

Engaging *Mêtis* as a Site of Disability Activist and Leadership Possibilities

Stephanie K. Wheeler¹

¹ University of Central Florida

Abstract

This paper emphasizes the importance of mêtis—adaptable and responsive rhetorical action—in achieving responsible, sustainable, and access-based community action for social justice. It specifically connects this concept to disability and access, arguing that centering disability and the embodied material experiences of disabled people are central to sustainable, effective, and ethical civic engagement practices for all. By drawing on the author's experience working with the Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) in Orlando, Florida, this paper details the challenges encountered and the responsive decisions made, emphasizing how integrating disability-centered methodologies foster inclusivity and accessibility. Ultimately, this paper argues that a mêtis approach informed by disability perspectives allows for effective and ethical civic engagement that prioritizes access and empowers marginalized communities.

Mêtis, according to Jay Dolmage (2014), is the “cunning and adaptive intelligence... characterized by sideways and backwards movement” that he associates with the physically disabled Greek god Hephaestus (p. 5). In contrast to linear, forward-facing, and uninterrupted movement toward a goal, Dolmage shows how images of Hephaestus with his feet twisted around backwards or sideways evoke the idea of a curve, “a body not composed in perfect ratio” capable of moving in a variety of directions in order to avoid obstacles (p. 7). Because *mêtis* offers a challenge to the “normal” or typical ways of moving towards goals like linear thinking and forward progress, Dolmage’s definition of *mêtis* foregrounds the experiences of disabled people in providing creative solutions to unexpected problems.

Because of my own commitment to access and participation in disability activism, the experiences of disabled people¹ are central to any civic engagement work I do. For me, thinking about *mêtis* in activist and community outreach spaces inspired me to ask why folks might not be participating in their community and to consider different ways for people to become active citizens that counter the

¹ *Fletcher-Watson and Happé have noted that the language best used to describe disability is “currently the subject of intense and passionate debate” (2019). Much of the available research, narratives, and conversations happening in disabled communities, however, indicate that identity-first is not only preferred but also far less stigmatizing than person-first language (Andrews et al., 2019; Gernsbacher, 2017; Kenny et al., 2016; Sinclair, 2013). Vivanti suggests that identity-first language “is increasingly endorsed as an expression of positive social identity whereby language historically used to dehumanize and marginalize is redeployed as a form of empowerment (2). By examining the social implications, risks, and effects of person-first language, and considering the preference and empowerment associated with identity-first language, I have chosen to use identity-first language throughout this project to reflect a more inclusive and empowering approach to describing disability.*

“normal,” typical, and often intentionally inaccessible paths to civic participation. In this way, I see my community engagement as a unique way to understand the degree to which *mêtis* and disability shape who we are as citizens and activists.

This paper will demonstrate the essential role of *mêtis* in responsible, sustainable, access-based community action for social justice. To do this, I build on Jay Dolmage's (2014) definition of *mêtis* as a way to “recognize the need for flexible, embodied, responsive rhetorical movement” (p. 160). In this way, I deliberately connect the concept of *mêtis* with disability and access. Because, as I am arguing, *mêtis* plays a vital role sustainable and access-based civic engagement practices, this paper will show that privileging disability and the embodied material experiences of disabled people are central to sustainable, effective, and ethical civic engagement practices for all. To do this, I will first begin by establishing the larger civic engagement goals and plans of my work with the Latino Leadership Institute's (LLI) Orlando chapter. Then, I will show the varying constraints our plans faced and the *mêtic* decisions we made in response. Then, I will outline three major lessons that served as a reminder to us about what it means to effectively and ethically civically engage. Lastly, I will provide takeaways based on those three lessons.

Orlando's Latino Leadership Institute

I began my work as a member of the advisory board of the Latino Leadership Institute's (LLI) Orlando chapter in 2016. LLI is a non-partisan, nonprofit 501(c)3 that “offers comprehensive and empowering classes on the electoral process and civic activism to promising and inspiring minority students for FREE” (Latino Leadership Institute, n.d.). When we began the Orlando chapter,

we understood how crucial it was to recognize the cultural diversity within the promising and inspiring minority students that LLI aims to empower. My participation on this advisory board has been characterized by a consistent push for access-based engagement that centers the material and embodied realities of disability while acknowledging the interconnectedness of various social identities. This commitment isn't limited to disability issues; it's rooted in a broader understanding of historical inequalities faced by marginalized communities. Foregrounding accessibility for people with disabilities sets a standard for inclusion that benefits everyone, particularly those facing additional barriers due to their background or identity.

Hahrie Han (2016), in a report prepared for the Ford Foundation, argues for three things that civic engagement must always attend to, two of which I understand to be varying degrees of access. Civic participation, for Han, must be *possible*, *probable*, and *powerful* (Han, 2016). While this definition of civic engagement is not widely used in the field, I find it to be a useful and insightful framework for understanding the complex relationship between individuals, communities, and the larger society. More importantly, it centers the role of access in civic engagement: people must be able to actually participate, want to participate, and participate in actions that have impacts on lived material realities of communities.

