EMPLOYING CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN COLLEGE TEACHING DESIGNS

David L. Palmer and Christina Standerfer

Abstract. Scholars recently have called for a more civic-based approach to education. In this article, we report on the use of a civic participation exercise in a large public speaking class. The assignment guides students to employ concepts from the course to organize a community event designed to productively affect a specific civic cause. Gaining membership in local communities inspires students to mobilize course concepts to meet the goals of these communities.

Student civic engagement is gaining status as both a method and a purpose of liberal arts education. The steady growth of service learning and civic instruction signals the concerted effort to bind education to social institutions—public, private, and civic (Lisman 1998). Recent university-based studies assessing the quality of student civic engagement reflect a growing desire to connect higher education to the civic sphere (Kuh 2001). The recent focus on civic instruction raises important questions, notably, how and to what extent should educators guide students to participate in civil society? In this article, we seek to offer partial answers to these questions.

One method used to teach the liberal arts infuses civic engagement into the curriculum. Teachers design course assignments as curriculum-based guidelines for student participation in the civic order. Having students act as citizens encourages them to embody—rather than merely wade through—the ideas they study. Benjamin Barber (1984), an advocate of this approach, remarks, “give people some significant [civic] power and they will quickly appreciate the need for knowledge, but foist knowledge on them without giving them responsibility and they will display only indifference” (234). In the spirit of Barber, we invite educators to consider the value of developing student civic agency in their teaching designs.

Employing civic participation in college instruction enriches the practices of both education and democracy. In this article, we report on the use of a civic participation assignment in a large public speaking course. The project requires students to employ course ideas to organize civic events that they design and implement. The assignment calls on educators to adapt their curriculum to the practices of democracy.

Why Employ Civic Forms of Education?

A standard criticism of liberal education is that it nurtures the individual over the public—despite its claims to do the opposite. In a liberal system, the work of the commonwealth tends to give way to the enterprises of the individual, and the citizenry is reduced to the individual rituals of government, voting, and patriotism. One outcome of liberal education can be found in the deep sense of detachment from civic life reported by both students and the general populace (Cone, Cooper, and Hollander 2001; Hahn 2001).

As the university reshapes itself in service to the private sector while depending on the liberal arts to import civic values, attention should be focused on how to best envision citizenship education. We find the traditional liberal view of citizenry to be limited and believe that curriculum designs should seek to cultivate a participatory democracy. In the words of the Kettering Foundation (Boyte, Barber, and Marshall 1994), civic education should strive to create a democracy whose politics is our common public work: where citizens are as prudent
in deliberation as we expect our representatives to be, where public problem solving takes the place of private complaint, where all give life to liberty, and rights are complemented by responsibilities that make them real. (6)

Participatory education recognizes that the skills and theories taught in the liberal arts can be mobilized to address the needs of the civic sphere.

Requiring students to participate in civic life can be an effective teaching method. Civic education accentuates community responsibility and democratic participation. Studies indicate that combining civics and education creates effective forums for applied knowledge, enhances social-issue awareness, and strengthens motivation to learn (Jarosz and Johnson-Bogart 1996). The civic assignment outlined in this article requires students to develop productive ties between their personal interests and the civic life. The assignment requires students to examine their own social interests, locate relevant local and national projects, and organize community events. We find through this assignment that students are passionate about civic issues but seldom are encouraged to pursue their interests or develop the skills of effective participation. The civic participation assignment, which shares attributes with the service-learning model, is designed to provide the resources students require to discover exciting identities and challenging projects in the civic forum.

The Civic Participation Project

A course in public speaking taught at the University of Northern Colorado functions as a case study by which to explore the civic assignment. The course, which serves four to five hundred students each semester, is taught by David Palmer and six to eight graduate teaching assistants. The class is divided into one large lecture and two recitations per week. Assistants teach the recitations, which consist of twenty-five students each.

Traditional public speaking courses outline the theoretical and practical approaches of public address. The guiding model is speaker-to-audience-oratory. Teaching designs focus on speech research, composition, and delivery techniques. The typical assessment framework consists of standard content tests and four or five in-recitation speaking assignments. Traditional designs do not require students to connect the course directly to the public sphere. The civic assignment, which replaces one of the standard speeches, requires that each student engage a specific social cause and organize a public speaking event that advances the interests of the cause. The guiding model is speaker-conducting-community-deliberation. Teaching designs focus on helping the students mobilize course material to realize the goals of their public events.

