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Richard M. Battistoni

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## Service Learning and Democratic Citizenship

**O**VER THE COURSE OF THIS SEMESTER I have become a citizen of New Brunswick. It could be argued that I was a citizen here well before registering for the course, but I did not feel as if I were one. Having taken the course, I now know why I must work for change, and never accept the status quo—things can always be better. I am now aware of what is happening around me. New Brunswick extends beyond the [campus] 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 cannot even say, for sure, that my work at my service site brought about this change in perspective for me. One of the most instrumental facets of my experience was simply my walk to the building [where I worked] each day. Every time I went I became more aware of my surroundings. I now see the city differently. I'm no longer scared walking to the 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. Through my work . . . I've gotten to know individual people, and they've gotten to know me. I enjoy my community service. It has opened my eyes as to the role I play as a citizen in my community.<sup>1</sup>

The above quote comes from a college student, but the sentiment underlying it just as easily could come from a high school or middle school student. My experience with service learning programs at all levels has been that when democratic citizenship is at the foundation of a community-

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based learning experience, students come away feeling more a part of their communities, and with a better and more critical understanding of these communities and their own roles in them.

This article focuses on the essential components of a civically-oriented service learning program. If service learning is to be a method of teaching young people about their roles and responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society, then content and strategies must model and support democratic principles. I emphasize here the content, skills, pedagogy, and structure that should inform the ways a teacher or program director designs a service learning curriculum with a view to citizenship education.

### The Ethics of Service

Advocates of service learning argue that community service experiences enhance teaching and learning in all subject areas. If we are concerned with service learning's contribution to education for democracy, however, we need to look beyond enhancing learning in distinctive subject areas. In addition, service learning should be valued as a method of developing in students an other-regarding ethic appropriate to democratic citizenship.

There are two distinctive ethical foundations for service learning: philanthropic and civic. While they may be mutually reinforcing in certain ways, the two nonetheless pose contradictory choices and

yield different pedagogical strategies. The philanthropic view emphasizes service as an exercise in altruism: the nurturing of giving either in terms of “paying back” or “gratitude” (Buckley, 1990), or in terms of a kind of noblesse oblige of people lucky enough to be where they are. This approach is in the tradition of 19th-century thinking about charity and emphasizes character building and a kind of compensatory justice where the well-off feel obligated to help the less advantaged, though they do not conceive of those served as being part of their own communities.

The civic view, which informs this article, emphasizes mutual responsibility and the interdependence of rights and responsibilities, and it focuses not on altruism but on enlightened self-interest. The idea is not that the well-off “owe” something to the less fortunate, but that free democratic communities depend on mutual responsibility and that rights without obligations are ultimately not sustainable. Here the focus is on the nurturing of citizenship and the understanding of the interdependence of communities (Barber, 1992; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Kemmis, 1990). The civic approach also encourages an educational partnership between school and community, with the community actively involved in defining its own capacities and needs as well as the role service will play in the education of students.

But where a philanthropic, charity-based model lacks a focus on the larger society and its needs, the civic emphasis may be too connected to the public, political sphere, rendering it more controversial in the public school setting. For many young people, who often lack confidence in the public realm and in their own political efficacy, service is seen as an antidote to politics, not a method of learning how to participate politically as a citizen. How does one reconcile the reality of political cynicism with a desire to educate for citizenship through service learning?

I have found that a focus on the less provocative concept of “community” can be particularly effective in a service learning program. By connecting students’ service to the concept of community, student learning can be expanded beyond the objectives of the particular project in question. Younger children can be encouraged to describe “their” community, even take photographs of im-

portant landmarks or leaders in the community; older students can be asked how their service work affects the community, and what community is being served by the project.

With community as the broader subject matter, students can be encouraged to think critically, and all academic subjects or disciplines can contribute to the idea of community. Moreover, students can bring different conceptions of community and citizenship to the understanding of their service work. For example, “my community” can be defined geographically, institutionally, or culturally. Students can thereby define community quite differently and yet have a common, civic reflection on their service.

### **Democracy and Diversity**

In addition to assisting students’ learning about community, service learning programs in elementary and secondary schools can be effective teachers about diversity. One of the greatest concerns in our democracy today lies in the increasing divisions between our people—divisions based on race, class, gender, age, and culture. While not a panacea, service learning projects where students work together in teams and reflect seriously on their service work can be opportunities for students from different backgrounds to join in common cause with adults and/or other young people in the larger community, themselves reflecting a diversity of cultures and interests.

