

The Service Learning Writing Project: Re-Writing the Humanities Through Service-Learning and Public Work

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From its beginnings in 1992, the Service-Learning Writing Project at Michigan State University has viewed the composition classroom as a place where rhetorical processes and democratic practices naturally converge. A number of core democratic principles, pedagogical challenges, ongoing conversations, and shared convictions about education for democracy continue to animate and energize the Project's faculty—including a consistent emphasis on encouraging democratic discourses and learning practices in the writing classroom, a search for pedagogical techniques that connect theory and practice, and efforts to reinvigorate the teaching of the Humanities as important and necessary cultural work in the public interest.

The Service-Learning Writing Project (SLWP) at Michigan State University was founded in 1992 by a group of faculty, service-learning student services professionals, and our community partners. From its beginning, it linked two strong traditions in undergraduate education at the land-grant university: service-learning, handled through Student Affairs by the highly-regarded MSU Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, and writing pedagogy, the charge of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures with its long American Studies-inspired tradition of introducing first-year students to critical reading of American cultural texts and writing in an interdisciplinary academic context. Faculty who teach in MSU's program have gained insights into both the practical management of such learning initiatives and the articulation of

their philosophical, rhetorical, professional, and ethical underpinnings (Cooper and Julier, “Democratic”; Fretz; Cooper).

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Reflecting on the 13-year history of SLWP, we recognize a number of foundational ideas that continue to animate the Project. They include a consistent emphasis on encouraging democratic discourses and practices within our classes, a search for pedagogical methods that connect theory and practice, and efforts to reinvigorate

the practice of teaching the Humanities as important and necessary cultural work in the public interest. At the same time, we recognize shifts in emphasis and lessons learned from our experiences. Cooper, Laura Julier, and other colleagues at Michigan State University grounded early SLWP efforts in a communitarian approach to service learning that emphasized direct service with community organizations (Cooper and Julier, “Democratic Conversations”). Later incarnations, especially Fretz’ work with Public Achievement, experimented with models of civic engagement and public work. Current SLWP concerns, driven in many ways by the publication of the 2002 Wingspread *New Student Politics* document and the fledgling Public Humanities movement, examine the tensions around educating students to participate in alternative politics and transforming mainstream institutions from within.

In our early experiments, a small number of sections of the general education writing courses offered by the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University included a community service component (Cooper and Julier, *Writing*). Those courses spanned several topics, including Women in America, The Civic Tradition in America, and Science, Technology, and the Environment. In these sections, undergraduates engaged in critical reading and discussion of American literary and historical texts, writing academic analyses of the ideas raised in these texts, and practicing peer editing and revision in small workshopping groups. In addition, the MSU Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement, in consultation with project faculty, provided students in these sections with a choice of

placements in Lansing-area community and nonprofit agencies and organizations.

From its inception the Service-Learning Writing Project was informed by two different disciplinary conversations: American Studies, with an emphasis on public culture, and composition studies. Early on, these merged into a focus on civic literacy as the historical and rhetorical linchpins of our pedagogy. As teacher/scholars in American Studies and Composition Studies, we found ourselves at an interdisciplinary crossroads that challenged us to renew and revitalize our dialogue with a venerable strain of discourse in American Studies supplanted in the 1990s by postcolonial modes of inquiry: namely, the putative claim for a national purpose based on a unifying civic culture articulated through shared democratic discourse, a claim accompanied by a philosophical faith in the integrative possibilities of interdisciplinary study that had until then shaped American Studies pedagogy.

Democracy and the Arts of Public Discourse

In the early stages of the SLWP, courses such as "Public Life in America" openly invited students to critically evaluate American civic culture. Typical course organizing questions included: What does it mean to be a member of the communities in which we live and work—school and classroom, workplace, place of worship, neighborhood and nation? What does it mean to be a citizen in a democracy? How well do traditions of American citizenship serve the complex demands and increased diversity of public life in America? What is the relationship between civil rights and civic responsibilities? What does "service" mean and what does it have to do with democratic citizenship? We also analyzed the heritages and diverse discourses that inform, complicate, and criticize the values of public commitment, and we invited students to explore values issues in their own lives and the relevance of those issues to the larger themes of the course.

