

PRACTICING DEMOCRACY:

EARLY AMERICAN AUTHORS IN 21ST-CENTURY COMMUNITIES

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In April 2003, I attended a Public Dialogue Series Action Forum in Fort Collins, Colorado. Organized through the Fort Collins Human Rights Office, it was the culminating event of a six-week series of small-group conversations about building community after 9/11. Some 150 community members—concerned citizens, elected officials, members of faith communities and social justice organizations, students from Colorado State University and Front Range Community College, Latinos and Anglos, evangelical Christians and Muslims, republicans and socialists, old folks and high school students—gathered in an auditorium at the Senior Center to plan the actions their weeks of talking across difference had brought them to. Individual participant’s action commitments to themselves and their communities were flashing in a powerpoint loop on an auditorium screen as people arrived for the session. But the evening wasn’t about individual actions. It was about what we could do together.

I was there with a few students from my early American authors class. They had chosen this dialogue series as their service learning project for the semester. For weeks, we had been asking ourselves how Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography might speak to the young man in the dialogue series who suggested that public schools ought to “teach real honest history,” not the “stories adults think are safe for young people.” We had been exploring how citizen

petitions in the 21st century might compare with 18th-century Black petitions for freedom. We had been putting into practice Thoreau's dictum from Walden that "[students] should not *play* life, or *study* it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end" (94).

While these students were working in dialogue circles with diverse Fort Collins citizens, other students in this upper-division early American authors course were collecting life stories from residents in a nursing home, tutoring at-risk adolescents in a court-mandated residential school, developing the creative writing skills of middle-school students in a charter school with an experiential learning curriculum, and playing pinochle and pool at the Senior Center. As students gave their various community partners at least 15 hours of service, they were listening hard for the ways in which the individuals they encountered found their voices and built communities. Students kept journals, shared service stories in classroom groups and in larger discussions, wrote a reflection paper, and participated in a series of panel presentations to class members and community partners as part of the final event that replaced a final exam.

In the process, they enriched our discussions of community and voice in Bradstreet and Jefferson, Franklin and Thoreau, Stowe and Douglass, with insights and questions from their service learning experiences. They imagined a world in which there was no United States, and they grappled with the issues that brought a nation and a multitude of new communities into North America. They began to ask some of the same questions that American founding documents address, and they came to see why those questions are still the sites of such contention and importance. What stories do Americans tell about ourselves and our origins?

Who gets to tell community stories? With what consequences? How do citizens balance order and freedom? Who is a citizen, and what does a citizen do? How do we foster the arts? Who can access the full benefits of community? Who can't? How do we support meaningful family life? Who has power? For what? It's the usual heady stuff of early American studies in undergraduate curricula, with a twist. This time students were asked to engage the questions in their communities as well as in the classroom, in their world as well as in their minds. They were asked to supplement their reading and class discussions with field research. Taking a page from John Dewey and political scientist Benjamin Barber, they worked from the assumption that "the point where democracy and education intersect is the point we call community" (Barber, 225).

I've been using a version of this service-learning assignment for several years, in courses ranging from advanced poetry to modern women writers. In effect, I've asked students to become practicing humanists and artists. They draw on their backgrounds in language, reading, writing, and literate performance to facilitate community partners' everyday use of those skills. The specific projects vary from class to class. Students in "American Poetry," for example, focus their attention on creative expression, while students in "Early American Authors" use their historical understandings from early writers to explore some of the varied, even conflicting, ideas of community that have developed in North America.

For those unfamiliar with service-learning, it may be important to say a few words about what it is NOT. This is NOT an internship for vocational preparation, as important as that may be for liberal arts students who often have trouble imagining themselves in work places. It is NOT volunteer work, as valuable as

that may be to communities and the individuals who do it. The rationale for service-learning does NOT derive from a philanthropic or charitable ethic. It is NOT even about helping others.

Instead, service-learning is about finding intersections between classroom concepts and community, literature and social structures, what Stanley Fish refers to as “a fullness of *engagement*, a mind and person that refuses to segregate its activities, to think, for example, that literary study is one thing, participation in the national political process quite another” (234). Service-learning is about learning more than it is about service. Students are prepared for their service in relation to course contexts, and they engage in periodic reflection activities that allow them to make connections between course materials and their community work. Class discussion encourages them to ask why communities are structured as they are, and with what consequences. Students engage the larger social, economic, historical, and aesthetic issues behind those structures. They may even begin to imagine alternative structures, each with its own consequences.

