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Paying the Bills Is Not Just Theory: Service Learning about a Living Wage

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Abstract

This article discusses how to combine service learning, and specifically a living wage research project, with radical political economy–based undergraduate economics courses to promote critical thinking, civic engagement, and active learning in students. The authors explore how instructors can integrate service learning into the teaching of political economy. In addition, the article describes the authors' experiences with living wage projects that they have implemented. The article makes the argument that the combination of experiential learning and political economics enriches the course experience for students significantly, leaving a much more lasting impression on students than a standard economics class.

JEL classification: A22; B24; B25

Keywords: service learning; living wage; political economy; teaching economics; pedagogy

I. Introduction

In the inaugural article in this journal on pedagogy and political economy, Peter Dorman articulates a broad vision for an approach to economic education. To Dorman (2002: 489), political-economic education should actively engage students in fieldwork and direct social change, preferably in a group setting. It should also promote critical thinking and address real world problems. In this article, we describe how service learning, and in particular a class research project on the topic of a living wage in the local community, provides an ideal context for the type of pedagogy that Dorman envisioned.

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Typically, academic service learning integrates traditional coursework with community service. Implementing service learning in a course offers the promise of encouraging higher order analytical and creative learning for all concerned, and it promotes the type of civic engagement in real world problems that can be valuable in teaching political economy. In what follows below, we begin by describing what service learning is and how it can be particularly useful in political economy courses. We then explore in more detail exactly how to integrate service learning into the teaching of political economy. We conclude by describing our experiences with living wage projects that embody our broad conception of service learning.

2. Service Learning and Political Economy

Service learning is a credit-bearing educational experience through which students learn academic concepts in an organized community service activity (Bringle and Hatcher 1996: 222). Service learning advances the goals of the course because the service learning activity is shaped by the course objectives. Service learning may connect students to existing community organizations, or it may construct a framework for study in which community engagement, including an active role in defining objectives, is central even when there is not an existing community organization.

Heffernan's (2001) four basic principles of engagement, reflection, reciprocity, and public dissemination offer a guide. Students learn through their engagement with the community. Civic engagement occurs because members of the community are involved in defining the service project. A valuable learning outcome of the project is that students develop a greater sense of civic responsibility. For service learning to be a meaningful activity that meets educational goals, there must be opportunities for reflection built into the course design. Students reflect on their service experiences through writing activities and class discussions. These reflection exercises explore students' feelings about the activity as well as enable them to analyze critically theoretical concepts and applications. Collaborative learning occurs when students explore these issues throughout the semester with other students and faculty in the classroom setting. This latter component is particularly crucial in achieving the transformative type of critical thinking that radical political economists try to foster.

Another key component of service learning is that it promotes a partnership between institutions of higher learning and the surrounding community because the learning activities are designed to meet actual community needs as defined by its members. Zlotkowski (1999) stressed that this partnership is based on the "reciprocity" of benefits and responsibilities. Reciprocity implies that the flow of expertise comes from both the theoretical and technical skills of the academic institution and the knowledge gained from the lived experiences of the community. Reciprocity also means that both the academy and community are serviced through the project because benefits accrue to both. Knowledge gained from the service learning project is shared with the community through some form of public dissemination.

Service learning is distinct from volunteerism and traditional, credit-bearing internships. Unlike volunteerism, in which students engage in undirected community service activities, service learning activities are organized around meeting course learning objectives and goals. These activities are designed by faculty to engage students in a critical inquiry of ideas explored in the classroom with the guidance of faculty. As such, they follow a

“learning-by-doing” model of active learning. Some courses on poverty provide students with the opportunity to work at homeless shelters. When these community service activities result simply in students handing out food or staying overnight at the shelter, they do not constitute service learning. Service learning necessitates that these experiences are linked to course concepts and explored in class. Traditional credit-bearing internships are also distinct from service learning because internships are primarily intended to promote the development of professional skills rather than enhance the curriculum and meet community needs. Internships typically do not have the reflective aspect of service learning that occurs throughout the semester.

