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From Service-Learning to Service Politics A Conversation with Rick Battistoni

Professor of Political Science and former Director of the Feinstein Institute for Public Service at Providence College, Rick Battistoni is a distinguished author in the field of political theory with a principal interest in the role of education in a democratic society. As Campus Compact's Engaged Scholar for Civic Engagement, Battistoni has published a recent volume, *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum*, and has been involved with the development of their Engaged Department institutes and toolkit. Battistoni currently directs Project 540, an ambitious new program that gives over 100,000 high school students nationwide the opportunity to talk about issues that matter to them and to turn these conversations into real school and community change (www.project540.org).

Reflections: You've been working in the field of service-learning for over a decade. As a profession, what do you think we've learned? What are some changes you notice?

Rick Battistoni: We have come a long way in the field of service-learning. Most of us agree upon certain principles of good practice for connecting experiences in the community to deeper learning. For example, we have come to recognize that community partnerships need to be built upon true reciprocity. We cannot see our partners in the community as merely providing placement opportunities for our students, but rather, as co-educators, we need to be in conversation, early and often, about the outcomes each of us seek, both in the community and in the classroom. While the principle of reciprocity has been stated for a long time, the field is finally taking this seriously in the way campuses work with the communities of which they are a part.

Similarly, most educators in the field have come to recognize that learning outcomes don't emerge from service just by themselves, that it is not enough for faculty just to "add service and stir" with their classes. Faculty doing service-learning need to be thoughtful about what they seek to accomplish with a community-based component, how this fits in with their overall learning outcomes, and what details of course construction need to change to accommodate the community-based experience. As Dewey argued, we must subject "the discipline of experience...to the tests of intelligent development and direction."

Finally, I see the field attempting to listen to student voices in ways that I didn't see twelve years ago when I began. Students often come to our campuses, and to service-learning courses and programs, with a wealth of prior experience and a set of expectations and interests that we need to acknowledge and incorporate into what we do.

Reflections: You've recently published *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum* with Campus Compact. Can you talk a bit about how you understand and would seek to foster "civic engagement" in composition, and in English Studies more generally?

Rick Battistoni: The term "civic engagement" is gaining acceptance. In some cases it has begun to replace service-learning, in the way colleges and universities define their mission and the way foundations invest in campus initiatives. The volume I recently published for Campus Compact explores how faculty in different disciplines can use service-learning as a vehicle to achieve greater civic engagement, both for students and for the campus as a whole.

One problem, however, is that the term civic engagement carries with it a lot of baggage. Some see it as inherently ideological or exclusive. Ideological, insofar as those advancing civic engagement are perceived as having an agenda. Left-leaning folks see civic engagement as a right-wing conspiracy to advance a kind of uncritical patriotic flag-waving. Right-leaning folks see it as a thinly veiled effort by proponents to recreate the spirit of 1960s community activists in our students. Civic engagement can be viewed as exclusive, insofar as citizenship is not something possessed by all, or exclusive in that it is the sole purview of social scientists.

But I argue that if we are to see civic engagement as occurring across the curriculum, we need to allow people in each discipline to tie their efforts to conceptual traditions and the development of skill sets in that discipline. In composition, I would be inclined to draw upon the tradition of essayists who have viewed themselves as "public intellectuals" to connect my work to the larger campus work of civic engagement. I would also connect what I do to the development in my students of certain "civic" skill sets found in the work of composition: skills involving civic judgment and imagination, critical thinking and analysis, written communication, and public problem solving. I discuss these more fully in the volume.

Reflections: What might teachers of writing have to offer to the larger project of encouraging civic engagement "across the disciplines"?

Rick Battistoni: I believe that the effort to encourage civic engagement across the disciplines shares much in common with earlier efforts to develop “writing across the curriculum.” As I understand it, the movement for writing across the curriculum was based in an understanding that whatever a student’s major or future aspiration, he or she needed to be proficient at written communication to be effective. This meant that every discipline or department at the university should concern itself with producing students who were “good writers.” In a similar vein, the current movement toward “civic engagement” assumes that just as we want students to be good writers, we want them to be good citizens. Whatever the student’s major, career, or life goals, she or he will be a member of some community, and for our democracy to be maintained and to flourish, we need people who will effectively exercise their civic rights and responsibilities. All faculty need to be enlisted in this effort to improve civic education.

Because of the similarities, I think we can learn much from the experience teachers of composition have had in advancing writing across the curriculum, to know how certain cross-curricular goals get translated in different disciplines and programs, and what strategies are effective in advancing such a campus-wide initiative.

Reflections: As a political science professor, you are always also a teacher of writing. Are there particular kinds of assignments that you have designed that foster critical thinking and civic engagement as well as writing that you find compelling?

