

Civic Education: Lessons Learned*

Thomas Ehrlich, *California State University and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*

It has become common among political scientists to bemoan a loss of civic responsibility, particularly among young people, and to urge increased attention to the civic education of students at every level. If the goal is solely one of improved information transfer—to offer fifth-grade civics in a more advanced form—the role for higher education is inevitably a modest one. This is no less true if the goal is solely to proselytize students to vote and pay attention to politics. Over the past year, a group of colleagues and I have been engaged in a pilot project with the more ambitious goal of educating undergraduate students in San Francisco to become, and remain, actively involved in strengthening their communities and enhancing social justice. At the same time, we have designed our civic education project to involve students closely in the search for common ground among public and private civic leaders with diverse perspectives on challenges facing San Francisco. In this article I describe our attempt to promote civic learning and share some initial lessons learned.

Teaching students about democracy by having them study and discuss texts that describe democratic processes and institutions is obviously important. But I believe that academic learning in political science is enhanced when students integrate their study with civic work in a community. This approach is a powerful means both for teaching the strengths and pitfalls of democracy and for providing students with

the foundations of democratic citizenship. A strong citizenry is crucial for the health of democracy, and it is not enough for political science instructors to provide only detached academic discussions of the workings of Congress, lobbyists, federal courts, and the electoral process. When preparing for a lifetime of engaged citizenship, students need to integrate classroom learning with experiential learning in the larger world where practical political decision making and democratic deliberation occur.

My thinking about civic education has been strongly influenced by my experiences with community-based service learning, and I am convinced that serving and acting in one's community is powerful training for democratic citizenship. Over the past decade, I have taught a number of undergraduate courses that integrate community service and academic study through structured reflection at Indiana University, Duke University, and California State University, San Francisco. These courses have generally required students to provide direct service to people in need by working at a social-service agency, but some have also demanded policy research and community outreach. Teaching these community service learning courses has convinced me that civic education is composed of a set of four interrelated learning goals—academic learning, social learning, moral learning, and civic learning—

and that civic learning is best achieved in concert with these other types of learning.

Academic learning is the starting point for most of my service learning courses, such as “Law and Society.” In that class, my students and I examine how law and lawyers have shaped American society from Puritan days to the O.J. Simpson trial and how American society has reciprocally shaped the legal system. Students in the course also engage in community service, usually related to juvenile justice. By reflecting on their service in relation to their academic study, they gain a deeper understanding of the actual interactions of law and society, in both personal and policy terms. Service in the community provides students with experiences that exemplify, challenge, and expand on what they

learn through lectures and readings.

As they enhance their academic knowledge, students in service learning courses receive social, moral, and civic lessons as well. Social learning entails developing the interpersonal skills and personal traits—such as careful listening, sympathy, self-esteem, and abilities to lead and compromise—students will find vital for functioning well in any social, political, or

When preparing for a lifetime of engaged citizenship, students need to integrate classroom learning with experiential learning in the larger world where practical political decision making and democratic deliberation occur.

career setting. Moral learning, on the other hand, depends on students thinking about themselves and their beliefs in relation to others. Moral learning begins when students ask questions like, “What is our community, and what are our obligations to

Thomas Ehrlich is distinguished university scholar at California State University and senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He is also president emeritus of Indiana University.

that community?" Service connects thought and feeling in a deliberate way by creating a context in which students can explore how they feel about what they are learning and how what they are learning influences their opinions and beliefs. The integration of academic study and community service offers students opportunities to reflect on what is important to them, and why, in ways they too rarely experience. Civic learning involves students coming to understand the democratic processes of a community, the problems it faces, the richness of its diversity, the need for individual commitments of time and energy to enhance community life, and, most of all, the importance of working collaboratively to resolve community concerns.

In each service learning class I have taught, I have tried to evaluate the results through surveys of attitudes and by considering portfolios of students' work. Measured by students' self-reports and my rudimentary reviews of student attitudes, students uniformly made academic, social, and moral gains. But the courses seemed to have fostered little civic learning. This surprised me because I was convinced community service learning could effectively stem the decline of social capital and the fractionation of community that Robert Putnam has chronicled, and I was equally convinced that community service promoted democratic citizenship (Putnam 1995; Boyte and Kari 1996). But how did I know? I kept asking myself. How sure was I that service learning really had the potential to enhance students' civic learning? And, in all events, couldn't I do better if I focused squarely on civic learning and designed a course based on what I had learned from teaching other courses and by reading the work of other educators? That is exactly what I did over the past year.

