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Enacting a Pragmatist Educational Metaphysic through Civic Engagement in the Basic Media Studies Communication Course

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The linkages between communication and democracy have long been utilized to justify communication courses in higher education. Edwards and Shepherd (2004) noted that these claims include the ideas that "vibrant democracies require citizens capable of engaging in public discourse; healthy democracies demand citizens educated in the ways of rhetoric, proof, and argumentation; strong democracies are populated by engaged and informed voters, skilled in analyzing the issues of a given day" (p. 230). It is because of these important justifications that we focus on basic media studies communication courses in an attempt to revive political participation and to engage students in democratic ways of life by analyzing various aspects of the media

It has been well documented that basic courses in Communication Studies can be enhanced through the use of civic-oriented service learning projects (e.g., Applegate & Morreale, 1999; Cheney, Wilhelmsson, & Zorn, 2002; Conville, 2001; Harter, Kirby, Hatfield, & Kuhlman, 2004). Yet, the advantages of civic-oriented service learning approaches have not been realized in

American Universities. It has been noted that nearly 80% of a student's time in class is devoted to listening to lectures (Armbruster, 2000). Edwards and Shepherd (2004) maintained that the disadvantageous tendency for some students in higher education to passively observe instead of actively engage course content requires immediate scholarly attention and practical action.

Our purpose is to continue the scholarly dialogue and encourage the practice of integrating civic-oriented service learning projects into undergraduate basic communication courses. Specifically, we focus on *basic media studies communication courses* (e.g., introduction to media criticism, media and society, media and culture) and discuss ways to implement service learning activities for the purposes of fostering greater civic engagement. We begin by organizing extant literature around two key themes: (a) educating citizens through civic engagement and (b) educating the public through media literacy. The essay features a case study where John Dewey's vision of a pragmatist educational metaphysic is applied to a media literacy project at a southwestern university. The final section of this essay discusses implications of the case study and offers guidance to education practitioners interested in the implementation of civic-oriented service learning projects.

DEWEY ON EDUCATING THE CITIZENRY

John Dewey's philosophy on education and democracy developed during his time as a professor at the University of Chicago. He views democracy as a large and comprehensive social idea that constitutes a par-

ticular way of living, a community of citizens who participate and cooperate in the interest of their neighbors, co-workers, and friends. As people participate in a community, they must also ask questions and critically evaluate the current state of affairs in order to ensure a good life experience for all citizens. Public discourse can be improved in several ways. First, there must be an interest in adopting scientific inquiry. Second, an improvement in conditions for public discussion and in the methods used to engage civic issues are needed. Dewey's vision of a democratic way of life exists not only in the town square, but in the American education system, the workplace, and at home (Hoy, 1998; Schilpp, 1951; Talisse, 2000).

Dewey writes about the foundation of the American democratic polity. The democratic state is the strongest when supported by local communities and small-town America. American democratic polity was "developed out of genuine community life, that is, association in local and small centers where industry was mainly agricultural and where production was carried on mainly with hand tools" (Dewey, 1927; p. 111). Visions of small town America are the foundation for a strong public voice. Democracy is all about striving for the great community. This is where "the township or some not much larger area was the political unit," he writes, "the town meeting, the political medium, the roads, the schools, the peace of the community, were the political objectives" (p. 111). The small-town meeting style is part of our democratic history, but Dewey is upset about the large political structures that dominate voices of the local citizenry. When the ordinary citizen is not actively participating in the process, the public is in danger of

false consciousness. Policy is not reflective of the public when citizens are not involved in the planning process. The public is not genuine when the political system forms policies without input from local communities.

Dewey is interested in returning to the roots of the local community in order to revive democracy. He calls for a shift from the "Great Society" to the "Great Community," but until the task is accomplished the Public will remain in eclipse. "The local face-to-face community," he argues, "has been invaded by forces so vast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown" (p. 131). Thus, the present state is "contaminated with problems felt rather than understood. The public will remain in eclipse until political participation in the local square is revived; without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance" (p. 142). Dewey believed that communication can create a great community. The type of communication Dewey called for involved the notion of unified citizens participating for a common cause.

For Dewey (1927), there is something extraordinary about individuals participating and arguing for public policy in a public forum. Civic education becomes the foundation for the medium that begins the journey towards public competency. Dewey believed that in order to act in the best interest of the public good, democracy must integrate the voices of the local community. Thus, his vision celebrated the hope for citizen interest in public affairs.

