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Policy debate pedagogy: a complementary strategy for civic and political engagement through service-learning

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ABSTRACT
National offices and organizations, such as the U.S. Department of Education and the Association of American Colleges & Universities, have called for higher education curriculum that better prepares students for lifelong civic engagement. Many institutions respond to this appeal by creating more service-learning opportunities for students. However, service-learning alone does not promote the political learning needed for students to have effective engagement. This essay explores the potential of policy debate to complement service-learning as a means of civic education. Policy debate improves civic education by furthering information literacy and critical reasoning skills beyond the classrooms.

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Recent scholarship has emphasized the need to reconsider the relationship between formal education and citizenship. From ancient Greece through the rise of our modern universities, education for citizenship has been a part of the curriculum in democratic societies. In recent years, however, concerns about growing social isolation and apathy, and fears about the impact of new media technologies, have created new concerns over declining political and civic involvement, especially among younger generations (e.g., Delli Carpini, 2000; Keeter, 2006; Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Fewer young citizens today are contacting their public officials about civic issues (Twenge, 2014), and few have the skills and information they need to engage in effective political activity (Galston, 2004; Quigley, 2011). The number of young Americans who vote continues to lag behind other age groups (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2013), and increasingly less attention is being giving to civic learning in American classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). President Barack Obama tapped into these concerns during his 2008 presidential campaign, and he made them a central focus of his first inaugural address. In that address, the president called for “a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world.” “This,” he said, “is the price and promise of citizenship” (Obama, 2009).
Obama followed up on these issues during his first term in office by partnering with prominent national organizations concerned with civic education, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU). The AACU’s 2012 publication, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*, issued a “national call to action” urging educators “to embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority” (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement [NTFCLDE], 2012, p. 2). Calling this a “crucible moment” fraught with “transformative possibilities” for revitalizing civic education, the AACU proposed a framework for civic learning and democratic engagement in higher education revolving around four dimensions of democratic praxis: knowledge, skills, values, and engagement (Appendix A). First students need *knowledge* of democratic systems of government and the plurality of religious, cultural, and social forces that shape our world; second, they need the information literacy and communication *skills* to practice political action; third, they need to *value* democratic ideals such as tolerance and equality; and finally, they need to actually *engage* in collective action to deal with social and political issues.

*A Crucible Moment* (2012) argues that more learning opportunities within the framework can succeed in promoting civic education because today’s college students are deeply committed to community service and “care deeply about public issues” (p. 4). For example, the report notes the popularity of service-learning programs and urges expansion of those programs in order to capitalize on students’ desire for more “meaningful opportunities to discuss and address social issues” (p. 4). At no point in the 136-page document, however, do the authors of *A Crucible Moment* refer to classroom or extracurricular speech and debate activities as a possible avenue for civic learning. Nor is their evidence that speech or debate practice was considered at any of the subsequent events or publications inspired by the original report. Instead, it seems that “debates,” in the rhetoric of civic engagement training, are what happen when politicians clash during election time or when stakeholders disagree about public issues. Both the AACU and the Department of Education say that students should be familiar with these political debates. Yet there is no discussion of how students might be trained to participate in public debates or deliberations.

The absence of attention to speech and debate activities in the public discussion surrounding what Auburn University’s Vice President for Outreach has called the most impactful report on civic education since Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* deserves thorough exploration that is beyond the scope of the current essay (AACU, 2014). It may simply be the case that representatives from the forensics speaking community have not participated much in the national exchange about civic engagement and higher education. The Penn State Conference on Speech and Debate as Civic Education, which inspired this special section, represented a propitious opportunity for speech and debate educators to graft onto the national “debate” that is circulating over how best to advance civic learning in higher education. We will need a meaningful way to participate in the national conversation if we hope to have an impact.

