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Reflections on Civic Engagement through Community Newsletter Projects

“Power is actualized only where the word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*
quoted in the frontispiece to Edward Chambers
Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action and Justice (New York: Continuum, 2006)

“Could there be such a thing as Wittgensteinian political theory? What might it look like?...It would presumably share his suspicion of broad, systematic generalization, his therapeutic stress on the particular case, on investigating and speaking self, and on the acceptance of plurality and contradiction...[I]t would be addressed from one citizen to others—as fellow human beings.

Hannah Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972: 325)

“I behold the others as myself and myself as them.”

Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)

In the face of the histories of fact-value distinctions, logical positivism, behaviorism, empirical methodologies of all sorts from the crude to the sophisticated which continue to lay claim the core authority of Anglo American Political Science, normative political theory faces the problem of the real. What cannot be measured is characterized as unreal or at best, mystical. Experience is discounted as unreliable, idiosyncratic, and worst of all, from the perspective of systematic political science, personal. So then, how does one take political theory into the field? How does one ask the classic questions of political science: who gets, what, where, when and how without resorting to measurement? Indeed, would one want to?

For the past ten years or more, I have been adopting the methodologies associated with the disciplines of anthropology, literature and the visual arts, including documentary photography, video and ethnography, to think about politics. In discussion of politics my students, are more likely to encounter a novel or film in my classes as they are an article from a professional political science journal. Why is that? Because I am interested in having my students see politics as lived human experience rather than as an abstract force or clash of interests which are apart from humanity.



(Fig. 1) Front page of *A HOPE News* Vol. 1 Issue No. 2 Summer 1996

In the second issue of *A HOPE News* (Fig. 1), a collaborative newsletter project my students and I put together working with the homeless community and Hospitality

House (a non-profit organization working with homeless people) a poem was featured on the front page by a homeless man named Richard. The poem titled, “A Call for Help” read:

I didn't know
It was a call
for help.
When I pulled those crosses up.
The care-taker came running
then the priest.
“Why did you do this?!”
“I don't know why.”
I had come down from the east
to start a new life.
It was May.
Lived outside
Under the foundations
of a broken down house.
Cleaned the flea market
when it closed.
Couldn't say why
I pulled those tiny crosses
Up. Felt dead inside.
The police were called.
Sentenced
To thirty-eight days
in jail.
I wasn't crazy
I was tired.
Needed help.
Didn't know
how
to
ask.
Out of this
I built a new life.
A lot has changed.

Poems like, “A Call for Help” which is the result of a shared community service learning experience have much to teach us about politics from the bottom up and from a political theory perspective. Who is Richard, the narrator of the poem? What does his story teach us about the nature of citizenship, inequality and power in contemporary society? What were the little crosses Richard pulled up and why? (The crosses where

symbolic markers, a speech act if you like, reminding the public of the church’s “pro-life” position on abortion). How might Richard’s act of “vandalism” be read a call for help as well as justice? What role did the criminal sanction play in this poem? Was Richard crazy? How might mental states be contingent on political and social contexts? What might Richard’s story teach us about the nature of the civil society and social contract theory? How is Richard’s life changing? What role do non-profits play in that change? What responsibility, if any, does government have to citizens like Richard? On the inside page of the newsletter a quote from Rousseau read, “The whole less one part is not the whole.” In class we discuss the implications of Rousseau’s insight for Richard’s story and the nature of community. We discuss what is realistic to expect and what is idealistic to hope for in politics and public policy.



(Fig. 2) Front page *A Hope News* Vol 1 No. 1

In the first issue of *A Hope News* people like Lena whose photograph and story was featured, on the front page (Fig. 2), again, taught students to think about the role of non-profits in our society today. After an initial discussion of the responsibilities of

government, students who helped put the issue together and students who read the newsletter in preparation for their own newsletter projects, began to ask questions concerning the deregulation of the poor and whether or not civil society has the capacity to respond to the nation's homeless poor. From these discussions and the reading of Robert Putnam on "social capital" and civic engagement, students see their community service learning work from a wider political perspective. Students began to see how community partnerships and civic engagement could contribute to the building of a better community. But first students, especially students studying political science, had to see the connection between field work and service learning and the study of government and politics. Students in studying political science had to learn or better yet, be given permission to see the connection between individual lives and the fundamental questions of politics and political theory.



(Fig. 3) Still photo of Dwight from *A Hope News* v.1 no.1

As Dwight, an African American homeless man (Fig. 3) explained in this issue of *A Hope News*: "It's important to recognize others can help: government, friends, the church or synagogue, but first they have to believe the homeless person is a human being. A person worth working with...The myth is the homeless person is something less than us." Dwight's point about being less than "us," again, raised profound questions concerning the nature of community and political representation.

Initially, the use of the newsletter format was a sort of "add on" in my classes in American government and political thought. I would work with a small number of interested students (one-to-three a semester), often outside of class assigning Independent Study Research designation for course credit. In the spring of 2006, I initiated my first

special topics course, “Civic Engagement in Community” in which the writing of collaborative newsletters were at the heart of the course (Fig.4). The results were promising but mixed. Let me explain.



