

CAN SPECIALIZED LEARNING COMMUNITIES INCREASE CIVIC LIFE? POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

Lorrie Clemo

State University of New York College at Oswego, Clemo@Oswego.edu

Karen Wolford

State University of New York College at Oswego, Wolford@Oswego.edu

Abstract

Since the 1960s a long list of scholars have commented critically on the absence of citizenship in higher education and the notable decline in levels of participation in civic life in the U.S. (Sennett 1974, Putnam 2000). These works have shaped both intellectual and popular perceptions of the public sphere. Institutions of higher education are often read as structures empty of citizenship or void of public spirit. Implicit in this criticism is the notion that the state of citizenship on campus is an influential form of citizenship in society broadly.

Despite this long standing strand of social thought, more recent scholarship revolving around the related concepts of the public, citizenship, and civil society are describing a more engaged academy, including the introduction of collaborative inquiry, service-learning, and multidisciplinary integrative learning, among other changes (Schnieder 2000). A highly robust level of civic and volunteer engagement among young people has also been reported in a number of recent studies tracking generational change in civic participation (Friedland 2005, Torney-Purta 2004, Dudley & Gitelson 2002). Based on these findings, it appears we may be witnessing a renewed self-understanding on the part of universities about their role in education and citizenship.

What we do not know to date however, is whether these structural changes result in sustained increased civic engagement. This paper explores the effects of student participation in a service-based living and learning community on levels of civic engagement as impacted by a web-assisted general education human diversity course and possible applications of this model to a distance learning framework.

Keywords: Learning community, civic participation, web-assisted instruction

I. Introduction

The study examines student behavior on voting, volunteerism and political activity. It argues that engaging in service-learning, whether through voluntary coercion or mandatory requirement creates habits that positively effect future behavior leading to an increased shift toward civic life. The possibility of redesigning this course experience to a fully online distance learning community is also discussed after the brief introduction.

It has been noted that students are increasingly being required and or encouraged to participate in civic activities at the high school level, in part because forms of civic activities including service-learning, volunteerism and after-school clubs have enhanced students' success in gaining admission to higher education. This increased pressure from a growing college orientation is well documented in longitudinal and cross-sectional research, and is supported by a wide range of contemporary journalism as well as being evident in popular culture where there is an explicit understanding that a college education is a means to a decent life in the middle-class (Schneider & Stevenson 1999, Beck 2002, Schwartz 2004). This suggests that the world into which young people are being socialized closely links civic activity and volunteerism to personal and instrumental benefit. If this is true and young people fail to align their ambitions with broader civic values, then civic engagement and volunteerism should carry less social and cultural capital once admission to higher education is secure. A dramatic decline in the volume of civic activity among students when they enter college should therefore follow. This expected behavior is contrary to the upswing in community involvement levels witnessed in this generation and reported in the generational tracking studies noted above.

While the recent acceleration of individualization may provide the structural context that shapes the meaning of participation for young people, it may also act to evolve into a powerful motive that can organize other motives. If indeed this is the case, which we think it is, it becomes incumbent upon the academy to provide opportunities for students to continue to engage in civic activity at the college level.

2. Civic Engagement at SUNY Oswego

Part of this effort to connect higher education to the public sphere is educators finding a way to encourage civic participation or socialize civic and political responsibility among enrolled students. Our research examines one model of civic activity—service-learning to determine whether overall civic engagement is changed or sustained as a result of participation in a college service-learning program. The study explores this question in an online-enhanced introductory course with a primarily freshman sample. (www.wolford.pageout.net).

To adapt the class format used for this research to a fully online format there are a few methods that could be utilized. The lectures and assignments could all be put online and group projects could be facilitated by small group discussions online with the presentations being shown as virtual presentations

(PowerPoint). Service learning could be accomplished through outside sponsorships of the volunteer activity with students completing online discussion about their experiences and their activity logs could also be submitted online. In a recent article on the SLOAN-C website, instructors at Kent State University moved a course on learning theory to a fully online course by emphasizing problem-based learning (PBL) and group activities similar to our approach. A quote from the article illustrates this process.