Early SLWP courses were innovative attempts to generate public discourse that was informed by academic questions and grounded in hands-on experiential learning. While they were reading theories and ideas of civic America, Michigan State students also took up major writing projects that met the special needs of Lansing-area public service agencies—projects that had a direct impact on the lives of people in mid-Michigan. Some students, for example,

wrote public service announcements for a regional youth employment center that offers counseling for young persons their age who don't go to college and are having trouble finding jobs. Another group created a new descriptive brochure for a non-profit organization that assists individuals with severe physical disabilities and their families. Other student teams drafted public service spots for a local TV station, a newsletter for refugees, and a fact-packed analysis of statistics on domestic violence in the Tri-County area.

When we began SLWP in 1992, we saw these community service writing projects as curricular initiatives that helped build and refine what Benjamin Barber considers "the literacy required to live in a civil society" (4), along with the discourse skills necessary for university-level work. Ethically committed students—students engaged, that is to say, in meaningful practices of obligation to others—had enormous opportunity to develop as more proficient writers. As practices of commitment, service opportunities also carried a strong moral valence for students. We saw that service assignments can be points of connection, as Robert Coles reminds us in *The Call of Service*, between self and other, moral moments in teaching and learning that yield, Coles says, "an awareness of the moral complexity that informs the choices we consciously make, as well as those we unwittingly make [A]ll service is directly or indirectly ethical activity, a reply to a moral call within, one that answers a moral need in the world" (154). The synergy generated from structured community involvement enmeshed in academic work helped remind our students of the vitality and scope of public life, as they came to recognize that the horizons of personal commitment extend well beyond the sanctuaries of friends and family, beyond even the narrow understanding of politics that often associates "public" with government or electoral politics, to encompass the "human community" as an ethical arena of meaningful commitment and personal aspiration.

Most important, the service-learning component of our courses invited students to move back and forth between an intellectual reflection on public culture in America and an experiential immersion in it. We found that only through that movement does the vocabulary of democracy truly come alive for our students. Students often came away from their service-learning experiences with a new understanding of and respect for the ethical application of political power. They discovered what freedom, responsibility, and participa-

tion are all about and recognized the importance of information, deliberation, and compromise to the hard work of seeking common ground. Students observed the messy work of community organizing as they witnessed community groups applying leverage and seizing opportunities to build their communities and achieve hard-won solutions to grass roots problems. Students also came away with more complex understandings of the role of language in the work of social and political change. They developed understanding of the significance of all sorts of rhetorical practices and choices which are often at the center of a first-year college writing class, not by hearing it from teachers or textbooks, but rather by confronting it as they worked to achieve the purposes of the organizations to which they had committed themselves.

One way to describe the early years of SLWP, then, is to talk about it resting on three foundations of civic literacy:

- 1 Service-learning placements in non-profit civic-minded organizations support effective writing pedagogy;
- 2 Writing projects assigned to students in conjunction with such community service placements advance higher order academic discourse skills;
- 3 The combination of writing for a public service agency and the intellectual experience gained through carefully studying primary cultural source materials effectively advances civic education.

Civic literacy, we learned, is a craft of social inquiry as well as an important mode of public discourse.

In a nutshell, our early curriculum was an introduction—simultaneously intellectual and experiential—into the ways democracy works with the aim of training our students to be more effective and articulate participants in the realization of democratic virtues and values. That emphasis helped pave the way for a new set of challenges and experiments, and it framed for us our next guiding question: How do we give our students a set of pragmatic public skills that allow them to identify and then work concretely toward the solution of community problems?

From Service to Public Work

By 2000, the service learning movement was shifting toward models of civic engagement, and SLWP faculty began using our experience to thicken curricular offerings and continue to educate a citizenry to participate in the democratic process. The national shift from communitarian-type service models toward civic engagement was inspired, in many ways, by scholars like Harry Boyte who critiqued a “therapeutic and philanthropic” idea of service and

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encouraged service learning practitioners to develop programs and courses that teach the next generation the habits of democracy (Boyte and Farr 5). For Boyte, civic engagement entails developing a set of democratic skills, exercising public voices, acquiring a public work ethic, and co-creating with communities tangible, public projects of lasting value. This shift in emphasis was a curricular attempt to foster civic responsibility in college students by helping them develop democratic habits of deliberation, negotiation, and participation and to acquire experience rolling up their sleeves, exercising what Boyte calls “civic muscle,” and participating in the public life of their communities.

