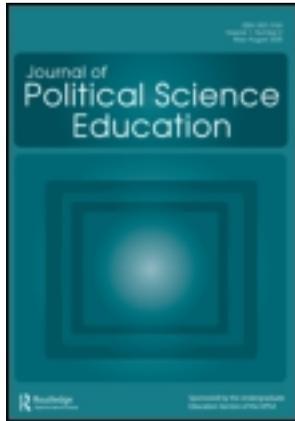


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Educating for Democracy: Reflections From a Work in Progress

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Why are Americans, and young Americans in particular, so turned off to government and politics? And, what can be done to arrest these trends? In this article, I suggest that three primary, and mutually reinforcing, trends, which can be summed up as the “relevance factor,” the “negativity factor,” and the “triumphant market factor,” have conspired to preempt any interest in government and politics on the part of young people. Consequently, these young people do not develop the skills and knowledge that democratic participation requires nor do they see a need to do so. As educators, however, we have a unique opportunity to address these barriers and, thus, to help repair a key aspect of our democratic fabric—the willingness and ability of citizens to participate in the well-being of the society and its political institutions and processes. This article presents a case study of such an effort at Temple University, a large public institution with a diverse student body located in the heart of Philadelphia.

Keywords democracy, experiential learning, political engagement

American democracy is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship.

So began the sobering Brookings Institution Press book, *Democracy at Risk* (Macedo et al. 2005, 1). Coauthored by some of the leading political scientists, the 2005 treatise recaps all of the dismal trends that now populate almost every conversation on the American political system. Summing it up in a sentence, Americans, and particularly younger Americans, are turning away from politics and government in alarmingly high numbers. Sixty-eight percent of 18- to 34-year-olds feel completely disconnected from government, a mere 26% of 15- to 24-year-olds consider “being involved in democracy and voting” as extremely important, and the percent of college freshmen who believe that “keeping up with political affairs is important” was more than halved from 1996–1997 (Gibson 2001).

This attitudinal crisis manifests itself in behavior and knowledge. With the exception of spikes in 1992, 2004, and 2008, voter registration and turnout among 18- to

I would like to thank my colleague Robin Kolodny for persuading me to undertake such a course many years ago. A special thanks to Bernie Mennis for his constructive feedback on an earlier version and to the two anonymous reviewers who provided very helpful comments. Most of all, I want to thank the students who have been part of this ongoing effort for their creativity, commitment, passion, and constructive feedback. I only hope that they have benefitted as much as I have from this course.

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24-year-olds have been steadily declining since 1972, the first year that 18-year-olds were eligible to vote in a presidential election.¹ Voter turnout for this age cohort went from 52% in 1972 to 36% in 2000, the steepest decline for any age group (Lopez and Donovan 2005).² The two primary reasons young people gave for not voting were that they did not believe their votes would make a difference and insufficient information (CIRCLE 2002). These reasons are underscored by the data on the civic knowledge of young people that reveals that they are ill-informed about government and politics. The *Civics Report Card for the Nation*, a report prepared by the National Assessment of Educational Program, revealed that only 27% of twelfth graders were proficient in their civic knowledge.³ In his exhaustive study of political knowledge, Michael Delli Carpini discovered that only 1 in 10 persons between the ages of 18 and 29 could name both of their senators. In each of these categories, results for older cohorts were much more promising.⁴ These trends do not bode well for a democratic society that is allegedly based upon an informed, active, and caring citizenry.

Why are Americans, and young Americans in particular, so turned off to government and politics? And, what can be done to arrest these trends? In this article, I suggest that three primary, and mutually reinforcing, trends, which can be summed up as the “relevance factor,” the “negativity factor,” and the “triumphant market factor,” have conspired to preempt any interest in government and politics on the part of young people. Consequently, these young people do not develop the skills and knowledge that democratic participation requires nor do they see a need to do so. As educators, however, we have a unique opportunity to address these barriers and, thus, to help repair a key aspect of our democratic fabric—the willingness and ability of citizens to participate in the well-being of the society and its political institutions and processes. This article presents a case study of one such effort.

The Unholy Troika: Relevance, Negativity, and the Triumphant Market

Many young people fail to see the relevance of government in their lives or in the lives of the surrounding community. They are unable to link what they perceive to be private or individual issues and problems with governmental activity or inactivity. Based on focus groups with college students from across the country, the National Association of Secretaries of State reported that “few participants could articulate any concrete ways in which government affects them.” Said one Iowa voter, “Most of the issues are for people who own businesses and have families and kids in college and stuff. I mean, it’s not even really related to us”(The New Millenium Project 1999, 19)⁵ This inability to link the particular to larger public decision-making processes may be a function of a lack of knowledge. A study of voting behavior among young Americans revealed that the two most consistent reasons for not voting were a feeling that their votes did not count (26%) and a lack of sufficient information (25%) (CIRCLE 2002). Moreover, a lot of government activity is extremely opaque, making it even more difficult for the average person to comprehend how the activity affects their life. Tax policy is perhaps one of the better examples of the complexity and opacity of the government’s role. How many college students make the connection between changes in tax and budget allocation policies and the rising cost of their tuition bills? Not many. Yet, if government were indeed irrelevant, then powerful economic actors would not spend the billions of dollars that they do on lobbyists and other mechanisms for influencing policy.

Related to the relevance factor is the “negativity factor.” The reputation of government in the United States has been under siege for years. These attacks have

assumed the all too familiar guise of government as “wasteful,” “incompetent,” and “corrupt,” all leading to the firm conclusion that “government is the problem.” Interestingly, the scandals in the private sector (e.g., Enron, Arthur Anderson, Worldcom, Adelphia, Tyco, Allegheny Health Care, and, of course, the recent Wall Street debacle that sent the world economy into a painful downward spiral) have not resulted in similar conclusions about the problematic nature of corporate America. In fact, efforts to impose strong regulatory practices on the financial sector were met with sharp opposition.⁶ A close cousin to the negative views of government is the equally negative view of politics. The very term itself has come to symbolize corruption, back-room deals, and all other forms of illicit behavior that interfere with decent practice. And, these views are particularly prevalent among younger Americans. Zukin et al. reported that in their focus groups with 15-to 18-year-olds, 55% associated the word “politics” with lying, 49% with corruption, and 48% cited it as “boring” (2006). These associations are a far cry from the dictionary definition of politics as “The total complex of relations between people in society” (“Webster,” 1988).