Where the school/classroom itself reflects a diversity among the students, community service integrated into the curriculum can be an effective device for understanding one’s own identity in relation to community and for engaging with other students from diverse perspectives. Where the school does not reflect the diversity of our larger pluralistic society, as is true of too many of our public school systems, service with members of the larger community can be an effective way of engaging students, themselves from somewhat similar backgrounds, with people of diverse backgrounds. At the very least, service can promote the integration of young people with adults from different age groups and walks of life. A number of studies (Carnegie Council, 1989; Conrad & Hedin, 1977) have criticized educational institutions for keeping students in school full-time, thereby isolating

them from adults (possible mentors) and from the “real world” of the community around them.

For example, middle or high school students can work with neighborhood or senior centers on oral history projects, which can accomplish the threefold tasks of providing companionship and service to the residents, contributing a resource to the community-based organization that paid staff would not be able to produce, and promoting intergenerational learning for the students involved.

A focus on community and diversity can produce a substantive framework for students’ civic education tied to community service experiences. Beyond this, three essential components of a democratic civic education must be explored in greater detail: intellectual understanding, civic skills and attitudes, and direct action in schools and communities.

### **Intellectual understanding**

Intellectual understanding comes first. Since the report of the famous Committee of Ten in 1893, which said that the chief purpose of education was “to train the mind,” the main thrust among American educators has been cognitive development. The “thinking citizen” is still one of the aims of civic education today. 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 programs should aim at developing in students their critical thinking skills. And experience in the community can reveal things about our cognitive assumptions regarding human nature, society, and justice.

The students’ ability to analyze critically is enhanced by confronting ideas and theories with the actual realities in the world surrounding them. For example, students who gain an experience interacting with the guests in a homeless shelter are both able to put a face on “the poor” and 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 shelter.

This discussion about using service learning to achieve greater intellectual understanding is not meant to minimize the possible tensions between the affective need to socialize students into patterns of responsible community and the cognitive need

to develop in students critical thinking skills. For obvious reasons, given the powerful emotional experiences gained when young people engage in service, service learning programs may be more tempted than most to adopt an hortatory or even celebratory tone. This is one of the most important reasons why service learning needs to inhabit the core curriculum, where critical inquiry and discussions are the rule. In this regard, Lappe and Dubois’s concept of “relational self-interest” (1994) may help balance the more romantic idea of community as the content core of a democratic, service learning curriculum.

### **Civic skills and attitudes**

Beyond the intellectual understanding essential to democratic citizenship that can be enhanced by community service learning, there are important civic attitudes and participation skills that can be developed through service learning. Alexis de Tocqueville laid out most clearly the argument for participation in community-based organizations—from an early age—as essential to maintaining democratic institutions and to educating people for citizenship. He argued that in democracies, “all the citizens are independent and feeble; they can do hardly anything by themselves, and none of them can oblige [others] to lend their assistance. They all therefore become powerless if they do not learn voluntarily to help one another” (de Tocqueville, 1945, p. 115).

Participation in civic associations educates people to overcome this powerlessness and isolation, since through this participation members of associations learn “the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires” and of “proposing a common object for the exertions of a great many and inducing them voluntarily to pursue it” (de Tocqueville, 1945, p. 115). More recently, Putnam (1995) echoes de Tocqueville’s argument, lamenting the decline in voluntary associations and the subsequent loss of “social capital,” the foundation of our democracy.

Essential to participation in civic associations are communication skills. Democratic citizenship certainly requires clear thinking about public matters, but it also involves the communication of our thoughts and actions, both vertically, to our leaders and representatives, and horizontally, with our

fellow citizens. The goal of any democratic service learning program ought to be to develop students' persuasive speaking and writing abilities in order that they might better communicate and deliberate in the public arena.

We all know about the importance of speech, argument, and persuasive communication to democracy. Perhaps even more important is the lost art of listening. In a democracy, citizens need to be able to listen to each other, understand the places and interests of others in the community, and achieve compromises and solve problems when conflict occurs. The overriding images of our democratic culture tend to involve talkers: great communicators such as Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Webster, Martin Luther King, and Ronald Reagan; representatives giving speeches or talking on C-SPAN; or lawyers persuasively arguing in the courtroom. Perhaps the truer image of democracy exists in the other part of the courtroom, among the members of the jury, both listening to the arguments and testimony and to each other in deliberation, or in the representative who listens to constituents at a public hearing. Education for citizenship must involve the development of listening skills as part of communications skills.