During the second stage of SLWP, faculty began to view service learning courses as curricular opportunities to animate students’ imagination to do public work and to accept the responsibility of active citizenship. In our view, active citizenship includes learning to identify and solve community problems through negotiation and participation, finding ways to be involved in the public life of one’s communities, and understanding that democracy depends on a vibrant civil society. For Boyte, “Substantial civic education through service . . . requires that young people be thought of as productive actors, citizens in the present, not citizens in the making, who have serious public work to do” (7). This involved re-thinking both the kind of work that professors accomplished in the classroom and the ways we think of and interact with our students. In the second stage of SLWP, then, questions expanded from “How do we introduce our students to the rich history of civic life in the United States?” to “How do we re-shape the everyday work that happens in our classrooms and provide opportunities for our students to actively participate in the public life of institutions?”

Practicing Deliberative Democracy

The question remained, though, about exactly how to involve students in the public life of communities and institutions and how to find ways for students to develop public voices. Answers to these questions were formed through Cooper's alliances with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, an operating foundation with a mission to strengthen the role of citizens within a democracy. From Kettering, we learned that a strong democracy is contingent upon informed, active citizens who can shape public judgment rather than react to public opinion. The best way to promote democracy is to encourage public deliberation of controversial issues, foster strong families and communities, and help promote citizens' civic, rather than professional identities.

One of the ways to shore up America's civic vision is to practice deliberative democracy in our classrooms. Jurgen Habermas offers a critical theory of public deliberation in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. For Habermas, a robust democracy is contingent upon the existence of a public sphere where citizens can participate in civic life and debate controversial public issues. Deliberative democracies involve ordinary citizens in the public discourse and decision making of local and federal issues. They use the opinions and judgments of experts without simply defaulting to what James Bohman calls "strategic rationality" (5).

In this way, the SLWP began experimenting with methods of connecting Boyte's ideas of Public Work and Kettering's commitment to practices of Deliberative Democracy.

Our Class: How We Practiced Democracy in the Classroom

In an effort to practice public work and deliberative democracy in the classroom, Cooper and Fretz designed two general education courses in 2002 to provide students opportunities to study techniques of deliberation and practice public dialogue and public problem solving. These were four-credit writing courses that enrolled 25 first-year students. We wanted to encourage student participation in the public sphere through active participation in class discussions and public forums as well as through direct involvement in public work and community service placements.

This course was not team taught in the traditional sense. Fretz was scheduled to teach a Race and Ethnicity class, and Cooper was assigned a Public Life in

America class with a special emphasis on education and youth issues. We each designed our own syllabus, although there was a good deal of overlapping of required texts, learning strategies and goals. Over the course of the semester we met as a large group (both classes together) about half of the time and broke off into our separate classes the other half of the class periods.

We integrated three experiential learning components that we thought would connect to the academic issues of the course, foster a learning community, and, most important, help our students practice democratic skills of deliberation, collaboration, and participation. The first component involved setting up a fairly traditional service experience for students, and the next two components involved requiring the students to organize a National Issues Forum on Youth Violence and then moderate Study Circles.

Traditional service learning, in which students work with local community-based organizations, was an important part of our curriculum. During the semester before we offered our courses, we searched for organizations engaged in activities that would suit the intellectual work of our classroom. We found a match with the Neighborhood Network Centers in Lansing. The purpose of the Network Centers is to provide services and support for families and children in some of Lansing's economically disadvantaged areas. The intellectual issues and social realities of race and education would converge in these kinds of service experiences.

Over the course of the semester, students worked two to four hours a week in one of the Network Centers and performed a variety of tasks such as tutoring elementary and GED students, working with Girl Scouts troops, and initiating food and clothing drives for the Center. They reflected on their service experiences in Critical Incident Journals¹ that we regularly discussed during class time and used to connect their service experience with the academic issues of the class.

National Issues Forum: The Public Use of Reason

To help our students develop habits of civic engagement, we incorporated into the class the preparation and organization of two National Issues Forums (NIF). The first, a mock forum on Public Schools and how to make them more effective, simply gave students a taste for the deliberative process of

public forums. The second, a full-fledged public forum organized by students, tackled the subject of Youth Violence and how to stop the trend.

National Issues Forums are structured public deliberations about controversial social topics. Content and information for the Forums are available through issue booklets prepared by Public Agenda and the Kettering Foundation. Each issue booklet explains the issue, lays out a series of solutions to the problem, and provides a rhetorical framework for effective public deliberation (*National Issues Forums*).

