

Teaching, Learning, and Activism

Francine White (Cooperative Education)

The main activity of social life used to be people visiting each other in the evening, but now people stay in their own houses and watch television. (Bigelow 292)

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, what impressed him most was the civic engagement of the American citizenry. Today, there is clearly concern about the decline in the civic nature of our communities and democratic institutions. Evidence of this decline is easy to identify in low voter turnout, low political/community involvement, and apathy towards government. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam talks about a decline in social capital. Putnam defines social capital as those informal social networks and norms of reciprocity that allow communities to solve their small problems without outside help. He suggests that this decline in social capital is in large part due to our preoccupation with work and watching television. Putnam's contention is that we spend so much time doing these things that there is little time left to participate in the bowling-league kind of activities. Many would go further to say that this decline in social capital manifests itself in our poor performance in the important areas of ethics, education, democratic responsiveness, safe neighborhoods, health, and the general well being of our communities. In an alternative analysis, Craig Rimmerman offers a detailed examination of grassroots mobilization and community activism as examples of contemporary forms of social capital and potential tools for confronting this problem of "bowling alone." The bottom line from both perspectives is that "bowling alone" jeopardizes the sustainability of our communities.

We may start to realize that we are the unwitting and unwilling guinea pigs in the largest experiment in human history, one involving our entire planet's ecosystem, food supply, and the health and very genetic makeup of its inhabitants. (233)

Teaching Students to Be Engaged Citizens

Solving the complex issues of today's communities requires novel approaches. We are not born "engaged" citizens. This level of citizenship is learned behavior. Where do we learn it? The classroom is a good place to start. Who should teach it? Educators in every discipline. How should it be taught? There's no one answer to this question but there are lots of good ideas around. However you teach it, the key is linking discipline specific information to real-world issues. This breathes life into otherwise abstract and meaningless information and the information becomes exciting and meaningful. Manipulating this new information gives students an opportunity to develop and refine these civic-friendly skills and values. Internships and concurrent seminars – our experiential education model – and group case study projects facilitate this work nicely.

After participating in a number of service-learning/civic engagement professional development conferences and workshops, I revised the syllabus for one of the internship's concurrent seminars to emphasize civic engagement. Though we rarely think of internships as catalysts for discussions about civic engagement, the students in my revised seminar discussed the social, cultural, economic, occupational, and environmental contributors to social well-being. In this way, the seminar encourages higher levels of student activism in their communities, internships, and permanent workplaces. The primary goal of the class is to reinforce industry-specific knowledge, terminology, workplace expectations, and competencies. Class discussions are framed by the concepts of democracy, social justice, social responsibility, and community.

The seminar curriculum focuses on democracy as a social system. Class discussions help students to identify characteristics of democratic environments. These include power, justice,

equality, social capital, civic capacity, interdependence, commitment to community members, and civic indifference. We then analyze these characteristics and apply them to everyday contexts in public/private spheres, workplaces, and internships. Finally, students are asked to identify and demonstrate good habits and ethics for both productive living and deepened internship/workplace experiences. As part of this process, students write extensively, analyzing their thoughts individually and sharing their conclusions in groups.

Group work is critical to understanding many of the different perspectives and cultures in our classrooms. Early in the term, students are assigned to groups. Each group is asked to complete a staged writing project with these components:

1. a proposal for a case study on a civic or community issue;
2. an outline of the critical factors in the case study;
3. an essay arguing a position, pro or con, with supporting evidence;
4. an essay relating the case issues to larger societal problems;
5. a final paper synthesizing the previous components. The final paper includes:
 - a. the facts of the case
 - b. the issues, the arguments, and the related supporting information
 - c. values in conflict
 - d. a discussion of the group's perspective on what a socially just resolution might be and why
 - e. policy arguments pro and con
 - f. a discussion of other related social issues
 - g. the group's conclusions.

During this case study project, discussions are held in class and online with me acting as mentor and monitor – asking questions, playing devil's advocate to raise the barometer in the classroom.

The benefits of the revised seminar are easy to identify. Students understand and appreciate the contribution of this instructional model as a tool for heightening political/social

awareness, developing tolerance, developing empathy, raising levels of personal responsibility, and strengthening interpersonal skills. They also see this as an invitation to safely talk about their own values and beliefs. The safe part doesn't all happen immediately, but it does happen. Surprisingly, during class discussions, students often share their prejudices and phobias in a mature and respectful manner with peers, and their views are respected. They also appreciate the case study method as an opportunity to use and reinforce information learned in other classes. They appreciate the opportunity to analyze real issues. It motivates them to participate more fully in their internship and in their communities.

Finally, these discussions breathe fresh air into traditional material, giving me an opportunity to engage students in a range of controversial and contested issues in the general course of class instruction. The discussions allow me to play a role in challenging their views and preconceptions while they simultaneously challenge mine. These habits of engagement are transferable. Students carry them into their internships. I hope they carry them into their communities as well.

The Proof Is in the Pudding

At the beginning of the class students are concerned about making the connections among internships, citizenship, and activism. At the end of the class they connect the dots easily and are grateful for the challenges that the class provided. They become more accountable for what works and what doesn't work in their lives, including in their internships. They speak in active terms about taking ownership of what they learn. Finally, they appreciate the interdependence of our communities and use the concepts we discuss in class to articulate their positions on major social issues and to identify the necessity for individual contributions.

WORKS CITED

- Bigelow, Bill and Bob Peterson, eds. *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2002.
- Hesselbein, Francis, et al., eds. *The Community of the Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, January 1998.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Putnam, Robert D., Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993.
- Rimmerman, Craig A. *The New Citizenship: Unconventional Politics, Service and Activism*. Boulder: Westview, 2001.
- Schoem, David and Sylvia Hurtado, eds. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace*. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2001.