



September 2000

What Should Be Learned Through Service Learning?

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Recommended Citation

Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (2000). What Should Be Learned Through Service Learning?. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 33 (3), 635-637. <https://doi.org/10.2307/420870>

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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What Should Be Learned Through Service Learning?

Abstract

Service learning is typically distinguished from both community service and traditional civic education by the integration of study with hands-on activity outside the classroom, typically through a collaborative effort to address a community problem (Ehrlich 1999, 246). As such, service learning provides opportunities and challenges for increasing the efficacy of both the teaching and practice of democratic politics. To better understand these opportunities and challenges, it is necessary to make explicit the goals of service learning and to consider how these goals intersect those of more traditional approaches to teaching about government and politics. We believe that one place these sometimes competing models could find common ground is in the learning of factual knowledge about politics.

Comments

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PS: Political Science and Politics, Vol. 33, No. 3. (Sep., 2000), pp. 635-637.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1049-0965%28200009%2933%3A3%3C635%3AWSBLTS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5>

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What Should Be Learned through Service Learning?

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Service learning is typically distinguished from both community service and traditional civic education by the integration of study with hands-on activity outside the classroom, typically through a collaborative effort to address a community problem (Ehrlich 1999, 246). As such, service learning provides opportunities and challenges for increasing the efficacy of both the teaching and practice of democratic politics. To better understand these opportunities and challenges, it is necessary to make explicit the goals of service learning and to consider how these goals intersect those of more traditional approaches to teaching about government and politics. We believe that one place these sometimes competing models could find common ground is in the learning of factual knowledge about politics.

Underlying the pedagogy of service learning are the beliefs that a

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central mission of civic education is to produce active, engaged citizens and that this mission is more likely to be accomplished by allowing young Americans to directly experience "politics" as part of their education. As noted by Frantzich and Mann, this view is very compatible with the stated mission of the American Political Science Association:

The founding of the [APSA] in 1903 marked the evolution of political science as a distinct academic discipline in colleges and universities. At the time, two educational objectives were claimed for the emerging discipline: citizenship and training for careers in public service. . . . For the student, direct experience was recommended to supplement formal instruction in government and politics. (1997, 193)

Frantzich and Mann went on to show that, while the definitions of public service and citizenship have evolved over time, training for both through a combination of classroom and "real world" experiences has remained a central responsibility for the discipline.

Despite this longstanding commitment to developing good citizens, there remains a tension between the educational and civic goals of the discipline. Not all members of our profession would agree that developing active citizens is or should be part of our mission. Perceiving political science as a discipline that observes, critiques, and seeks to understand public life can easily (and justifiably) lead individuals to embrace a teaching philosophy that dictates transmitting knowledge and cultivating a critical perspective rather than encouraging participation. Indeed, some political science theory and research suggests that, for some Americans at least, civic and political engagement is irrational, unnecessary, ineffective, and even

harmful (see, e.g., Berelson 1952; Downs 1957; Edelman 1988; Ginsberg 1982; Neuman 1986; Olson 1971).

Being more dedicated to transmitting knowledge than creating engaged citizens would not automatically lead one to reject the value of experiential learning, but it would lead one to consider it valuable only to the extent that it enhances a student's understanding of government and politics. In short, a factual orientation would lead one to design service learning experiences that increased learning (of a certain kind) rather than service.

Of course, the choice between transmitting knowledge and creating engaged citizens is seldom so stark as this. It is fair to assume that most political science instructors believe there is a connection between understanding government and politics and being an effective citizen, even if they never ask students to experience public life as part of their coursework. Similarly, few advocates for service learning as a means for creating more engaged citizens would deny the importance of putting one's real-world experiences into the broader context provided by readings, lectures, discussions, and writing assignments. The challenge facing instructors, therefore, lies in clarifying the relationship between classroom and experiential learning. Put another way, the questions all instructors, whatever their teaching philosophy, must answer are "What does the experience of participating in public life add to classroom learning?" and "What does classroom learning add to the participatory experience?" While there are numerous ways one might attempt to answer these questions, we suggest that one good answer to both is factual knowledge about politics.