The public forums provide opportunities for students, community members, public policy makers, legislators, and community leaders to meet together and discuss a range of solutions to specific community problems. The NIF Web site describes the forums as “a way for citizens to exchange ideas and experiences with one another, and make more thoughtful and informed decisions.” The two-hour forums are moderated by a NIF-trained moderator who leads the audience through an organized discussion of the problem at hand and guides participants through possible solutions to the problem.

Study Circles

Toward the end of the semester, we committed four weeks to the organization and implementation of student-led study circles about youth and race issues.

A study circle is a group of eight to ten people who come together to discuss an important or controversial topic (*Study Circles Resource Center*). It provides an environment where ordinary citizens can exercise their public voices and

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practice the democratic skills of deliberation and negotiation. Study circles also serve as agents of community action and problem solving through dialogue. While expert views are important, study circles encourage ordinary people to converse, find common perspectives, and tease out differences over issues that are important to their lives. We held a total of eight one-hour study circle discussions on Education and Race and Ethnicity over the course of two weeks. Study Circle resource booklets provide a structured format that helps members identify the problem at hand, consider its implications, and provide possible solutions. Facilitators must practice habits of critical listen-

ing, asking leading questions, generating and sustaining discussions, staying neutral and leading groups toward consensus. Through their facilitation of a Youth Issues Study Circle Guide, Cooper's class engaged groups in dialogue about contemporary youth problems and how they can be resolved. Fretz' section used the Race Relations Guide to initiate conversations on racial identities, participants' experiences with race, and the roots and solutions to these problems. We required each student in our class to moderate one study circle discussion, giving each student the opportunity not only to exercise a public voice, but also to assume leadership in practicing the art of deliberation.

The Classroom as Organic Learning Community

Reflecting on that experimental class convinced us that engaging in public work in higher education means including students and their interests into the work and life of the classroom. In an organic classroom like ours, teaching in the traditional sense of disseminating knowledge and downloading students with information gets transformed into a collaborative process where professors and students work jointly toward a common goal.

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One of the best ways to make students partners in the learning experiment is to create an environment of collective decisions between faculty and students. To that end, much of

our mode of operating throughout the course of the semester was organized around student-led committee work. Typically, Cooper and Fretz would confer before class and make a list of long- and short-term tasks and responsibilities that needed to be performed. In class, we would set up working groups through which students would conduct the public work of the class. This dynamic had the effect of extending the kind of learning that went on in our classroom. Students conferred, imagined, and worked with each other to accomplish classroom tasks that had tangible products. They designed assignments, edited each other's papers, co-authored letters and discussion guides, authored web pages and conducted research. Our classroom quickly became a working environment and was frequently a buzz of activity. This was especially the case when we included students in the process of writing and designing assignments and engaged our students in a dialogue about grading and evaluation.

Some Conclusions on the SLWP's Middle Period

Learning strategies and outcomes that promote public work offer rewards and fresh perspectives but also challenge professors. Organizing public forums, facilitating service-learning experiences, practicing deliberative strategies, and co-designing assignments with students thrust faculty into new positions in the classroom. No longer the “sage on the stage,” teachers become facilitators and, in many ways, co-learners with students. No longer directing from the sidelines or articulating abstractions behind a podium, we found ourselves doing work right along side our students. Our most challenging and prosaic role was that of project manager. We helped our students anticipate snags, identify community and university resources, solve problems, develop networking skills, and lay out efficient workflows. We also fetched envelopes and department letterhead, provided campus contacts to facilitate logistics for the forum, arranged for the use of printers, fax machines, office phones and computers. It is not always a comfortable position. This pedagogy demands a great deal of preparation and planning, but at the same time requires spontaneity and flexibility. We had to give up some expectations about what should happen in a college classroom. In the process we found new ways of thinking about those questions that all of us in higher education ponder: Where does the learning take place, and what do I want my students to take away with them? Through practicing democracy in the classroom, we are able to answer these questions in different and more interesting ways than we could have in a more traditional classroom setting. Students learned disciplinary knowledge (in this case, writing rhetorical arguments, thinking critically, connecting written argument to concrete public problem solving) through experience and practice. In addition, they began to experiment with ways of operating and affecting change in the public sphere. For our part, we learned that the role of professor is both bigger and smaller than those articulated by the traditions of our academic disciplines.