Rick Battistoni: In *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum* I highlight in the Appendix a number of assignments I have found to be effective in fostering civic engagement. One of the most meaningful assignments I have given students is one that asks them to develop their own philosophy of service. This assignment, also included in the appendix to *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum*, asks students to write a one-paragraph statement of their philosophy of service followed by a narrative explaining the paragraph statement. Among the things I ask students to consider in the longer narrative are: their definition of service; values, motivations, or goals that underlie their understanding of service and the service they choose/want to do; the relationship they seek to establish with those whom they serve (including how they understand the people being served, their “needs,” how to prepare for entering and exiting service, etc.); how they understand “community” and how that impacts their philosophy of service; how—if

at all—issues of citizenship and/or politics enter into their philosophy of service. It is an assignment that I ask students to share with the rest of the class before submitting a final draft, to get feedback from their fellow classmates.

This is an assignment that those of us teaching in the Feinstein Institute for Public Service now regularly assign in both the introductory course for first-year students and again in the senior capstone seminar. It has become a valuable opportunity for our students to see where they have grown over their time in the program, and also serves as a tool in for us to assess whether and how our curriculum adds value for our students.

Reflections: You were one of the leaders of this past year's Wingspread Summit that engaged students in reflection on their understandings of citizenship and service. What stands out to you from the conference? What did you learn from the conference that would be of value to those of us who are teaching first-year students?

Rick Battistoni: What stands out to me is that our students see the whole question of civic engagement, and its connection to service, quite differently from those of us who philosophize about the connections. On many of our campuses students who are engaged in significant community-based work are deepening their learning about the issues that matter to them. They are getting to know their community neighbors, to work with people across differences of race, gender, class, religion, and interest. And they are challenging faculty to do more than pay lip service to civic engagement, by bringing their practices in the classroom and/or community into sync with democratic values. I would call this significant "civic engagement" learning, and yet, most studies fail to unearth this aspect of student learning from community service.

Much of the excitement that I felt at Wingspread last year has been captured in *The New Student Politics*, a new volume also published by Campus Compact, and co-authored by one of my former students, Sarah Long. One of the biggest standouts at Wingspread, captured in this publication, is a new definition students came up with: "service politics." Many critics of service-learning argue that while students engage with communities through service, they avoid tackling the larger political or policy questions, actually choosing service as an alternative to politics and civic engagement. As the Wingspread students defined it, however, "service is alternative politics, not an alternative to politics. Participation in community service is a form of conventional political activity that can lead to social change, in which participants work primarily outside of governmental institutions; service politics becomes the means through which

students can move from community service to political engagement.”

Reflections: What have you learned about student attitudes and beliefs that could inform the ways we approach service-learning writing courses?

Rick Battistoni: Something I have long believed but came away with an even stronger attitude toward is that we need to allow students to name how their service and other community-based experiences connect to notions of civic engagement, rather than framing this connection for them. Teachers of writing can contribute to students’ own formulations about the way they see service, community, and politics, by exposing them to writing addressing these issues that is provocative and encompasses diverse perspectives, and then asking students to frame the issues for themselves, both orally and in writing.

Reflections: Many teachers of writing are familiar with Bruce Herzberg’s arguments in *Community Service and Critical Teaching*, first published in 1994. Do you share the concerns expressed in that article that service-learning experiences can, paradoxically, reinforce prejudices or distract students from analyzing structures and systems that maintain inequality and weaken community?

Rick Battistoni: I do share these concerns, but only because too many of our colleagues have worked from the premise that the service experience alone will cause appreciation of diversity or structural analysis. My experience is that this rarely happens by itself, that we as educators need to create the atmosphere within which students can explore and examine prejudices and analyze systemic inequalities. Part of creating this atmosphere involves working closely with community partners to establish the kind of relationship that will model deeper thinking. Here at Providence College, our service-learning program has been enhanced significantly by our ability to bring community partners into the classroom, both as co-faculty and as guest facilitators. We also create an atmosphere for critical thinking and community challenge by having advanced undergraduates serving as “community assistants,” working with the community to orient and supervise student work and with the faculty to link classroom work with community work.

We have come to understand that students need both support and challenge when doing difficult and complex community-based work. Faculty and campus-based service-learning offices have spent much of their time thinking about how best to support students in their community service experiences. While this is certainly very important, we also need to consider how we go about challenging

students to think critically and structurally about the work they are doing in community. And this is difficult, because it requires that we become familiar with the details of the kind of work students will be doing and how they will be confronting the kinds of prejudices and structural inequalities that exist in the larger community. Community partners are crucial educational allies, as they are well-positioned to help us create intellectual challenges for our students.

Works Cited

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