This essay suggests how policy debate activities might be integrated with service-learning to foster civic knowledge and engagement beyond the classroom. Specifically, I argue that experience with policy debate can improve students’ information literacy and increase the political learning that is accomplished through service work. The argument that “debate is good” is certainly not new. I draw on excellent past work from scholars,
teachers, and debate coaches to make a case for the place of policy debate activities in our national agenda for higher education. Yet, by showing how policy debate pedagogy can be effectively integrated into service-learning programs, this essay offers a new perspective on higher education’s role in educating for democratic citizenship in America.

Promoting civic engagement in higher education

In 1990, the U.S. Congress passed the National and Community Service Act, followed shortly after by President Bill Clinton’s National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993. These legislative acts shined a spotlight on the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education, and particularly on service-learning as an effective pedagogy for promoting high-impact learning experiences. Service-learning is a type of experiential curriculum that calls for students to engage in structured opportunities to work with community partners to solve a problem (Flecky, 2011). As part of a class on health communication, for example, students might be tasked with developing a campaign to encourage transient populations in their community to use free wellness services from a local clinic. In contrast, students in an introductory chemistry course might demonstrate chemical reactions at local elementary schools as their service-learning experience. Service-learning is distinguished from general volunteering or internships by its “explicit link” with curricular learning objectives, organized treatment of student participation, and the expectation that students will engage in purposeful reflection on the relationship between their service and social issues (Flecky, 2011). Service-learning is actively sponsored by private, state, and federal education initiatives, and it is routinely cited among “best practices” for educating and preparing students for civic engagement. In the 1990s alone, thousands of service-learning courses were developed across the country (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and the momentum for research and program development in service-learning has only increased since then (Campus Compact, 2015).

Speck and Hoppe’s (2004) robust treatment of the early period of service-learning’s popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s also attributes the rise of formal service-learning programing to the reemerging influence of John Dewey’s philosophy of education. Dewey’s (1916) work stresses the importance of education that cultivates the “habits of mind” necessary for democratic action. Learning to think critically about experience, Dewey argued, was far more important for democracy than learning about any particular subject. Service-learning’s emphasis on individual reflection in light of social action echoes Dewey’s sentiment. Service-learning experience has been credited with helping students build empathy for others and with building students’ sense of their larger communities (Furco & Root, 2010). Cress (2010) commends service-learning for promoting active participation by drawing students out of the traditional classroom. The result of these benefits is higher retention rates and academic achievement for students (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Thus the U.S. Department of Education (2012) heralds service-learning as a best practice for promoting civic engagement, arguing that, done well, “civic education teaches students to communicate effectively, to work collaboratively, to ask tough questions, and to appreciate diversity” (p. 4).

Service-learning, however, is not without its critics. Eby (1998), for example, argues that the type of reflection done in service-learning promotes too simplistic an understanding of social issues. Often students are asked about their personal feelings towards their service...
experience and then called upon to abstract that experience to broader social policy when instructors have spent little to no time in class exploring the relevant political dimensions of an issue. This type of reflection serves to make the material reality of social problems a function of a student’s personal experience. A student who volunteers at an animal shelter, but has little information about regulations covering stray animals in the community, for example, is unlikely to offer a sophisticated response if asked about whether or not the local police should be involved in investigating animal abuse complaints. The prevalence of shallow knowledge development in service-learning compels Eby to call for student reflection that also includes “critical analysis and understanding of the theoretical issues, service strategies, social change, agency policies, social policies, and community structure” involved in a service-learning experience (p. 7). Students should be able to call on a range of knowledge and information in their reflections. Only then can they gain the full benefits of service-learning.

Colby (2008), Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, similarly challenges service-learning educators to attend to the two dimensions of engagement necessary for democratic practice. “Political and apolitical civic engagement,” Colby argues, are both valuable to democratic communities. Service-learning often favors civic engagement by encouraging voluntarism and a philanthropic mindset. This type of activity can, but seldom does, lead students to “draw connections” to systemic issues or practices. Students who do service work “generally encounter very little encouragement to get involved in politics, even broadly defined.” This leaves many students confident about the need to volunteer, but uncertain “about how they might be politically engaged, and what that might involve.” Moreover, Colby contends, civic participation through service “can lead to the development of politically relevant skills” such as writing memos or making persuasive public appeals, but often it does not. Activities such as cleaning up a river, or tutoring children, do not place students in roles where political skills are developed.