As higher education is called to renew its commitment to create opportunities for civic engagement, service learning can serve as means to engage social problems and community needs (Bok, 1982, 1986; Boyer, 1990; Ehrlich, 1995; Jacoby, 1996; Newman, 1985; Zlotkowski, 1998). Civic engagement and service learning activities foster Dewey's vision of a "Great Community" where citizens embrace the opportunity for dialogue about everyday events occurring in the civic life. We believe that Communication Studies courses facilitate this vision of civic participation by educating students about "practical" communication skills that help them achieve knowledge and engage in social issues via participation and service for the public good (Craig, 1989, 1999).

Civic engagement, as Ehrlich (2000) described, is "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes (p. vi). Thus in an educational setting, civic engagement begins when we educate students to be thoughtful and engaged democratic citizens (Milner, 2002; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001). The pragmatist educational metaphysic is well suited for this endeavor because of the belief that the classroom is a "practical, simplified version of society" (Jacobsen, 1999, p. 231). As Dewey (1916) noted, "[i]nformational statements about things can be acquired in relative isolation…realization of the *meaning* of the linguistic signs is quite another matter. That involves a context of work and play in association with others" (p. 358, italics in original). That is to say, edu-

cation becomes an experience of meaning-making, belief construction, and civic engagement. "Because of the centrality of experience and the goal of praxis, the pragmatist educator maintains that a productive classroom requires an open environment and an attitude toward instruction that encourages experimental inquiry" (Edwards and Shepherd, 2004, p. 235). Communication courses are especially rich sites for this practice.

While public speaking basic courses and hybrid communication basic courses serve as worthy forums to implement civic engagement and service learning activities, we would like to look beyond the traditional basic course by giving special attention to basic media studies communication courses. Basic media studies communication courses (e.g., introduction to media criticism, media and society, media and culture) are quickly becoming a central component in communication curriculum at most undergraduate programs (Baran, 2002; Straubhaar & LaRose, 2004). One goal of this article is to encourage scholars to think about the basic communication course in a different way, that is to say, attention must be given to evolving areas in core communication course requirements that move beyond the traditional disciplinary offerings such as hybrid courses and public speaking.

In response to requests by university and community college administrations, many communication departments are adding technology and media components to hybrid and public speaking courses with the growing need to educate students in the issues surrounding information literacy. Furthermore, basic media studies communication courses are often required at the first-

year and sophomore level as core curriculum in the areas of media and society, basic media criticism, and media and culture to name a few. We must be prepared for the basic communication course to potentially evolve in an information society that challenges us to expand on the oral tradition of communication by considering the needed skills for mediated citizenship.

Specifically, we argue that media literacy is a topic that can be addressed in the basic media studies course through civic engagement and service learning in hopes of connecting students to the larger community. In the next section, we discuss media literacy as a valuable objective in basic media studies communication courses.

A Deweyan Perspective on Media Literacy

When implementing civic-oriented service learning into any curriculum, educators must intentionally direct their students to projects them help them train for civic participation and engagement in a democratic public (Gelmon, Holland, Shinnamon, & Conners, 1998; Howard, 2001; Seifer, 1998). Attempts to revive student participation are important during a time when their interest in politics and community service are in a state of decline (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003).

Media literacy has been discussed by a cadre of scholars in communication and culture (Aufderheide, 1997; Hobbs, 1997; Meyrowitz, 1998; Neuman, 1991; Zettl, 1998). Some view media literacy as public policy (Aufderheide, 1993), a critical cultural concern (Alvarado & Boyd-Brummet, 1992), as a teaching perspective for elementary educators (Houk & Bogart, 1974),

and as guidelines for parents (DeGaetano & Bander, 1996). It is a term used to study context and ideology (Lewis & Jhally, 1998), audience (Buckingham, 1998), and is often associated with media education (Sholle & Denski, 1994).

While many scholars have debated the meaning of media literacy, we want to be clear about how we are using the term. We are referring to the development of basic critical analysis skills through three modes: reading and writing (print literacy), speaking and listening (audio literacy), and visualizing and observing (visual literacy).

Civic engagement through civic-oriented service learning activities strengthens these courses when students are given the opportunity to work on media literacy projects to foster civic engagement (Jospin, 1992; Sandroni, 1992). Beyond being engaged in community issues, students in basic media studies communication courses will be orienting themselves to the subject matter and to the community. In the following section we demonstrate how to implement civic-oriented service learning as a means of civic engagement in the basic media literacy communication course. While our suggestions center on a particular basic media studies course (Media & Society), many of our suggestions can be utilized in other course formats.