In the three years of Orlando's chapter of the Latino Leadership Institute (LLI), our efforts up to this point created possibilities for the community to become more civically engaged and civic-minded. Specifically, we focused on our efforts to making political participation more accessible to communities of color, poorer communities, and communities for whom English was not their first language. We removed barriers to information on getting involved in the political process by offering the Electoral Activism and

Leadership Academy (EALA), taught by former and current elected Latinx officials and politicians. These courses were designed with accessibility in mind: courses were held in a central location on campus, transportation was provided for those who needed it, and course materials were offered in different languages and formats. LLI's presence in the community, in Han's terms, made civic participation *possible*. The problem that we faced going into the fall of 2017 was that upon reflection, the EALA did not frame civic participation as something people would *want* to do unless they were already interested in the topic. This was unlike the previous year, which had seen a record number of participation due to the contentious nature of the election, indicating a distinct contrast in the approach and its impact on involvement. More importantly, our relatively new EALA course did not have enough graduates in elected offices long enough to demonstrate the tangible impact on their policy decisions. In this way, our earlier efforts did not necessarily create powerful *communities* so much as it created powerful *individuals*. Nor did we create a culture where local community members wanted to participate outside of a specific goal of running for office or becoming involved in politics in general. Our original goals for the upcoming EALA course, then, focused on the structure of LLI and its functioning concerning our contributions to the community.

Our first goal was to articulate the structural incentives that Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) laid out that would make the community *want* to participate in civic life and politics. In creating this goal, we were responding to the need to provide more accessible and relevant resources needed to enhance political interest by tying their wellbeing to LLI's goals. Secondly, the advisory board recognized the need to draw on the interdependent relationships that created and sustained the partnership in the beginning. In the context of disability studies, interdependence refers to the idea that

individuals with disabilities, like everyone else, are inherently interconnected with and reliant on others in various aspects of their lives. This perspective challenges the traditional notion of independence, emphasizing that independence does not necessarily mean doing everything on one's own without any support. Interdependence recognizes the importance of relationships, community, and collaboration in facilitating the well-being and full participation of individuals with disabilities, exactly the kind of recognition that LLI had hoped to cultivate with each course. Therefore, our second goal was to work alongside local organizations to mobilize people and create a political identity based on some of the overall goals of LLI and the EALA (Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy) but that centralized participants' embodied and material experiences. Part of this goal was to grow the organization via our partners and duplicate the kind of success the original New York chapter experiences on a regular basis. Students there demonstrate a lot of interest and engagement, and the chapter finds itself turning people away in order to maintain a reasonable class size. Their approach is to mobilize and solidify a constituency as a reliable group of voters who see the potential as change-makers for local policy. In this way, the Orlando chapter approached the fall course as an opportunity for our organization to be seen as a potential for change on the local and individual level by tactically combining and leveraging participation in order to change policy.

When I first began this project, I was interested in providing generalized insights about ways that the rhetorical concept of *mêtis* can function as a way to resist racist, classist, and ableist discrimination that is embedded in and sanctioned by a political climate. I had hoped to show how the plans of LLI (Latino Leadership Institute) – and the EALA (Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy), in particular – could demonstrate how

mêtis can specifically provide access to political participation and activism. Yet just as these plans began to take off, everything was put on hold with the local preparations for Hurricane Irma. Less than a week after Irma passed through Central Florida, Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico. Suddenly, this project took on a whole new direction: whatever kind of insight into *mêtis* I had planned to reveal was quickly replaced with the deliberate and tactful choices I needed to make as part of the LLI advisory board in order to respond to my communities' material needs. Yet while the initial purpose of my project had shifted, I quickly saw that the focus on *mêtis* would, and should, remain. Hugo Letiche and Matt Statler (2005) define *mêtis* as a kind of "sporadic and dramatic" choice that engages the kind of change in an organization that responds to unexpected circumstances (p. 6). When a new, unexpected crisis arises in the midst of other crises, competing responses to each can make it difficult to determine what problems exist, what solutions exist, and what solutions the organization is capable of enacting.

Turning Resources into Goals

This is where the relationship to the New York chapter was useful: Orlando's Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) chapter was only in its third year and heavily relied on the main chapter in New York for support and advice. But the kind of response we needed in Orlando post-Irma and Maria could not be found by looking to New York's "best practices" or even past responses. Because of the embodied nature of *mêtis*, the New York best practices proved to be incongruent with the material realities and lived experiences of our community members. According to Dolmage (2014), "*Mêtis*, perhaps no more so (and no less) than any other rhetorical figure, is body" (p. 194). Embedded within this understanding that *mêtis* is embodied is the recognition that the unique nature of *mêtis* is the

awareness of context and the adaptive responsiveness that, for Letiche and Statler (2005), defines its necessity (p. 3). So while we had the main chapter of LLI in New York for advice and support based on their prior experiences and organizational plans, our decision to tactically combine resources meant that we had to accept that the New York chapter alone would not be able to provide all the answers we needed effectively. In this way, the Orlando chapter needed to be mindful of combining useful resources, keeping in mind that what was useful to New York may not be useful to us.