There are a number of reasons why economics faculty might want to consider incorporating service learning into the design of their courses. Service learning enhances the learning process because it links theory and practice by enabling students to connect abstract ideas with real world situations.¹ This is particularly relevant when confronting mainstream economics, which often draws on fixed a priori categories and assumptions that may not correspond with empirical observation. For political economists, service learning provides an opportunity to engage students in the learning process by problematizing mainstream economics. Living wage projects, for example, raise questions concerning the accuracy of neoclassical theories of wage determination and the effectiveness of market forces in resolving social problems. Faculty can also design service learning courses as a way to consider broader educational goals such as environmental awareness and multiculturalism. Exploring these goals may have the added benefit of inspiring a more diverse group of students into taking political economy courses.

Service learning allows students to explore the ethical implications of the subject matter. In the context of the living wage project, students grapple with the value of equity: is it fair for some full-time workers to receive compensation that is insufficient to support them? How can wages be increased in our economy so they are sufficient to meet living standards? What conflicts are involved in this process? Given its ethical and civic imperatives, service learning can be a valuable tool for political economy courses.

Indeed, for a service learning project to work effectively, it must have the potential to connect directly with students’ lives, the course material, and a contemporary policy issue as well as with a local community. Virtually any topic that activists are taking up can be integrated into a political economy course. We have been particularly successful with projects on sweatshops and the living wage, but other issues targeted by activist campaigns could also be used within this framework.

Service learning projects, when combined with a political economy focus, have the potential to lead to personal and social transformation. Faculty-directed reflective activities can challenge students to think critically about the world we live in. Students may begin to question the role they play in a particular problem under analysis, and this questioning can engender personal change. Ideally, this transformation will lead to changes in behavior and

1. A service learning dimension directly introduces the notion of praxis, or theory-informed practice, into courses, inviting students to examine and reexamine both hypotheses and outcomes in light of real world experiences. Antonio Gramsci (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*; 1971), Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; 1970), and Dewey (*Democracy and Education*; 1916) each developed a critique of traditional ways of understanding the world and instead offered an alternative combining theory, practice, and reflection. Their views on pedagogy and praxis form the basis for the pedagogical approach we adopted in our service learning projects.

could also stimulate students to engage in social action. Faculty involvement is critical to this process. Too often, service learning borders on volunteerism without a sustained link to course material and themes. Given that service learning is particularly valuable for teaching political economy, the next section discusses an example of the type of service learning project that political economy courses may undertake, namely, a living wage study. Two different cases suggest different ways in which community involvement, course themes and material, and student learning may be enhanced.

3. Specific Examples from Two Living Wage Projects

As readers of this journal are no doubt aware, the living wage movement has emerged in the past decade as a force for economic justice in communities around the country. The basic premise is that full-time workers should earn enough so that their families are able to live above the poverty level, independent of public and private assistance.

The definition of a living wage in these terms quickly brings students' attention to additional complexities in terms of defining family size and the poverty level. Distinctions drawn between family and household composition as categories also can be considered. Students will need to decide how many people one full-time income should be able to support. Students can also compute the income necessary to support several different family types to get a feel for how difficult it is for low-wage workers to raise a family.² And students can explore the relationship between government-defined poverty thresholds and actual needs.³

3.1. Bucknell University

During the spring semester in 2000, two sections of radical political economy (taught by one teacher) and one section of economic geography combined; the unit focused on the living wage and on establishing a community-based project for students drawn from both classes. In this example, low-wage support staff workers at the university were the "community" people articulating the problems and defining a clear need that the students could fulfill. They believed that the campus administration and faculty would endorse their claims if only the truth about a living wage (compared to their wages) were made known.