Service learning programs that employ appropriate reflection strategies heighten students' communicative abilities. Through a community service learning experience, students are forced to give an account of themselves and their thoughts in classroom discussions, in oral or artistic presentations of their activities, and in their writings. All of these activities are based in a real community setting. The community service experience also teaches students to listen to the stories and needs of others. When visiting an elderly person, doing an oral history, or tutoring another student, young people learn, in a tangible way, the art of listening.

A service learning program in elementary or secondary school aiming at citizen education should also develop students' moral dispositions of civic judgment and imagination. By civic judgment I mean the ability to use publicly defensible moral standards in application to the actual life and history of a community. There is currently a debate among moral philosophers about whether politics can generate ethical or moral standards, but there is no debate about whether such standards are neces-

sary for the individual citizen's judgments about how to choose and act in the political world. Civically-minded service learning programs should try to develop capacities for public judgment.

Imagination is also crucial. Imagination involves the ability to think creatively about public problems. Moreover, to put oneself in the place of others requires imagination. Prejudice and bigotry may simply be the absence of imagination. 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 history, to past communal life; to "dream things that never were and say, 'Why not?'" as George Bernard Shaw put it.

The practical experience students gain in service learning programs allows them to set and reset their standards of judgment, and it may cause them to modify their political judgments in reaction to the world they observe and with which they interact. Their imaginative abilities should also be heightened, by enlarging their sense of who they are and better enabling them to use their imagination to join together in common causes with people who come from different places and have different life stories.

### **Civic action**

Community service learning programs need to develop the abovementioned cognitive and civic attitudes and dispositions. But democratic citizenship is also about taking action, both individually and together with members of one's community. Community service projects cannot neglect the importance of getting even the youngest students to engage in direct action to meet school or community needs. The simple acts of planting a garden, testing a local stream, recycling, or working to solve traffic control problems near the school are tangible reminders to young people of the importance of direct public action.

Providing opportunities for students to engage in direct service, however, is no simple task. In fact, finding a suitable activity and coordinating the logistics of student participation in the community may be the most challenging aspects of service learning. It is no surprise, then, that many teachers choose to end a unit of civic study with having students discuss how they might solve a

community or national problem, without ever actually giving them the chance to try to effect change.

This approach may be tempting due to constraints on time, energy, and funds. However, direct civic participation has the greatest chance of not only motivating students' lifelong participation in their communities but of enhancing their interest in learning academic skills and content as well. Direct action is not just the "icing on the cake" in service learning programs; service provides the program's *raison d'être* and allows students to connect academic learning with activity that has meaning in the here and now for themselves and others in their community.

So far the discussion has centered on the principles and skills most consistent with a democratic citizenship emphasis in a service learning program. To focus exclusively on civic content and skills, however, is to miss the important role that pedagogy and institutional relationships may play in structuring how students learn, even in an experiential, community-based learning program. Many education writers (Bowles & Gintis, 1972; Illich, 1972; Silberman, 1970) have described the presence of a "hidden curriculum," arising out of the school's organizational imperative that there be order, hierarchical control, efficiency, and organized competition among students. Merelman (1980) summarizes the argument about the hidden curriculum by saying that "students cannot learn democracy in the school because the school is not a democratic place" (p. 320). If an education for democratic citizenship is the ultimate aim, we must also look to transform the classroom and the relationship between students and teachers in the classroom, as well as the relationship between the school and the larger community, all in line with a model of community characterized by democratic equality and participation.

### **Classroom Pedagogy**

Democracy demands equal participation and voice by all citizens. The classroom, on the contrary, often mirrors hierarchy—what Friere (1970) termed the "banking model of education," with the teacher "depositing" information into the minds of passive student-ATM machines. Moreover, in most classrooms, even those with experiential compo-

nents, students do their work and are judged as individuals. A citizenship education model for service learning that does not reform the traditional pedagogy is not modeling what it wants students to learn about democratic community and, more importantly, may not contribute to student learning in ways those in the service learning movement conceive. Long ago, Dewey (1916) argued that under this kind of individualistic, "mechanical learning," students'

seeming attention, [their] docility, [their] memorizing and reproductions, will partake of intellectual servility. Such a condition of intellectual subjection is needed for fitting the masses into a society where the many are not expected to have aims or ideas of their own, but to take orders from the few set in authority. It is not adapted to a society which intends to be democratic. (p. 305)

Dewey contended that any educational regimen consisting of "authorities at the upper end handing down to the receivers at the lower end what they must accept" was an education "fit to subvert, pervert, and destroy the foundations of democratic society" (1916, p. 133). Even a conservative such as Michael Oakeshott (1967) felt that "the activity of the teacher is specified in the first place by the character of his partner" (p. 156), necessitating a view of the teacher's role that pays serious attention to the students' needs and interests as well as those of society, which wants to bequeath to them its "history of human achievements, feelings, emotions, values, and beliefs" (p. 176).