The relevance and negativity factors are bolstered by the “triumphant market factor.” Reification of the market translates into a strong push to privatize as many functions, products, and services as is humanly possible thereby further emasculating government. Working hand-in-hand with privatization is our fascination with the individual as opposed to the collective body. While the myth of “rugged individualism” has always nurtured the American soul, we appear to have gone head over heels for it over the last 30 years. The 1980s ushered in the era of the “entrepreneur” with a vengeance. As our infatuation with personal responsibility, personal gain, and personal salvation soared, the traditional organizational bases of American political, economic, social, and spiritual life (e.g., political parties, labor unions, communities, and religious institutions) waned. This inverse relationship created a vicious cycle with “organizational” life taking a decided back seat to individual expression. The 1960s adage that “the personal is the political” has been turned on its head. The new dictum is “the political is the personal.” The market has replaced the polis as *seemingly* personal problems falsely cry out for customized solutions. The tragic irony of the above trends, of course, is that they further enable powerful economic and other interests to distort government policies in their favor.

Given the almost ubiquitous nature of these three factors (relevance, negativity, and triumphant market), it is hardly surprising that young people lack the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in a democratic society or that they do not perceive any pressing need to acquire them. Moreover, despite all of the talk about the “civic mission of the schools,” it is not clear that formal education has done or is doing a very good job of preparing young people for active roles in a democratic society. From the structure of educational pedagogy, which too often employs the “banking system” or “cold storage” approach, to the materials used in the classroom, formal education has often sent an opposite message to young people.⁷ Rather than help them to develop critical faculties and to solicit their participation, formal methods of education have often stifled both. This stifling is reinforced by the picture that is painted of democracy in the leading textbooks as very passive with only a limited role, at best, for the citizen. In a recent examination of the three major textbooks used in high school civics and social studies classes, Sharareh Frouzesh Bennett made the following observations:

[T]he underlying supposition conveyed through the largely descriptive and unproblematized representation of government institutions is that

the institutions of American democracy manage to operate effectively regardless of citizen participation. . . . The textbooks fail to connect active citizenship to American constitutional democracy. This is especially troublesome because the texts are taught not just as an authority on American government, but as civics texts committed to outlining the range and scope of citizenship in an institutional context. By extending their projects to the latter missions, while offering such limited means or reasons for the necessity of citizen participation, the texts undermine the institutional rationale for active citizenship. (Bennett 2005, 9 and 16)

An Educational Approach to Political Disengagement

Despite the repeated failings of formal education to adequately prepare young people for active participation in a democratic way of life, as educators we have an opportunity to confront the underlying causes of disengagement head on. Through effective pedagogy, we can begin to counter the forces that are discouraging political knowledge, interest, and engagement among our youth. The essential tasks of this pedagogy are philosophical, cognitive, and normative. Philosophically, we need to demonstrate the relevance of government, to recast its image from negative to positive or, at least, to neutral, and to debunk the myths of privatization and the "lone ranger syndrome." Cognitively, the pedagogy should furnish students with the necessary knowledge and skills for operating in a participatory and deliberative society. Students need a working knowledge of how government and institutions operate and how what they do and do not do impacts the lives of individuals, an awareness of the issues at hand and of the mechanisms for and rules governing participation, and an understanding of power and its exercise and accessibility. Equally important are the skills necessary to engage in democratic practice: collection and evaluation of information, effective communication, critical thinking, and debate and deliberation. Normatively, such a pedagogy should inculcate students with the values upon which democratic participation is founded; values that promote equality, respect for and appreciation of diversity, tolerance for different points of view, compromise, teamwork, public regarding behavior, a belief in one's own capacities to influence larger decisions, and trust in the larger system that it will be responsive to such participation.

This list clearly indicates that the kind of education needed to foster the knowledge, to develop the skills, and to instill the values necessary to sustain a democratic society will have to be experiential, empowering, and democratic in nature.⁸ It must be experiential because democratic practice is not a passive activity. In fact, the all too common textbook depictions of American government as a static set of institutions seemingly on autopilot may actually discourage participation in public life (cf. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; McDonnell, Timpane, and Benjamin 2000). It must be empowering because meaningful participation requires citizens who believe that their participation is valued. It is no accident that participation is lowest among those groups who are, or believe themselves to be, the most marginalized in society (racial minorities, poor people, recent immigrants, young people). And, it must be democratic lest it reinforce notions that we do not live in a democratic society. Pretense only heightens cynicism which is a strong link in the chain of increasing disengagement. In short, educating for democracy needs to be a pedagogy that embodies the values it is trying to promote in the learner. And, it must incorporate significant opportunities for reflection in which personal experience is connected to external

Table 1. An educational approach to political disengagement

Problem	Underlying Causes*	Approach	Intended Outcomes
Political Apathy and Disengagement	Perceived irrelevance of government and politics Negative views of government and politics Reification of the market and individual solutions to problems	Pedagogy that is experiential, empowering and democratic	Students develop/acquire the knowledge, skills, and values associated with political and civic engagement
Components -Lack of knowledge		Components Philosophical-to demonstrate relevance of government and to promote an understanding of how it operates Cognitive- to develop the knowledge and skills required for effective civic and political participation in a democracy	Components Understand the dynamic nature of government, how and why it is relevant, and its overriding importance (Knowledge): roles and function of government; mechanisms and rules of participation; power. (Skills): collect and evaluate information; communicate; critical thinking; debate and deliberation
-Weak skills		Normative- to develop values central to democracy	Values: equality, diversity, compromise, teamwork, public regarding behavior, trust
-Private regarding behavior			

*While each cause is powerful in its own right, the three typically interact creating an even greater impact on the behavior and disposition of young people.

activities as well as to larger theory and scholarship. Table 1 provides a graphic representation of the educational approach being suggested here.

