



Is There Civic Community in America?

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Few of my students knew people from either the New Orleans area or those who had moved to Michigan following Hurricane Katrina. I learned of housing problems that arose from slow payment by government departments responsible for the beleaguered New Orleans residents. So like many teachers around the country, I thought that current events would lend themselves to “teaching moments.” However, I noted that in order to raise my students’ level of civic awareness, it would be important for them to look at their own state and city. Many times by studying the needs of our neighborhoods we can connect to the plight of people who live far from us. To underscore this lesson, I frequently refer to Martin Luther King’s writings in part because he worked for civil and human rights and in part because much of my own self-identity is linked with the ideology of being a person engaged with others. Furthermore, many students’ writing and learning takes off when they can see themselves as part of a community with which they can engage—as a participant or agent for change. To demonstrate what I mean and what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught in many of his writings, I frequently use King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in which he frequently refers to the concept of the interconnectedness of humans as a tool in his lessons on the need to work together for a common good. When questioned about his presence in Birmingham, Alabama he said:

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice

anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

The students in the Detroit classrooms were not as well versed in King’s writings as they were in the distinctions between classes and races. Many of the students were African American and represented the middle-class as well as working-class families from which they came. In a sense, the class divisions highlighted in the news reports were all too familiar for these students. Others students came from immigrant working-class, middle-class or rural families. None had read King’s works, although most knew about King, as he is an icon of the civil rights movement in the US. As I hoped, discussing King’s message along with the news coverage of Katrina’s aftermath helped students visualize the need for the kind of action King advocates, as they could see the discrepancy between the needs of the displaced and the quality and quantity of help offered by local and federal government agencies.

As part of a service learning writing experience, I asked students to select from the various agencies listed with the Student Leadership Development Institute Program at the University of Detroit Mercy (see <http://www.udmercy.edu/ldi/>). Students had a good selection of agencies from which to choose. Most of these agencies had dealt with social issues that paralleled the needs of people in the New Orleans area; a further parallel was that the need for the agencies’ work was the result of a poor response from government—local and federal—to the needs of poor, undereducated, and underemployed people. The assignment required that students help the agencies with their missions and then to write about what they learned. Future research on issues they discovered facilitated the academic writing component of the

learning unit. Additionally, because of mission of the Leadership Development Institute, students learned the importance of reaching out to others in need—to give back to the communities in which they lived. Many of the students helped out in soup kitchens, by feeding the homeless, or in park and recreation departments, where they worked alongside those who aided youth in the area, or in women's shelters and centers that distributed clothing to the poor, and even in food trucks which brought sandwiches and bottled water to areas where homeless gathered. Others worked at adult literacy centers as aides to the teachers. All students gained insights that reinforced the

As I worked with these students, I reflected on the fact that currently there are no "national" media outlets that can function as they once did. However, teachers can continue to teach service, critical thinking, and civic community by piecing together what passes for news with local issues that students can work to solve. In doing so, we can help to create a community of sorts that would be worthy of the values our country once not only espoused but practiced.