Teachers who wish to incorporate democratic pedagogy in their service learning courses should, to every extent possible, structure discussion formats, encourage "dialogue journals" or other group-oriented written reflections such as end-of-semester group projects and presentations, and attempt to organize students in their service placements into small teams or crews. Many community service programs are organized around individual service placements. However, when program leaders make the experience of democratic community a part of the organization of the class and of the service team, students get a better sense of the meaning of group responsibility, reciprocity, interdependence, and cooperation (or conflict). Students in teams are able to share and compare their service experiences,

supplementing the teacher-student and community-student learning environment with a peer education experience.

### **Program Design and Structure**

The literature on service learning gives several good reasons why student participants should be given adequate input into and ownership of a school-based service learning program (see Wade, 1997). The focus on participatory democracy and equal citizenship should also cause educators to make genuine student input central to the service learning program's design and management. Students should play an active role in planning the program and serve as leaders in it not only because students have good ideas and can recruit and organize other students, but also because active participation and involvement in service learning can help students learn the lessons of democracy. When students participate actively in the design and structure of educational programs, they learn about direct political decision making and about civic responsibility in ways that overcome the most dangerous effects of the hidden curriculum.

Research findings have shown that students who have participatory experience in school policies and activities are more likely to exhibit "democratic" attributes (Battistoni, 1985; Beck & Jennings, 1982; Boyer, 1983). "These students have been found to be more likely to be informed about how political decisions are reached and the alternative ways of reaching them, to have more self-confidence, and to be more actively 'participatory' in motivation and more skillful in the art of weighing opinions, negotiating, dissenting, and discussing issues of mutual concern" (Battistoni, 1985, p. 122). Aside from the obvious effect on student empowerment and citizenship education, institutionalizing student participation creates a more suitable climate for operating a service learning program.

Teachers must also play an active role in the integration of service learning into the curriculum. There has been a tendency among those in the service learning movement, as has been the case with other educational reform movements on all sides of the political spectrum, to exclude classroom teachers from the design of projects and curricula (see Battistoni, 1985). Some service learning advocates, at both the state and local level, have tried

to design "model" service learning projects or curricula for use in the schools, in effect bypassing the classroom teacher. There may be good reasons for this—ranging from teacher unfamiliarity with service learning to the time burdens on teachers of adopting this pedagogical approach—but we cannot bypass individual classroom teachers, who know best how to integrate particular projects into the daily life of their classroom and whose thinking is ultimately invaluable to the success of a program. We must realize that the bureaucratized, routinized, or "bypassed" teacher will not be the agent of an education befitting active democratic citizenship.

### **Community Partnership**

An emphasis on democratic citizenship should cause any school service learning program to reexamine the school's relationship with the larger community. If service is primarily an educational tool for our students to learn about democracy and citizenship, and when we understand that the school is inadequate to act as a social service agency, parents and organizations in the larger community can be approached as partners in education rather than as sets of clients to be served.

Partnership underscores mutual interdependence and helps create an understanding of community—not as those with problems but as the group to which we all belong. The town comes to be seen as a "text," and neighborhoods reciprocally gain the opportunity to reclaim their schools as centers in the community (see Lappe & DuBois, 1994). It is no small coincidence that community-based service learning often goes hand in hand with site-based school management reforms, where parents, community members, and teachers play an active role in the running of the school and its curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

Community service learning can be a particularly effective method of civic education, itself a condition of our democracy's survival. This article attempts to raise concerns, in the areas of content, method, and program design, for educators wanting to use community-based learning in the service of democratic civic education. Arendt, writing about what she saw as the crisis in American education, declared:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. (1961, p. 196)

Arendt saw education as the process of preparing our children "in advance for the task of renewing a common world" (1961, p. 196). Service learning can be the vehicle by which we fulfill this task, but only if we consciously construct our programs with the education of democratic citizens in mind.

### Notes

1. Quoted from journal entry with permission of student.

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