What I have outlined is the ideal scenario. Clearly, not every course in the college catalog can conform to these parameters. Course content (e.g., theoretical mathematics) and class size (e.g., very large lectures) may impede such efforts. Nevertheless, there are many courses that can accommodate the ingredients of educating for democracy, in varying degrees. The remainder of this article discusses an ongoing attempt to incorporate some of these ingredients into an undergraduate course, paying particular attention to what worked, what did not work, and the challenges of that effort. The course has been taught six times so there is a richness of data, both quantitative and qualitative, informing the lessons, challenges, and larger themes presented here. The setting for the course is Temple University, a public institution in Philadelphia with a large student body (35,000+) that is racially and economically diverse. The class has ranged in size from 8–23 students. Undoubtedly, class size is critical, but many of the ingredients can be incorporated into larger classes (see below). Moreover, by reflecting on certain practices and how well they worked, the article is intended to stimulate thinking on how we can modify our pedagogy in ways that further the cause of educating for democracy.

Before proceeding, let me address the inevitable criticisms of what I am proposing, namely, the question of whether we should be encouraging political engagement through our teaching. This is certainly a controversial point and there are good arguments to be made on both sides. However, I will come down on the affirmative side since part of the reason why students fail to make a connection between their civic activities and political involvement and do not move from civic or voluntary activities to political engagement is because their education focuses just on the former. Thus, through our seemingly “apolitical” approach, we are helping to shape the political attitudes of our students. And, this shaping is leading them away from the behaviors and values associated with citizenship. My argument is that there is no way of *not* influencing students. Thus, let’s be proactive and use our pedagogical tools to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and values that active citizenship requires. A call for active citizenship is not a call for partisanship. Confusing the two results in pedagogical practices that encourage, often unintentionally and indirectly but no less damagingly, political apathy among our students. Similarly, I am not proceeding on the assumption that all political engagement is good. History provides far too many examples of political activities that were destructive of democracy and, even worse, of lives. But, as Thomas Jefferson so eloquently argued: “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves and if we think [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education” (Padover, 1939, 89).

Political Science Takes to the Streets: An Experiment in Experiential Learning

Background and Objectives

In spring 2005, I developed a new course, *Youth Civic Engagement and the Community*, to provide students interested in working with youth and on policy issues with the understanding, training, and education that such work requires. I have taught the course every year since then making necessary adjustments in the process based on student feedback and our own reflections.⁹ The course is closely aligned with, and uses

as placements for student fieldwork, the programs and community-based activities of the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (UCCP), a grant-funded center that I founded and direct at Temple University. The UCCP “prepares and supports youth and young adults to become confident, effective leaders and collaborates with organizations to create cultures that value and integrate the contributions of youth, thereby building stronger communities” (University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia Mission Statement. www.temple.edu/uccp). This mission is carried out through programming, capacity building, and applied research activities. Through a continuum of after school programs, credit-bearing internships, peer education, and paid employment, the UCCP engages older youth in skill-building and leadership opportunities during their high school years and through their transition to higher education or employment. Programming typically involves small groups of youth (8–15) working collectively on a project they select that has community or social justice implications. Youth conduct research on their issue, frame their message, identify supporters and resources in the community and develop an action-oriented campaign around their issue. Most projects involve a media component such as a documentary or public service announcement. Youth work under the guidance and instruction of Leaders Corps members—college students and older youth who are trained, paid and receive ongoing professional development from the UCCP to facilitate its programs and to assist in its capacity-building activities. Many Leaders Corps members are former program participants. All programming is conducted on Temple University’s campus so that participants have access to faculty, staff, and students thereby increasing their “comfort level” with a university environment and their confidence about pursuing postsecondary education. Many participants go on to two- and four-year colleges.

Initially, the course was intended as a tool for training Temple University students who are members of the UCCP’s Leaders Corps, many of whom repeatedly expressed the need for more training in group facilitation techniques, more knowledge about the topical issues that are raised by the youth, and a better understanding of Philadelphia’s government, politics, and communities.¹⁰ Of necessity, the course is open to all students and has become a major vehicle for recruiting new Leaders Corps members.¹¹ Combining a weekly seminar with an 8- to 10-hour per week internship (field work), the course is designed to help students:

- Develop critical thinking skills and learn how to help youth develop them;
- Acquire basic research and analytical skills;
- Develop/enhance communication and facilitation skills;
- Develop media literacy skills;
- Acquire knowledge of how institutions and larger systems of power work and their impact on specific issues;
- Develop frameworks for examining issues in the community and beyond;
- Develop an understanding of Philadelphia (politics, communities, issues, organizations, resources);
- Develop an understanding of issues pertaining to youth in general and marginalized youth in particular.

Course Pedagogy and Structure

The course is based on certain guiding principles derived from experiential and popular education as articulated by Dewey (1938) and Freire (2001) including

problem posing, situated student-centered learning, and reflection. The course was set up to be as nonhierarchical as possible within, of course, the inevitable confines of my responsibility for grading students and the prior socialization of both the students and me. In-class group activities and small- and large-group discussions constitute the dominant mode of instruction. Constructive criticism is encouraged as are respect, tolerance, and patience. Finally, students are encouraged to address me on a first name basis.

The course is structured around a weekly 3-hour seminar and 8–10 hours of field work with a UCCP program or project. Since many UCCP programs only meet for 4–5 hours per week, interns engage in additional research or other activities that support their program work. In addition to their regular program work, interns are encouraged to participate in monthly Saturday sessions that engage program participants in topical and skill-based workshops, cross-program team-building and project-sharing activities and to attend community events facilitated by program participants. Finally, interns are invited to participate in the UCCP's Monday night Leaders Corps meetings during which time team building, program planning, and professional development activities occur. These other avenues count towards fulfilling the 8–10 hour per week field work requirement.

