

Service-Learning as a Pathway to Civic Engagement: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

A common assumption is that service-learning leads students to civic engagement. However, it is not clear that service-learning is better than other activities at engaging students in civic life. This report summarizes findings from a study in which students followed a variety of pathways to civic engagement. These findings suggest that while service-learning is not necessarily more effective than other methods in influencing student attitudes about civic life, it does influence the way students think citizens should act in a democracy.

Over 30 years ago the Board of Trustees of Brigham Young University created a course, American Heritage, and mandated that all freshmen take it. It was conceived as an “appreciation” course—at the end of one semester students were to have gained an appreciation for the American constitutional system and the people who created it. It was taught that way as well. Hundreds of students sat in the biggest auditorium on campus, listening to the best lecturers from the history, political science, and economics departments describe the origins of the Constitution and its influence on the political and economic life of the United States. American Heritage soon became the largest university class in America—as many as 3,000 students took the course from one faculty member (and approximately 30 teaching assistants) each semester. Those students, overwhelmingly conservative, white, Western, and Mormon, found American Heritage to be a difficult but rewarding class. Its praise for the Constitution, capitalism, and the American Republic sat well with them in the final decades of the Cold War.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the growing diversity of the American citizenry (including BYU’s student body), and the battles over abortion, multiculturalism, and the role of religion in American public life shook up the American Heritage program. The class is still gigantic, but it has shed its “appreciation” goals. In their stead has come a commitment to preparing BYU students for active citizenship, a commitment that has changed the content and pedagogy of the course. In particular, American Heritage faculty have sought ways to give students practical experience in the problems and promise of democratic citizenship. Service-learning has been an important part of the course’s new commitment to civic engagement.

In this, American Heritage is not alone. Over the past decade, the attention of the service-learning world has turned steadily toward civic engagement (Erich and Hollander 1999; Mann and Patrick 2000; Gelmon et al. 2001). This shift has been a

boon. It has connected service-learning with other movements for educational reform, extended service-learning's appeal as a pedagogy, and secured a place for service-learning organizations in the national discussion about the crisis of American public life.

But while embracing civic engagement has been good for service-learning, it is not as clear that service-learning has been good for civic engagement. This is not to say that service-learning fails to encourage civic engagement. It is, however, to suggest that it is hard to *know* if service-learning encourages civic engagement. Here are some reasons why measuring the impact of service-learning is so difficult:

1. A widely accepted definition of civic engagement is impossible to come by. While many academic practitioners work from social justice or progressive models of civic engagement, the spectrum of definitions stretches far beyond those points (see Becker and Cuoto 1996; Boyte and Kari 1996; Schudson 1998; Putnam 2000; and Battistoni 2002 for a sample of the variety of definitions in use). Some definitions focus on action—traditional involvement in politics (e.g., voting, running for office, political party membership), political involvement outside the electoral system (protests, for example), non-political community-based work (e.g., volunteerism, club membership, neighborliness), or the expression of individual freedom. Others favor attitudes—trust in government, for example, or patriotism. No service-learning program could promise to provide so much to its students.
2. Regardless of the definition, civic engagement is in decline. Fewer people vote, read the newspaper, write letters to politicians, join clubs, or invite neighbors over for dinner today than at any time in the past fifty years. That decline has been steepest among the young. And while there is some evidence that new forms of civic engagement are emerging—internet chat rooms and affinity group-based protest are two commonly mentioned forms, it is unclear if they will have a measurable impact on the quality of civic life. They may, instead, reinforce the isolation and interest-group-led politics that so many citizens abhor. In this context, any positive effects of service-learning may be swallowed up by broader negative trends (Cone, Cooper, and Hollander 2001; Halstead 1999; Putnam 2000).
3. The scholarship on service-learning's connection to civic engagement is in its infancy. Much work has suggested that service-learning does engage students in civic life (Eyler and Giles 1999). But the research has significant blind spots, such as the assumption that service-learning and civic engagement are synonymous, and its reliance on evidence from courses that naturally attract engaged students (Battistoni and Hudson 1997; Erlich 1999). There are also many questions not yet investigated. We are not sure which aspects of the service-learning experience lead to engagement. Nor do we know if service-learning is more effective than other pathways to civic engagement.

A study of the effectiveness of service-learning in American Heritage can begin to respond to the gaps in the research on service-learning and civic engagement. Because the course is a requirement, not an elective, it allows a peek into the views of students who are not necessarily predisposed to some form of civic action. Because many of the students are conservative, it allows us to ask how service-learning influences students who do not speak the language of social justice. And because service-learning is only one mode of civic engagement in American Heritage, we can compare its effectiveness with that of other pathways to civic engagement.