The civic assignment is introduced early in the term and is completed in four stages: exploration, navigation, direct action, and reflection. A revised civic-based curriculum is designed to assist students through each phase of the project. Formal assessment of the assignment occurs in the last phase, when students analyze their project and present it to their classmates. Students complete an assignment reflection form at the end of the project.

Phase One: Exploration

In the exploratory phase, students examine social issues that interest them. The purpose of this phase is to have students think about social causes not merely as topics of interest but as community-based projects that require their service to prosper. The focus of activity in this phase is student research and the guided discussion of social issues.

From the outset, students are labeled “citizens” and are encouraged to think about the public speaking curriculum as a set of practical tools for civic engagement. A menu of topics and resources is provided in the syllabus, and instructors help students identify a variety of social causes. Students explore the Internet and reference materials and are given class time to discuss their findings. Based on their research, students must choose a specific social issue with which they will become directly involved. Popular topics include the environment, race-based policies, domestic and sexual abuse, and health and free speech issues. Students submit a brief description of the topic, its history, and its potential for local involvement for the instructor to review.

Having students view social causes as forums for participation prompts them to think about civic issues in different terms than those to which they are accustomed. The civic sphere is presented to them as a forum with opportunities for participation rather than as the detached subject of academic analysis. Helping students identify civic causes about which they care and in which they want to be involved creates opportunities for instructors to explore with them the challenges of civic participation. “[The civic project] got me thinking about things that were really important to me and that I valued,” one student noted. “It allowed me to ‘come out of my shell’ and reveal my values to a group in society.”

Phase Two: Navigation

In the navigation phase, students connect their interests to a specific civic group. The purpose of this phase is to have students involve themselves in communities of people who are (or can be) organized to act on their civic interests. The focus of activity is monitored student participation in local projects connected to their selected topics.

Armed with a host of resources from the course and their research, students examine national trends and local organizations. They are encouraged to think about civics as activities wherein groups of people act together toward common social goals. Many students contact established advocates in the field to inquire about avenues of participation. As students seek out forums for involvement, they tend to find communities of people receptive to their service. Students often are surprised to learn that they can access participation forums so easily. Those who are interested in teenage suicide, issues with the elderly, or domestic violence, for example, tend to quickly locate local forums for active involvement. “I learned that it is so easy to get involved, that there is so much information out there, and that if you want to volunteer and help out with basically anything, people will gladly let you,” one student wrote.

Students are required to spend at least one hour per week outside of class participating in local projects tied to their selected issue and to report regularly to instructors on the status of their involve-
ment. Getting involved in the civic arena requires legwork (contacting people, identifying projects, and traveling to local sites), and many students are anxious about going into the field. Instructors encourage incremental involvement and help students contact representatives of local communities. Students who cannot locate local projects tied to their area of interest are directed to organize discussion-action groups of interested friends, family, and community members. Student-initiated groups, which make up about one-third of the projects, require students to organize their own community-based action forums.

To complete the navigation phase, students are required to participate in a specific local project for four to six weeks. The goal is to have each student gain a sense of membership within a local community that acts on the selected issue. Discovering groups of people who share their civic interests guides students to think about the idea of community in new and empowering ways. For example, a student interested in child care joined a local cooperative that provides clothing and blankets to infants in crisis. Her experiences led her to marshal her extensive network of family and friends to donate time, money, and materials to the organization. For many students, the experience of community has been limited to family, friends, and, possibly, church. This assignment invites them to envision community in broader civic terms.

Phase Three: Direct Action

In the direct action phase, students design and orchestrate any type of talk-centered community event that productively affects their selected civic issue. The focus of activity for this phase is the student design and implementation of a community event in which public deliberation is the centerpiece. The purpose of this phase is to have students employ course concepts that facilitate the goals of their community project. A student’s action base need not be located within a local organization, but, instead, it can be organized in spaces that they select. Thus, students might choose not only to speak at local organizations but also to orchestrate community teach-ins, hold formal debates, or arrange town meetings with local representatives.