Challenging Disengagement: The Course in Practice

The seminar is comprised of readings, discussions, in-class and take-home exercises, team activities, and individual and group projects designed to prepare students for, and connect with, their field placements. Journal assignments are also used to connect seminar content with field placements, among other things. Collectively, these components seek to address the philosophical, cognitive, and normative dimensions of disengagement discussed above. Table 2 provides a graphic illustration of these components.

Philosophical: Rescuing Government From Irrelevance, Negativity, and the Dominance of Market-Based Thinking

The choice of course content and the use of situated student-centered learning as a method of delivery were driven by the desire to illustrate the relevance of government to every aspect of our lives, the fact that government is neither good nor evil but rather often reflects the desires of powerful actors who have exerted significant influence, and that no important issue can be solved through individual actions. These points are introduced through the very first reading, “You Are What You Grow,” a *New York Times Magazine* (4/22/07) article by Michael Pollan. In several power-packed pages, Pollan demonstrates how what many Americans would view, if they even knew about it, as a seemingly benign “farm bill” impacts almost every aspect of our lives with serious global ramifications as well. To say it is an eye opener understates the point. The second “framing” piece is *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*, Geoffrey Canada's (1995) examination of the intersection of poverty, race, drugs, and violence in urban America, how it has changed over the last 30 years, and its impact on poor urban youth. Canada's book provides the backdrop for understanding urban America and the role of public policy in shaping much of what urban America looks like. Written in a highly accessible fashion, the book has never failed to engage students nor to stimulate very spirited class discussion. It also sets the stage for the three substantive areas of concentration: education, criminal justice, and the media.

Table 2. Course components

Component	Objective	Tools
Philosophical	Address the unholy troika of government irrelevance; government ineptitude; and reification of the market and individual solutions to problems	Situated student-centered learning; Readings; Films; Reaction papers; Guided reflection
Cognitive	Knowledge development and skill building	Activity-based learning in group fashion (Power analyses; scavenger hunts; policy campaigns); Experiential learning; Classroom learning connected to and supportive of field work; Reading; Guided reflection
Normative	Instill values of democratic participation and citizenship	Class environment; Experiential learning; Group projects; Guided reflection; Journaling

Education and criminal justice were selected because of the enormous impacts they have on the lives and life chances of young people, especially low-income youth and youth of color. The readings and discussions examine the impacts of these two systems on youth as well as the relationship between them. Readings in education have focused on funding disparities, the achievement gap between the races, national policies, in particular, the No Child Left Behind Act, state and local policies, educational reforms, and pedagogy. Criminal justice readings have addressed issues including the role of prisons (Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* [2003]), the education-to-prison pipeline, and youth violence and how to address it.

In discussing education and criminal justice, students are asked to talk about the readings in the context of their own experiences, a practice that is reinforced through the assigned reaction papers in which they are also asked to relate their experiences to the readings.¹² This approach helps them to connect personal experiences to larger systems of power and decision making and allows us, as a class, to view issues from various perspectives. Students from inner city neighborhoods typically relay very different experiences with education and criminal justice systems than those who came from affluent suburban areas. Similarly, the experiences of African American and Latino students differ from those of white students. These differences, while discussed on a very personal and human scale, nevertheless provide another window through which to bring in the role of policy and government as well as issues of equity and fairness in the distribution of resources and the impact of those issues on one's life chances. In short, it helps to connect the personal to the political.

The topic of the media provides another opportunity to connect the personal to the political while also debunking mythic notions of the power of individual action.

The media was selected because it is a multibillion dollar, global industry that affects almost every aspect of our lives including what we purchase, what we consider to be important, how we see ourselves and others, and how we think. And, youth are a prime target of the media both in terms of negative stereotyping and as a lucrative market to be manipulated by slick ad campaigns. The latter point is brought home in *The Merchants of Cool*, a Front Line documentary that shows how industry uses youth culture to manipulate youth (Goodman and Dretzin, 2001). The role of government is underscored through readings that explore the influence of the media and the source of that influence, in particular, laws and public policy. Finally, the enormous financial and organizational power of the media highlights the fact that if one wants to challenge that power, collective action, on a very large scale, is undeniably necessary.

Combating the media's enormous power also requires an understanding of the media itself and how its power can be harnessed by youth. The former is addressed through a series of activities that teach media literacy.¹³ *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change* (Goodman 2003) demonstrates how youth can use the power of media to create alternative images of youth culture, issues, and struggles to those found in mainstream media. It also examines how media can be a tool for developing critical thinking, analytical, and research skills among youth. The book is based on Goodman's experiences as founder and director of the highly successful Educational Video Center in New York City, which trains high school students in media production and media literacy.

While the readings and discussions on education, criminal justice, and the media could easily lead to a very negative picture of government, I try to preempt this by portraying policy outcomes as the result of organized pressure exerted upon government and lawmakers by well-heeled interests. In short, I try to present a picture of democracy in action. This depiction is also intended to impress upon students the need for and value of getting involved in the political system. Government is not irrelevant. Policy directly impacts all of our lives and going it alone or complaining in silence will not remedy what ails the individual citizen. This message is reinforced through a set of cases illustrating how youth in Philadelphia and other cities are addressing issues in education, criminal justice, and the media through organizing and other strategies. And, the cases in which youth were victorious (e.g., persuading school districts to set up small schools in Philadelphia, New York City, and Chicago) highlight the fact that collective action can successfully challenge other organized interests. It also shows that young people can influence the policies and practices that directly impact their daily lives.

Cognitive: Knowledge Development and Skill Building

Seeing the relevance of government and understanding that it is neither a force for good nor evil but rather a tool to be influenced through concerted political action, is a necessary but insufficient pre-condition for actual political engagement. Students also need to have a basic working knowledge of government and the political system and a command of the skills necessary for effective and productive political participation. Power analyses, scavenger hunts, and policy campaigns, all conducted in small groups, are used to develop the necessary knowledge and skill bases.