2. Some potential family types to consider include that stereotypical nuclear family of the 1950s, with one adult full-time worker, a nonemployed spouse, and two dependent children; a single parent with one, two, and three children; and a two-parent, two-child household with both parents employed. It is also useful to specify and compute family types with varying ages of children because infant, preschool, and school-age children have very different costs associated with them.

3. Many poverty experts have suggested that the federal poverty threshold is too low. For example, Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto (2005) of the Economic Policy Institute cite the fair-market rent (FMR) values used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as reliable estimates of housing costs for low-income families. In 2001, the FMR was 82 percent of the poverty threshold for a family of three and 65 percent for a family of four in Boston.

According to Schiller (2004), the federal poverty line has fallen in relative terms. In 1963, the poverty threshold for a family of four was 50 percent of the median family income but had decreased to just 34 percent by 2001.

In the year prior to the project, campus dining service workers and others shared their concerns about their below-living-wage conditions to a small student/faculty group on campus that became known as Bucknell Caucus for Economic Justice. Afraid to voice their complaints publicly, the workers talked and wrote letters detailing their problems. In addition to low wages and few, if any, benefits, the workers identified a faulty grievance procedure which they felt left them extremely vulnerable. They also felt silenced by a system offering them no systematic input into wage and other vital decisions affecting them.

We began the service learning living wage project at Bucknell after and while students read and discussed theoretical and historical material related to the topic. We found that the presentation of abundant evidence and analysis from a close reading of two books, David Gordon's *Fat and Mean* (1996) and Robert Pollin and Stephanie Luce's *The Living Wage* (1998), raised the overall level of students' discussions of the issues. Of course, these fit with the rest of the course literature, including an introductory grounding in the ideas of Marx. Although instructors maintained a guiding role in discussions, unsupported assertions made by students no longer went unchallenged by their classmates. The challenges posed by the reading and class discussions generated ample interest in the living wage subject for most students and, for some, a sense of outrage at social injustices.

The next step was to develop a group research project to investigate the topic. We found it helpful to make the group research project optional, with students able to choose instead an independent research project on a different topic if they preferred. Thus, students were not pressured into research on a topic that they might not have found compelling, and those students who chose the project had a real interest in the topic.

At the beginning of the research project, we divided the class into teams to investigate various aspects of the topic. For our living wage project, we had groups of three to five students investigating each of the following areas: (1) wages, benefits, and working conditions on campus; (2) wages, benefits, and working conditions in the local town; (3) the cost of living in the local town; (4) the cost of living in other nearby towns; and (5) what is going on with other living wage campaigns. The number of groups can be expanded or contracted based on the number of students involved.

In class and with the small groups, through both discussion and literature review, we identified the mechanics of a living wage project. The key activity involves compiling data on the monthly expenses of households of various sizes, including the cost of housing, utilities, childcare, transportation, health care, food, clothing, and miscellaneous expenses in the local area. To be truly accurate, computations should also deduct all estimated taxes and add in all credits, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Care Tax Credit, and Child Tax Credit. The appendix describes in more detail the exact method for computing a living wage in the local area.

As an initial effort, we directed students to county-level data on the cost of living from the Wider Opportunities for Women's (WOW) Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project (Wider Opportunities for Women n.d.). WOW and its partners have computed a self-sufficiency standard for thirty-six states based on a standard definition of the living wage:

The [Self-sufficiency] Standard defines the amount of income necessary to meet basic needs (including paying taxes) in the regular "marketplace" without public subsidies—such as public housing, food stamps, Medicaid or child care—or private/informal subsidies—

such as free babysitting by a relative or friend, food provided by churches or local food banks, or shared housing. (Wider Opportunities for Women n.d.)

Although the WOW self-sufficiency studies are useful, there may be interesting differences in the cost of living in various local communities that warrant further investigation. For example, in the Bucknell University living wage study described below, the town of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, which houses Bucknell, had a cost of living 3 percent higher than the county average. This helped students understand why so many university support staff members lived in other local communities. Thus, we recommend that students go further than the self-sufficiency standard and compute the cost of living in their town and possibly in surrounding towns where university employees are likely to live.

