Editor's Note IUJSL Volume 6 Number 1 Fall 2016

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The Editor’s Notes

I begin this semester teaching an interdisciplinary seminar in civic engagement that is tied to learning community, not surprisingly, called “Civic Engagement”. When I asked the students in my class why they were taking the course, they said simply that they were put into the course. The seminar is part of a new initiative on campus to create a required learning community experience that illustrates for students how their learning integrates and how they can use their learning to look at critical issues we should be participating in daily. Our themes are Civic Engagement, Global Citizenship, and Sustainable. When I asked my students what their understanding of the course was, they replied that they we asked to be engaged on campus and volunteer for one of the community service projects.

I do not think anyone of us would be surprised by my students’ responses. They hear terms like civic engagement, social justice, community involvement all the time. They encounter these terms in workshops they take from student affairs, in the mission statements of many student organizations, in some of the courses they take, and, of course, in many activities on campus like food drives, voter registration activities, community service projects and alternative spring breaks, and diversity programing. And, it is becoming more common that our students come to our campuses with similar experiences from high school. For students, civic engagement is similar to a cafeteria menu.

This also resembles what we are struggling with – how do we delineate civic engagement? Is this simply where offices are housed on a campus? It is not unusual to find community service/community- based learning under student affairs and service-learning under academic affairs. But “civic engagement” is a bit harder to find. It seems to involve engaging the community in which students live. That community could be their “academic” community, the social community on campus, the community in which the college resides, and/or the global community. It could involve academic internships, general internships, volunteer experiences, service-learning, undergraduate research, fieldwork, public performance, study abroad, and more. It could be housed under another of our favorite umbrellas – “experiential learning”.

But there does seem to be a common thread that runs through all of these – our student through all these different ways engage a “political life”. But this political life is not about jumping into politics as we might normally think. Rather, it alludes to politics as Thucydides described it in Pericles’ Funeral Oration – our daily activities with other people, from our families, our friends and our neighborhoods to the broader community; activities we reflect on and use our learning to consider the social and human constructs that seem to shape us. And perhaps through this, students begin to learn that their lives are always one of the texts in every class they take.

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Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change Fall 2016

Published by Opus Open Portal to University Scholarship, Governors State University.
Perry (1970) noted that when students engage in a “pluralism of values and points of view,” they engage in an experience that fosters their ethical and moral development and their abilities to make personal commitments in a relative world (p. 35). I think about this as I read the reflections my students have written after a course I taught on social change that did not involve service-learning, internship, or any other type of experiential learning. One student noted:

The challenging of a person comes with a certain risk. Either that person will become offended and deny the truth heading their way, or they will face it with open arms and kneel at the altar of humility.

Civic engagement is not grounded in a debate of what should be included under the umbrella of its rubric. Rather than talking with our students about the types of activities that meet our outlines of civic engagement we may want to talk with them about how they learn to lead reflective lives, learn to lead themselves first, and to master the skills to think with their learning to think about and think through their unending negotiations with whom they live and the communities in which they arise. Perhaps we should consider civic engagement as a department with different “tracks” but with a common learning outcome, perhaps the outcome that Abbé Faria hoped for Edmond Dantès:

“learning does not make one learned; there are those who have knowledge and those who have understanding. The first requires memory, the second philosophy”.

(Dumas, The Count of Monte Cristo)

Hopefully, through this polysemic concept of civic engagement our students will learn to be a little wiser.

Works Cited


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