Borrowing from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, students engage in a power analysis of education.¹⁴ This exercise involves drawing a circle that represents a typical inner city public school. The circle is then filled in with all of the images that this brings to mind—peeling paint, locked bathrooms, dirty lunch rooms, metal

detectors, broken desks and chairs, fights, and so on. Moving outside the circle, students then list the entities that influence what is inside the circle. The responses typically include local, state, and federal governments, zoning commissions, realtors, prisons, companies that supply products and services to prisons, testing services such as Educational Testing Service (ETS), social service agencies, and pharmaceutical companies, among others. We then discuss how each of these entities contributes to the existence of that inner city school. The exercise helps students to begin making connections between individual issues or conditions and larger systems of power and decision making thereby illustrating the roles that different institutions play in society, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to the individual. Finally, it provides students with a framework of analysis that can be applied to other issue areas. And, it is a framework that underscores the complexity of issues, hopefully hammering home the point that research, knowledge, and collective action are necessary to address any issue in a meaningful fashion.

Analytical frameworks are necessary guides but they need to be populated with information about the area under investigation. Operating on the principle that learning can be fun, students are set loose on a scavenger hunt to find basic information about education such as funding, decision-making structures, demographics, and reform and advocacy efforts. From these seemingly disparate pieces of information, they are able to put together a composite picture of a policy area that they then present to the class. In the process, they also acquire a lot of knowledge about education and develop some data collection skills.

All of the activities and readings for the seminar are designed to, among other things, prepare the students for mentoring and guiding youth in UCCP programs on their group-based, community-oriented projects. Modeling what this looks like in practice, students go through a similar process of developing action-oriented research projects. Working in teams, students choose an issue in education or criminal justice and then identify the information/data needed to make their case—likely allies, resources, target audience, and desired and reasonable outcomes—and then develop a strategy for achieving those outcomes. In short, they are asked to develop a policy campaign. Going through this process enables them to guide program participants through a very similar process.

Normative: Instilling Values of Democratic Participation and Citizenship

The third dimension of the course centers on the inculcation and nurturing of the values upon which a democratic society rests. These include equality, respect for and appreciation of diversity, tolerance for different points of view, debate and deliberation, compromise, teamwork, public regarding behavior, a belief in one's own capacities to influence larger decisions, and trust in the larger system that it will be responsive to such participation. Values are perhaps best learned when they are embedded in and reinforced through routine processes and projects. Thus, I try to promote a tolerant, respectful environment that encourages participation and that pushes students to think outside the box.¹⁵ Upon this foundation are layered many activities and assignments geared towards developing these values. The process of using group assignments as often as possible also serves as a reinforcement.

Through group projects, students are forced to debate the issues, to take and defend positions, to compromise, divide up and assume responsibility for parts of the larger project, and to cooperate on scheduling, deadlines, and project management issues. Most importantly, they have to work with students who are different

from them. Not only does this help to break down barriers between people but it also fosters a much better understanding of difference. Invoking the classic work of George Herbert Mead, Robert Rhoads talks about the relationship between community and the emergence of self: “Social interaction—as defined as the interplay between self and other—is key to the developing self” (Rhoads 2003, 27). Rhoads’ interest in the emergence of self is tied to a more fundamental concern—the development of what he terms the “caring self,” a persona that only comes about through notions of the other, the self, and, ultimately, identity development. Educational environments, if structured properly, can help to develop the “caring self.” There is no doubt that the heavy emphasis placed on teamwork can create such an environment.

The nature of the field placements also contributes to creating the “caring self.” Placing students in the roles of instructor and mentor for youth who are younger and, more often than not, from less fortunate circumstances tends to bring out the best in the students. Their journal entries and comments in class often reflect their desire to support the youth in so many ways and their frustrations when they did not know how to do it. Some of the students, as noted above, become members of the UCCP’s Leaders Corps after the class ends and, among those who do not, some have kept in contact with the youth they met through the internship portion of the course, while others continue to volunteer with the UCCP, some even after graduating from Temple University.

The nature of the field placements (working with youth who have been marginalized by larger systems and who are trying to have a voice) also makes the entire experience come alive in all of its human dimensions and puzzling contradictions. These contradictions sometimes challenge deeply held values and force students to get beyond surface impressions and to engage in the kinds of struggles that democratic practice embodies—struggles that cannot be generated through class discussions or simulations, no matter how skilled the facilitator is. The seminar is necessary for providing the background knowledge and information but it is only through actual activities that we can apply and test this knowledge and information.

Another process critical to the installation of the values mentioned above and to experiential learning in general is reflection. Reflection activities are reinforced through weekly journal entries, the final project and a final 10- to 12-page reflection paper. In the weekly journals, students are asked to write about their field placement activities for the week and their reaction to those activities. Some students make very personal entries poignantly talking about stereotypes they had and how those are being challenged, about rewards and difficulties of engaging young people, about their own privilege as college students, and the like. A common thread through the journals is the ability to stand in someone else’s shoes.

Philosophical, Cognitive, and Normative: Tying it All Together through Final Projects and Reflection

For the internships, students work in teams to develop a binder for their placement site that combines their hands-on experience with the readings, the weekly seminar content, and their individual and collective reflection on the entire semester. The required content categories of the binders—*Project Development*, *Engaging Youth*, and *Assessment*—represent the application of critical, organizational, and strategic thinking to knowledge about government and information on the project topic (e.g., barriers to higher education for low-income youth).

The first category—project development—is divided into a summary of the issue that their group addressed, ways to frame the issue, a fact sheet designed to engage other constituencies in the issue, strategies for addressing the issue, and resources that could be enlisted for groups working on that issue. The second section of the binder—engaging youth—contains a series of activities for engaging youth in teambuilding, issue identification, research, project development, leadership development, and reflection activities. The final section—assessment—contains a discussion of ways to assess the individual growth of the participants as well as overall project success.