The success of our Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) chapter, then, depended on what Marshall Ganz (2000) calls “strategic capacity,” which is the capacity to turn what you have into what you want—that is, turning resources into goals (p. 1003). One of the underlying goals of LLI’s Orlando chapter is to be less dependent on New York but to be more *interdependent* with them. In other words, the Orlando chapter of LLI aimed to reduce its reliance on support or resources from New York. We hoped to foster a mutually beneficial relationship where both the Orlando and New York chapters are interconnected and supportive of each other. The goal was not complete independence from New York but rather establishing a collaborative and interdependent partnership that enhanced the overall effectiveness and sustainability of both chapters. Indeed, for Ganz (2005), the effectiveness of strategic capacity among organizations depends on the leadership’s willingness to respectfully and honestly interact with one another with regard to their resources, accountability, and plans (p. 1005). The leadership of the Orlando and New York chapters consistently demonstrated the potential to create more effective strategies for their local communities because each leader provides access to relevant knowledge, meaning that the conversations between the two function as opportunities for learning. Success for the Orlando

chapter of LLI, then, depended on a *mêtic* approach to the resources and blueprints provided to us by our predecessors in order to serve and be a service to our community. Despite the threat of losing focus with LLI's work—getting members of the community into leadership positions, elected or otherwise—the impact of both Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria provided an opportunity for us to discover new spaces of resistance and re-evaluate what our role was in the community and to the New York chapter as a whole.

***Mêtis* Gets its Chance**

Given the significant delay in holding the advisory boards' first meeting of the semester caused by the hurricanes, it became clear very quickly that in order to productively move forward, we would need to become less dependent on the New York chapter for answers and draw on the embodied and material nature of *mêtis* to guide our response. Since *mêtis* is a tactful and strategic response to a change in a situation, it can only be activated when there's confusion, unexpected circumstances, and indeterminacy. Letiche and Statler (2005) clarify by saying that "*mêtis* gets its chance when there is confusion in unresolved circumstances, and a lack of clear direction" (p. 7). But just as importantly, "*mêtis* demands a focus on embodied rhetoric and, specifically, demands a view of the body and its thinking as being double and divergent" (Dolmage, 2020). In this way, the advisory board would need to rely on a *mêtic* approach that responded to the physical and material realities our community faced. Using a *mêtic* approach allows and encourages the kind of unique move or action that can respond to contexts where best practices, precedents, and "rational" thinking are no longer useful. Dolmage (2020) states that "*Mêtis* is the rhetorical art of cunning, the use of embodied strategies, what Certeau calls everyday arts, to transform rhetorical situations. In a world of

chance and change, metis is what allows us to craft available means for persuasion” (Dolmage, 2020). In other words, a mêtic approach centralizes flexibility in thinking and action as a response to the inevitable change of plans, but it also requires that flexibility in thinking and action as always centralizing the material and embodied realities of those involved. Letiche and Statler (2005) refer to mêtis as an “action that responds to particular events in the context of identifiable circumstances” (p. 2). If Hurricane Irma was the “particular event” that Letische and Statler refer to, responding to the “identifiable circumstances” meant that we needed to accept that many participants and partner organizations could not commit to a nine-week program we originally planned: our plans for LLI needed to respond to where people were in the community.

For some members of the board, moving forward with finding potential candidates through the EALA (Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy) was most important, given the elections that were coming up and LLI’s focus on providing this class. For others, putting all of our energy into assisting the efforts to help Puerto Rico needed to come first. Many felt that our efforts should stay even more local, helping with local cleanup and rebuilding. David Campbell (2015) writes how “competing values make it difficult to agree on what the problems are, much less how to solve them” (p. 201). Often what results in these conversations, Campbell continues, is the creation of new problems, caused by repeating action steps that were successful in creating solutions to past problems that may not exist in the current context. What the board did agree on was the fact that none of these problems existed independently of the others, and a holistic response was necessary. Campbell (2015) observes that those faced with these unexpected problems to solve like ours “can only hope that mêtis comes to the rescue” to adjust to “the particularities of time and place” (p. 201). The response of the board was an example of mêtis coming to the

rescue: we immediately began discussing the shift in context by locating the issue in time and place. The intention of having an LLI chapter in Orlando—and by extension, its advisory board—was to provide Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy (EALA) courses at least once a year, ideally in the all to prepare for spring elections. But a nine-week program in fall would have included the weekend of Veterans Day and Thanksgiving as well as some events held by partner organizations on Saturday mornings, the same time as our EALA classes take place. Furthermore, this schedule could not be flexible because of the constraints on the space. Since our faculty union, United Faculty of Florida-University of Central Florida (UFF-UCF), was the primary partner with LLI, the space that was available for the LLI was space that was available to UFF-UCF: classrooms. Going beyond the nine-week mark for the schedule was not possible because classroom space would no longer be available for use once the semester ended.

The more this conversation among board members went on, the more we saw how infeasible a Fall EALA (Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy) course would be. Since EALA courses are the cornerstone service that LLI (Latino Leadership Institute) provides to the community, the board needed to decide how to respond to this change in plans while at the same time retaining our mission and values. Letiche and Statler (2005) observe how the need for a *mêtic* approach becomes particularly obvious in situations where a minor shift in plans has the potential to lead to major systemic changes (p. 7). Dropping the EALA course gave us the opportunity to approach this apparently “minor” shift in our schedule as an advantage. From this decision came the first major systemic change of how the Orlando LLI chapter would function: instead of doing the EALA, we thought, we would take inspiration from LLI in New York and do a Public Policy course. What made this distinct from New York would be that our course would function as a civic

literacy course with an emphasis on the specific seats that were opening up in the next election as opposed to New York's close readings of specific policies in the community. This Public Policy course was only a possibility if we were not running the EALA at the same time.