In the fall of 2002, Fretz took these interests with him when he left MSU to direct the Community Studies Center at Naropa University where he developed a Public Achievement Project from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota.²

Service Politics

The Public Work model continues to give shape, substance, and experimental

energy to SLWP classes. In Fall, 2003, Cooper designed and offered the latest incarnation of a writing curriculum tempered by nearly a decade of experiments with a composition pedagogy influenced by service-learning practices, civic engagement, and deliberative democracy. The course emphasized public interest research and public literacy projects that brought students into direct contact with senators and representatives at the Michigan state capitol. A centerpiece of the course was, in effect, a classic lobbying campaign. Students designed, refined, and carried out strategies to distribute among key state legislators a booklet on youth public policy perspectives—*Generation Y Speaks Out: Public Policy Perspectives through Service*—Learning-researched, written, and produced by two previous classes.³ The goals were two-fold. First, get *Gen Y* into the hands of influential shapers of public policy. Second, present persuasive arguments to those policy shapers that the student voices in *Gen Y*—and the voices of their generation at large—deserve a place in the deliberation and implementation of public policy in Michigan. As one of the original student authors, quoted in a press release drafted by Cooper’s students, said: “Older generations think we’re slackers, but this type of project shows that we really do care and want to make a difference. Our ultimate goal is to change a law or influence policy in some way. Then we’d know that our voice is really being heard” (4). In the course of their projects, Cooper’s students testified before legislative committees, met with house and senate staffers, designed PowerPoint pitches, and wrote letters, e-mails, executive summaries, and press releases. Along the way they studied *A Citizen’s Guide to State Government and The Legislative Process in Michigan: A Student’s Guide*. Meanwhile, students had plenty of opportunity to read, write about, and reflect upon the argument, made by Robert Putnam and others (whom we read), that their generation was doing more than its part to accelerate a process of disinvestment in our country’s social capital.

Just about the same time, Campus Compact published *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement*. The Wingspread Statement challenged the parameters and perspectives that Cooper, in particular, had come to trust and rely on. Three claims were particularly bracing. First, the Wingspread students articulated a generational alternative to politics they called “service politics” where “participation in community service is a form of unconventional political activity that can lead to social change” (Long 18). Second, the Wingspread students called into

question the authenticity of some universities' commitment to community outreach. "[Some universities] seem to view service," the students wrote, "more as a public relations strategy" (8). Third, the Wingspread students challenged the conventional sociological wisdom that their generation is politically numb and civically disengaged. "We discovered at Wingspread a common sense that while we are disillusioned with conventional politics (and therefore most forms of political activity), we are deeply involved in civic issues through non-traditional forms of engagement" (1).

Do the civic skills the Wingspread students learn from service opportunities in their local communities, Cooper began to wonder, differ from or maybe diminish or indeed eclipse those more mainstream skills his own students acquired from drafting public policy briefs, attending legislative committee meetings, and lobbying their state representatives? Had he made a mistake in shifting the service component of the course from interpersonal networks of direct service to institutional practices of organized political participation? Did that weaken or undermine the notion of "service politics" that the Wingspread students advocate as "the bridge between community service and conventional politics" (18)? Cooper feared that he unknowingly initiated students into those kinds of conventional political activities that the Wingspread students are disillusioned with. As a consequence, had he and his students ended up practicing democracy less in terms of the Wingspread emphasis on the social responsibility of the individual and more in terms of the retrograde civic obligations of the citizenry? On the other hand, Fretz was not convinced that the voices and conclusions of the Wingspread document—especially the "service politics" definition—are representative enough to extrapolate generalizations about student attitudes toward civic engagement. In our experience, many students really do wish to acquire a set of public skills that allow them to transform mainstream institutions from the inside out, and it is incumbent upon educators to give them opportunities for working within the system. If service learning/civic engagement really wishes to transform democracy, its practitioners are going to have to educate a very large group of citizens to fundamentally transform existing institutions from within.

These are important questions about pedagogy, disciplinary practices, institutional integrity, politics, history, and intergenerational sociology. They are questions about commitment and our students' identities and our own self-

images as teachers, service-learning practitioners, members of our disciplinary and university communities, and players in the democratic life of our neighborhoods, communities, and country. These are also questions for the service-learning movement. They point to the difficulties and challenges of cross-fertilizing traditions of “service” to local communities and the latest clarion call for “civic engagement”—a coupling that seems so natural in a statement like *The New Student Politics* and on the letterhead of the Campus Compact. Meanwhile, students, practitioner faculty, student affairs professionals and our community partners struggle to get it right.