Students are also required to write individual final reflection papers, an assignment that asks them to reflect on the course as a whole. Often times we are not aware of what we learned or the impact of it upon our thinking, decisions, and the like until the light bulb goes on years later. The final reflection paper is an attempt to short circuit that process by forcing students to think about the specific knowledge they acquired, the particular skills they developed, and how they will use the knowledge and skills to make connections between their education, the government, and their lives. They are also asked to discuss the major impacts that the class has had on them in terms of educational or career choices, how they see people of different races, ethnicities, cultures, or ages, how they view government, and the like. Since the placements are all in youth-related programs and initiatives, many students talk about their desire to stay involved with youth through volunteer activities, how humbled they were by the insights, experiences, and passion of the youth, how surprised they were at what the youth had to go through on a typical day in their school or neighborhood, and the like. A portion of students in each class talk about wanting to pursue careers in education or the nonprofit sector, a desire they attribute to their experience in this course. And, it is not uncommon for students to volunteer with organizations that they connected with through the class.

We Make the Road by Teaching: Issues, Lessons, and Challenges

During the six years of teaching this course, I have changed the readings, altered the assignments and continued to grapple with how best to provide education that is experiential, empowering, and democratic in nature while also ensuring that students develop the skills, knowledge, and values that are associated with democratic citizenry and quality education. This road has been filled with successes, challenges, and unresolved issues.

With respect to the experiential component, the course has been very successful, exceeding all of the requirements for good experiential learning—strong support and guidance from their supervisors, lots of time for reflection, ample room for and active solicitation of feedback.¹⁶ However, since all students are placed in one of the UCCP's programs or special projects, I have significantly more control over the fieldwork component than the more typical scenario in which students are placed in outside organizations that may or may not provide the kinds of experience, support, and guidance that make for a high-quality learning experience. This aspect cannot be overemphasized. If students wind up in organizations that do not have the capacity or understanding necessary to provide the kinds of support that good experiential learning requires, it can have a very negative impact on the student. Obviously, most professors do not have the luxury that I do. However, we can look for proxies. Many universities have centers that are engaged in the community and that could offer advice or even serve as a broker for student placement. The Intergenerational Center

at Temple University, for example, has successfully worked with many experiential learning classes over the last decade, placing hundreds of students in the community. Civic Engagement Offices, or similarly named centers, that focus on developing strong relationships with community-based and citywide organizations can be a wonderful resource for experiential learning classes by brokering community connections. Colleagues constitute another source for connecting to the community. The key in each case is to make sure that the relationships are solid, the organizations capable and willing, and the lines of communication open and maintained.

Class size has also contributed to the quality of the field work component. My classes have ranged in size from 8–23 students. Experiential learning approaches similar to the one described here can and have been incorporated into larger classes at Temple and other universities, often times using graduate students to lead project teams and to act as liaisons to the community partner and placement site. In some cases, advanced undergraduate students have played similar roles. Such arrangements can be highly effective if the students in charge are well trained, stay on task and communicate regularly with the professor. While experiential learning approaches can be adapted to larger classes, we do need to seriously consider the size factor; at what point does the learning experience become so compromised that we are doing a disservice to our students, to the organizations with whom we partner, and to the objectives of developing educated citizens?

While the fieldwork component has been quite successful, connecting the readings to the placements has been a rockier road. The content areas of education, criminal justice, and the media, as noted above, were chosen because of their significant impact on youth. Thus, they provide the context for understanding the world within which these youth reside. However, if a student is working with a group of youth on a project relating to teen pregnancy, for example, one often does not see the relevancy of reading articles on the media. Without relinquishing my responsibility, I believe this disconnect speaks to a more fundamental issue in education that has direct implications for democracy: Students overall seem less willing/able to conceptualize, which is a necessary process for making connections between issues. In response, I have been more intentional about drawing out these connections in class discussions and in using readings in the beginning of the class that serve as framing pieces. Geoffrey Canada's *Fist, Stick Knife, Gun* has been an excellent aid in this effort. In fact, this reading is cited more than any other reading as helping students understand the youth with whom they end up working. I have also been more explicit with their journal assignments, giving specific questions that force them to relate what they did at their placement to the readings. Finally, I have devoted more class time for students to talk about their placement experiences, which gives me the opportunity to connect those to the readings. Based on their final reflection papers and their end of semester evaluations, these changes appear to have helped significantly though I still have room to improve.

With respect to the empowering nature of the course, the discussion is based largely on my own observations with some student feedback.¹⁷ Relatively speaking, this was the most informal and open class I have conducted in my 20+ years of teaching. With respect to my colleagues in my own department, the course was definitely an outlier in these respects and was probably an outlier for the college as well.¹⁸ This latter assertion is backed up by the qualitative portion of the student evaluations in which students referred to the “laid back,” “interactive,” and “open environment” of the class and the “sensitivity” to diversity and race that made them feel “comfortable

expressing their views” as well as listening to the different views of other students in the class. They also noted, with strong approval, the absence of “lectures.” If these characteristics were common to their other classes, it is doubtful that they would have singled them out on these evaluations. Given that many of the class discussions centered around issues of race and class, this feedback is quite reinforcing. Moreover, it does suggest a level of empowerment for the students.

As generous as many of the students’ comments were, there were many challenges to providing a fully empowering experience. Trying to create a “student-centered” learning environment, in which you begin with the student’s personal experience and then relate it to larger structural issues, often got stalled in “personal” gear. Many students were very eager to discuss their experiences, so eager that they could not get beyond them. This then led to a second challenge that I shall term the “silencing issue.” Many students were quite passionate about their experiences creating a situation in which one person’s empowerment became another person’s imprisonment. The passion and mode of expression either intimidated other students or turned them off. Talking with students in private about not being intimidated or toning down their comments met with limited success. I have also changed the readings over the years, trying to remove some of the more polemical pieces such as Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete* that tends to encourage and reinforce the one-sided, personally driven diatribes. This too has helped but passions still fly from time to time. While my preference as a professor is to have a classroom in which all students feel comfortable speaking, can connect their personal experiences to larger political, social, and structural issues, and can listen to each other and fervently, but respectfully, argue and disagree, I have rarely seen this kind of dialogue take place in the outside world. Indeed, as the wise sage Madison pointed out in *The Federalist Papers*, we cannot remove men’s passions without denying their freedom. (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1787/1961). Hence, maybe I am trying to create an unreal situation. Perhaps my students’ discussions are simply mirroring democracy in action and perhaps *that* is the connection I should be helping them to make when such conversations take place. We could then talk about whether such conversations help or hinder democracy and, if the latter, how we can improve the quality of deliberation so that democracy is strengthened.