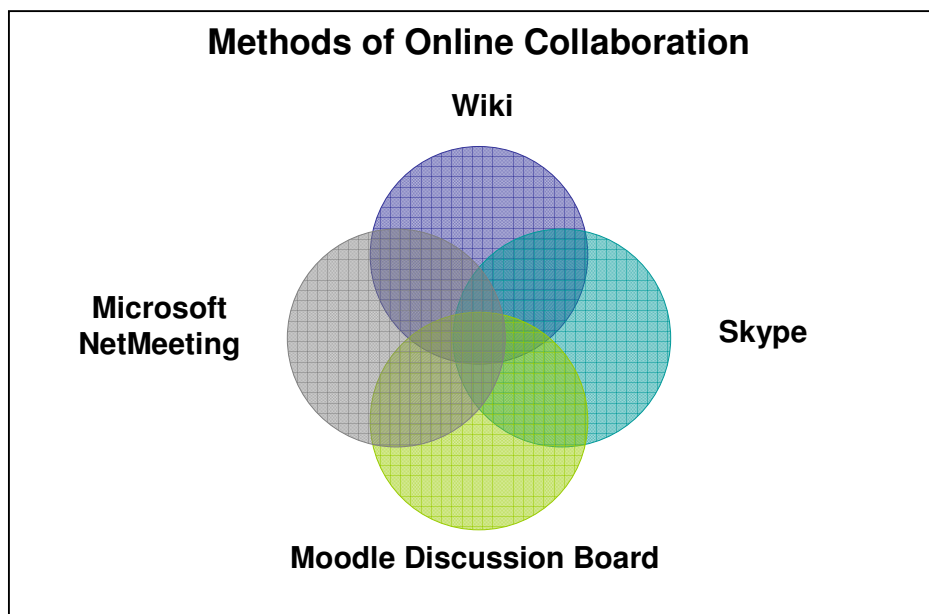
“A PBL group might be given a problem by a facilitator who helps them define their needs for more information and problem-solving approaches. They may then do research individually on the background information needed and meet later to exchange that information and their ideas about the solution. Depending on the size and nature of the problem, the group may go through several cycles of research and group collaboration. Again, there is a research base that shows that PBL groups can learn as much or more, even on basic concepts (not just problem solving), than students taking traditional lecture courses.” (Ingram, 2006).

To adapt the group project for a fully online course. Students can use a Wiki discussion board (Augar et al., 2004) for a collaborative writing space along with Skype (students edit and discuss while they edit their research paper) and then post reflective comments regarding research papers online. Instructors can use a "learning community" concept for the class. This is helpful for group work especially as everyone takes responsibility for everyone's learning. Participation and active level of involvement then become the means for grading the project and the efforts that go into the project can be tracked by checking for the submitted posts. Moodle with a Moodle discussion board is also useful for internet teaching and writing assignments (Dougiamas, 1999). If students are using virtual presentations, then Microsoft Net Meeting in PowerPoint could be utilized for discussions and collaborations (Farren & Tweedy, 2004). See illustration Methods of Online Collaboration next page.

When PageOut[®] is used for the course platform as a learning management system, each students submission and length of time spent on each task can be tracked by accessing and or printing out the student activity report for a given time period (Lewis, et. al., 2005). The report shows the date, time spent, what the student produced and submitted, and what part of the course the student visited and viewed or posted to while they were on line.

Our research was conducted at the State University of New York College at Oswego in Oswego, New York. Oswego is a post-industrial city of approximately 18,000 residents. The college is located just outside the city of Oswego sprawling over 690 acres along the shore of Lake Ontario. Oswego is one of 12 comprehensive colleges of the State University of New York. Originally founded as a teacher's college, in 1962 the college broadened its scope to become an arts and sciences institution and maintains an annual enrollment of approximately 8,500 graduate and undergraduate students drawn primarily from New York State. The college's motto is "To Learn, To Search, To Serve".

