

Waiting for the Bus: Awakening a Social Justice Sensibility through Communication Activism

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Abstract:

Engaging youth in civic life yields long term benefits for meaningful participation to sustain our democracy. In this essay, we report on how a critical service-learning model of communication activism inspired university and high school students to secure more area bus benches and shelters. We suggest and demonstrate that improving quality deliberative practices can awaken a social justice sensibility in our youth so that they can adequately address the political, economic and cultural forces at work in the community.

Article:

Engaging youth in civic life yields long term benefits for meaningful participation to sustain our democracy—to reinvigorate communities, to introduce young people to the important communal values of service, and to tackle the conditions of persistent inequality. Language and the actions that follow in such a curriculum shape students' understanding of democracy to "...emphasize human connectedness and facilitate redescription, transformation and liberation" (Pestana & Swartz, 2008, p. 92). We believe communication activism, defined as "intervening directly to assist groups and communities to secure social reform" (Frey, 2006, p. 44) is a vital means by which to connect students to the community in ways that illuminate the possibilities for a more socially just world. Indeed, "communication matters because our lives, in various manners, are created, conditioned, helped, accentuated, and positioned by the decisions we make about, and through, our communicative practices" (Swartz, 2006, p. 11).

To introduce students to community concerns and forms of democratic participation requires cooperative action by citizens, government officials, and businesses. Thus, service-learning courses are taking on an increasingly important role in the academy and in the field of communication studies more specifically (Jovanovic, 2003). We know that service-learning is an effective pedagogy (Simons & Cleary, 2006) but not all service-learning is the same. Many service-learning programs refrain from exploring the political landscape, examining the genesis of unequal resources, and considering the emancipatory discourses that lead students to question the systemic, institutional, and policy conditions that give rise to the need for their service in the first place (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich & Corngold, 2007). Communicating service as a political act leads to social change and requires that faculty assist students in developing the competencies to not only engage with community partners, but also to organize citizens, elected officials, and civic groups (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010).

In this essay, we document how a critical service-learning model of communication activism inspired non-partisan political action (Mitchell, 2008). The goal of the program was to "contribute to social changes that make communities more self-sufficient" (Schwartzman, 2007, p. 20) so that ultimately the partnership activity could be sustained by the high school students themselves and the city in which they reside. More specifically, we discuss how university students partnered with high school students to increase civic literacy and eventually to focus their collective effort on securing more bus benches and shelters. Using dialogue circles, research skills, and public speaking and writing projects, the university-high school partnership yielded material results for the community, and heightened civic and advocacy skills for the students. A sequenced and developmental

curricular plan for civic action can inspire our youth to reclaim their voices as vital contributing factors to their education and their community well-being. We believe the practices and insights offered here will prove useful to other K-12- university partnerships that also involve nonprofit and corporate community partners.

We begin by reviewing some of the political struggles in public education, before briefly examining the theoretical underpinning for a social justice sensibility in service- learning programming. We then bring into focus the communicative acts in this service- learning project, highlighting quality deliberative practices and ways in which communication can activate youth civic participation. We conclude with a call to action for more teaching and scholarship to promote and describe creative pedagogies to prepare youth for democratic engagement in their communities.

A Low-Performing High School Reveals the Struggles in Public Education

Since 2000, the North Carolina State Supreme Court has declared not once, but twice, that all of our state's children have a constitutional right to a sound basic education that includes the tools, instruction, and motivation to participate in a democracy (see *Leandro v. The State of North Carolina*, 1997). This is, of course, consistent with John Dewey's (1933) claim that public education in the classroom is an important step to preparing young people for meaningful civic action in the community—and the route to ensuring our democracy remains strong.

Unfortunately, a combination of forces in North Carolina's educational system have conspired to curtail our youth's ability to acquire the necessary cognitive achievement, literacy proficiency, social and emotional development, and critical thinking skills needed for today's active citizen. High stakes testing, inadequately funded federal mandates, stretched state budgets, dissatisfied teachers, behavioral challenges, and overcrowded schools have percolated for so long that the results have been predictable, if not disastrous. There are 50 chronically low-performing high schools in the state (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, April 2007) including the one where our critical service-learning program was established. At that high school, 55 percent of the students have failed to satisfactorily pass state achievement tests for five consecutive years. North Carolina Superior Court Judge H. Manning has commented on this condition, going so far at times to call the current state of education "academic genocide" that leaves many children without the necessary tools and resources to participate fully in society.