The study reported here suggests that a semester-long service-learning project is not necessarily a better way to engage students than are other pathways to civic engagement; classroom lectures and activities seem to have had a stronger influence in shaping student attitudes about the quality of civic life. However, this conclusion requires three qualifications. First, students who were members of service organizations before the semester began were more likely than other students to rate service as an essential characteristic of a vital civic life, even if they were not involved in service as part of their course work. Second, reflection, a hallmark of service-learning pedagogy, heightens the quality of student civic engagement regardless of the type of engagement activity the student performs. And third, while service-learning did not seem to have a determinative effect on student attitudes about the quality of civic life, it did influence the way students understand the role of citizens in a democracy. Most American Heritage students shared a set of attitudes about civic life, but service-learning students were more likely than others to believe that community service is the proper way for citizens to influence that civic life.

Project Description

During Winter Semester 2001 all American Heritage students took part in the Citizenship Projects, an effort to deepen students' civic engagement and learning. The project started with the teaching assistants choosing which pathway to civic engagement—service-learning, membership in voluntary associations, media watch, or foundational documents—they preferred. All of the students assigned to a particular teaching assistant participated in the type of project chosen by their teaching assistant. This process gave us two advantages. First, the teaching assistants facilitated the sort of citizenship project that they preferred, and so became part owners of the project. Second, because the students were randomly assigned to a citizenship project, we could measure the comparative strengths of the four pathways to civic engagement without worrying about the problem of student self-selection.

The four projects represented major approaches to engaging students in civic life.

1. **Service-learning:** The service-learning students worked in the Tutor Outreach to Provo Schools (TOPS) partnership between BYU and the Provo School District. Most of the elementary and middle schools in the Provo District qualify for federal Title 1 funds because more than half of their students are non-native English speakers, live below the poverty level,

and are transient. The BYU students filled needs in the schools identified by the District's principals, teachers, volunteer coordinators, and after-school program leaders. Much of their work was in one-to-one tutoring, but they did everything from help teach choir to pilot a new English as a Second Language program.

2. **Voluntary association:** The voluntary association project grew out of the oft-repeated idea that American democracy thrives because of the variety and influence of citizen organizations (Tocqueville 1981). Students in the voluntary association project joined any organization that would allow them to work on a topic of interest and provide them leadership opportunities. Most students joined one of BYU's dozens of clubs. Others joined local service organizations, and at least one group of students formed their own voluntary association.
3. **Media watch:** Since the time of Thomas Jefferson, many Americans have argued that the best preparation for civic life is to stay informed on contemporary issues. The media watch project grew out of that assumption about citizenship. Students in the media watch group tracked national political debates in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the nation's most respected opinion magazines.
4. **Foundational documents:** Finally, the students in the foundational documents project spent the semester reading major works in political philosophy and American public life, including portions of John Locke's *Second Treatise*, Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, and Theodore Roosevelt's *New Nationalism*. In this, the students were working out of the assumption, common among political philosophers and political conservatives, that acquaintance with great thinking is the best preparation for wise citizenship.

Regardless of the project the students worked on, they all faced the same requirements. All students had to spend two hours a week on their project and report on their work in the weekly discussion section. There they also completed spoken and written reflections that asked them to connect their citizenship project work to course content. At the end of the semester all students had to write a paper that described how they had understood citizenship before the class began, what they had learned about citizenship in class and in their project, and how they now understood citizenship. All told, the citizenship project counted for one fourth of each student's grade.

While much of the reflection on citizenship took place in discussion sections, the twice-weekly lectures regularly focused on the role of citizens in founding and reforming the United States. The semester opened with a history of citizenship, focusing on the models of citizenship undergirding each of the projects. For the rest of the semester, case studies of effective (or ineffective) citizens illustrated each lecture. The lecture on the Civil Rights Movement, for example, did not just focus on legal changes, but the ways in which citizens brought about or impeded those changes. The

final class period described the current decline in civic engagement, its effect on the nation, and ways in which students could work to reinvigorate civic life.

Methods

Participants. As described above, participants were undergraduate students in a large, multi-disciplinary course at a large, religiously affiliated university. Participation was built into the laboratory aspect of course requirements. Over 2,200 students were enrolled in the class. A total of 1,315 students (58% female, 42% male) completed all measurement instruments.