All study participants were students enrolled in our class *Race and Gender in the United States: Political and Psychological Considerations*. Our course deals primarily with complicated and complex social issues including racism, sexism, classism, able-bodyism, heterosexism, etc. A focus of the class is to examine solutions to inequities in society within a social justice social responsibility framework. Our class includes two populations of students. A service-learning based learning community (SLBLC) of 16 students embedded in a team taught interdisciplinary class of 85 additional students not in the SLBLC. The SLBLC students are in three common linked classes including Chemistry, English, and the Race and Gender class described above. All three classes are part of the general education curriculum required of all graduates.



The learning community for these students is titled, “Helping Your Community”. These students reside together in the same residence hall which is also part of the learning community. Recent research has demonstrated that students can derive educational benefits from service-learning “when service is viewed as providing youth with opportunities to learn about systems of meaning through participatory action. From the viewpoint of educational policy, schools can help students most when they organize service strategically and integrate service into the academic curriculum” (McLellan & Youniss 2003).

In review of service-learning outcomes, Eyler (2004) found that it is a learning approach that is most successful educationally when there is “opportunity for problem-based learning with continuous reflection and challenge activities.” Our class utilizes cooperative learning with project groups similar to those in (Mikic & Grasso 2002). Group roles are assigned and group meetings are structured through the steps of creating a group project (research

presentation) which is centered on a complex social issue and a critical analysis of all sides of the issue. Group members are engaged in continuous thinking, research, and written activities as they develop their projects over the first half of the semester. They first select a topic on a socially complex issue such as racism or sexism, they then select group roles, develop a project idea, and then they subdivide their topic area and decide on methods of research and presentation formats. In the final group meeting they draft an outline of the project with subtopics and sources cited. In the remaining half of the semester, each group presents their project. The project grade is based upon substantive input, use of credible sources, organization, presentation skill and peer rating of group participation in the process. In addition to the required cooperative group project, all students are encouraged to participate in diversity activities outside of class in the college or surrounding community and are offered extra credit for writing a reflection paper on the experience.

3. Methods

This study assesses the degree of participation in service-learning beyond what is required for the SLBLC students (5 hours) and student's self-reported envisioned future volunteer and political behavior between the two groups. Students not in the learning community (85) vs. those in the SLBLC (16) are the comparison groups. The measure is a survey of student behavior including future behavior in voting, campaign work, political donations, volunteering and filler items on other student behavior. The pilot survey is based on a 5 point Likert scale. Students were asked to complete the survey with a response rate of 100% for the SLBLC group and a 84% participation rate for the non-SLBLC group.

4. Findings

As expected we found that the majority of respondents, 92% had engaged in civic activity during high school. This aligns with the major finding of *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins 2002), that civic and volunteer engagement among youth is relatively robust. They indicate that much of this volunteerism has been shaped by the perception that voluntary and civic activity is necessary to get into college. This study found evidence to support this claim as indicated by the 17% drop off in reported volunteerism when respondents moved from high school to college.

When we examined the difference in volunteerism rates among SLBLC students and non-SLBLC in college, members of the SLBLC volunteered at higher levels (94.5%) than the non-SLBLC students (56%). This differential may be due in part to the five hour requirement associated with the living-learning community, but it also may indicate that providing students with a structured opportunity to engage in volunteerism may encourage continued volunteer activity beyond high school.

We also did find significant other forms of activity with different motivations other than course requirements however. For example, 50% of the SLBLC students reported that they had participated in the political process by

voting, compared to only 16% of the SLBLC students. Similarly, 37.5% of the SLBLC students reported that they had participated in the political process by donating money to a candidate or a political interest group, while only 2% of the non-SLBLC students had done so.

Findings on envisioned future volunteer and civic activity among college students found similar differences among the two cohorts. Of the SLBLC students 31% vs. 15% of non-SLBLC reported that they plan on participating in the political process in the future by donating money to a candidate or a political interest group. Among the SLBLC students, 19% vs. 1% of the non-SLBLC students plan on participating in the future by volunteering for a campaign, and when asked if they plan on running for a future office, 19% of the SLBLC students vs. 7% of the non-SLBLC students reported yes.