The infrastructure in our schools that is simply inadequate to handle the complexity of demands young people face today parallels in some ways the deficits in infrastructure in our cities. For example, with reference to public transportation that many of the high school students and their families rely upon, there are only 70 bus shelters and an additional 57 benches at the more than 1100 bus stops in the city. In other words 94% of bus stops do not have bus shelters and 87% do not have benches for people to sit on. Additionally, 81% of the bus stops are non-accessible to people with disabilities.

Dialogue to Community Action

Since 2007, university students in communication studies courses designated as service-learning and intentionally designed to foster a social justice sensibility (Wang & Jackson, 2005) have worked with minority students in the low-performing high school to boost civic awareness there and importantly, prompt civic action. In coordination with classroom teachers, we developed newspaper reading activities, writing assignments, and weekly discussions to introduce the high school students to pressing social issues in their community. University students who themselves are receiving instruction in companion communication courses, probed with high school students a variety of philosophical questions surrounding social issues, such as why speaking out is vital to a democracy, how intercultural differences matter in community decision making, and impediments to effective discourse practices. The high school students learned by practicing deliberative speaking skills that foster dialogue, and public speaking skills to enhance their participation at public events coordinated by the college students.

Beginning with the 9th grade class in 2007, we focused on public speaking and interpersonal communication skills. A social change forum brought the city's daily newspaper editorial page editor, an alum of the high school, back to moderate a discussion among students on the impact of technology on friendships, the Obama presidential campaign, and the value of diversity in schools, to name a few of the broad topics. More intimate conversations focused on gun-control, sex education policies in schools, and the persistence of racial violence in Southern communities.

A year later, in 2008, our program shifted gears slightly to work with 10th graders on speaking and writing projects. Coordinated through English classes, the university service-learning program revolved around the use of newspaper articles to provide the impetus for in-class conversations at the high school each week. Both university and high school students were particularly engaged by conversations regarding domestic violence and relationships, national drug policies, and access to healthy foods in their own cafeterias. From there, timely and evocative writing assignments were given to the high school students and graded by their teachers.

More recently, in 2009, our program sought to move 11th grade students toward community action. The students (some of whom participated in the 9th or 10th grade programs) were guided by the university students from talking about the news, to gaining an appreciation of civic engagement as a necessary condition for democratic engagement, to practicing important research and advocacy skills. The focus of their collective effort was on securing more bus benches and shelters for a community where few of those amenities are available for bus riders.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Practically and theoretically, the three year long service-learning program we developed and report on here relied on dialogic ethics theory (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986, 1993; Buber, 1947, 1970; Levinas, 1969, 1980), democratic theory (Dewey, 1916, 1933, 1938); and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000, 2004; Giroux, 2005; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; hooks, 1994), to invigorate new forms of communicative practice that facilitate the connections between the school and the broader community within which it exists. There is little doubt that we continue to live in an age of communicative crisis (Arnett, 1986) in which increasing polarization in our communicative lives has led to misunderstanding, conflict, ideological entrenchment, and social division within our communities. We believe these divisions are at the heart of the problematic status of the high school, but also stand as the best opportunity to begin the process of walking the "narrow ridge" (Arnett, 1986; Buber, 1947) that separates people in the communities they inhabit. The ethical phenomenology of alterity proposed by Emmanuel Levinas (1969) set into conversation with the dialogic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, 1993) and Martin Buber (1947, 1970) guided our work.

By meeting the high school students where they are, and by teaching our university students how to facilitate insight, understanding, engagement, and community action, grounded in a desire to create change, we sought to develop an ethical- experiential approach to engendering communication activism. We were also acutely aware that we must respect and engage the narrative lives of others, recognizing that our narrative understandings of their concrete life circumstances may not fully mesh with— indeed, may at times be in conflict with their own (Arnett & Arneson, 1999). Of course, we see this potential collision of narratives as a vital opportunity to enter productive dialogue, and to instantiate change. Directly employing dialogue as the primary tool of our critical pedagogy, in the vein of Stewart and Zediker's (2000) notion of dialogue as a "tensional, ethical practice" of "holding my ground" and "letting the other happen," we engaged the voices of these students in ways that the ordinary embedded structures of the public education system do not generally feature or sometimes, allow. Our social action research interests and pedagogical methods evolve from a belief that knowledge of classroom materials and community needs strengthens the value of each and contributes to students' ability to locate themselves as active citizens in our democracy.