As I considered how best to achieve civic education, I maintained my original belief that civic learning should be linked closely to service learning. Benjamin Barber and many others have stressed that community service is one of the most important ways, often the most important, to reverse a tendency toward civic and

political disengagement among college students (Barber 1992; Barber and Battistoni 1993a, 1993b). Civic learning—in the sense of learning how a community works and how to help it work better—and academic learning should be mutually reinforcing, as John Dewey emphasized (Dewey 1916; 1938). Dewey was adamant that the overarching goal of education should be no less than fostering and maintaining democracy; he believed that schools themselves must be real communities, and that learning in school should be continuous with learning out of school. It is Dewey's vision of education in the service of a democratic society that informs my thinking about civic education; a vision of an education that prepares students to develop and enter interactive, collaborative societies in which the process of deciding how to solve a problem is understood to be as important as acting to solve the problem itself.

Starting with Dewey's vision of education for democracy, I began to think more seriously about how to design a civic education course by reflecting on my own courses and by reading about other courses that strive explicitly to encourage students to "experience citizenship," in the fine phrase that titles a service learning monograph sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education (Battistoni and Hudson 1997). Taken as a whole, that volume, publications from Campus Compact (Jackson 1994; Rothman 1998), and my own experiences suggested that the best method for promoting civic learning would be to link service learning to two other powerful pedagogies: problem-based learning and collaborative learning. These three pedagogies embody the three key elements that John Dewey stressed in the democratic learning process:

Problem-Based Learning: This technique requires students to focus on problems to be solved, as Dewey urged.

Collaborative Learning: Dewey insisted that student work should be collaborative, both among stu-

dents and between students and faculty.

Community Service Learning: This pedagogy fulfills Dewey's mandate that students' learning should extend outside the walls of a school and into the surrounding community.

Though some educators have long emphasized problem-based learning, it has received increased attention in recent years. Such courses are designed around a problem or set of problems. As students advance, they tackle more difficult problems using increasingly sophisticated techniques and increasingly complex knowledge bases. The problem approach, as Dewey taught, is essential for preparing students to actively participate in the ongoing renewal of democracy. This is because democratic renewal involves much more than attention to the minimum responsibilities of a citizen to vote and participate in various civic organizations. Democracy also requires citizens to identify community problems and to work communally to resolve those problems. At its best, problem-based learning prepares students to fully practice democratic citizenship.

Collaborative learning is also an increasingly important part of undergraduate education. A recent volume states that "collaborative learning may well be the most significant pedagogical shift of the century for teaching and learning in higher education" (Bosworth and Hamilton 1994, 2). While president of Indiana University, the most common criticism I heard from employers was that our graduates were ill-trained to work as members of a team. Collaborative learning is not only a pedagogy designed to encourage the development of the skills required to be a productive team member, it is also an important tool for training students to enter a democratic society in which citizens interact with each other, learn from each other, disagree with each other, grow with each other, and work together to make their communities more than the sum of its parts. Dewey argued that building a community of learners was the best way to ensure that

this process occurs. Collaborative learning offers an excellent opportunity for building learning communities.

Combining these two pedagogies has significant potential to bring about civic learning, and they can be particularly powerful when joined with community service learning, their natural pedagogical partner. Community service learning allows students to put into practice what they learn in the classroom and to bring insights from service to bear on their academic analysis. In my grazing through the fields of higher education in recent years, this troika repeatedly appears as a powerful combination.

I sought to shape a course that would strengthen in students the four central components of civic learning—motivation, skills, knowledge, and values—by employing all three pedagogies. My goal was to produce students who were significantly more likely to engage in the political processes of their communities than they had been before participating in the course. Those results require students to develop motivation to engage in democratic processes despite the trend against engagement, skills of civic engagement, substantive knowledge about issues facing their community, and a set of values that fosters political engagement as a means of serving one's community.