From Service Politics to Public Work

One of the insights we’ve taken away from the Wingspread students is that the moral claims informing the SLWP’s public literacy curriculum may be sincere but misdirected. We might be asking the wrong questions: Instead of asking, Why have we withdrawn from public association? Why does our democratic system seem to be failing us? Why have so many Americans lost faith in our common life?, maybe we should be asking questions extrapolated from assertions made in the Wingspread statement. For example, how can we deepen our students’ connections to the community through the kinds of experiences that move them from an awareness of issues into problem solving strategies? What forms of civic engagement best fit our students’ *personal* motivations to get involved—especially their anger, their hope, and the pragmatism they bring to the work of pursuing systemic social change? “Does the rhetoric of public service and being a good neighbor,” as the Wingspread students themselves ask, “believe the realities that . . . students experience in the local community” (8)—and, indeed, on their home campuses and *especially* in our classes? And what traditions in the life of our civic culture best sustain “service-politics” as a catalyst for political engagement?

At the beginning of SLWP, we bought into Putnam’s notion that students (and United States citizens at large) were becoming increasingly disengaged from civic life. Now, however, after working intensely with students in community learning environments, we have much more hope for our students’ interest in creating and sustaining the kind of civic associations that Tocqueville identified as the essential ingredients of American democracy. This much is fairly clear: cynicism, skepticism, pessimism, and an outright rejection of politics-as-usual run rampant among our students. But there’s

something that might not be so clear. Our students are not part of a generation that is civically *disengaged* or ethically disoriented. Consider the paradoxical features of our students' civic profile. Findings from focus groups conducted by KRC Research for the Campus Compact's Student Civic Engagement Campaign show, in fact, that the very term "civic engagement"—broadly defined as "action designed to identify and address issues of public concern"—turns off most students. They "reject the idea [of civic engagement] as irrelevant to their current lives and unsuccessful at inspiring them to take future action." Still, especially among student leaders like those invited to the Wingspread gathering in March, 2001, "it is apparent," the KRC "Findings" memorandum concludes, "that the level of civic engagement is strong" when measured by such things as "interpersonal connection," "immediate gratification," "local community activities," and "the translation of actions of the individual into positive change." By articulating the important conceptual scheme of "service politics" *The New Student Politics* transforms an apparent contradiction into an interesting and insightful paradox: *our students hate the idea of civic engagement but they welcome opportunities to become civically engaged*. Even though they express discontent around studying the history of civic America, our students still need our expertise and our leadership in raising those classic American Studies questions about the relationship between the individual and the community in a democracy. These are rather easy questions for us to develop and raise in classroom environments, mostly because that is what we were trained to do in graduate school. What is more difficult, though, and where students desperately need our leadership, is in developing a set of public skills that allow them to identify salient issues in their communities and places of work. This involves, among other things, learning to recognize and negotiate difference, understanding power and how it works in institutions, tapping into their own self interests and connecting their interests to larger public problems, and learning to create free spaces that allow the associated life of democracy to flourish.

The old challenge to deeply integrate students' experiences in their community service placements with course content is giving way to the new challenge, put simply, of managing the rupture or the disconnect between action and ideas.

What do these paradoxes and ironies mean, then, for our teaching? For one

thing, they may help explain our students' preference for interpersonal and affective connection—"building relationships," as the Wingspread students put it, "and connecting with others in concerted action" (18)—over the exercise of ideas and theoretical abstraction that occupy our professional worlds. While Cooper's students were busy pressing their cases in the corridors of the State capitol and while Fretz' Public Achievement students helped high schoolers develop social action projects, they bristled with activity and energy. The classrooms hummed with the churn of learning. They shut down, for the most part, when Cooper and Fretz sought to connect that public work to canons of civic literacy and when they tried to shore up students' felt practices of citizenship with an intellectual fretwork of concepts, ideas, and critical readings drawn from the canon of Civic Culture Studies. The same thing happened with the Study Circles that Cooper's students later convened among senior citizens at a local community center. Students fussed and throbbed with energy as they planned, practiced, and facilitated the Study Circles. They shuffled through the drill when Cooper tried to leaven those community dialogues with critical reflections on traditions of deliberative democracy in America.

The Wingspread students perceived a similar gap, explaining that they experience a curricular deficit on campus: "We perceive our institutions as willing players in the message of deferral of civic responsibility.... This is illustrated in pedagogy that requires us to live in bifurcated worlds of theory and action. We are told to ingest large amounts of information that point to a concern, yet we are often discouraged from action on our knowledge and idealism" (10).