Once students have identified the type of event they will facilitate, they work with their instructor to plan the public function. Students then design a rationale that describes the event and its purpose. The content of the speaking event must relate to the purpose of the civic cause (for example, to reduce domestic violence or increase voter registration). Planning civic events presents students with a challenging task. For many, creating a speech forum is the first time they have been required to engineer a community project. As students labor to organize the function, they begin to think about citizenship as a set of practices that require responsibility and collective decision making. “The project gave me a push to actually take action and get people involved in volunteering,” one student observed.

Combining the theories of public address and the practices of civic action helps students apply what they are learning in class to problems they care about and want to solve. Students are required to select four specific ideas from the curriculum that will enhance the purpose of their event. The course material provides the menu of options. Public speaking strategies for informative speaking, argument design, and audience analysis are reviewed. With instructor assistance, these ideas are chosen carefully and woven strategically into the speech event plan. For example, a student interested in increasing voter registration organized a community forum to address the issue. The group designed and implemented an informational campaign that employed persuasive techniques to attract potential voters. Another student, who initiated a local AIDS awareness teach-in with members of his fraternity, combined fear appeals with problem-solution techniques to convince his audience about the benefits of abstinence and safe sex.

Directing a community to discuss and act on social issues poses unique challenges for students. This project constitutes the first time (for most) that they have been responsible for facilitating community deliberation. Productive deliberation consists of helping others identify the relevant facts, tease out the pressing issues, and weigh the costs and benefits of potential solutions. Here, as Parker (1996) points out, “discussion is prominent in the curriculum not only as an instructional method but as a subject matter and as a form of democratic action” (197). Orchestrating public discussion requires students to think about public speaking in more community-based terms than does the traditional curriculum. Standard speech techniques are transformed to encompass the practices required of collective deliberation. “I was able to touch people in my audience by sharing with them my passion,” a student commented. “I provided [them] with valuable resources and information they could use to be active in the community.”

The speech event is the nucleus of the civic assignment. Students are given the opportunity to invent their own form of direct action that is designed to have a productive effect on the civic sphere. The event brings together curriculum goals and student agendas within the community. With few exceptions, the speech events are positive and memorable experiences, as students guide a community to effect positive social outcomes. One student interested in teaching health issues to elementary students assisted a teacher in a local school for five weeks prior to instructing the students about proper nutrition. Gaining a sense of membership in the elementary class inspired her to employ informative techniques from the course to personalize health regimens for each student.

Phase Four: Reflection

In the reflection phase, students analyze their project and present it to their classmates. The purpose of this phase is to have students reflect on their work and teach others about their experiences. The focus of activity is the preparation and professional presentation of an analysis of a civic project. Because critical reflection helps students develop their ideas about how the course is tied to civic action, the reflection phase is vital to the assignment. The reflection phase also is the stage in which student projects are formally assessed. The syllabus includes a model of the reflective presentation and the criteria for its evaluation. Students are assessed on the quality of their presentation, the richness of the project narrative, and the depth of content analysis. Students
submit a formal outline of the reflection to the instructor for review.

Two primary areas of discussion guide the reflection: a narrative of the student’s project and an analysis of the course concepts employed during the speaking event. Students design a narrative that outlines their motive for involvement, steps taken to connect to the community, the type and purpose of the speaking event, and a description of the event. Stories concerning how students labored with others to complete the project are highlighted. One learning-disabled (LD) student created a discussion forum at her high school resource center to share the challenges and triumphs of her college experience. The event functioned to inspire and equip other LD students to explore the possibility of attending a university. Narratives such as these teach other students how civic projects are productively advanced through public deliberation.

The reflection requires an analysis of the utility value of the course concepts that were employed in the speaking event. Students describe what strategies they chose and why, how the strategies were integrated into the event, and the impact that they had. Descriptions of how the concepts were (or were not) useful to the purpose of the event are highlighted. Student descriptions of how curriculum ingredients were employed reinforce ideas discussed throughout the term. For example, a student interested in drunk driving issues mobilized a group to offer a free late-night taxi service for the community. The group worked together to organize and advertise its service. As they constructed the advertisements, they employed audience analysis and persuasive techniques that are staple topics in public speaking. The student’s presentation served to ground the abstract notions of audience and persuasion often found in the text and in the classroom. Reflecting on the utility of course concepts helps students envision how the practices of public speaking can be applied to collective civic action. “I learned the importance of emotional appeals through the personal experiences and stories I wove into my speech,” one student observed.