Turning to the democratic nature of the class also raises issues, challenges, and tensions, many of which will remain unresolved. One concerns how you encourage democracy in a nondemocratic system. While terms like “organized chaos” have been used to describe universities, they definitely contain hierarchies including in the classroom. My students were given the syllabus, readings, and assignments in the conventional top-down manner. Although I have, over the years, incorporated their feedback into my syllabi, they did not participate in its design. Similarly, they do not participate in the construction of their grade. As much as I sought and tried to set a tone that was nonhierarchical, the reality is quite different. I give grades and, thus, have *lots* of power over the students.

Grading also presented the challenge of support versus evaluation. Some students come with more preparation than others and, as a result, it is easier for them to get an A. But what about the student who had much less preparation but demonstrated significant effort and commitment, and, while their work over the semester showed marked improvement, it was still not at the level of the A student? Are we grading students in relationship to each other or as individuals? If the latter, am I doing them a disservice in terms of the larger world that is highly competitive? If

the former, then I am merely reinforcing that competitive system and am a key perpetrator in the very system I am critiquing.

Another challenge centers on students' understanding of democracy. For some students (and adults), democracy and empowerment are antithetical to accountability, rigor, and structure. Thus, many requests, such as asking students to re-do assignments to improve their writing or organization, seem to contradict the "empowerment" objective of the course. For many students, a "revise and resubmit" has negative connotations as images of "the teacher who just wants to harass the student who just wants to be done with the assignment" take center stage. And, of course, the reemergence of these images interferes with efforts to create an open and trusting environment.

Finally, trying to create an open environment that is empowering and democratic also encountered challenges from the students' prior socialization processes. They have been schooled in the dominant-subordinate/teacher-student relationship that has characterized their entire education and, thus, they have significant difficulty in overcoming that in a one-semester class.¹⁹ For example, although students were encouraged to call me by my first name, only a few each semester do. And, I must admit, every time they do, I feel a little strange.

Given all of these challenges and struggles and the fact that they are not totally resolved, can I say the course is a success? By most standard accounts, the data suggest the course has been a success. Feedback obtained from students over the years, using different tools and at different points throughout each semester, forms the basis of this conclusion.²⁰ Moreover, in six times teaching the course, I have had zero attrition. Initially, the success may have been exaggerated since I was essentially preaching to the choir. Many of the students had prior community, labor, or organizing experience and brought a perspective to the issues that was similar to mine. Over the years, however, the students have become more diverse in background and orientation, a pattern for which I have no explanation.

With respect to the educational goals of the course (critical/analytical skills, communication skills, research skills, command of substantive policy areas) the results have been impressive. The work submitted by students has been of a fairly high quality and usually demonstrates improvement over the course of the semester. Self-assessments (student evaluations of the course) have been consistent with the quality of the work. On questions relating to the value of the course, how much the students learned, the usefulness of the materials and activities, and how many hours per week they spent preparing for the class, the course is above the 90th percentile for the college.

Finally, in terms of shaping educational and career goals in the direction of "public regarding" professions, the course has had a decided impact on students. To date, 89 students have taken the class. On average, 20% of the students go through the UCCP's 6-week summer Leadership Development Institute and then become members of the Leaders Corps, the staff that is paid to carry out the UCCP's programming and technical assistance activities.²¹ Twelve students have applied for Teach For America and six were accepted; three became AmeriCorps members; five applied for Philly Fellows (a yearlong paid internship in a Philadelphia nonprofit organization); two became full time Volunteers in Service to America (VISTAs) with the UCCP; one was hired full time in the UCCP; one was a Peer Teacher with me in the course this year (Spring 2011); one started her own nonprofit organization in New York City; two are currently Teaching Fellows in the Philadelphia School

District; one developed a course that explored urban violence for Temple University students and high school students and that was taught by a Sociology professor; and, several others are working in the nonprofit and public sectors. Of course, I cannot claim total credit for these decisions, but many cited this class as a factor in their decisions and the skills they acquired and networks they developed as key to their ability to secure these positions. In fact, in more than a few cases, students obtained these positions as a result of direct networking efforts by me and UCCP staff.

Conclusion

I suggested in the introduction to this article that educators occupy a special place from which to address the problem of political disengagement of our youth. I am under no illusions that we alone can solve this problem or that education can completely overcome the transgressions of a just and democratic society. Moreover, I am very conscious of the difficulties involved in carrying out this role. However, if we are serious about civic engagement and democratic practice, we need to demonstrate the relevance of government and politics to the everyday life of our students while countering the assumptions that government is a negative force and that the individual and the market are autonomous actors capable of addressing what are, in fact, complex political and social problems. Second, we need to provide students with the knowledge, skills, competencies, and tools necessary to engage in larger societal processes.

Exploring, developing, and refining pedagogical tools that can penetrate the wall of indifference that characterizes far too many young people is a task well worth undertaking. From my own experience, situated student-centered learning—reaching students where they are and then connecting their experiences to larger forces—proved to be a powerful antidote to the relevancy problem. This is especially critical in courses that focus on American government and society. For many students (and their friends and families, that is, their “known world”), democracy is still a promissory note. Hence, classes that portray democracy as a battle that has been fought and won, merely reinforce the irrelevance factor for those students who have not benefited from the spoils of victory. Focusing on the student’s experience and then exploring the gap between that and the promise of democracy, however, is far more likely to address the relevancy problem while also helping the student develop critical thinking faculties.

Personal narratives, which are a large part of situated student-centered learning, have the power to engage students by putting a human face and voice to what would otherwise be distant situations. The experiential learning component of the course further reinforced this tool. Because my students were working with youth largely from low-income communities in Philadelphia, they heard many personal narratives that were both engaging *and* enraging. The latter helped to develop a strong sense of empathy in many students. Anger and empathy, however, can easily lead to further disillusionment and a retreat to the world of one-on-one solutions that are no match for problems that are structural in nature. Thus, experiential learning must contain a strong reflection component that encourages students to process their experiences in the context of larger social, political, and economic factors. Through guided reflection, students can channel the anger and empathy into critical analysis, although the potential to become overwhelmed is ever present.