In this way, our proposed course would be strategically looking for people who are interested in issues and helping them find themselves in leadership roles that can address those issues and facilitate their success. The goal of this course would be to learn how to find out where there is a need for people to run for office when seats become open and what the function of those seats are. The general approach would talk participants through the functions and influences of upcoming seats which would generate interest for people who are interested in participating at an elected level but aren't quite sure what the process entails. Then, if people are still interested, they would take the planned Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy (EALA) course in the spring. While this proposed course would not be a prerequisite, it would function as an invitational space where participants can see how policies affect everyday lives and locate those points where they can intervene. Ultimately, in our imagination, this course would serve to show community members the power that they already have and give them productive outlets to deploy it. Furthermore, this class would be more accessible: it would ideally only be four weeks and would call on members of the board who work with various local governments, those of us who know or who are university faculty or even past graduates of the EALA course, to come in and lead the classes.

Thus, our approach to a policy course would be distinct enough from New York's example that we are tackling localized issues and needs, but also similar enough that we are still speaking with the

same voice of Latino Leadership Institute (LLI). Several authors (Berry, 2005; Campbell, 2015; Dunne, 1993; Forester, 1999) have addressed the ways *mêtis* supports and fosters the development of policies that are responsive to specific places and people. While New York's policy courses are immensely successful for their own communities, using a *mêtic* approach to develop our own policy course demonstrates the degree to which *mêtis* provides a way to respond to the specific situation and political experience of the community. We agreed on a timeline and action steps to get the Public Policy course moving. In doing so, we kept in mind that even if participants who came to the Public Policy courses were not interested in running for any kind of elected office, they would still be able to learn policymaking to discover where they intervene, thus creating a scenario where civic interest becomes civic participation.

Disability at the Center, or *Mêtis* Gets Another Chance

The proposed public policy course never got off the ground. We did not see this as a failure of LLI (Latino Leadership Institute), however; in fact, we saw it as a victory because we felt that we had found a way to stay true to our mission and values despite the absence of the cornerstone course we were meant to offer the community. To echo Hamraie Han (2016), LLI's mission is ultimately to make civic participation must possible, probable, and powerful, specifically for marginalized communities. We do this by offering courses on electoral activism, offering all the information and support needed to run for office. Our goal is to create the conditions where people are able to participate, want to participate, and participate in actions that have visible impacts on the community. To put it bluntly: because of the large Puerto Rican

community in Central Florida and the number of LLI board members associated with organizations who work for or alongside the Puerto Rican community, policy courses were not a priority in the wake of the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria. The LLI advisory board in Orlando canceled all plans for any courses in the fall semester in order to focus our efforts toward getting boots on the ground, which included packing meals and supplies to be sent to Puerto Rico and South Florida, organizing fundraising events, and rebuilding and cleanup tasks in our own neighborhoods.

The reality we were faced with upon seeing how infeasible another Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy (EALA) or public policy course would be meant that we needed a way to take a step back and examine how we saw Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) functioning in the community. I have previously argued that the success of the EALA courses that LLI hosted was largely due to our attention to and practice of centering access and the experiences of disabled people by giving particular attention to three disability methodologies: madness narratives, interdependent relationships, and nothing about us without us (2018). Despite not having a person with a disability on our advisory board or in any of our offered courses, my investment in the belief that access must be the foundation of any and all programs, structures, and action, has come to characterize the development and delivery of the EALA courses and the functioning of LLI as a whole. Honoring nonlinear or nonrational ideas as possible solutions (madness narratives), inviting and offering collective work and resources (interdependent relationships), and centering the voices and participation of affected communities (nothing about us without us) are all disability methodologies that allow us to make decisions with access and inclusivity at the fore. What emerged upon reflection was the degree to which *mêtis* informed these methods, allowing us to not be afraid when making *mêtic* choices since those were the

kinds of choices we had been making all along. In this way, LLI in Orlando consistently made choices based on what was necessary, not so much what was expected of us, or what we thought the community needed, but what we heard affected voices tell us was necessary. In the aftermath of the storms, some residents lacked electricity, fresh food, and clean water for a prolonged period, and, with roads impassable, many had limited access to medical care. We organized transportation to emergency shelters and hospitals for those who needed it; served and delivered medicines, meals, and snacks; created and distributed relief bags (which included items like hygiene items, cleaning supplies, and over the counter medicines); and volunteered to make minor repairs to damaged homes. Furthermore, many in our community had family in Puerto Rico, and we solicited volunteers to help connect people to their families by providing translations support, emergency hotlines, and word of mouth on the ground in Puerto Rico.