Basic media studies communication courses (i.e., Media & Society) often focus on the history and development of mass media in the United States as well as the organizational, institutional, and cultural dynamics of today's major commercial media. Some courses give attention to components on print media, radio, television, cinema, and computer Internet communication

systems. Course themes may include media production and consumption, globalization, cultural imperialism, race, class, gender in media and popular culture, and media literacy. Civic engagement and service learning activities can be easily integrated into the basic media studies course to make the content more dynamic and to set up an opportunity for students to connect with the community. We now describe our mode of inquiry by turning to our case study.

A CASE STUDY OF SERVICE LEANING IN MEDIA AND SOCIETY

In order to illustrate the convergence of Dewey's pragmatist educational metaphysic and the basic media studies course, we conducted a case study of a media and society course for a six-month period beginning August 2003 and ending January 2004. Our mode of inquiry has been established by prior scholarship dating back to Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, 1937) and W. Lloyd Warner (1949) who used the case study approach to understand and describe small town American, while more recent scholarship has utilized case studies regarding faculty and administrator conflict in higher education (Baxter, 1993), teacher-student negotiations (Hurst, 1991), and in the instruction of communication research methods (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) to name a few.

In the present case study, we are interested in the teacher/student experience in a basic media studies course that integrates Dewey's philosophy with the intent of adding to our understanding of service learning's

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ontology. Further, we want to promote an epistemological awareness regarding the way we inquire about the basic communication course in formats beyond fundamentals and public speaking. As the case study is discussed, the term "data" needs to be thought of in a general sense as the teacher/student experience is captured in instructor notes of the semester long experience, student reflection essays, instructor evaluations, instructor materials, assignment descriptions, student work portfolios, student media literacy presentations, and responses from the community.

Learning Objectives

The instructor integrated civic engagement and media literacy as a course objective. In the present study, the following objectives were specified: (a) *identify* ways to critically read media, (b) *evaluate* oral, print, and digital culture, (c) *create* media literacy activities to present in the community, (d) *engage* students in civic-oriented service learning throughout the course curriculum, and (e) *apply* critical approaches to the media into everyday life (Brunner & Tally, 1999; Tyner, 1998). While the preceding learning objectives work well in basic media studies courses, we suggest for teachers to remember Dewey's interest in reviving democracy. Students must participate outside of the university setting promoting greater civic engagement. Thus, the students must be involved with local citizens in some manner to connect to Dewey's philosophy. Education transforms from teacher informing students to a social interaction between teacher, student, and community citizens.

The preceding course objectives connect to Dewey's pragmatist educational metaphysic in several ways. First, Dewey believes that education is vital to the process of enriching democracy. So, if local colleges and university students connect subject matter to self and community, the education process is extending beyond the traditional classroom walls promoting a more localized voice of interaction regarding media literacy. This localized dialogue of the local citizenry strengthens the vitality of the public. Second, students are playing the role of participative citizens who are informing other community citizens about media literacy issues. According to Dewey's vision, ordinary citizens must come together in local schools, town halls, and coffee houses. This interaction between teacher, student, and community citizens reflects Dewey's vision of the "Great Community."

Beyond designing the course with learning objectives inclusive of civic-oriented service learning, there were other factors to consider such as student team formation, community agents, assignment implementation, and student reflection/learning outcomes. To continue our study of the convergence of Dewey's pragmatist educational metaphysic and the basic media studies course, we now provide more details about the media literacy project.

Pedagogical Approach

Students enrolled in this "Media & Society" course used critical approaches to the study of media and were challenged to integrate criticism as a practice in their everyday lives. To help facilitate the learning objectives,

students in teams (five students to a team) were required to apply critical approaches to the media by developing a brief (30-45 minute) media literacy presentation to present in the community at junior high and high schools, literacy councils, and other available non-profit organizations in need of volunteers. Based on the age group and need of the given audience, each team developed a media literacy presentation to audiences in the community in need of media literacy training using both written and oral communication. Students in this course during one semester presented to over 200 students at junior high and high schools in a South Texas Community. Another team presented to 40 adult learners who had mastered English as a second language, but needed to improve their critical thinking and media analysis skills as they were training for new jobs.

This learning context allows for teachers to be experimental beyond the university classroom as students connect self with course content and community. Dewey's vision of a pragmatist educational metaphysic is advanced as educators move beyond the individualized "teaching philosophy" to a more shared experience between teacher student, and community.

Community Agents

Selecting the right community agent (contact person) is a key component to the success of the media literacy service learning project. The availability of the community agent is important. The contact person must be available to answer teacher and student questions about the audience the media literacy activity will be presented to, particularly at the beginning of the semes-

ter when the media literacy project is being explained and student schedules are taking shape.