I began by sitting down with a group of civic leaders in San Francisco to discuss the elements they thought were important in civic leadership and the design of a project to encourage development of those elements in my students. Fortunately, the Urban Institute of San Francisco State University, which links the university to the city, was my ready ally. Last year, the Urban Institute joined with a nonprofit civic group to form the San Francisco Policy Center. The Center is a gathering of civic leaders from various sectors, including community-based organizations, business, labor, and education, who came together to design programs, such as job training, that channel the University's resources into programs and projects that assist the city. I sought

the counsel of this group in shaping the pilot project on civic education. Though the leaders had different perspectives on many issues, they were united in their concern that San Francisco was lacking potential new civic leaders and in their desire to share in the education of their successors.

We discussed at some length what cluster of political and civic issues would work best as a focus for the project. Like most urban centers, San Francisco faces no end of tough problems. We considered, among other topics, municipal transportation; employment strategies; juvenile crime; a major freeway running through the city; health issues, particularly AIDS; environmental concerns; housing issues; and welfare reform. In the end, we chose a hybrid of the last two topics: San Francisco neighborhoods in the wake of state and federal welfare reform.

I am now convinced, however, that any of the topics could have provided the opportunities necessary to achieve the civic education goals I established, because they all related to issues affecting the whole San Francisco community and involved broad concerns of social justice.

Based on advice from the members of the Policy Center, I planned a forum of civic leaders that would serve as the centerpiece of the course. Leaders from a range of perspectives would be invited to discuss the chosen topic and to try to reach common ground. The forum would need to be highly regarded in order to attract the attention of civic leaders and there had to be a clear sense that the issue was not just an "academic exercise" but was worth discussing on its own merits. In other words, the pedagogical program had to be attached to something real. We also wanted to choose a topic that would allow student to read and discuss relevant materials, interact with civic leaders who were working on a real urban problem, work both individually and in teams on that problem, and reflect on what they learned in the realms of theory and practice and how or whether the two connect.

The choice to make the impact of welfare reform on San Francisco

neighborhoods the focus of the course was informed by all these considerations. It was a central concern for the city and discussion at the forum could involve two different groups of civic leaders: one in the realm of affordable housing and the other in welfare and workforce development. Though both groups recognized that welfare reform policies would have radical effects on their overlapping constituencies, they had not spent much time talking to each other, and the forum would provide a useful opportunity for such a discussion. Moreover, the work of the students could be of direct benefit to both groups.

After deciding upon a topic, I invited Ms. Lori Bamberger, who had recently completed a stint as assistant chief of staff for legislation and policy at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, to co-teach the course.

Although the primary course goals were centered on civic learning, this could not occur unless students developed substantive knowledge about housing or welfare. We made a particularly strong team for designing and teaching the course because Ms. Bamberger had detailed knowledge of urban housing and welfare reform, while I had experience relating to civic responsibility.

We chose two complementary sets of materials for the course: one on civic responsibility (primarily readings from Barber and Battistoni 1993a) and one on issues of urban poverty (including readings in Danziger, Sandefur, and Weinberg 1994). We also distributed supplementary materials on welfare reform and workforce development. Each class was designed to move back and forth among questions raised in these materials so that the issues of civic responsibility were addressed in terms of their impact on urban poverty and problems of urban poverty were viewed as matters of civic concern.

In one class session, for example, the focus was immigration, citizenship, and welfare reform. The class considered the implications of welfare reform for immigrant households, children, the elderly, and the disabled. We discussed whether it

was fair to discriminate in the allocation of government benefits based on place of birth, whether place of birth should be the primary criterion for citizenship, whether citizenship should be a primary criterion for the distribution of welfare, and what should be the citizenship test for immigrants. We also focused specifically on the implications of welfare reform legislation targeting elderly and disabled immigrants for benefit reductions, such as laws restricting eligibility for food stamps.

The civic leaders forum met during the third week of classes. In preparation for that session, students read materials on current housing and welfare rules in San Francisco, focusing particularly on how the new federal and state legislation was creating massive shifts in eligibility for public benefits. The forum brought together 22 civic leaders from city government, non-profit organizations, the Chamber of Commerce, private business concerns, and benefit recipient advocacy groups. This marked the first time that the groups had come together, though many of the individuals knew and had worked with each other previously. Students were mainly observers, but they had an opportunity to raise questions and to mingle with the civic leaders before and after the forum. During the three-hour forum, Ms. Bamberger led a structured discussion and debate on the options available to the city and the organizations present and how to take the least painful paths in support of poor people. Students said they came away inspired by the leaders, sobered by the challenges that had been raised, and committed to work on those challenges. In addition, all the members of the forum agreed to assist the students in their work. Though the forum was a great success in most ways, we would, in retrospect, have held the forum later in the semester, after students had acquired more theoretical and practical knowledge about the issues involved.