Assessment instruments and procedures. In her recent essay, "Progress toward Strategies to Evaluate Civic Engagement," Barbara A. Holland argues that because civic engagement work is in its infancy, its assessment must be flexible enough to detect unexpected local outcomes but durable enough to withstand criticism (Holland 2001). Both flexibility and durability were at the center of our evaluation strategies. We wanted our assessments to give voice to the religious, ethnic, and political particularities of the thousands of students in the class, and allow us to adjust the course midstream. But at the same time we wanted our findings to allow us to connect our work with the emerging scholarship on civic engagement. To reach both these ends, we started several months before the course began to assemble a repertoire of assessment tools, some structured and some unstructured, some quantitative and some qualitative. Those tools are described below, in the order in which they were employed.

- **Teaching Goals Inventory/Learning Goals Inventory (TGI/LGI):** The TGI/LGI was developed at Washington State University to allow faculty members to compare how their objectives for a particular course matched up with the objectives of their students. The survey asks takers to rank statements about learning on a five-point scale, ranging from 1—not applicable (a goal I never try to achieve in my course) to 5—essential (a goal I always try to achieve). The results are then clustered around six major learning goals: higher-order thinking skills, basic academic success skills, discipline-specific knowledge and skills, liberal arts and academic values, work and career preparation, and personal development. The first author, who taught the American Heritage class, and all of his teaching assistants, took the TGI/LGI before the semester began; the students took it during the first week of class.
- **Civic Engagement Survey:** After a consideration of existing civic engagement surveys, the authors decided to create a new civic engagement tool for this study. That decision was based on two considerations. First, because we aimed to measure the impact of service-learning, membership in voluntary associations, the analysis of contemporary issues, and the study of foundation documents on civic engagement, we needed a tool broad enough to embrace each of these approaches to civic life. Since most existing surveys grow out of a particular approach to civic engagement, we found

them to be too narrow. Second, the religious and political characteristics of BYU's student body required the creation of a tool that would encourage students to honestly express their views on civic life. Many currently existing tools favor a particular orientation to civic questions—that a good citizen is obligated to vote, for example. We hoped to create a tool that would allow space for a student to reject that option in good conscience.

Our desire for topical and political breadth led us to the concluding chapter of Michael Schudson's book *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* in which Schudson proposes several measures of the quality of civic life. Some, like voter turnout, trust in government and other major institutions, and membership in social groups, are traditional measures widely cited in the scholarship on civic decline. But Schudson is careful to note that a lack of trust in government is not necessarily a bad thing. Nor is declining membership in social groups, from certain political perspectives. His other measures—the quality of public discourse, the disparity between rich and poor, the access of the disadvantaged to political influence, and the scope of state-guaranteed rights, are less commonly used. And, in several cases, these measures show civic life to be better today than fifty years ago (Schudson 1998). Our survey measured student opinion about each of these indicators. But it also includes a set of statements, based on the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* annual survey of incoming freshmen, asking about student goals for the future. Students took this survey during the second week of class, and then again during the final week of class. The survey is included as an appendix to this essay.

- **Focus Groups:** During the third and fourth weeks of the semester, students in the second author's Psychological Research Methods course conducted focus groups with American Heritage students. These groups focused discussion on a series of open-ended questions designed to let students define citizenship, discuss its importance, and indicate why they thought civic engagement was central to the American Heritage course.
- **Reflection:** Every weekly discussion section included time for informal reflection on the Citizenship Projects. On three occasions, students wrote short papers on topics that related their project work to the course content. For example, during the week in which lectures covered the location of powers in the Constitution, students wrote a short paper on what their citizenship projects had taught them about using power to achieve laudable ends.
- **Weekly Feedback:** Daynes met weekly with the teaching assistants in a feedback session. During those meetings teaching assistants talked about how their students were responding to course content and their project work as well as made suggestions on how the content of the course might be made more applicable to the work the students were doing.

- **Open Communication:** All students had access to Daynes via email or by appointment. On average 10 students emailed Daynes each week with questions or concerns about the role of citizenship in American Heritage.
- **Final Paper:** At the end of the semester, all students turned in a paper that described how they defined citizenship before the semester began, how they defined it at the end of the semester, and what, if anything, led to the changes in their definition.

Results and Discussion

As might be expected, seven forms of assessment and 2,268 students have given us an immense pool of data. Still, that data has several weaknesses worth noting. First, it comes from a single semester and so provides no evidence about the long-term effects of civic engagement or assessment strategies. Second, because our focus is on determining ways in which a course can encourage civic engagement, we have not examined the influence of specific non-curricular events on the students. Third, we have analyzed the data for what it tells us about the civic engagement of students in general. Our findings thus represent the views of a majority of the students, but ignore outliers. In *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that outliers are often trend-setters, who, if they have sufficient influence, can create “social epidemics,” or movements on behalf of a particular political or social end (Gladwell 2000). By overlooking the outliers, then, we may be ignoring precisely those students with the greatest ability to lead others toward civic engagement.