To get the most out of service-learning, students need concurrent attention to political learning, which encourages engagement with public policy and electoral issues, while fostering opportunities to build skills needed for political activities (Colby, 2008). Helping students gain knowledge about politics and political processes is a first-step towards accomplishing this goal (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). But political learning should be more than acquiring a list of facts. It is what takes place as students discover the connection between policy, institutional practice, and the status quo. Political learning is happening when students come to understand that public policy and practice can and do change, and that they influence how policy-making happens, even as an ordinary member of the public. Political engagement happens when students develop the skills necessary to help make political change possible. As Colby (2008) explains:

Teaching for political understanding and engagement involves helping students find political issues they can be passionate about while also staying open to opposing views. It involves teaching students to be sensitive to others’ feelings about hot-button issues while also encouraging them to be tough and slow to take offense themselves. Students also need to develop a thoughtful, reasoned approach to politics without becoming immobilized by doubt.

Such attention to the dual roles of civic and political engagement may also address another common criticism of service-learning programs in higher education. By challenging
students to engage the system-level ideology and praxis relevant to social experience, educators can help mitigate against service-learning experiences that promote power inequalities by situating students as charity providers to needy others. We also must do more to reward community partners for the substantial time they invest in student participants. Because community organizations often serve vulnerable populations such as immigrants and children, it is imperative that service-learning experiences lead participants to engage politically and ethically in and beyond the classroom in order to justify the short-term disruptions and costs associated with bringing a group of students into a civic space (Tryon et al., 2008).

One way to address these criticisms is to incorporate policy debate into service-learning programs. In the remainder of this essay, I show how integrating policy debate into the pedagogy of service-learning deepens political learning and promotes the acquisition of skills essential to political engagement.

**Policy debate in the service-learning classroom**

In policy debate, students are asked to consider whether a particular course of action should be taken, generally by state institutions such as the United States federal government, or its respective branches, such as the Supreme Court or the Congress (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). A policy debate can involve any institutional actor or agent such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and so on. Questions of policy can address broad global issues, such as “Should the United States federal government sign a new nuclear treaty with Iran?” Or they might consider narrow rules for legal action, such as “Should the Michigan Department of Treasury require individuals to pay taxes online?” When connected to a service-learning experience, educators might set aside time for students to debate a relevant policy question. Using previous examples, students working on the health campaign might also be asked to debate the question, “Should the City of Grand Rapids provide mobile health clinics in the downtown area?” Chemistry students could debate, “Should the federal government require a universal science curriculum in all high schools?” No matter the topic, students should have the opportunity to engage multiple perspectives on the question, including speaking on the affirmative to support a new policy and on the negative in opposition to a change in the status quo. Students may be asked to work with one or more partners to research and develop materials that can be used in their speeches or in question-and-answer periods related to their arguments.

Especially for readers familiar with extracurricular policy debate competitions in high schools or college, this depiction of what policy debate entails may seem overly simplistic. Yet, even basic consideration of policy issues related to a service-learning experience can improve a student’s odds of political learning. Through policy debate, students can develop information literacy and learn how to make critical arguments of fact. This experience is politically empowering for students who will also build confidence for political engagement.

**Information literacy**

While there are many definitions of information literacy, the term generally is understood to mean that a student is “able to recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the information needed” for problem-solving and decision-making (Spitzer, Eisenberg, & Lowe, 1998, p. 19). Information
exists in a variety of forms, in visual data, computer graphics, sound-recordings, film, and photographs. Information is also constructed and disseminated through a wide range of sources and mediums. Therefore, “information literacy” functions as a blanket term which covers a wide range of more specific literacies. Critiques of service-learning’s knowledge-building power, such as those articulated by Eby (1998) and Colby (2008), are challenging both the emphasis the pedagogy places on information gained through experience and the limited scope of political information students are exposed to in the process.