Apart from participating in the forum, doing readings, and engaging in class discussions focused on the assigned readings, the students had two other closely related responsibilities. The first was to spend at least

five hours per week in a community service agency that helps welfare recipients. Most of the agencies were located in four neighborhoods with the highest proportion of welfare recipients. Ms. Bamberger and I had identified seven community agencies that met this criterion and had offered to host students from the course. The leaders of those agencies were also participants in the civic leaders forum. One of the participating agencies, *Arriba Juntos*, is a Latino community-based organization that helps families achieve self-sufficiency, particularly by offering job training. Another, *Chinatown Community Development Center*, is a neighborhood-based housing and community development organization that provides services to low-income tenants. A third participant, *Renaissance Parents of Success*, is a multiservice job-training and placement agency in the predominantly African American *Bayview Hunter's Point* neighborhood.

The only participating agency not directly related to welfare or housing was a group called *Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders (SHINE)*. This organization trains students to be "citizen coaches" for immigrants who are studying for the naturalization examination. The students working at SHINE helped immigrants gain citizenship knowledge and skills, and by doing so, strengthened those skills themselves. Another civic education course could easily be developed around the problems faced by poor immigrants in San Francisco, with all the students serving in SHINE and also working on the particular housing and welfare issues faced by immigrants. One interesting project would be to create an effective citizenship exam to replace the existing one. Currently, applicants for citizenship are given a book with 100 factual questions about American history and government, such as "What are the colors of our flag?" and "How many stars in our flag?" Examiners from the Immigration and Naturalization Service choose a few of these questions for the exam and citizenship depends on answering them. Even the most fervent

apostle of E.D. Hirsch would not suggest that knowing the number of Supreme Court justices (question 54) is evidence of any potential for good citizenship, but designing a replacement for the existing exam is a substantial challenge.

We made significant efforts in every class session to link the students' community service to their readings through class discussions and a brief paper each student wrote as a publicity brochure for her or his agency. A number of these brochures were good enough to be used by the agencies involved. The other main link between academic study and community service was an extensive field project in the four San Francisco neighborhoods that are home to most welfare recipients. Students worked in teams of four or five. In most cases, they worked with a community agency in the same neighborhood where they did their field study. We gave students a substantial set of background materials containing data about demographics, housing, and poverty, as well as studies that had previously been done on low-income housing and welfare issues in San Francisco. However, none of these prior studies had examined the impact of welfare reform on these four neighborhoods, which meant that students had an opportunity to prepare reports having real-world use and importance. Using the information they had been given, each team prepared a "Neighborhood Study on the Impact of Welfare Reform" consisting of: a demographic profile of the neighborhood, including the prevalence of welfare reciprocity, average income levels, and so forth; an objective summary of the welfare-related needs of the neighborhood arising out of welfare reform, including an estimate of how many households will need jobs, child care, transportation, and other services; a survey of housing stock; summaries of residents' and businesses' concerns about welfare reform; summaries of welfare-related services, such as job training and child care, available to neighborhood residents; a list of options and recommendations for giving priority in housing assistance; an analysis of

how the recommendations of a housing task force established by the mayor would affect the neighborhood; an analysis of one of the numerous citywide programs affecting the neighborhood (including a new football stadium and a business-backed welfare-to-work initiative); and an action plan for the neighborhood.

This was an ambitious agenda, but the students followed a detailed protocol for the report, and we spent half of a three-hour class role playing how students could gather the information they needed by talking with welfare recipients and others. By the end of the semester, the four teams in the class—one for each of the four neighborhoods—had produced studies that will be of direct value to the community-based organizations and leaders who were involved in the forum. Two of the studies were excellent and, though the other two were less strong, each contributed to all parties' understanding of the impact of welfare reform.