Those weaknesses in the data aside, our research into the civic engagement of students in American Heritage leads to four major conclusions. First, the current debate over whether college students are self-absorbed and careerist, on the one hand (Brooks 2001), or civically minded, on the other (Long 2002), obscures the ways in which students understand the civic significance of personal development. American Heritage students, at first glance, describe themselves in a way that lends credence to the thesis that college students are self-absorbed. The most common response to the LGI question “What is your primary role as a learner?” was “To grow and develop on a personal level.” When asked to rank their learning goals for the semester, students ranked “developing higher order thinking skills” first, followed by “personal development,” “work and career preparation,” and “developing discipline-specific knowledge.” “Developing liberal arts and academic values,” the goal that includes civic engagement, came fifth, ahead only of “developing basic academic success skills.”

But if American Heritage students placed their personal development above the development of civic skills, they did it for civic reasons. In focus group interviews done during the third week of the semester (and thus before the citizenship projects were in full operation), students consistently claimed that civic engagement was important to them—75 percent rated it “very important” or “somewhat important” and only one percent said it was “not important.” For students in this study, there is no contradiction between their desire for personal development and their declarations of

civic engagement. Instead, they understand civic engagement in terms of personal development. When asked why they thought civic engagement was a required component of the American Heritage class, 87 percent replied that it helped them personally become better citizens, while only 8 percent said it would better the community. And in response to a question about the benefit to society when people are engaged, the majority of respondents described the benefit as the cumulative result of individually satisfied people. Only 12 percent gave a response that suggested that civic engagement improved the workings of society in and of itself, i.e., “the government works better.”

It is tempting to understand these findings as proof that students care little about anyone beside themselves. However, that belief ignores the historical connection between personal development and civic well-being in the U.S., and that particularly among conservatives it is still seen as the principal pathway to a better civic life. Perhaps more importantly, the connection between personal development and civic engagement suggests that teachers who draw out the connections between personal well-being and the well-being of others can deepen student engagement. After getting the results of the focus groups, Daynes adjusted lecture content so that the stories of individual citizens took a larger role. Students also began to participate in the civic engagement projects. By the end of the semester, though students still ranked most civic activities as more beneficial to themselves than to their families or communities, the mean scores for family and community had risen a statistically significant amount, while benefit to self was stagnant or had declined.

Second, though a course that focuses on civic engagement can influence student views on civic life, service-learning does not appear to be a more effective pathway to civic engagement than membership in a voluntary association, following politics in the media, or reading foundational documents. Results from the pre- and post-semester administrations of the civic engagement survey show several statistically significant changes. American Heritage students were more likely to trust political parties and the media at the end of the semester, and less likely to trust congress, the military, big business, and universities. They were more likely to find benefits to their families in becoming an authority in their field of study, becoming well-off financially, caring for the environment, being creative, taking part in a community organization, getting a college degree, giving to charity, holding political office, staying up-to-date on political affairs, and lobbying legislators. Students found benefits to their community in getting a good job, lobbying legislators, being creative, and becoming well-off financially. Finally, they were more likely recognize the effect of racism and more likely to value constitutional rights at the end of the semester than at the beginning.

These differences hold true for the class as a whole. In only two instances did one of the citizenship projects show itself to be more influential than the others in shaping student attitudes. Students in the media project were more likely than those in voluntary associations or foundational documents to rank “giving to charity” as a desirable characteristic. And service-learning students were more likely than voluntary association students to believe that involvement in community organizations was beneficial.

The relative unimportance of the citizenship projects can be explained in three ways. First, all of the citizenship projects used the same techniques to connect course content with the project. If reflection is as powerful a tool as it seems, then it may ameliorate differences between the pathways to engagement. Second, though students spent over 20 hours during the semester on their citizenship projects, they spent more time in lecture and in studying lecture-related material. The lectures, then, may have been more influential than the projects in shaping student engagement. Third, as Richard Light suggests in *Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds*, course content comes to matter when students can make it relate to their personal lives. In other words, self-selection matters (Light 2001). Because we randomly assigned students to particular projects, they may not have been in a project that most closely related to their personal concerns. A student in the service-learning group might have been better served in the media group, and vice versa.