5. Discussion

Adding a service-learning component to college level courses may produce many additional advantages for enhancing student learning as well as civic participation. There are two sets of mutually beneficial goals involved. Service goals include direct assistance to the agency/group in the community that the students work with and the learning goals including the specific skills or knowledge the student will gain from the experience (Mathie, 2006). The combination of service and learning (Duffy & Bringle, 1998) and civic participation are the key ingredients of the experience. Faculty that supervise this work can use the student's participation in real-life community settings as reflected in their experience papers or logs to help the students apply the knowledge they have gained from the classroom or prior experience to the efforts involved in the service activity (Plater, 1995). Having students discuss what they learn as an integrated part of the classroom discourse is potentially stimulating to others who may want to pursue similar experiences. We observed an additional benefit of improved first-year retention rates for those students who participated in a service-learning community (84.4%) vs. those who did not participate (73.6%).

A number of other key advantages to this type of learning have been outlined in a recent article (Mathie, 2006). Students who have participated in service learning in civic organizations are in a position to become socially responsive change agents who can make a difference (Altman, 1996 as found in Mathie, 2006). College community relations are enhanced as students make connections with local agencies and organizations. Students are in a unique position to come to know organizational structure and management issues. Lastly, one of the key goals is to help students identify social problems and derive potential solutions for these problems and the civic participation directly provides these opportunities (Duffy & Bringle; Zlotkowski, 2001 as found in Mathie, 2006).

Continued tracking of this cohort of students both in the SLBLC and non-SLBLC groups is necessary before conclusive statements can be made about the effects of service-learning on sustained civic engagement. We are

inspired by the early results noted here that indicate promise for increasing civic activity of college enrolled students.

6. Conclusions

While the instrumental motive for engaging in civic activities is prevalent among high school students of this generation in the sample from the United States, this study provides some evidence that these achievement orientations can be shaped at the college level resulting in a path of autonomous self-development within the context of a broader community-connection. That is, for some young people the one important reason for their civic engagement may be the desire to build a resume for college admission, for others they may be engaged for complex reasons with multiple motives, including altruism, religious belief, and love of politics or volunteerism that coexists with them. Civic engagement opportunities in colleges and universities may help students blend achievement orientations and commitment to community which help create habits that positively effect future behavior such as sustained civic life. Moving this course to a fully online format would constitute three basic changes in the learning community structure in that the groups would not meet physically (but would meet virtually in online groups) and the students would not live together in the same location (dormitory) or be in other F2F linked classes. The study would have to be repeated with an online sample to see if the results would differ.

Changes in university structure and practices that are being reflected in a more engaged academy including service learning, collaborative inquiry, and multidisciplinary integrative learning are all examples of the ongoing movement toward a more engaged academy. Advantages of web-enhanced courses such as broader student access and increased interaction are becoming widely known (Schmidt, 2002). Our data suggests that at least one of these tacit models of civic engagement demonstrates a successful commitment to citizenship reform by bringing citizenship onto campus and online in a web-assisted format which encourages students to align their instrumental ambitions with both newer and traditional forms of civic association. Furthermore use of these practices may raise awareness within the academy and result in finding ways to build on these achievements and help to reach a fuller vision of citizenship in society.

References:

- Altman, I. (1996). Higher education and psychology in the millennium. *American Psychologist*, 51, 371-378.
- Augar, N., Raitman, R. & Zhou, W. (2004). Teaching and learning online with wikis. Proceedings of the Australian Society for Computer in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCLITE). Retrieved June 30, 2006, from <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/augar.html>.
- Beck, Ulrich & Beck-Gersheim. (2002). *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Dougiamas, M. (1999). Reading and writing for internet teaching. Retrieved July 2, 2006, from <http://dougiamas.com/writing/readwrite.html>.
- Dudley, Robert L. & Gitelson, Alan, R. (2002). Political literacy, civic education and civic engagement: A return to political socialization? *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 175-182.
- Duffy, D. K., & Bringle, R. G. (1998) Collaborating with the community: Psychology and service-learning. In R. G. Bringle & D.K. Duffy (Eds.), *With service in mind: Concepts and models for service learning in psychology* (pp. 1-17). Washington D.C: American Association for Higher Education.
- Eyler, Janet (2002). Reflection: Linking service and learning—Linking students and communities. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58, 517-534.
- Farren, M. & Tweedy, E. (2004). Using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to support action research and distance learning. Working paper 2002-2004. Paper originally presented at Educational Studies Association Conference Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Retrieved July 2, 2006, from <http://odtl.dcu.ie/wp/2002/odtl-2002-04.html>
- Friedland, L. (2005). The changing life world of young people: risk, resume-padding, and civic engagement. *Circle Working Paper* 40.
- Garrison, R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (2001). Critical Thinking, Cognitive Presence, and Computer Conferencing in Distance Education. *American Journal of Distance Education*.
- Ingram, Albert (2006). Combining effective individualized and group instruction. SloanCWiki. SLOAN-C article retrieved June 20, 2006, from http://www.sloan-c-wiki.org/wiki/index.php?title=Kent_State_University_-_Combining_Effective_Individualized_and_Group_Instruction.

- Keeter, Scott, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins. 2002. The civic and political health of the nation: A generational portrait. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
- Lewis, B., MacEntee, V., DeLaCruz, C., Englander, T., Takach, E., Wilson, S., & Woodall, J. (2005). Learning Management Systems Comparison. Proceedings of the 2005 Informing Science and IT Education Joint Conference. Retrieved June 29, 2006, from <http://proceedings.informingscience.org/InSITE2005/P03f55Lewis.pdf>.
- Mathie, V.A. (2006). The value of Psi Chi service. *Eye on Psi Chi*, Winter 2006: 10 (2), pp. 6 & 18.
- McGraw Hill PageOut (2006). Retrieved July 2, 2006, from <http://www.pageout.net/page.dyn/intro/welcome>.
- McLennan, Jeffrey A. & Youniss, James (2003). Two systems of youth service: determinants of voluntary and required youth community service. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32, 47-58.
- Microsoft Corporation. (1998). Microsoft NetMeeting Web Pages. [On-Line] Available: <http://www.microsoft.com/netmeeting>.
- Mikic, Borgana & Grasso, Dominico (2002). Socially-relevant design: The TOYtech project at Smith College, *Journal of Engineering Education*, 7,319-326.
- Moodle.com (2006). Retrieved July 2, 2006, from <http://moodle.org>. Also see <http://moodle.usd.edu/file.php/1/USDMoodlePPT.ppt#30> for an overview of Moodle.
- No author. (2006). Poznan Conference working paper. Working collaboratively over the internet in course design http://zeno.ced.appstate.edu/wikis/C15630/index.php/Poznan_Conference_Work_Area
- Peterson, S. J. & Schaffer, M. J. (1999). Service learning: a strategy to develop group collaboration and research skills, *Journal of Nursing Education*, 5, 208-214.
- Plater, W. M. (1995). Future work: Faculty time in the 21st Century. *Change*, 27 (3), 22-33.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Schmidt, K. (200). The web-enhanced classroom. *Journal of Industrial Technology*. 18 (2), pp 1-6. Retrieved June 29, 2006, from <http://nait.org/jit/Articles/schmidt011802.pdf>.

- Schneider, C.G. (2000). Educational missions and civic responsibility: Toward the engaged academy, in *Civic responsibility and higher education*. T. Erlich, Ed. American Council on Education and Oryx Press, 108.
- Schneider, Barbara L. & David Stevenson. (1999). *The ambitious generation: America's teenagers, motivated but directionless*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schwartz, Barry. (2004). *The paradox of choice: why more is less*. New York: ECCO.
- Sennett, R. (1974). *The fall of public man*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company.
- Tang, McBride & Sherraden (2003). Toward measurement of civic service. Global Service Institute. Research Background Paper supported by a Ford Foundation Grant. Center for Social Development, Washington, D.C. As found on November 16, 2005 at http://www.iadb.org/etica/Documentos/tan_hacia-i.pdf
- Zlotkowski, E. (2001). Mapping new terrain: Service-learning across the disciplines. *Change*, 33 (1), 25-33.