Looking back, there are important ways that the course can be improved, particularly by better integrating community service, class discussions, readings, and field surveys. But, in the views of both the students and agencies involved, this initial effort was a true success in terms of fostering civic learning. Ms. Bamberger and I did extensive surveys of attitudes, interests, and involvement in civic affairs at the start and end of the course. The results of those surveys indicate that most of the participating students expected to remain active and engaged citizen leaders of San Francisco—or another community—for the rest of their lives, regardless of career choice, and that the course positively influenced their decision to remain active. The differences between “before” and “after” were not great, but they were positive. The first survey question, for example,

asked how strongly students agreed or disagreed with the statement “Adults should give some time for the good of their community.” In the initial survey, half agreed, and half agreed strongly. By the second survey, all but two agreed strongly. At the beginning of the semester, a slight majority said that they neither agreed nor disagreed that “It is important to me to become a community leader,” and the rest agreed with the statement. By the end, a strong majority agreed, and several agreed strongly. Finally, at the start of the course, many students were ambivalent about the statement that “Volunteer service will/would be valuable in my career.” By the end, all of the students agreed, and most students agreed strongly.

I do not want to overstate the importance of the survey results, but the increase in students' commitment to political engagement and civic leadership was supported by other assessments. My and Ms. Bamberger's own discussions with the students over the course of the semester confirmed that the shifts were significant. We also conducted a general course evaluation at the end of the semester and found strong student support for the course and the need for more efforts to integrate the course readings, discussions, community service, and projects. Of course, fifteen is a small number of students and there may have been a selection bias since most of the students probably came to the class with a higher level of civic engagement than the average student. However, the surveys and other evaluations suggest that even those students who joined the class with what may have been higher-than-average levels of civic engagement probably came away from the course with an even stronger commitment to active political participation and community involvement.

Since this was a start-up course, this edition obviously took more time to design than will future editions. Still, this type of course is more demanding of faculty than a “closed classroom” offering, and the very fact that it was team-taught meant that more resources were allocated to the course than is typical. Finally, this course fell prey to a phenomenon that I have often seen elsewhere, particularly at commuting campuses where many students are not only seeking an education but also have commitments to families and jobs. A number of students expressed strong initial interest in the course but thought that the work sounded too time-consuming because they were not used to the community service component and believed that it meant additional work piled on top of the regular requirements for a four-unit course. Perhaps more important, the Department of Urban Studies at San Francisco State University, though extremely supportive of the course, had no natural “home” for it within its regular curriculum and faculty in the department viewed it, therefore, as an “extra” or tangential course. These problems are endemic to community service learning courses and, though some campuses have overcome them, they remain a challenge for most. The challenges for service learning courses are particularly serious when a campus has a large number of graduation requirements and these courses do not fit neatly into the structure of those requirements. These are not insurmountable concerns, only bureaucratic difficulties that are more acute on some campuses than others.

This caveat aside, the pilot course proved very promising for giving students a hands-on education in democratic citizenship and civic leadership that would complement more traditional political science instruction about democracy, participation, and public policy.

Note

*My thanks to Lori Bamberger and to Elizabeth Beaumont for assistance in preparing this article.

References

- Barber, Benjamin. 1992. *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America*. New York: Ballantine.
- , and Richard Battistoni, eds. 1993a. *Education for Democracy*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- . 1993b. "A Season of Service: Introducing Service Learning into the Liberal Arts Curriculum." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26(June): 235–62.
- Battistoni, Richard, and William Hudson, eds. 1997. *Experiencing Citizenship: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Political Science*. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.
- Bosworth, Kris, and Sharon J., eds. 1994. *Collaborative Learning: Underlying Processes and Effective Techniques*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boyte, Harry, and Nancy Kari. 1996. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Danzinger, Sheldon H., Gary D. Sandefur, and Daniel H. Weinberg, eds. 1994. *Confronting Poverty: Prescriptions for Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education*. New York: MacMillan.
- . 1938. *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Jackson, Katherine, ed. 1994. *Redesigning Curricula*. Providence: Campus Compact.
- Putnam, Robert. 1995 "Bowling Alone." *Journal of Democracy* 6(January): 65–78.
- Rothman, Michael, ed. 1998 *Service Matters: Engaging Higher Education in the Renewal of America's Communities and American Democracy*. Providence: Campus Compact.