Why have I become so fond of this assignment that I use it in at least one course every year? It’s not a critique of more traditional assignments for research-based work using print, web, and archival materials. I still use such assignments frequently, and with the conviction that they develop historical and aesthetic understandings and critical thinking skills. All too often, though, I’ve heard students speak as if their communities, their roles as citizens, were something to be considered after every other dimension of their lives—family, jobs, health, education, spirituality—had been addressed. They seem to have framed their life narratives as if there were no connections between their

identities as citizens and their other identities. Marooned in radical individualism, a hybridized mixture of the Bill of Rights and Terminator III, many students see themselves going it alone in a world they are powerless to change. As Fabricio Rodriguez, a student at Mesa Community College put it, “We were sold out in the cradle, and now we’re expected to counter the most widespread, pervasive . . . monolith that mankind has ever seen. We were raised to believe that the monolith was as the world is. It is all . . . there ever has been” (11).

This idea of an unchanging, untouchable communal monolith is the problem service-learning seeks to engage. Potential citizens believe in their powerlessness. It is the terrorism of their everyday lives. What Jurgen Habermas called the bourgeois public sphere developed at least as long ago as the eighteenth century, but our 21st-century students have yet to imagine their place in it. As market economies and a growing middle class opened a public space not controlled by the state, democratic ideas took new, bold forms. In this intermediate space between public authority and the intimacy of family, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century citizens began to address matters of public policy and collective interest. They participated in debating societies, salons, scientific organizations, faith groups, lecture series, tavern clubs, tea table gatherings, reform movements, libraries, and voluntary associations that ranged from Franklin’s Junto to Brook Farm to Margaret Sanger’s American Birth Control League (Shields; Brown; Headrick).

Habermas concludes that this bourgeois public sphere, what I call a civic sphere, is gone by the late twentieth century, when vehicles of mass communication come to create public opinion rather than facilitate its

development (Habermas, 27-56; see also Evans and Boyte, 182-202). He is not alone in his critique. Amy Kaplan reminds us that the concept of a public sphere as a stable space for civic engagement is too reductive, and that any dualistic notion of public and private spaces is misleadingly tidy (Kaplan). But my experience with service-learning convinces me that an educated citizenry can engage new versions of democratic spaces.

Such a citizenry must be prepared. It must be composed of individuals who understand what manipulative forms of pre-fabricated community do *to* them, and what genuinely democratic communities do *for* them. It must also be composed of individuals who understand the relational nature of individuals and communities, the reciprocities of Emerson's "Society and Solitude." None of us becomes an individual entirely by our own efforts. Selves are defined and redefined by their contexts. Furthermore, such individuals need practice to enter communities they haven't experienced before, and to ask questions about community structures and values. There's nothing original in my point here, as U. S. founding documents and writers from Winthrop to Wheatley to Jefferson reveal. But originality isn't what we're after. Shared experience trumps uniqueness in any process of community building.

The most common shared experience of my service-learning students has been surprise. The student who prepared food for a lunchroom at the Senior Center this spring saw first hand where some members of his community were eating the only meal they would get that day. He was stunned, but it was nothing like what he experienced on his last day in the lunchroom when he learned that state and local budget cuts will soon force the program to close. He spoke

movingly to the class about the people he had met there as he drew on a selection from The Federalist Papers to reflect on the difference of scale between a republic and a democracy. Another student walked fearfully into a nursing home in January but surprised herself and her class members by choosing work in the lock-down Alzheimer's unit by the end of the semester. She told classmates that she had never spent any time around old people. She was surprised, she said, to learn that the people she worked with weren't asking for sympathy. All they wanted was ordinary human interaction. Her classroom discussions of family breakups in Douglass and Stowe were punctuated with stories from nursing home residents who had no families. Still another student presented a scene from a play she had written about her experiences working at the Senior Center. With a half dozen classmates, all of whom had worked at the Center, she staged a reader's theater. Using humor and sharply-drawn characters, her script critiqued the ethnic homogeneity she had observed and invented a different scene 25 years in the future.

There are more stories to be told than space to tell them.

Service-learning encourages students to give up the myth of their powerlessness. They are genuinely surprised that their work matters, and that it puts course questions into contexts that demand immediate responses. "How do I hold personal convictions while valuing the opinions of those with vastly different beliefs," asked one student from the Public Dialogue Series. "What will I do with my trashed-out stereotypes?" asked another. A journalism major excited to use the media to give voice to silenced community members put it this way: "I realized how important it is for these voices to be heard by the wider community.

. . . I got several story ideas, and I just can't wait to write them." A young woman who spent her time at the Senior Center remarked that "the generation gap doesn't seem like much of a gap once you start talking to someone and genuinely listening to what they have to say." The voices multiply: "You do the work in the world that you wish to see done." "The people I disagreed with most were the people I learned the most from." "In this kind of community the leader doesn't have to know all the answers and everything is a group effort." These students found a way to take the aims and habits of humanist thinking into the messy, material world. They were practicing democracy. "This entire assignment I have been worried about how others find their voices," concluded still another student. "But it was never about finding other people's voices. It was about finding my own. And I did it. . . ."

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