Policy debate can augment a student’s civic and political learning by fostering extended information literacies. Snider and Schnurer (2002) identify policy debate as an especially research intensive form of oral discussion which requires extensive time and commitment to learn the dimensions of a topic. Understanding policy issues calls for contemplating a range of materials, from traditional news media publications to court proceedings, research data, and institutional propaganda. Moreover, the nature of policy debate, which involves public presentation of arguments on two competing sides of a question, motivates students to go beyond basic information to achieve a more advanced level of expertise and credibility on a topic (Dybvig & Iverson, n.d.). This type of work differs from traditional research projects where students gather only the materials needed to support their argument while neglecting contrary evidence. Instead, the “debate research process encourages a kind of holistic approach, where students need to pay attention to the critics of their argument because they will have to respond to those attacks” (Snider & Schnurer, 2002, p. 32). In today’s attention economy, cultivating a sensibility for well-rounded information gathering can also aid students in recognizing when and how the knowledge produced in their social environments can be effectively translated to specific contexts. The “cultural shift in the production of data” which has followed the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies means that all students are likely “prosumers”—that is, they consume, produce, and coproduce information online all at the same time (Scoble, 2011).

Coupling service-learning with policy debate calls on students to apply information across registers of public engagement, including their own service efforts and their own public argumentation, in and outside of their debates. Information is used in the service experience, which in turn, informs the use of information in debates, where students then produce new information through their argumentation. The process is what Bruce (2008) refers to “informed learning,” or “using information in order to learn.” When individuals move from learning how to gather materials for a task to a cognitive awareness and understanding of how the information-seeking process shapes their learning, they are engaged in informed learning. Through this process, students can come to recognize that information management and credibility is deeply disciplinary and historically contextual (Bruce & Hughes, 2010). This understanding, combined with practical experience in locating information, is a critical missing element in contemporary political engagement. Over 20 years ago, Graber (1994) argued that one of the biggest obstacles to political engagement was not apathy, but a gap between the way news media presents information during elections, and the type of information voters need and will listen to during electoral campaigns. The challenge extends beyond elections into policy-making, especially as younger generations continue to revise their notions of citizenship away from institutional politics towards more social forms of activism (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011). For students to effectively practice more expressive forms of citizenship they need experience managing the breadth of information available about issues they care about. As past
research indicates a strong correlation between service-learning experience and the motivation and desire for post-graduation service, it seems likely that students who debate about policy issues related to service areas will continue their informed learning practices after they have left the classroom (Soria & Thomas-Card, 2014).

**Arguing facts**

In addition to building information literacies, students who combine policy debate with service-learning can practice “politically relevant skills,” which will help them have confidence for political engagement in the future. As Colby (2008) explains, this confidence should be tempered by tolerance for difference and differing opinions. On the surface, debating about institutional politics might seem counterintuitive to this goal. Politicians and the press have a credibility problem among college-aged students, and this leaves younger generations less inclined to feel obligated to the state or to look to traditional modes of policy-making for social change (Bennett et al., 2011; Manning & Edwards, 2014). This lack of faith in government and media outlets also makes political argument more difficult (Klumpp, 2006). Whereas these institutions once served as authoritative and trustworthy sources of information, the credibility of legislators and journalists has decreased over the last 40 years or so. Today, politicians and pundits are viewed as political actors interested in spectacle, power, and profit rather than truth-seeking or the common good.