Based on student instruction, all participants build a catalog of civic activities and strategies for engagement. Peer instruction based on lived experiences lends credibility to both the information and the assignment. Class discussions that follow the presentations often are rich with dialogue about civic involvement. The final presentation is a successful feature of the project. Students often are excited about their accomplishments and ideas, and their emotions spill over into their presentation.

Crafting Student-Citizens

The civic sphere can be an effective forum for merging the practices of teaching and learning. The participation exercise outlined here is designed both to cultivate skillful public speakers and to enrich the democratic civic sphere. Each semester, between four and five hundred student-citizens from this course engage in social projects in ways that vivify the links between the curriculum and the forum of civil affairs. The assignment guides students away from their perceived roles as passive receptors of education and encourages them to construct a productive civic life. The following sections examine how employing the civic project affects learning outcomes for students and the community.

Student and Course Outcomes

Infusing course resources into the civic sphere enhances the value of the curriculum. Learning outcomes of the project are consistent with studies that indicate that civic-based instruction produces higher levels of comprehension, better test scores, and increased commitment to lifelong learning (Lisman 1998). Students understand the concepts they employ in the civic project in more practical and thorough terms than they would have if their educational activities had been confined to the classroom. They articulate (in the reflection and on exams) pragmatic and detailed descriptions of the practices they employed during their speaking event. Enhanced comprehension is the result of applying course ideas to the practices of civic deliberation. We believe student-citizens will continue to carry with them the public speaking techniques of informing, persuading, and deliberating as a result of having applied these concepts directly to problems in the civic forum. This outcome might explain why many students remain actively committed to their cause following the completion of the course.

A catalog of local organizations, potential civic projects, and contacts is now included in the syllabus. Selected videotapes of model student assignments provide a resource library of projects for class viewing and analysis. Students and instructors also have been integral to the ongoing construction of a Web site that identifies public speaking resources and civic participation forums. These resources help students analyze a variety of issues, steps, and strategies involved in developing civic projects.

Student input concerning the project is important. Students claim, overwhelmingly, that the project is work intensive, yet worthwhile. The assignment encourages them to reevaluate their ideas about civic responsibility, community, and education. Many students disclose that the civic project encourages them to take risks they might not have taken alone. “The most positive point in the civic participation project is that a class of 400 was all responsible to take a step most would be scared to take otherwise, and in so doing, have started on a journey never imagined,” one student noted. “I was not crazy about the ‘idea’ of this project, but really realized that it made a difference—and that made me feel good,” another participant wrote. Students suggest that the project affects how they view their role in civic society. “I learned that I have the power to persuade and the ability to have my voice heard in the world,” claimed one student. “I can stand up for what I believe in and be able to express myself through public speaking.”

Student comments reflect the idea that their commitment to the project increases as they become more involved in their selected (or created) communities. We believe that increased dedication to the project is the result of sequencing student participation in the community for a period of time prior to having them design their speaking project. Students subsequently are encouraged to gain a sense of community membership before they mobilize course concepts to organize their direct action event. This sequencing tactic addresses the challenge of student motivation. Traditional education situates
student learning prior to real-world application, a practice Dewey (1985) labels “objective teaching.” Students are taught to gain a technical understanding of concepts prior to translating the ideas into purposeful action. A negative outcome of objective teaching is that—more often than not—it fails to help students gain a sense of ownership of the material they study (Barber 1984). The civic exercise reverses traditional sequencing by having students first gain membership in a community as a strategy for motivating them and then employ course material to meet the community’s needs. As students gain ownership of their civic interests, they seek out ideas that enhance their capacity to advocate viewpoints and develop productive community projects. Students involved in civic communities often are eager to solicit course material that will advance the goals of the community.

Teaching assistants in the course disclose that the civic project forces them to employ more practical methods of teaching than are required for the traditional speech assignments. Monitoring student participation in the civic sphere requires instructors to explain course concepts in ways that are pragmatic to the real-world goals that students are striving to achieve. Course assistants carry with them the strategies and lessons learned from the civic project.