The contact person must be willing to attend all of the students' practice presentations and provide feedback on the final campaigns. In the process of connecting with the community agent, teachers should be careful to select a representative with a positive attitude towards the project and who is willing to explain their needs clearly to the student teams. Before making a final commitment to any literacy council or local school, the instructor must clearly explain the project to the contact person. The community agent must understand the course objectives and the students' needs and skill levels, as well as a clear understanding of the media studies basic course curriculum.

Assignment Implementation

At the beginning of the semester, each team was given the following instructions. Each team of students was to focus on a particular artifact in popular culture. While some teams were working with elements in popular culture that engage junior high and high school students (MTV, reality television), others focused on more adult oriented material such as health advertising for diet pills and Viagra. The main task was to develop a 30-45 minute presentation to deliver to their respective audience in the community.

Teams were told to construct examples to bring to the media literacy presentation (hand outs, activities, etc). One of the primary tasks with a service learning project is to take knowledge from one learning context and apply it to another context so that community orga-

nizations benefit from your service. Specifically, each team developed a media literacy activity based on several guidelines. See Figure 1 for these guidelines.

1. Introduction: Clearly identify the focus of the presentation. Be sure to provide a clear preview of the presentation. What examples will you examine? What audience are you targeting?

2. Media Example (artifact): Describe the media example (movie, TV show, video, web site) that serves as the focus of the activity. Provide a rich description of the media example serving as the team focus. Identify critical questions about the example under inspection. What is the main idea? What argument is being made? Whose point of view is it? How relevant and reliable is the information? What people and what subjects are represented and how? Are the portrayals of people or other subjects accurate, exaggerated, or biased? What are the harms/benefits of the message?

3. Activity/Visual Aids: Each team should design and implement an activity or hand out for the audience to respond to the media example. Specifically, TV clips, magazines clippings, etc. should be provided to engage the audience in the media literacy activity.

4. Reflections on Service Learning: After the teams present their media literacy presentation in the community, it is important for them to reflect on their experience.

Figure 1 — Guidelines for Assignment

Reflections on Course Content:
   Describe your experience with the media literacy project?
   Did this service learning project motivate you as a student?

Reflections on Service Learning:
   Did the service learning project extend course content?
   Describe your reaction to service learning.
   Discuss your application of course content to service learning project.
   Do you feel like this service learning project established a student learning community or social network?

Reflections on Personal Growth:
   What did you learn about yourself during this project?

Reflections on Team Work:
   Discuss any team conflicts you encountered.

Reflections on Community Benefit:
   Discuss the benefit of this activity to the community.
   Discuss your interaction with the community members.

Figure 2 — Questions for Students

Students responded well to questions producing a variety of media literacy project topics about their experiences. Please Figure 2 for student questions to reflect on about their experiences. Or as Garrison (1997) noted, "'Reality' will be reconstructed, including the reality of schools and classrooms, when those with different purposes and values begin to speak and write about their experiences" (p. 15). Based on student

portfolios and community presentations, the students presented a variety of media related topics to an Adult Literacy Council and junior high schools. See Figure 3.
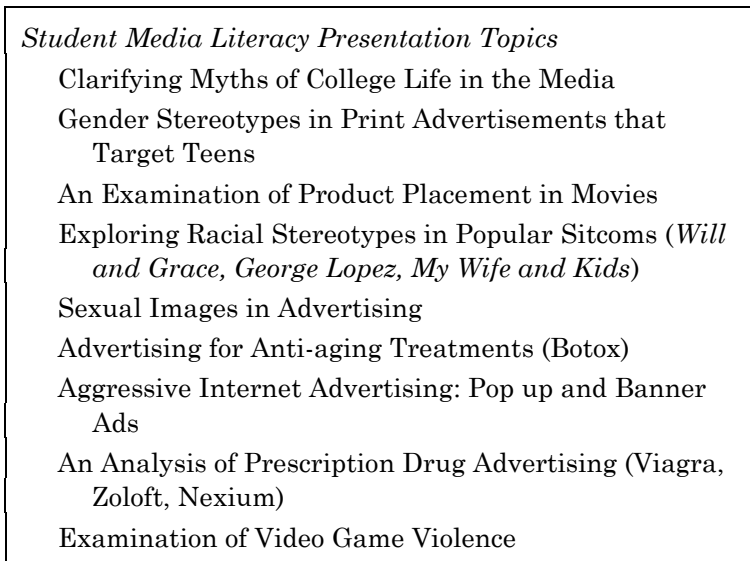
Student Media Literacy Presentation Topics