Even while the in-class syllabus moved onto other topics and the two courses went their separate ways, the two faculty members met with the living wage project groups outside of class on a weekly basis. Discussions ranged from practical questions of how to obtain information to more careful consideration of claims in texts about markets, class, and labor conditions.

For the group doing research on campus employment, we were fortunate that officials at Bucknell were willing to provide us with information on wages and benefits for employees with identifying information removed. Thus, once we determined what a living wage was in Lewisburg, we were able to determine precisely how many university employees earned less than a living wage. If, however, the university had not provided us with the information, we had planned a survey in which a sample of employees in each division (dining services, physical plant, and administrative services) would have been used to estimate wages for each division and the number of employees earning less than a living wage.

As might be expected, employers in the local community were not forthcoming with information on wages and benefits, so we were forced to use general information on wages given the types of occupations found in local business establishments. Local government officials were cooperative, however, so we were able to get data on the wages paid to municipal employees.

In compiling data on the cost of living in Lewisburg and surrounding communities, students contacted local government agencies for data on rent and utilities, and childcare centers for data on childcare costs. They used the WOW self-sufficiency standard study of Pennsylvania for data that were not readily available elsewhere.

When combined with their background research on other living wage campaigns, the result was a comprehensive, twenty-five-page report that provided useful history and background information along with up-to-date data and a compelling argument for a living wage in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, of \$14.50 an hour to support a one-adult and two-child family. After considerable debate among the students, they decided to recommend an hourly wage of \$9, a figure that would not, they believed, be dismissed out of hand. In many ways, this decision embodied so much of the service learning of the course. They sought input from support staff people, debated political versus economic reality, discussed how many people one full-time income should support, and considered how they might best make a contribution to what they had come to believe was a fair and just demand for a living wage. Their reflection drew on course literature, interaction with many people in the community, and a clarified understanding of power relations in society and what these mean to real people who earn low wages.

The students then presented a summary of the report to a campus audience consisting of students, faculty, and university administrators. A few brave support staff individuals attended the public meeting, but on the whole they remained silent. The effort and public presentation by the class group, however, contributed to a sense of solidarity and willingness for support staff workers to encourage others to come forward to the Bucknell Caucus for Economic Justice, at least on a confidential basis.

Once the project was completed, the Bucknell Caucus for Economic Justice took up the findings of the report to continue pushing for a living wage on campus. Some of the students and faculty who had worked on the project joined the ongoing effort. The findings of the group project, combined with ongoing efforts to make known the working conditions, emboldened support staff people to turn out at a petition drive and wear buttons calling for a living wage. The existence of the student report, an ongoing information campaign, increasing awareness about working conditions, and the willingness of some support staff people to provide credible information all combined to shift sentiment on campus. By the end of the next semester, the university faculty voted in support of a living wage as the guiding principle on campus. Although the university administration did not agree to all of the demands put forward in the campaign, it did eventually (within another year and a half) take steps to raise the wages of the lowest paid workers to \$9 per hour (indexed to the Consumer Price Index, or CPI) after a probationary period. So students were able to see that their efforts actually had an impact on the lives of Bucknell employees: a particularly valuable lesson that you can make a difference if you do your homework and speak out for economic justice.

A remarkable number of students from that semester project, now four years old, remain in contact with the professors, especially to learn about living wage issues and working conditions. The project not only helped to cement the immediate course material but also, for many, became a signal moment in their education when the classroom walls came down.

3.2. Hood College

Unlike Bucknell, where the project was a component of the course, the living wage project at Hood College formed the basis for the entire economics seminar, a required course offered every two years for seniors and juniors. Seminar topics vary each year, and in the spring of 2001, the seminar focused exclusively on a service learning project that enabled students to become involved in a community project under the auspices of the newly formed Hood College Center for Community Research.