At first blush, the learning of po-

litical facts would seem far removed from the goals and approaches most centrally identified with either the service learning movement or current thinking about effective classroom instruction. The central objective of service learning is the development of lifelong habits of engagement in democratic citizenship. Indeed, service learning is often held up as an alternative to the dry, objectified, often context-free memorization of facts associated with traditional classroom civics. At the same time, even those who believe classroom learning is valuable in and of itself often emphasize the teaching of skills such as critical thinking or effective argument over the learning of specific facts.

While we agree that rote memorization of facts does little to create either engaged citizens or educated students (Niemi and Junn 1999), we also believe that imparting factual knowledge about politics is necessary, if not sufficient, for creating both. Consider the current paradox: America's youth are highly engaged with volunteer activity and yet very disengaged from traditional political activity; they are more trusting of government than their elders and yet feel much less politically efficacious (National Election Studies 1998). Young people want to help solve society's problems, but most do not see how what the government does can worsen or ameliorate these problems. And those who do see this connection often lack the practical knowledge of the issues, players, and rules to be able to participate in politics effectively. Political knowledge is a key to seeing these connections and to understanding how to affect the system.

Perceiving political science as a discipline that observes, critiques, and seeks to understand public life can easily (and justifiably) lead individuals to embrace a teaching philosophy that dictates transmitting knowledge and cultivating a critical perspective rather than encouraging participation.

Being informed increases the likelihood that a citizen will have opinions about the issues of the day and that those opinions will be stable over time and consistent with each other. It produces opinions that are arguably more closely connected to one's values, beliefs, and objective conditions. It facilitates participation in public life that effectively connects one's opinions with one's actions. And it promotes greater support for democratic values such as tolerance (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Put simply, while one can debate the amount or content of information a person "needs" to know, it is difficult to imagine either an educated student or an engaged citizen who is unfamiliar

with the substance, key actors, institutions, and processes of politics.

Granting that factual knowledge is a prerequisite for becoming an educated and engaged citizen, we can begin to answer the two-part question posed above. One anticipated outcome of service would be the learning of political facts. There are reasons to expect this. Research suggests that knowledge is both a spur to political interest and involvement and a consequence of such interest and involvement, often offsetting more structural correlates of knowledge such as class, gender, or ethnicity (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Junn 1991; Leighley 1991; Tan 1980). Further, political learning is more likely to occur when the information is directly relevant to one's immediate circumstances and behaviors. It is likely that a service learning experience, properly constituted, could activate interest and demonstrate relevance in ways that would increase a student's receptivity to and retention of factual knowledge. In addition, how much an individual

learns about politics is closely tied to the opportunity to learn. Well-designed service learning projects would expose students to a great deal of essential contextual information about substantive issues, key political actors, the law, policy making, political participation (and the barriers thereto), and other fundamentals of the operation of the political system, all of which would increase the likelihood of political learning.

All of the above suggests that including service as part of students' educational experience can increase their motivation and opportunity to learn about politics, which in turn could increase the likelihood of their continued engagement in public life. Indirect evidence for this can be found in the *National Assessment of Educational Progress 1998 Report Card for the Nation* (U.S. Department of Education 1999), which found that students who engaged in some form of volunteerism in their community (either through schools or on their own) scored higher on a test of civic knowledge than did those who had not engaged in this kind of activity.

The key to success is likely to be found in the nature of the service experience and how well the experience is integrated into the classroom. Effective programs provide opportunities that are likely to lead students to both "bump into" and actively seek out information about politics that is relevant to their activities. At the same time, this specific information will be more easily learned, more likely to be retained, and more likely to be connected to broader kinds of political knowledge if the classroom curriculum is integrated with the service experience. It is in the classroom that specific, often disparate service experiences can be tied to larger issues of government and politics, helping to instill not only factual knowledge but also the motivations and skills likely to increase learning over time.

Research is needed on several fronts. What is the impact of service learning on both short- and long-term gains in knowledge? What specific kinds of service experiences and

teaching techniques enhance this learning? At what age (or ages) is service learning likely to be most effective? But we already know

enough to expect that the combination of experiential and classroom education—when properly designed—can be an effective way to produce

citizens who are both educated observers of the political scene and more active participants in public life.

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