While some political controversies are rooted in competing values, Klumpp (2006) explains that arguments about policy are more often based in fact. Indeed, when engaged in public arguments over questions of policy, people tend to “invoke the authority of facts to support their positions.” Likewise, “the governmental sphere has developed elaborate legal and deliberative processes in recognition of the power of facts as the basis for a decision.” Yet, while shared values are often quickly agreed upon, differences over fact are more difficult to resolve. Without credible institutions of authority that can disseminate facts, public deliberation requires more time, information-gathering, evaluation, and reasoning. The Bush administration’s decision to take military action in Iraq, for example, was presumably based on the “fact” that Saddam Hussein had acquired weapons of mass destruction. This has now become a classic example of poor policy-making grounded in faulty factual evidence.

This shortcoming is precisely why policy debate is a valuable complement to service-learning activities. Not only can students use their developing literacies to better understand social problems, they can also learn to access a broader range of knowledge sources, thereby mitigating the absence of fact-finding from traditional institutions. Furthermore, policy advocacy gives students experience testing the reasoning underlying claims of fact. Issues of source credibility, analogic comparisons, and data analysis are three examples of the type of critical thinking skills that students may need to apply in order to engage a question of policy (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Louden, 1999). While the effect may be to undermine government action in some instances, in others students will gain a better understanding of when and where institutional activities can work to make change. As students gain knowledge about the relationship between institutional structures and the communities they serve, they grow confidence in their ability to engage in future conversations about policy issues. Zwarensteyn’s (2012) research highlights these sorts of effects in high school students who engage in competitive policy debate. Zwarensteyn theorizes that even minimal increases in technical knowledge
about politics can translate to significant increases in a student’s sense of self-efficacy. Many students start off feeling very insecure when it comes to their mastery of institutional politics; policy debate helps overcome that insecurity. Moreover, because training in policy debate encourages students to address issues as arguments rather than partisan positions, it encourages them to engage policy-making without the hostility and incivility that often characterizes today’s political scene. Indeed, it is precisely that perceived hostility and incivility that prompts many young people to avoid politics in the first place.

I do not mean to imply that students who debate about their service-learning experiences will draw homogenous conclusions about policies. Quite the contrary. Students who engage in service-learning still bring their personal visions and history to bear on their debates. As a result, students will often have very different opinions after engaging in a shared debate experience. More importantly, the practice of debating should operate to particularize students’ knowledge of community partners and clients, working against the destructive generalizations and power dynamics that can result when students feel privileged to serve less fortunate “others.” For civic and political engagement through service-learning to be meaningful and productive, it must do more to challenge students’ concepts of the homogenous “we” who helps “them.” Seligman (2013) argues that this civic spirit can be cultivated through the core pedagogical principle of a “shared practice,” which emphasizes the application of knowledge to purpose (p. 60). Policy debate achieves this outcome by calling on students to consider and reconsider their understanding of themselves, institutions, community, and policy every time the question “should” may arise. As Seligman writes:

… the orientation of thought to purpose (having an explanation rest at a place, a purpose) is of extreme importance. We must recognize that the orientation of thought to purpose is to recognize moving from providing a knowledge of, to providing a knowledge for. This means that in the context of encountering difference it is not sufficient to learn about (have an idea of) the other, rather it means to have ideas for certain joint purposes—for a set of “to-does.” A purpose becomes the goal towards which our explanations should be oriented. (p. 61)

Put another way, policy debate challenges students “to maintain a sense of doubt and to carry on a systematic and protracted inquiry” in the process of service-learning itself (Seligman, 2013, p. 60). This is precisely the type of complex, ongoing, reflective inquiry that John Dewey had in mind.

**Political engagement through policy debate**

This essay began with a discussion of the growing attention to civic engagement programs in higher education. The national trend is to accomplish higher levels of student civic responsibility during and after their time in college through service-learning experiences tied to curricular learning objectives. A challenge for service-learning scholars and teachers is to recognize a distinction between civic activities that are accomplished by helping others and political activities that require engagement with the collective institutional structures and processes that govern social life. Both are necessary for democracy to thrive. Policy debate pedagogy can help service-learning educators accomplish these dual objectives.