The center solicited research proposals from community groups and chose projects based on feasibility, usefulness to the community, and compatibility with the interests and resources of students and faculty. The project selected for the economics seminar was requested by the Frederick County Human Services Coalition (FCHSC) in Frederick County, Maryland. The coalition wanted to know the costs of living in the county because they were concerned about the adequacy of resources available to low-income households. This provided an ideal opportunity to engage the seminar students in a living wage project that might deepen their understanding of poverty and the regional economy as well as provide a valuable service to Frederick County.

Students and community members were involved in the organization of the service learning project from its inception. The class met with individuals from the FCHSC to discuss their ideas about the project, their timetable, and any project concerns that they might have before we began our research. The project was divided into three phases: planning, research and analysis, and reporting. In the first weeks of class, the planning phase, we read articles on poverty, the living wage movement, and the WOW self-sufficiency standard, and we gathered demographic data on Frederick County. This phase framed our subsequent discussions and student reflection on issues involving pay, unfettered markets, unemployment, and economic justice. Unlike the Bucknell case, all but one of the students in the seminar class had a background in labor economics, and we drew heavily on their knowledge.⁴ Two students researched housing, and two researched childcare. The remaining three students each focused on one of the remaining categories: food, transportation, and health care expenses.⁵

During the research and analysis phase of the project, students gathered materials and data on their expenditure categories. In each class, students reported on their progress in obtaining data, and the rest of us provided suggestions to further the research along. Because the entire class time was devoted to the project, students went around the room and gave oral reports on their categories. We often put data on the chalkboard and discussed them at length. The learning environment was flexible and empowering because it enabled students to draw on their areas of expertise. For example, an accounting major in the class volunteered to calculate the taxes for different family sizes. As we analyzed data on the chalkboard, the more quantitative students were able to make sure that the math was sound. Hierarchical relations between students and professor diminished because the role of the instructor was to facilitate discussion among students and coordinate the project.

Throughout the semester, students continued to work with community members. They contacted personnel from the FCHSC for suggestions on local agencies and individuals who might have data. Students then visited people from those agencies for additional advice and information. For many of the seminar participants, this was the first time that they had interacted with people in Frederick County outside of the college environment.

Depending on the expenditure category, students worked collaboratively in class to adjust the data to various family sizes and monthly costs.⁶ Once students had their expenditure data, we calculated the living wage for four different family sizes by adjusting for taxes and credits. We then compared these data to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Income Guidelines for select family sizes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services n.d.). The Frederick County Self-sufficiency Guideline (Living Wage) greatly exceeded the federal poverty guidelines. For example, we calculated that the yearly income needed for a

4. The labor course covered neoclassical and political economy approaches, so students were used to engaging in class analysis. The student who did not have a background in labor economics had taken courses in African American studies that emphasized the interplay of class with race and gender.

5. The final expenditure category, miscellaneous expenses, included monthly household expenses not covered by the other categories. These items included clothing, telephone services, diapers, household cleaning products, over-the-counter medicines, and other basic necessities. We followed the conservative protocol used by Montgomery County, Maryland, by calculating miscellaneous expenditures as 10 percent of other costs. Once taxes were calculated, miscellaneous expenses fell to 7-8 percent of other costs.

6. Food costs, for example, were obtained from the Official USDA Food Plans (U.S. Department of Agriculture n.d.). Students, however, had to extrapolate the data and recalculate them for different family sizes and ages based on the self-sufficiency standard.

single parent with a preschooler was \$30,228, compared to the 2001 Health and Human Services guideline of only \$11,610. To meet expenses, single parents with a preschooler needed an hourly living wage of \$14.31 to subsist within the county.