In turn, critical analysis can help to unmask the “lone ranger” by revealing the powerful forces that are behind the structures and policies that shape our individual and collective lives. Developing an understanding of what influences policy is a

major step towards seeing government in a more realistic, albeit highly complex, manner. It is neither good nor evil but rather susceptible to the pressures that powerful groups bring to bear upon it. It can produce different outcomes but that will take effective politicking.

Seeing that government is relevant, that its actions are the result of external pressures, and that change requires effective engagement in the political system provides students with a place for the anger and empathy generated by the field work experience and by some of the readings. But they still need the tools to address the problems they have identified and encouragement that they can make a difference if they pursue change. Activity-based learning proved to be a highly effective way of developing the knowledge and skills necessary for civic and political engagement. Moreover, conducting all of these activities in groups further reinforced the notion that collective action is more powerful than acting alone while also helping to develop their teamwork skills. Finally, readings and films that told the stories of successful campaigns for change by people who looked like them—people of color, students, young people—provided the necessary assurance that they too could achieve change.

Through a pedagogy that embraces experiential, activity-based, and situated student-centered learning and that has as its goals helping students to see the importance of government, politics, and active participation in a democratic society, we can begin to chip away at the unholy troika. The recommendations provided here are neither easy nor challenge free as the case study demonstrated. For the reader who was looking for a more formulaic conclusion, my discussion is bound to disappoint. However, democracy has never been accused of being neat, efficient, or easy. Therefore, the preparation for it, while adhering to certain principles and goals, will, by definition, consist of a lot of trial and error. The first task in educating for democracy is thus to examine our own practices, many of which will come up wanting. Ultimately, educating for democracy means living with risk—risk that our assumptions, beliefs, and authority will be challenged and tested. What I hope to achieve here is a sharing of experiences, lessons, challenges and, more important, a provocation to others to help make the road to democracy by teaching and sharing their experiences with others. Preparing people for democracy is, like democracy itself, an ongoing practice that will never be perfected but that can always be improved upon.

Notes

1. In the 1992 presidential election, turnout for the 18- to 24-year-old cohort increased by 9 percentage points from 1988 presidential election (49% and 40%, respectively). A similar spike occurred in the 2004 presidential election when the turnout for this cohort increased by 11 percentage points over the 2000 turnout (47% and 36%, respectively) (Lopez and Donovan 2005). In the 2008 election, turnout for this cohort was 48.5% and then plummeted to 22.84% in the 2010 midterm elections (US census.gov 2010). Although midterm elections traditionally experience voter declines, the 2010 figures for this age cohort were lower than the 2006 midterm election figure of 23.5% (www.civicyouth.org, CIRCLE Fact Sheet 2008). These figures suggest that the “Obama factor” in 2008 was indeed short lived.

2. The source from which these numbers are taken—Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) report—notes that there are different ways of calculating actual turnout. However, regardless of the method, the overall trend of decline remains. The different methods yield decline patterns of 13 percentage points to 18 percentage points in the 1972 through 2000 presidential election period (Lopez and Donovan 2005).

3. Civic competence is a composite of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed “critical for the responsibilities of citizenship in America’s constitutional democracy.” P2

The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2006. National Center For Education Statistics. US Department of Education NCES 2007-476.

4. Cited in Gibson (2001).
5. The New Millennium Project (2000). www.nass.org.
6. While it is true that the Obama administration did succeed in passing financial regulation, it was an extremely watered down version of what was initially sought.
7. The banking system was Freire's (2001) metaphor while the "cold storage system" was Dewey's (1938) metaphor.
8. Of course, there are institutional and practical limits to how democratic the classroom can be so the goal is really to strive for as much democracy as is possible and to collectively discuss the limits to complete democracy and what that term even means in practice.
9. UCCP staff, who supervise the interns from the class, and I do postsemester debriefs identifying what worked, what did not, and how we can improve the course, especially the fieldwork component, the next time.
10. The issues most commonly pursued by UCCP participants relate to criminal justice, education, and stereotyping. Moreover, we have increasingly incorporated media into our programs, with youth using film, magazines, and Web productions as tools for youth voice.
11. It was not bureaucratically feasible to admit only students who worked for the UCCP to the course.
12. Students had to write a 2- to 3-page reaction paper for each of the readings. They were asked to discuss the central argument(s), how it fit with their own experience/knowledge and to provide examples, and to identify actions that could be taken to address the problems raised in the reading.
13. Two very resourceful Web sites for media literacy activities are the Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org) and Media Education Foundation (www.mediaed.org) among others.
14. Although there are a variety of power analyses, the one developed and used by The People's Institute For Survival and Beyond was the most relevant and engaging for purposes of this class. See <http://www.pisab.org/>.
15. While I believe that I do this in all my courses, I make a much more conscious effort to do so in this class.
16. See for example, Battistoni (2002), Billig (2000), Dewey (1916), Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999).
17. That is, we did not ask students questions that would get at how democratic or empowering they believed the course was.
18. Most instructors still rely on the lecture format, and a trend that will no doubt increase as Temple University and other universities move to larger and larger classes to accommodate, on the cheap, burgeoning enrollments.
19. Ira Shor (1992) discusses at some length similar difficulties that he has encountered with undergraduate students when he tries to "democratize" the classroom.
20. Feedback consisted of midsemester written comments on the field component, end-of-semester in-class discussion guided by written questions, and standard final course evaluation required by the university. These formal mechanisms were supplemented by informal conversations with students.
21. More students have expressed interest in participating in the Leadership Development Institute (LDI) and the Leaders Corps but scheduling difficulties prevented them from doing so. Additionally, many students were graduating seniors, some of whom said they wished they had taken the course earlier in their education at Temple so that they could have become part of the UCCP.

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