Our *mêtic* approach informed by these disability methodologies came to the fore as we dealt with the consequences of Hurricanes Irma and Maria and their impact on us, our partners, and our friends. Centralizing access of disabled people made the success of the Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy (EALA) lasting, unique, and, more importantly, inclusive even though we were never pressed to do this work in response to a particular issue. In this way, access was “baked into” the functioning of Latino Leadership Institute (LLI), limiting the often-unhelpful responses to retrofit or add on access as an afterthought. This inclusivity meant that LLI had a lot of community partners working with us as organizations and as individuals on their own terms to their own self-identified abilities. As noted above, as long as our values align with a potential partner or participant, we welcome their involvement at whatever level is possible for them. This degree of access and inclusivity allows for meaningful reciprocity in our actions. Ellen Cushman

(1996) defines reciprocity as “an open and conscious negotiation of the power structures reproduced during the give-and-take interactions of the people involved on both sides of the relationship” (p. 16). Building off of this definition, Cynthia Fields (2014) asks us to become more aware of how disability provides a way to understand and achieve the goals of ethical representation and reciprocity (p. 43). “When the madness narrative is heard,” Fields argues, “other forms of knowing become open from the realm” of disabled people (p. 43). While it may seem that LLI’s efforts for the fall were a bust, the ongoing change in plans gave us an opportunity to underscore the methodologies and values that created and sustain this chapter of LLI. As a result, we were able to respond to the very real embodied and material needs of our neighbors—that is, we reached our ultimate goals of inciting participation and growing the organization, albeit in a way we hadn’t planned. We also came to recognize the central role that *mêtis* and disability methodology played, and continues to play, in our approach to civic engagement.

Looking back at the fall of 2017 as a success means that we have to honor the *mêtis* choices and moves we made to maintain our support of the community. The space to make those *mêtis* choices were created and sustained by disability methodologies that allowed us to honor the embodied and material realities our community faced. I have demonstrated here that *mêtis* and disability are deeply entwined; from my perspective, I cannot enact *mêtis* without simultaneously enacting a disability methodology. In this way, I see successful, sustainable, access-based, and effective civic engagement as a practice of *mêtis* which can only be made possible by being grounded in disability methodologies—that is, accessible and inclusive ways of seeing the world.

Privileging the voices and experiences of those who are most vulnerable reminds me of three lessons that have, and will continue to guide Latino Leadership Institute's (LLI), and my own, civic engagement: sustainable civic engagement must be interdependent; participants in civic engagement must be self-reflexive; and civic engagement must always be responsive to the lived realities and experiences of affected communities and their allies.

Sustainable Civic Engagement Must Be Interdependent

The underlying feature of Latino Leadership Institute's (LLI) creation and work are the interdependent relationships we have and continue to build. Faculty members, New York's LLI chapter, local politicians, and a number of local community organizing groups, including Jobs with Justice, Vamos 4 Puerto Rico, and Mi Familia Vota, bring a diverse group of experiences and ideas that allow LLI to function. More importantly the relationship among all of these groups creates the space for *métis*, or the "unexpected insight, creativity, excitement, and/or transformation" (Stewart and Alrutz 2012) required to effectively meet the needs of the community. I have previously argued how that very insight, creativity, and transformation came from the partnership between LLI and these groups that generated ideas and capabilities that have transformed our goals, self-interests and our institutions (2018). Pulling together the resources of LLI and University of Central Florida's faculty union, for example, faculty members were ready to lead whatever class we decided to hold on a moment's notice. Space, materials, and even students came from our faculty partners committed to the success of LLI's Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy (EALA). Going into fall semester and thinking about these partnerships that we cultivated necessitated that we evaluate our relationship to the New York chapter of LLI. As with any

partnership, we needed to be aware of our place in how our shared goals and self-interests played out. “According to traditional theories,” Letiche and Statler (2005) write, “organizational leadership should do its best to speak with one voice with a clear message that is grounded in basic truths” (p. 5). Ultimately, because the New York chapter provides some blueprints that guide Orlando’s goals to grow stronger and more powerful, we have to understand that together, we are working under one voice with shared values, functioning as our “basic truths.” The basic truth of LLI was to be a service to the community by providing opportunities for everyone to meaningfully participate.

Being interdependent in this way—that is, having a relationship devoid of hierarchy, knowing that one cannot be successful without the other—allowed us to see strategic capacity working in a way that might not have seemed rational at first but is nevertheless valuable to the success of both chapters. For example, understanding the trajectory of the proposed public policy courses and the Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy (EALA), Fields’ (2014) madness narratives help us see what may be lost when we rely on our own rationality or “common sense,” limiting our ability to be *mêtic* in the service of underrepresented populations. Common sense might have told us that because the goal of LLI (Latino Leadership Institute) was to offer the EALA, the advisory board should do whatever it takes to get the course going or cancel it altogether and disband the LLI until the following semester. If we can’t do it, common sense might say, we don’t do it and instead individually focus our energy with our respective organizations. But by moving within a space that welcomed and encouraged out-of-the-box thinking, we developed plans for an entirely new course and found different ways to make our contribution to the community meaningful and lasting. In madness narratives, “representations are fragmented and non-rational,” write Hitt and Garrett (2014), with

“the refusal of a tidy conclusion, changes in tone and focus, and the use of whitespace and section breaks to indicate experiences that cannot easily transition or be represented” (p. 7). The unspoken agreement among the advisory board members of LLI was a refusal of a conclusion forced on us by the hurricanes. Validating the difficult-to-understand and hard-to-see possibilities and representations of our future meant that we could activate *métis* and engage with new opportunities. Again, drawing from the disability methodology of madness narratives, our *métic* choices allowed us to make decisions based on our understanding of everyone’s needs, capabilities, and potentialities, even if those needs and capabilities resisted linear one-size-fits-all “common sense” practices.

