

Alison McCartney, Elizabeth Bennison and Dick Simpson, eds. *Teaching civic engagement: From student to active citizen*.

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More than twenty years ago, an amazing trend among college students and their professors emerged: service-learning. Here, students step outside of the classroom to engage their communities in a service capacity. This may include, *inter alia*, accounting majors serving at a non-profit to assist in fund-raising or a political science major serving to assist in writing ordinances for a small town. The emphasis is on service in a hands-on, practical manner. Janet Eyler was one of the first to analyze this phenomenon in a short article (1999) and then in a comprehensive study (2000). Since then, colleges and universities have incorporated service-learning into major academic programs that took a stale, old internship program and turned it on its head to better train students and, as part of the process, developed students willing to serve their respective communities.

In this major work (more of a resource guide than a book), McCartney *et al* produced (edited is just not strong enough) a tool to serve political science faculty wanting to go to the next level. This work picks up where service learning stops. Here, faculty with civic-minded students are shown many ways to foster that desire to become active in their communities. In Section 1 (pp. 3-100), the foundation is laid for modes of engagement techniques and participatory learning. There is even considerable time spent offering counterpoints to teaching civic engagement as it might be seen as influencing students on “what to think” instead of focusing on teaching them “how to think” (p.73). This point is a recurring theme and an important one for professors who are attempting to develop active citizens and not just another service-learning program. There is also considerable effort put into cultivating a hybrid of classroom and service learning points of connection. So, where the professor’s class is one on American Public Policy (pp. 137-66) or Political Philosophy (pp. 229-246) or International Relations (pp. 247-78), there are chapters

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from a host of political science and service-learning experts to offer suggestions for improving both the classroom and the non-classroom engagement process.

Sections III and IV were much more faculty-centric than the earlier ones, but still could be used for those teaching Civics in high school. Probably the most important contribution is the notion that such civic engagement offers a unique experience for students and faculty to try different experimental models simultaneously. The result is a staggering array of projects, learning communities and engaged students well on their way to becoming assets for their particular communities. According to one study by Campus Compact (2001), a coalition of colleges and universities focused on civic engagement, more than 700,000 students participated in service-learning projects and performed more than 17 million hours of service (p. 369). But, the verdict is still out on how well these projects translate into students becoming active citizens.

Towards the end of the book, lessons on engagement are offered, in part, to assist faculty in developing successful programs, but also to restrain the inevitable frustration that is likely to emerge (pp.456-58). Simply put: not all students will become Gandhi or Rosa Parks or Vaclav Havel, but many may become important resources and activists in their communities. If the point of such an effort is to improve citizen involvement in the public policy process and raise the level of public debate, then engaging students may very well be a step in that direction. However, this should not be limited to political science majors, but be more inclusive of all majors. After all, in most majors, there is a social science requirement. Could a class that includes a civic engagement aspect be more attractive than one where a talking head pontificates for 3 hours a week?

As with any review, the writer must find fault to show how clever he is. This is no exception, although the issue is quite minor. Considering that so many colleges and universities offer hybrid or on-line degrees, there should be attention paid to how civic engagement could be developed in that pedagogical model. For example, I have developed an on-line course where students use Facebook or Twitter to create a fictional campaign. Why not take this idea a step further and have them do this in actual campaigns of their choice? Or, for non-profits? Since so much work is handled through the virtual world of the web, why not have student engaged civically through this format?

Lastly, if you want high schools to incorporate aspects of this into their Civics curriculum, then high school teachers need to be part of the (excellent) collection of faculty serving as editors and contributors. Every political science professor should have a well-thumbed copy of this book on his or her desk.

References:

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Eyler, Janet (1999). "Reflection: Linking Service and Learning---Linking Students and Communities. *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol.58, No.3, pp.517-534.

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