to interview someone in the community who was working on that issue. If students were unable to interview someone, they were required to do additional research on library databases and synthesize information

from the articles they collected. The third essay in the series required students to complete a pro/con analysis of the issue, take a position on the issue based on the information they had collected, and then write and send a letter to a civic leader. I designed the humanities course to include two assignments: a creative assignment where students wrote a hero story about a civic issue; and a civic assignment where students completed a pro/con analysis of the issue and wrote a letter to a civic leader. All three courses were hybrid courses; each class met once a week face-to-face, and each class was required to do online activities each week.

Gateway Community College, one of ten Maricopa Community Colleges in the Phoenix metropolitan area, is an inner-city campus with a very diverse student body. My study group of these three classes was composed of fifty-two students who identified themselves as Caucasian (39%), Hispanic (23%), African-American (15%), Native American (13%), and “multi-ethnic” or “other” (10%).

I adapted a service learning assessment instrument developed by Eyler and Giles (1999) and asked fifteen questions directly related to attitudes about civic engagement in a pre- and post-attitudinal survey (see Table 1). I used many of the questions as they were (i.e. “I feel I can have a positive impact on solving social problems”) and replaced the term “service learning” with “civic engagement” in some questions (i.e. “Civic engagement takes a lot of effort”).

Fifty-two students took the pre-test; thirty-five students responded to the survey at the end of the semester. When selecting answers, students could choose between four responses from “essential/strongly agree/always” to “not important/strongly disagree/never.” To add to those quantitative results, I also asked students to answer ten questions on their attitudes about and involvement in civic engagement. I collected thirty-four of these qualitative responses at the beginning of the semester and twenty-three at the end.

Results

When asked at the beginning of the semester what students thought I meant by civic engagement, most students were aware that it had to do with something to do with political issues, law and society, or engagement with the community (29 of 34 responses). On the post-test, every student (23 of 23) gave a more articulate definition that included “getting involved with issues.” The results that I find significant, then, are based on student self-reports on their attitudes about civic engagement or civic activism.

Student attitudes on the pre- and post-attitudinal survey changed significantly on six of fifteen questions. Students do think they could impact society if they got more involved and worked with others. They would like to find more time to contribute to society, and they see the connection between civic engagement and citizenship. Overall, student attitudes did not change about their ability to find more time to contribute to the community or standing up for what's right; they also did not demonstrate an increased understanding of the connection between civic engagement and academic growth. Surveys also did not indicate significant change in student satisfaction with their own community involvement, student understanding about the needs of their community, and their sense of how much time it takes to be civically engaged. Table 1 shows the significant changes on six questions from the survey. My results are based on a one-tailed test. I was predicting a positive direction of the difference between the pre/post test. Six of fifteen questions met this prediction.

Table 1. Significant Changes in Student Pre/Post Responses

	Pre-test Mean/ SE	T-test on Pre-Test	Post-test Mean/SE	T-test on Post-test	T-test pre/post differences
I believe that if everyone works together, many of society's problems can be solved.	3.27 (.08)	9.99*	3.66 (.09)	12.61*	3.20**
I understand the connection between civic engagement and citizenship.	3.01 (.07)	6.89*	3.40 (.08)	10.70*	3.42**
I feel that I have a positive impact on the community in which I live.	2.76 (.07)	3.94*	3.01 (.08)	6.25*	2.41**
Becoming involved in civic engagement to improve my community	2.82 (.10)	3.34*	3.14 (.10)	6.35*	2.27**

Everyone should find time to contribute to his or her community.	3.06 (.06)	9.17*	3.27 (.10)	8.04*	1.92**
I feel that I can have a positive impact on solving local social problems.	2.78 (.08)	3.47*	3.00 (.10)	4.99*	1.73**

*indicates students felt strongly about the issue (i.e., mean significantly higher than an apathetic score of 2.5.)

** denotes a significant increase from pre-test to post-test (p. < .05 using a one-tailed test).

The qualitative results support some of these changes in attitudes. First, students who were uninvolved in the past now believe they will become involved in civic engagement in the future (pre: 28%; post 83%). Although some of this change could be attributed to a “recency” effect, the change is dramatic enough to believe that some students who were not politically involved will become more active in the future. Second, more students report that letters or phone calls can influence civic leaders (pre: 58%; post: 71%). Still, almost 30% of the students remained cynical about the political process. Third, students did gain a better sense of political processes. The chart below shows the categories of pre/post responses to the following question: “What is your perception of the process that people use to change society or culture?” The post-test responses reveal dramatic changes in student knowledge about the process.

Chart 1: Categories of Pre/Post Responses

Most Frequent Responses (two or more students)			
Pre-test (34 responses)		Post-test (23 responses)	
No answer	7	Grass Roots (meetings, writing leaders)	9
Sometimes Fair	3	Voting/Petitions	3
Sometimes excludes majority	3	Special Interests	2
Can’t stand protesters	3		
Slow, hard process	3		

At the end of the semester, I was curious to see if students were registered voters and, if they were not, how many would register after the civic engagement assignments. Out of twenty-three responses, 70% were already registered, but 22%, one-fifth of the study group, were not registered and were planning to now. This series of assignments did impact many students in a variety of ways.