Participants in Civic Engagement Must Be Self-Reflexive

In practice, privileging the interdependent relationships of everyone involved with LLI (Latino Leadership Institute) requires constant self-reflexivity to reaffirm that we are functioning as advocates on values and issues rather than endorsing specific people or institutions involved with our organizations’ respective goals. This is significant given the political climate that developed in the wake of the hurricane—specifically, the politicization of providing resources and support to save and support the lives of those stranded in Puerto Rico. If we chose to represent ourselves as a group concerned with values and specific issues rather than political players or parties, we were more likely to receive the support we needed to support others in turn. In other words, we made purposeful moves not to be anti-Trump, but rather pro-Puerto Rico. Many people on the advisory board are a part of organizations that are 501(c)3’s and are unable to endorse a candidate or a politician as a representative of their organization. Being interdependent allowed us to see what would be lost by

going with a perhaps “common sense” approach to just resisting Trump, but we were not willing to lose central figures and organizations to do so. By choosing an interdependent approach, the board aimed to avoid potential consequences, such as losing the partnership with central figures and organizations, that could arise from a more straightforward or unilateral strategy of simply resisting a political figure—in this case, Trump. This approach demonstrated the board’s commitment to collaboration, consensus-building, and finding common ground within the constraints of legal and organizational guidelines. Furthermore, while it would be easy to find and invite community members from one political party or campaign to help with the support efforts (if LLI is backing issues and not candidates or parties), we are also moving away from predictability: predictability concerning allies, participants, and outcomes. Lois Bragg (2004) calls *mêtis* an embodied rhetoric that “never goes forward in a straight line but is always weaving from side to side” (p. 32). If we worked in a straight line—that is, if we consistently worked with the same methods with the same people to reach the same ends—then the results might be the same, but they would lack the fullness, richness, and efficacy of what we set out to do. Ultimately, LLI succeeded because we refused to limit our chances by moving beyond candidate and party participation to issues and values. In this way, the madness narrative gave us the space to perform *mêtis* in order to reach the whole of an issue rather than a limited viewpoint and part of it. Self-reflexivity challenged us to make this *mêtic* space possible.

By interrogating our positionalities across the varying contexts in which we work, Latino Leadership Institute’s (LLI) Orlando chapter is also given a chance to truly centralize our bodies as a way to understand our privileges and limitations. This kind of self-reflexivity informed by a madness narrative asks us to do a practice of *mêtic* strategic capacity in order to see what we might lose when

we are only relying on our own conclusions that are based on the kinds of “rational” thought. Our interdependent relationship with the New York chapter helped us avoid the tendency to automatically turn to New York’s best practices for community participation. While that advice and model behavior is based on conclusions that just seem to make sense, what works for the New York chapter may not work for the Orlando one. When working with a group of people each making individual decisions that honor their own unique circumstances, a variety of perspectives and voices emerges that results in a fragmented, collective, and truly *métic* approach.

Our practice of self-reflexivity welcomed a madness narrative, one that asked everyone what they believed our plans should be (plans that reflected the goals, values, and resources of everyone’s respective organization). *Métis* emerges then when there are madness narratives: where there is confusion and unresolved circumstances, or things that don’t quite go together, *métis* gives us the opportunity to put things together to create something new. Letiche and Statler (2005) observe how “change (often) starts with. . . individual behaviors that are grounded in personal sense-making, undertaken in concrete circumstances” (p. 7). The results are very unpredictable, and there’s a lack of clear direction, but what it also does is bring together even more diverse communities and even more diverse skills that help LLI as a group come together to work towards our values.

While we may not have an obvious beginning, middle, or end, consistent self-reflexivity reminds us that we share the same goals and values. For the LLI (Latino Leadership Institute) advisory board, our ultimate goal is to serve our community, thus when interruption after interruption foiled our plans, the individual perspectives and behaviors that are grounded in what “makes sense” to each of us—

but may not make sense to the larger group—enabled us to grab opportunities and embrace possibilities. Because there were real material circumstances that resulted from the events that sidelined our plans, individual decisions of each member of the board and of the people who were organizing and planning for the fall semester made individual decisions in order to do things that they needed for their specific communities.

Civic Engagement Must Always Be Responsive to the Lived Realities and Experiences of Affected Communities and Their Allies

Foregrounding the experiences of the different embodiments that come to bear on civic engagement through disability methodologies reminds us to reach citizens where they are—that is, to provide support to communities based on their own identified needs, not our personal conjectures. When we focus on the embodied material realities of the lives of people in our community in an effort to create a program that would allow people to become more civically engaged, the connection between craft and *mêtis*—that is, thought and action—inform one another. In other words, in our goal to serve the community, we were presented with a moment that gets us to the place where thought and action are informing one another, albeit not in the way that we had planned. What a *mêtic* approach provided to us was room to be realistic about our resources and where those resources were needed. More importantly, it helped us empower the people we set out to work with in such a way that we were able to bring our resources to follow their lead.