With the help of the Wingspread students we are beginning to sense a shift in the sorts of teaching challenges we face as the service-learning movement evolves into the "civic engagement campaign." The old challenge to deeply integrate students' experiences in their community service placements with course content is giving way to the new challenge, put simply, of managing the rupture or the disconnect between action and ideas. This rupture, for better or worse, characterizes both our students' predominant learning style and their *modus operandi* as citizens. While the old challenge was pedagogical, the new challenge is largely epistemological. Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton offer insight into this disconnect in their analysis of "the widening

gap between the ways in which students learn best and the ways in which faculty teach.” Citing research done at the University of Missouri-Columbia, “today’s students,” they note,

perform best in a learning situation characterized by ‘direct, concrete experience, moderate-to-high degrees of structure, and a linear approach to learning. They value the practical and the immediate, and the focus of their perception is primarily on the physical world.’ Three-quarters of faculty, on the other hand, ‘prefer the global to the particular, are stimulated by the realm of concepts, ideas, and abstractions, and assume that students, like themselves, need a high degree of autonomy in their work.’ In short, students are more likely to prefer concrete subjects and active methods of learning. By contrast, faculty are predisposed to abstract subjects and passive learning. 128-29

Such a mismatch of learning styles, teaching practices, and knowledge claims is especially acute-and its impact largely ignored-in the humanities. Marooned in the arcana of postmodernism, the contemporary humanities are far more preoccupied with theories of social control and construction, “interrogations” of ideology, power, cultural production, and the dynamics of social class than they are with the gritty proposition that students might ache to engage actual social and class issues as they play out in their own back yards. The humanities must do a better job of bridging the gap the Wingspread students see on their campuses between a culture of ideas and a commitment to action.

Students recognize, for example, that “uncontested skepticism is welcomed in contemporary university culture as a sign of intellect” while they “long for ideals to believe in and for those ‘idealists’ who will inspire them” (Long 6). Although they take pride in “the larger activities and mission of [their campuses that] are aligned with the values of inclusion, justice, reciprocity, community building, and participatory democracy,” they are troubled that “the [university’s] theoretic relationship with the community often differs from the real” and that colleges and universities “rarely provide models for healthy communities, either on campus itself (where the hierarchical nature of the institution often overlooks students’ needs/input when making decisions), or

through relationships with the surrounding community” (Long 8). Finally, they frankly admit that service activities and public work are “rarely celebrated on par with academics” on campuses where administration and faculty encourage students “to be primarily consumers of knowledge and democracy—not active producers” (10).

The Wingspread students remind us that listening to student voices and bringing students into meaningful and productive relationships with civic life are particular and problematic challenges for today’s faculty. We humanists, in particular, are drawn to a compelling but competing notion-sanctioned, in part, by the triumph of theory over praxis and, in part, by the cult of meritocracy and specialization we have bought into—that the university and its airy world of ideas is a place apart from the friction, heat, and hurly-burley of the public sphere.

Thirteen years ago, the SLWP emerged from faculty interest in connecting scholarship and teaching to public issues outside of the academy. In the early stages, we invoked the voices of America’s civic past in an effort to engage students in direct community service. Currently, we are still listening to those voices, and we continue to ask students to draw inspiration and models from them as well. As we have developed new ways of being in the classroom and as we have sought to re-claim the public mission of the university to reinvigorate the humanities through our teaching and our learning, we have also learned to pay attention to the voices, challenges, capacities and learning styles of our students. The service learning qua public work movement has allowed us to re-imagine our role in the classroom and the working relationships we have with students, our colleagues, and community partners. It has given us opportunities to combine the teaching of academic and public skills. Above all, it has renewed our hope that universities can play a dynamic role in educating citizens to perform the difficult, necessary, and rewarding work demanded by a strong democracy.

Notes

1 For a discussion of the use of Critical Incident Journals, see Cooper, “Reading, Writing and Reflection” 47-56.

2 Public Achievement is an international youth initiative that provides a structure for

service learning students to develop a set of public skills. Public Achievement teams university undergraduates with small groups of young people ages 8-18. Together, the groups undertake public work projects around substantial issues that are identified by the youth and express their own values and beliefs. For more information: www.publicachievement.org.

3 For the full text, see: www.msu.edu/~atl/GenY_SpeaksOut.

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