    Clarifying Myths of College Life in the Media

    Gender Stereotypes in Print Advertisements that Target Teens

    An Examination of Product Placement in Movies

    Exploring Racial Stereotypes in Popular Sitcoms (*Will and Grace, George Lopez, My Wife and Kids*)

    Sexual Images in Advertising

    Advertising for Anti-aging Treatments (Botox)

    Aggressive Internet Advertising: Pop up and Banner Ads

    An Analysis of Prescription Drug Advertising (Viagra, Zoloft, Nexium)

    Examination of Video Game Violence

Figure 3 — Student Topics of Media Literacy

Learning Outcomes

The response to the service learning project in the "Media & Society" course has been extremely positive both on the part of the students and the community agents. On course assessments, the students rated the experience very worthwhile. On written evaluations and reflections students noted several positive experiences about this project. For example, one student commented that this project provided a "lot of hands on experience.

Civic Engagement

We actually got to put our class work into action." Another student remarked that they felt like they "made a personal contribution to the community."

During follow up interviews, each of the community organizations emphasized their satisfaction with the media literacy projects. All of the groups noted the professional quality and student benefit were beyond their expectations. In fact, one of the junior high teachers wrote that she was amazed at her student responses to the media literacy presentations, "My students and I have been talking about your students presentations all week. Beyond the media literacy activity, this was a great forum for college students to set an example for the youngsters. I hope we can continue this partnership." While positive feedback about the media literacy project from students and the community is in line with research reflecting the benefits of service learning on student learning and social development (e.g., Corbett & Kendall, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, 2000), teachers must also reflect on experimental learning contexts and view teaching as a shared communicative experience between self, students, and community.

Dewey's pragmatist educational metaphysic is connected to the media literacy project because of the underlying theme regarding public competence. The more informed the public is regarding the information that is disseminated across various media formats, the more competent citizens will be as they are making choices about consumption, as well as their overall connection to public matters. Dewey (1927) is concerned about experts speaking for local citizens as they "are so removed from common interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all" (p. 207). Citizens

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must critically evaluate information disseminated to the public and learn to do so in an education system focused on civic responsibility. Furthermore, Dewey believes "The Great Community is conceivable. But it can never possess all the qualities which mark a local community (face-to-face intercourse)." "It will do its final work," he continues, "in ordering relations and enriching the experience of local associations. Is it possible for local communities to be stable without being static, progressive with being merely mobile? Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (p. 213).

The present study regarding media literacy shows that teacher and students from a basic media studies course can come together in a "neighborly community" to engage local citizens in a forum of evaluating information that is disseminated to the public.

Dewey's fascination with experts being taken on by the local citizenry is also addressed with the media literacy project. Many of the student examples included products that are marketed by experts, such as prescription drugs and anti-aging products.

Dewey's notion of ordinary citizens in the local community questioning the validity of experts tempting citizens with medical products at the adult literacy council, arguing the ethics of gender and ethnic stereotypes in popular sitcoms during adult continuing education classes, and young citizens questioning the myths of the college experience in the media during school hours are seen as Dewey's pragmatism is converged with the basic media studies course in the present study. Dewey's utopian ideals of the public citizen can be facilitated as stu-

dents of the basic media studies course are engaged in local concerns.

CONCLUSION

In this article, our purpose has been to challenge teachers and scholars to think about utilizing a pragmatist educational metaphysic in a basic media studies course. The media literacy project helps us go beyond the practice of service learning; our perspective of service learning's *ontology* has been informed as we addressed the experience of teacher, student, and community members in our case study of the media literacy project. That is to say, the meaning, experience, and design of the basic communication course was thought about in a different way.

We have attempted to make an *epistemological* contribution regarding how we study and design the basic communication course by converging Dewey's pragmatism with a basic media studies course and by examining a format other than the basic hybrid and public speaking course. Specifically, we call for scholars of the basic course to continue to explore other areas in our discipline in need of adopting basic course formats to different types of courses (i.e., basic media studies communication courses). In addition, we believe that civic engagement and service learning formats, projects, and activities are a way to make the basic courses in communication more dynamic.

We have made another case for service learning with an interest in engaging, as Harter et al (2004) contended, "basic course students and ourselves as agents

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of social change rather than as mere spectators of public affairs" (p.187). It is in these experiences where education can happen. John Dewey maintained that education was a critical component to the growth and advancement of democracies and could only be achieved through communication. This project highlights a way to possibly achieve his visions by using civic engagement in the basic media studies course.

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