POLS 373:Civic Engagement in Community & Community Lab class. Spring 2006 UNCA Asheville.

Rather than working one newsletter as a class, I divided the class into four community service learning project teams. Each team was assigned to work with a non-profit organization in town on the creation of a newsletter. The class met twice a week for seventy-five minutes (3 credit hours) and once a week for a community lab (1 credit hour) and workshop hour. In addition to covering issues of newsletter production, the majority of the course was spent in a traditional manner closely reading a variety of texts drawn from literature, philosophy, anthropology and political theory. Despite the ample class room time devoted to the coverage of assigned readings, not enough time was spent, particularly in the early weeks of the course on technical production issues (for example, how to use publisher software and digital cameras) and the design and development of

newsletter story lines. As result students were left too much on their own in the beginning of the development of newsletter articles. This was not all “bad”. I told students in the beginning of the course that they were first to “get to know” the agency they were working with and to build trusting relations. Students volunteered from one-to-three hours a week (or more) at the beginning of the semester and these volunteer hours steadily increased over the course of the semester as students got to know their agencies and work on the newsletters. In the end, based on my review of student journals, it was not uncommon for students to spend an estimated five to twenty hours outside of class at their agency and/or with fellow project members as they worked to complete their newsletter assignments. This community service time was in addition to the time spent on the more traditional class readings and assignments for the course (as I wanted to ensure the course continued throughout to have a solid basis academically).

In the end four newsletters were produced (Figs. 5 through 8). These newsletters are: (Fig. 5) *Many Voices one Vision* (a newsletter that reported on the work and people of the Emma Family Resource Center, a non-profit that works in a low income, economically diverse section of town), (Fig. 6) *Life House Alive* (which reported on an independent living center for people living with mobility disabilities), (Fig 7) *The Western Informer* (in this case, the materials collected by students, including interviews with clients, were incorporated into an already existing newsletter of Western Alliance Center for Independent Living, a non-profit that works in the area of advocacy, education and support of the disabled community) and (Fig. 8) *Homeless Not Hopeless!* (a student generated newsletter that feature stories and information for and by homeless women at the Room at the Inn, a homeless shelter program organized by community churches.) All four newsletters featured interviews, calendars, upcoming events and stories profiling major issues of concern to their community. For example, *Homeless Not Hopeless!*, highlighted issue of violence toward homeless woman and city efforts to come up with a new homeless initiative. *Many Voices on Vision*, focused on community efforts to work with city and county officials to lay and repair sidewalks in their neighborhood, while both *Life House Alive* and *Western Informer* made use of life histories and photography

to explore issues of disability identity and the need for greater access to city and county transportation.



(Fig. 5) *Many Voices, One Vision*



(Fig. 6) *Life House News*



(Fig. 7) *The Western Informer*



(Fig. 8) *Homeless, Not Hopeless!*

In reviewing student papers and comments for all of these projects it is clear that much was learned in terms of a better understanding of community, especially as it relates to issues of diversity and power and powerlessness. One student wrote, “During

my experience at Emma, I learned from listening to people in the community that an individual's economic status is not purely a result of their actions and behaviors but that social forces bigger than any one person's effort can act as a real barrier to their getting ahead in society." Students also reported that the readings helped them better understand the issues of human suffering as it relates to the building of better communities. But quite frankly, the connection to the formal questions of political theory were not always as clearly recognized and articulated in their written assignments. In part, that is my shortcoming as a teacher in not always being as explicit as I might in terms of making the link between political theory and community service learning and it is an area that I need to think through more carefully and clearly. For while I may "get" the connection between Aristotle's belief that an individual living in isolation of a *polis* is either less than a person or more than a God, the notion that classic works of political theory can truly inform the direction of student work in the field is not always clear. While there is now a growing literature on the benefits of community service learning in terms of a greater sense of student efficacy and understanding of politics, how specific works of political theory can be used in the field as both a kind of guide to qualitative research and a lenses through which to view of normative questions still needs work. In this effort, I plan to teach, "Civic Engagement in the Community" once again, in the Fall of 2007.

In closing, I would like to quote the political theorist Michael Sandel who has written in a 1996 article, entitled, "America's Search for A New Public Philosophy":

The global media and markets that shape our lives beckon us to a world beyond boundaries and belonging. But the civic response we need to master these forces, or at least to contend with them, are still to be found in places and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities that situate us in the world and give our lives their moral particularity. *The task for politics now is to cultivate these resources, to repair the civic life on which democracy depends*" (emphasis added, *Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1996:74)

It is my concern, that in a Post 9/11 world, when story and mutual understanding are needed more than ever, they are being replaced by a public philosophy based on "us" versus "them". The result is that even at the local level, it is increasingly difficult to overcome fear of the other and engage our students (and colleagues) in ways that truly

make a difference, while at the same time contributes to a meaningful, non-cynical understanding of politics as a shared human experience.

Coda: Currently I am working with one of my students, Bret Dodge on what will be a bilingual edition of the *Emma Source* (Fig. 9) and an undergraduate research project that uses the insights of political theory to explore political spaces in unexpected places.



(Fig. 9) Front page mockup of *Emma Source*