Arguing for a Social Justice Sensibility

What we know is that service-learning has many manifestations and applications. Our approach argued for a social justice sensibility to service. Among the themes we explored in our service-learning courses and more

specifically with this project were the paradoxes of participation, the dialectic of standardization and critical engagement, and the discourses of justice that guide communication activism. These themes provide a critical lens into how service-learning can encounter resistance even as it promotes engagement.

The Paradoxes of Participation

High school youth today receive mixed messages. From their teachers and administrators, they find a strict model of control has infiltrated most classrooms through routine, rigid curriculums. At the same time, students are told they can influence change in the world if only they acquire the tools that education affords. As such, they are encouraged to be creative, while operating within a system of rules that someone else ultimately controls. Stohl and Cheney (2001) spoke to these contradictions and tensions in their development of the paradoxes of participation. They identified four different types of paradoxes — structure, agency, identity, and power. Most pertinent to this project is the paradox of structure, which often illustrates how individuals are encouraged to participate as long as they play by someone else's rules.

As part of an activist project, we examined in-school tensions and community-based engagement to reveal how students navigate between polls of participation on their terms and on the terms established by others. For example, during small group discussions at the high school, students repeatedly identified sexual health and sex education as topics that were of great concern to them. However, because conversations about sex are often tightly and strategically controlled at the local district, state, and federal levels, the students' ability to participate creatively in these discussions is very limited. In fact, our university students were asked not to raise that topic again once it had surfaced. The subject matter, teachers and administrators suggested, was too controversial to pursue with the high school students.

The Dialectic of Standardization and Critical Engagement

At the high school where our project is situated, standardization is the operative frame. From mode of dress requirements to classroom instruction to procedures for handling misconduct, students routinely encounter standardized rules and norms for managing their everyday practices. This school, like virtually every other public high school in America today, is pressured to adhere to an unyielding set of expectations, prompted by the No Child Left Behind Act. The cost of such standardization has been the loss of time and energy spent on critical thinking, creative problem solving, and nuanced decision making. A consideration of ethics, or how it is we ought to respond to any given situation, has been all but abandoned.

Our project confronted this educational priority head-on with a different vision of education by engaging students to deconstruct long-held narratives, to consider competing ideologies, and to assert a vision for a more just world. For instance, the 11th graders we encountered concurred—the standard mode of dress adopted for that high school in 2007 (the same year we started our program there) was a policy they wanted to see changed. In our discussions of what could ensue, we explored creative options. "What if..." questions led to a collective response that the students wanted to speak out and express their views to the principal. Nine students wrote letters reflecting their own views and those of their classmates. The students articulated strong arguments for a small change to the standard mode of dress policy by suggesting occasional "casual Fridays." One student wrote, "Taking the time out of our 90 minute instructional period just to discipline a child about dress is time lost being taught." Another student argued, "I believe the standard mode of dress policy is not the answer to stopping fights, to practicing important research and advocacy skills. The focus of their collective effort was on securing more bus benches and shelters for a community where few of those amenities are available for bus riders.

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Not only does the standard mode of dress policy violate our first amendment, but our individuality and creativity is limited as well...Before they instituted this policy, they should have done so in a democratic way by voting that included the parents of our students.

In these examples of the high school students' attempts to advance social change, students adhere to and resist the norms of public school education policies that impact the democratic impulse.

Just as scholar Jason Del Gandio (2008) suggests in his book, *Rhetoric for Radicals*, the students followed a well-established writing plan to assert their views by first selecting the issue about which they felt strongly, then advancing a "hook" or perspective on the issue, before linking that to a thesis, and then writing, editing, and proofing. That is, the students adhered to standard educational practices for writing as they resisted other educational practices used to control their expressions in clothing choices.

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