To do this, we needed to keep the “Nothing About Us Without Us” methodology in mind, an approach based on the rallying call of

disability activists to policy makers. "Nothing About Us Without Us" is a slogan that encapsulates a fundamental principle in the field of disability studies and disability rights that advocates that policies and actions should not be formulated or implemented about or on behalf of people with disabilities without their direct and meaningful participation. It underscores the concept of empowerment, self-determination, and the recognition of the expertise that individuals with disabilities bring to discussions about their own needs and rights. In practical terms, embracing a "Nothing About Us Without Us" methodology involves involving individuals with disabilities in a variety of areas, including the design of accessible spaces, the development of inclusive educational practices, the creation of disability-related legislation, and the formation of support services. By centering the voices of people with disabilities, this approach aims to ensure that solutions and decisions are more relevant, respectful, and effective in addressing the diverse needs of the disability community.

When Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) needed to make decisions about our direction, enacting this methodology required us to lift up and privilege the ideas and input of those impacted by those decisions. Amy Edmonson's (1999) conception of "psychological safety" underscores the significance of openness and questioning that invites these voices, and, by extension, allows *métis* to occur. For Edmonson, "psychological safety" is the shared understanding among team members that interpersonal risks are encouraged and supported. Having psychological safety among decision-makers meant that we recognized the role of tactical choices in serving our community and the value of questioning, doubting, or even changing practices that might be working in another location or another time, but needs attention in the here and now. In this way, it promotes the idea of people coming together and back to circumstances on the ground.

Our unofficial advisory board was often referred to as “friends coming together to get advice,” which promoted this kind of psychological safety and built the foundations that cultivated this attitude. At all points of the decision-making process, members were encouraged to question practices that had become routinized and gone unquestioned. Letiche and Statler (2005) argue that:

“psychological safety” frames the ability to question, doubt, criticize and change practice(s). It promotes organization as open rather than closed. It supports interaction as innovative and circumstantial, instead of as routinized and prescribed. In “psychological safety” one feels free to question and change. Yet in many organizations, one is not free to admit errors, to question practices or to investigate procedures. In this environment, if something unexpected occurs or if something goes wrong, it is covered-up and discussion is silenced. There are no unexpected events, only the apparently uninterrupted function of routines. (p. 6)

Because, as they continue, “*mêtis* is the logic of the unexpected event,” having psychological safety among board members meant that the board functioned as a space for each one of us to hold one another accountable to our own values, LLI’s, and more importantly, the community that we served (p. 6). Without that culture of psychological safety, it is unlikely that *mêtis* would have played such a productive and important role in our decision-making. In this way, the board functioned as a site of invention where instead of being silenced, people’s voices were amplified and necessary changes were made.

In this kind of psychologically safe situation, however, Letiche and Statler (2005) remind us that *mêtis* doesn't always quite manifest itself because preparing for the unexpected means that every event

is then expected. To evoke *mêtis*, they argue, you need a puzzling, unexpected, and challenging circumstance. Only then can psychological safety address the reception of *mêtis* involved in challenging routinized responses to vague circumstances. While the board did intend for our chapter to begin evolving and developing into our own identity, *mêtis* did manifest itself by way of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, as Letiche and Statler would say. Our goals for the new semester were tied up in the idea that civic mindedness can motivate civic participation; the civic participation that emerged was not what we had envisioned, exactly, but it was exactly what was needed. Drawing on shared goals and values with our partners, we were able to activate civic mindedness by demonstrating the power of civic participation. Civic participation comes out of people seeing the link between personal concerns within a shared place (Kemmis, 1990); Campbell (2015) argues that “while the specific forms vary, these practices embody one essential idea: that governance is something we citizens do together. . . . We do it because we share a world in common and thus a common fate” (p. 203). In this way, our greatest success was to invite the community into the practice of citizenship with a “Nothing About Us Without Us” methodology in mind, demonstrating the degree to which our power has the capacity to be a forceful change when we prioritize embodied and material realities of our communities.

Practitioner Takeaways

With the unexpected crisis brought on by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, it was essential, as a community organization, for LLI (Latino Leadership Institute) to respond in accordance with our values. We needed to be careful how to determine what the problems our communities faced without creating new problems in our attempt

at offering a solution. The success we had was only possible to the extent that we stayed true to our core values, which, at its foundation, centralizes access and inclusivity. *Mêtis*, as I have demonstrated, is always bound in the body; taking on a *mêtic* approach in the context where access and disability are valued made *mêtis* so valuable in LLI's restructuring. Ultimately, if the effectiveness of *mêtis* relies on a foundation of disability methodologies, and civic engagement relies on *mêtis*, civic engagement efforts must always be attentive to disability, access, and inclusion if they are to be effective and sustainable. Otherwise, civic engagement efforts run the risk of reinstating the very power structures they intend to fight, which can only result in a never-ending process of silencing and erasure.

With that in mind, I offer the following takeaways for anyone interested in being more deliberate about creating sustainable access-based civic engagement.

Prepare for failures, complications, and crises before they happen. Failures and complications are inevitable, so plan for them as opportunities for *mêtis* and more inclusionary creative responses.

- Welcome complications as opportunities to take stock of where you are and where you want to be. Let the responses to obstacles be your activism. Too often we plan our activism around assumptions: assumptions that what we are doing is the most appropriate and generative response, and that our plans, if we execute each correctly, will lead us to the solution that we are striving towards. Because of this, we risk losing sight of that very thing that we are working for, and instead only focus on our plans of action.