In the reporting phase, students compiled their findings for public dissemination. Each student was responsible for writing her section of the report and providing the requisite tables to accompany her expenditure category. Students who were skilled at generating figures and charts took on this responsibility for the class. Copies of the report were presented to the FCHSC in conjunction with a public presentation of all of the college's service learning projects for key community leaders sponsored by the Hood College Center for Community Research. Seminar participants took responsibility for determining who would write the PowerPoint presentation and who would present it to the large audience. Students remained engaged with the project after the semester ended (and grades were already tallied). Several students met with members of the FCHSC to discuss the project in greater detail after the course was completed. In their course evaluations, students commented that the course was a great research experience, applied economics to the real world, was less stressful than working on individual research papers, and was hard but excellent.

4. Conclusion

In light of our experiences with living wage and other service learning projects, we are convinced that service learning is an invaluable pedagogical tool that works particularly well in radical political economy courses. Service learning in midlevel undergraduate courses at Bucknell and an upper-level undergraduate seminar at Hood proved stimulating to students and seemed, dare we say, "efficient" as a way to gain new perspectives on the world.

Service learning, structured as outlined above, contributes to the breakdown of the hierarchical model of teaching and learning, which is a barrier to independent learning and critical thinking. Students work collaboratively with each other and with faculty in small- and large-group settings, thereby enhancing the potential of more egalitarian social relations. The reduction of power relations within the classroom emboldens students to challenge what they hear and read. Service learning assists in the construction of an alternative pedagogy to get students to think differently about the world and connect more directly with the subject matter of radical political economy courses. Student reflection on and questioning of dominant perspectives are the first steps in the process of altering hegemony. Service learning facilitates this process when students participate in local, direct action campaigns with goals defined by community members whose ideals may differ, for example, from government policy priorities.

For political economists, one of the most valuable aspects of service learning is that it gives students a broader, more critical understanding of the theories and models presented in mainstream economics courses. Students move beyond neoclassical theory with its simplifying assumptions and omissions regarding the role of power relations, historical events, and human agency. The living wage project, in particular, promotes an alternative, ethically based vision of the world that deviates from the neoclassical acceptance of wages that are insufficient to meet human needs. In addition, as students examine the data on the actual effects of raising the wages of the lowest paid workers, they may develop a clearer under-

standing of political economic forces shaping the labor market that go far beyond neoclassical externalities and inefficiencies. Issues of power and class, for example, help students understand why employers and government officials so frequently oppose living wage proposals. Of course, the near hegemony of neoclassical, or at least “market,” perspectives is not vanquished all at once, if ever. Many students continue to reiterate such assumptions, even in the face of their own work. But for some, the combination of course material and service learning creates an eye-opening experience. And by requiring students to work within local communities, students’ interest and involvement in the world beyond the academy (and beyond neoclassical economics) are encouraged.

Indeed, for some students, this experience proves to be a catalyst to pursue civic engagement beyond the end of the semester. Although service learning requires additional attention from the instructor, we have found the experience so intensely rewarding and necessary for what we hope to inspire in our students that we encourage other readers of this journal to embrace it.

Appendix Steps Involved in Calculating a Living Wage

1. Add up all *monthly expenses* to get total expenses.
2. Calculate *hourly wage* by dividing total expenses by 176 hours (176 = 8 hours per day 22 days per month).
3. Calculate *annual income*: monthly expenses * 12.
4. Figure out federal income taxes for each household type using 1040A (yearly and monthly):
 - A. Line 6d’s number of exemptions will be the total number of individuals in the household.
 - B. Calculate credits (child care expenses, child tax credit, and EITC, if they qualify).
5. Calculate state taxes (yearly and monthly for each household type).
6. Calculate local taxes (yearly and monthly for each household type).
7. Calculate payroll taxes on annual income (7.65 percent) yearly and monthly.
8. Calculate monthly state sales taxes on miscellaneous expenses only.
9. On the living wage form, add all taxes, then subtract credits.
10. Figure out yearly, monthly, and hourly living wage (monthly wages/176).

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