To call policy debate a pedagogy rather than just a style of debate is purposeful. A pedagogy is a praxis for cultivating learning in others. The pedagogy of service-learning helps students to know and engage social conditions through physical engagement with their
environments and communities. Policy debate pedagogy leads students to know and engage these same social conditions while also challenging them to apply their knowledge for the purpose of political advocacy. These pedagogies are natural compliments for cultivating student learning. Therefore, future studies should explore how well service-learning combined with policy debate can resolve concerns that policy debate alone does not go far enough to invest students with political agency (Mitchell, 1998). The present analysis suggests the potential for such an outcome is likely.

Moreover, research is clear that the civic effects of service-learning as an instructional method are improved simply by increasing the amount of time spent on in-class discussion about the service work students do (Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2010). Policy debates related to students’ service can accomplish this goal and more. Policy debates can also facilitate the political learning students need to build their political efficacy and capacity for political engagement. Through informed learning about the political process—especially in the context of service practice—students develop literacies that will extend beyond the classroom. Using this knowledge in reasoned public argument about policy challenges invites students to move beyond cynical disengagement towards a productive recognition of their own potential voice in the political world.

Policy debate pedagogy brings unique elements to the process of political learning. By emphasizing the conditional and dynamic nature of political arguments and processes, debates can work to relieve students of the misconception that there is a single “right answer” for questions about policy-making and politics, especially during election time. The communication perspective on policy debates also highlights students’ collective involvement in the ever-changing field of political terms, symbols, and meanings that constitute interpretations of our social world. In fact, the historical roots of the term “communication” seem to demand that speech and debate educators call for such emphasis on political learning. “To make common,” the Latin interpretation of communicare, situates our discipline as the heart of public political affairs (Peters, 1999). Connecting policy debate to service-learning helps highlight the common purpose of these approaches in efforts to promote civic engagement in higher education.

Notes

1. The AACU’s (2014) follow-up statement makes no reference to speech or debate activities. The author also reviewed all available documents associated with initiatives listed in the follow-up report.
2. The National and Community Service Act of 1990 created a federal agency to oversee support for youth service opportunities in and outside of the nation’s schools. In President Clinton’s 1993 act, this agency and its programs were subsumed into the Corporation for National and Community Service, which was also tasked with administering President Clinton’s three signature service programs: Senior Corps, AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America.
3. The health communication example is from the author. Esson, Stevens-Truss, and Thomas (2005) describe a version of the chemistry project described in this article.

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References


Appendix A. A Framework for Twenty-First-Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Knowledge

- Familiarity with key democratic texts and universal democratic principles, and with selected debates—in US and other societies—concerning their applications
- Historical and sociological understanding of several democratic movements, both US and abroad
- Understanding one’s sources of identity and their influence on civic values, assumptions, and responsibilities to a wider public
- Knowledge of the diverse cultures, histories, values, and contestations that have shaped US and other world societies
- Exposure to multiple religious traditions and to alternative views about the relation between religion and government
- Knowledge of the political systems that frame constitutional democracies and of political levers for influencing change

Skills

- Critical inquiry, analysis, and reasoning
- Quantitative reasoning
- Gathering and evaluating multiple sources of evidence
- Seeking, engaging, and being informed by multiple perspectives
- Written, oral, and multi-media communication
- Deliberation and bridge building across differences
- Collaborative decision-making
- Ability to communicate in multiple languages

Values

- Respect for freedom and human dignity
- Empathy
- Open-mindedness
- Tolerance
- Justice
- Equality
- Ethical integrity
- Responsibility to a larger good

Collective Action

- Integration of knowledge, skills, and examined values to inform actions taken in concert with other people
- Moral discernment and behavior
- Navigation of political systems and processes, both formal and informal
- Public problem-solving with diverse partners
- Compromise, civility, and mutual respect

(National Task Force, 2012, p. 4)