This possibility is borne out by our third finding. Though no single citizenship project was more influential than the others, prior membership in some sort of civic organization had a significant influence on student attitudes. Twenty-four percent of students belonged to a political party before the semester began, while 41 percent belonged to a social club and 47 percent belonged to a service organization. There was no distinctive profile for members of a social organization, but members of political and service groups did exhibit a distinct set of characteristics, both in comparison to each other and to those who are not members of such organizations.

Some characteristics of group members are predictable. For example, members of a political party were more likely to have voted than members of a service or social club, or no club at all—69 percent of party members voted, while 50 percent of service or social members and 43 percent of the students who did not belong to a group did. Political party members were also more likely to have worked on a campaign (12% versus 4% for non-party members) and written their national representatives (13% to 5%). Members of service organizations participated more commonly in group service projects (92% to 87% of non-service group members) and individual service (78% to 65%) than did non-members. While the finding that there are service and political profiles is hardly surprising, it should encourage practitioners to be careful about assuming that service-learning and political engagement sit on the same continuum. Instead our findings extend the thesis, put forth by Keith Morton in a slightly different context, that there are different styles of service, each with its own philosophy and practice (Morton 1995). In this case service-oriented and politically-oriented students approach civic life differently. We should think twice, then, before we assume that service-learning will lead naturally to other forms of civic engagement. It may lead instead to more community service.

Our final finding grows out of a less-intuitive aspect of the profile of “service people.” Members of service groups spent their time in different ways than did other students. They were less likely to spend time on-line or watching television than other students, and more likely to have checked a book out from the library, signed a petition, or worked to care for the environment. Put more generally, while service students might

share attitudes with people who do not belong to service organizations, they spend their time differently—they act differently as citizens. In the semester-ending papers, we began to see evidence of these differences among members of the service-learning group as well. Their attitudes toward citizenship were quite close to those of their classmates in the other citizenship projects. But the way they described the behavior of good citizens differed. Service-learning students were more likely to say that a good citizen served in the community, or, in the words of one student, “I’m convinced that we could wipe out the problems of hunger, poverty, and illiteracy if we worked together as citizens.” Service-learning, then, may not necessarily change attitudes toward the challenges of American civic life, but it may change the way that students respond to those challenges. There is some question as to whether community service can actually solve complex political and social problems. But it seems certain that if we ask more students to take part in service-learning projects, we will have more citizens willing to voluntarily take those problems on.

Implications

Though Brigham Young University, as the largest faith-based institution of higher education in the United States, is in many ways unique, it shares important characteristics with many large urban universities. BYU’s students are, in general, less diverse and more affluent than the residents of the neighborhoods that surround it. And BYU struggles to find ways to civically engage students, especially in the large, general education classes that are ostensibly to teach civic skills to the student body.

These common characteristics, and the results of the study reported above, carry important implications for faculty and staff at urban universities. The first is that, at least in large, general education courses, faculty can support civic outcomes with a variety of pedagogies, of which service-learning is only one. While service-learning is undoubtedly a powerful pedagogy for disciplinary learning, civic engagement assignments that ask students to join clubs, follow the media, or read foundational documents, if accompanied by reflection and connected to the curriculum, are as powerful as service-learning in creating civic outcomes. For any service-learning office that has struggled to place hundreds of students a semester, or community-based organization that has struggled to accommodate those students, this can only be good news.

The second implication is that service-learning and civic engagement practitioners must be at least as familiar with the cultures of their students as they are with the cultures of the communities in which those students serve. The service-learning literature is replete with reminders that practitioners must hearken to the voice of the local community and establish reciprocally beneficial, long-term relationships with authentic community organizations. But the literature that pays such attention to local community characteristics tends to assume that students share roughly similar civic attitudes wherever they are. This study makes it clear that student civic cultures have a strong impact on the civic skills and knowledge that students will develop in class. One would, of course, expect this to be the case at a faith-based institution like BYU. But beyond the influence of religion, our finding that there are “service” and “politics”

cultures among students at BYU, or that many students understand their personal development in civic terms, suggests that practitioners need to identify the civic cultures among their students before they can predict how service-learning or any other civic engagement effort will work.

By arguing that there are several ways beyond service-learning to civically engage students, we do not mean to imply that urban universities should disengage from the community in order to engage students. It seems clear that a student who follows an irrelevant issue, or who joins a club that she despises, will learn fewer civic lessons than one for whom the civic engagement assignment is personally meaningful and locally relevant. We do suggest, though, the universities embrace a more expansive definition of civic life, one that includes community members and students as civic actors, and one that is as attuned to the culture of students on campus as it is to the culture of off-campus communities.

Editor's Note: Copies of the full survey instrument for the American Heritage course are available from the authors. Their contact information is provided below in the Author Information section.

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