Conclusions

Although only limited conclusions about these results are possible due to the small sample size, I am encouraged to believe that it is possible to change some student attitudes about civic engagement by doing a series of assignments that help inform students about an issue before they act on it by writing a civic leader. The mission of most composition programs, including my own, is to improve academic writing in order for students to be successful in college, with little or no consideration of how they might improve students' understanding of the democratic process and their civic writing skills. I agree with Putnam's (2002) claim: "The way we teach students about community engagement and political participation is likely to have a powerful and long lasting effect on the way younger Americans think about the problems and possibilities of achieving an authentically democratic society" (par. 5). If educators believe in the goals of civic literacy, they should look at various models before developing civic engagement materials and pedagogies that suit their curriculum and the constraints of time. Extensive resources are available through the many groups working toward better civic education; the Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission, Project Pericles, Campus Compact, the Community College National Center for Community Engagement, and the Democracy Project are but a few examples.

Some voices run counter to this enthusiasm. Terri Camajani and Ingrid Seyer-Ochi (2003) claim that schools have never been very good at curing the wider social, political, or economic problems, and that the general public has to decide as a group what to do to create more equal opportunities for everyone. Carol Schneider (2002), President of AACU, in "Greater Expectations and Civic Engagement," states that the public is not convinced that one of

the primary missions of colleges should be to promote civic activism. She argues that educators need to do much more to build public support for civic engagement.

My research provides some support that educators can help improve student attitudes about civic engagement. In light of these results, I would urge service learning practitioners to include civic engagement in their curriculum. In order for students to gain civic literacy skills from their service learning experiences, they require directly-linked political engagement activities. Educators who do not include service learning in their curriculum should consider integrating one or more civic engagement assignments into their courses. If we rally to the call to promote democracy in the classroom, then we are helping to “ensure that succeeding generations gain the understanding, skill, and motivations needed to preserve and promote the spirit of liberty” (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003, par. 3).

Research support provided by a Fellowship on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning from the Maricopa Institute of Learning.

Works Cited or Consulted:

- Battistoni, Richard M. 2000. “Service Learning and Civic Education.” In *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices*, ed. Sheilah Mann and John J. Patrick. Bloomington, Ind.: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education. ERIC ED No. 447 065.
- Camajani, Terri and Seyer-Ochi, Ingrid. (2003). Leading Students toward Citizenship. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85 (1), 39.
- Colby, Anne; Ehrlich, Thomas; Beaumont, Elizabeth; and Stephens, Jason. (2003). *The Spirit of Liberty*, (Posting #537). Message posted on Tomorrow’s Professor Listserv at <http://ctl.stanford.edu>
- Democracy Project. (2002). *Experiencing Democracy*. Retrieved Jan. 7,2003, from <http://www.cedarcrest.edu/Redesign/democracy/education.html>
- Eyler, Janet, and Giles, D. (1999). *Where’s the Learning in Service Learning?* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Hahn, Carole L. (2001). What Can be Done to Encourage Civic Engagement in Youth? *Social Education*, 65 (2), 108-110.
- Putnam, Robert. (2002, Aug. 9). *A Message from Robert Putnam*. Message posted to <http://www.cedarcrest.edu/Redesign/democracy/reinventing.html>

Schneider, Carol. (2002) Greater Expectations and Civic Engagement. *Liberal Education*, 88 (4). Retrieved January 7, 2003, from <http://www.aacu-edu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa02/le-fa02presidentsmessage.cfm>

Spiezio, K. Edward. (2002). Pedagogy and Political (Dis)engagement. *Liberal Education*, 88 (4). Retrieved January 7, 2003, from www.aacu-edu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa02/le-fa02contents.cfm)

Torney-Purta, Judith. (2001). Civic Knowledge, Beliefs about Democratic Institutions, and Civic Engagement among 14 Year-Olds. *Prospects*, 31 (3), 279-92.

About the Author:

Dean Stover, has been English/Humanities Faculty at GateWay Community College since 1995, and has been teaching writing and literature for over twenty-five years. He holds two degrees from Arizona State University: a BA in English Education and a MFA in Creative Writing. At GateWay, he has been active in many areas: assessment; writing across the curriculum; learning communities; service learning; and hybrid courses. He was also part of a team that received a three-year Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant. He has served in a variety of roles: English Instructional Council member; Chair of Liberal Arts, and current President-Elect of Faculty Senate. Contact Dean Stover at the English/Humanities Department, GateWay Community College, 108 N. 40th Street, Phoenix, AZ 85034, (602) 286-8726, or dean.stover@gwmail.maricopa.edu.