The Participatory Citizenship Outcome

A committed and skilled citizenry is, in large part, a product of effective education (Guarasci and Cornwell 1997). A primary goal of civic instruction is to translate private interests into public modes of action. One way to achieve this goal is to have students participate in public life. The civic assignment encourages students to identify social projects, engage others who actively share interest in those projects, and forge advocacy and change through deliberation. As a result, students’ capacity to engage in constructive dialogue and community building is enhanced. Through the challenges they face, students begin to develop the skills needed to organize events, facilitate deliberative discussion, and mobilize community resources. Students of the project organize political rallies and fundraising drives, assist missing children and domestic violence organizations, and provide vital community services. Their accomplishments reflect a vibrant participatory spirit among the student body.

Students of the civic project learn to contribute to the formulation of the public good in a variety of ways. In broad terms, students gain a sense of ascendance to the democratic tradition as they enlist in the historical struggle to sustain the rights and responsibilities of democracy. In more concrete terms, the project encourages students to explore their capacity as civic leaders. As a result of their civic project, many students are enlisted by members of the community to contribute to related causes. As students move into primary organizations, they carry with them the skills needed to teach others the vocabulary and practices of democratic deliberation. “The project gives people a chance to be a role model,” one student asserted. “It made me think about how to teach others how to be involved.”

The civic assignment guides students to conceptualize the world around them in different terms than does traditional liberal education. As Pam Heath (1999) argued, civic-based instruction leads students to realize that citizenship is more a practice than a status. Student civic engagement translates the abstract idea of democracy found in sound bites and textbooks into tangible lived experiences. The civic assignment articulates citizenship in terms of social rights and responsibilities. The bitter challenges and precious successes of participatory labor are forged through hard work and experiences that leave lasting impressions.

The Civic Public Outcome

A curriculum that employs civic action not only serves educators and students but also benefits our communities. The priorities of liberal education are realigned to focus student attention on participatory citizenry. The civic forum of Colorado (and beyond) benefits from student-initiated projects that enrich the civic infrastructure. Students who have experienced how to advance social causes are more attuned to the needs of civic communities. As they move into various organizations, they are equipped to change existing conditions and assist members in the challenges of self-governance. Students build valuable networks that often are sustained following the project, bonds that, for many, will be a lifelong source of civic community and a model of how to become active participants in the civic life.

A revealing outcome of this civic project is its success in light of a heavy student enrollment. Despite large student numbers, instructors rarely encounter instances of students not being able to locate or assist civic communities. Indeed, the opposite is true. Students express surprise at the range of civic forums that are receptive to their services. The project teaches students not only how to engage civic groups but also the extent to which these civic communities require dedicated service. The groups in which students participate depend on citizen contributions. In an era of government institutions that often seem distant and impersonal, civic organizations provide vital forums for meaningful and collaborative participation in the body politic (Guarasci and Cornwell 1997).

The civic sphere is edified to the extent that each discipline shoulders the responsibility of reclaiming the public mission. Strong democracies consist of populations that are equipped for collective civic action. Civic-based instruction marshals the resources of education to the needs of the democratic arena. A broad civic curriculum functions to teach the populace to act less as a group of individuals and more as a citizenry.

Conclusion

Civic education is our greatest tool for achieving the prospects of democracy. Much has been written over the past decade concerning the promise of democratic education. These theories must be put into practice and tested. Turning civic education into concrete collaborative practices entails challenges in course design—especially in light of an education system that values students as consumers over students as citizens. Educators who value democracy can mobilize their teaching resources to the projects of civil society. It is wise to remember that democratic action without education is misguided, and education without action is inert.

Teachers who want to integrate civic assignments into their teaching designs have many resources at their disposal.
National organizations such as the Center for Civic Education, Participate America, and Democracy Now are available to assist instructors willing to translate their teaching practices into the body politic. Clearly, not all programs or students are ready for the challenges and responsibilities of civic-based instruction. Yet, given supportive teaching staffs, projects such as the one outlined here are not only possible but also effective and enjoyable. Civic education is one of the noblest causes in teaching. Not until the project of democratic education is undertaken by all disciplines will the promises of an active and healthy democracy begin to emerge.

Key words: civic education, public speaking, community service

REFERENCES