While planning and preparing is a valuable part of any kind of civic engagement, we must work with the world the way it is, not the way we would like it to be.

Get in the habit of consistent self-reflexivity: Civic engagement, activism, and access are ongoing.

- In a similar vein, remember that nobody is perfect, and even your *métic* responses won't guarantee your work happens entirely without complications. Just as nothing can be completely accessible, understand and accept that your activism won't be flawless because the very nature of activism is an ongoing ever-changing thing.
- Whatever your engagement and/or activist work is, get in the habit of asking yourself and those around you why you are doing what you are doing. Are your goals still the same? What is the relationship between you/your organization and other people/organizations: are you too independent? Too dependent? Practicing and honoring interdependency as a foundation for civic engagement supports the growth and sustainability of an open, honest, and successful effort. Central to your self-assessment, then, is a clear inventory of privileges, weaknesses, and self-care. Make sure that the space you create is consistently respectful and encouraging of boundaries and boundary-making.

Activism and engagement must always respond to the bodies and material realities of affected communities and their allies.

- Let your responses and efforts be guided by the needs, voices, and participation of the affected community, even

when it might not “make sense” to you. If it doesn’t make sense, ask why. If it does make sense, challenge yourself to ask why. What worldview is guiding your decisions? Find an expression of those things that try to silence you, your base, and/or your allies, especially those systems of oppression that construct things that “make sense.” Education, awareness, and open communication will create a space for all narratives, not just the ones that “make sense.”

- Avoid activist burnout by responding to your own body: by looking at the self-care needs of you and those around you, the workload and capacities of you or your organization will likely manifest in burnout or stress. Remember that community building and power building are two central components of civic engagement and activism, but they are not the same thing. Make space for emotion and allow yourself and others around you to honor it. Recognize that this might very well be the cornerstone of the success of your effort.

Recognize what your values and self-interests are, both as an organization and as an individual.

- It is important to remember that values and self-interests are not the same. Values are the beliefs that shape who you are, and self-interests are the tangible manifestation of those values. Find and surround yourself with people who share the same motivation to make your values tangible. If people you are surrounded by share your values but do not share your self-interest, that’s okay: honor what they think and what they might be able to bring to your efforts.

Always prioritize aligning your values, not your self-interest.

Honor the lived realities of everyone in the fight.

- Don't give away your power by becoming too narrow in your definition of participation. If you want power, you need to build your base. The best way to do so is to be as inclusive as possible.
- Prioritize access for all, including language/communication access, physical access, and access to participate. Are your meetings, rallies, and other engagement efforts accessible? Who is invited? How will they get there? Are you providing information on the work you are doing in accessible formats? Remember that people know more about themselves and their needs than you do: everyone has the right to name their own experiences and needs. Create an environment where people are heard, asked what they need, and get what they need.
- Ask yourself if your civic engagement efforts are too much: for a movement to be sustainable, it needs to be held by many people, not just a few. The workload is heavy and must be shared among members of a group or a community.

Conclusion

With the inability to move forward with another instantiation of the EALA (Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy), it became increasingly clear that our capacity for civic engagement is grounded in *métis*: the only thing we can prepare for was unpredictable, context-based access needs. LLI (Latino Leadership

Institute) Orlando's goals are not so much about how to create a functioning system of civic engagement opportunities for the community, but rather how to respond to their needs while retaining the mission and resources from LLI in New York. If we wanted to move forward in serving our community, our goals needed to be grounded in this same regard toward the bodies of our participants and community members.

Centralizing disability methodologies in these partnerships allows access and inclusion to become the cornerstone foundations upon which sustainable, access-based civic engagement exists, and, by extension, the changes that engagement generates. The prior incarnations of the Electoral and Activism Leadership Academy (EALA) focused on how individual active participation can have the most impact on our local community and politics. Yet institutions and institutional structures do not respond to individual demands as satisfactorily as collective action, so while Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) encourages the community to be active in Central Florida, that action is often deployed and regarded as individualized. A localized and individualized action is relatively unlikely to result in the kind of transformational changes that local activists want to see. To remedy this, our chapter of LLI required that we recognize that civic interest is not a precursor for civic participation, but rather civic interest comes out of civic participation. We thus planned for the fall semester to be dedicated to fostering spaces where members of the community could discuss civic literacy and civic participation, and, in doing so, creating the conditions for powerful civic participation. By ensuring interdependency, self-reflexivity, and responsiveness to lived realities, LLI Orlando was able to build on our efforts to make civic engagement and participation possible. By responding to the immediate needs of our community and allies, civic participation became probable because our engagement had immediate and

long-lasting effects. Resistance and action are only effective when we intentionally privilege underrepresented and neglected perspectives, voices, and bodies, and it was our disability-infused *métic* approach that allowed us to do so.

References

- Berry, W. (2005). *The way of ignorance and other essays*. Shoemaker and Hoard.
- Bragg, L. (2004). *Oedipus Borealis: The aberrant body in old Icelandic myth and saga*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Campbell, D. (2015). "Mêtis, craft, civic mindedness: Essential attributes of democratic citizenship in communities." *Community Development*, 46(3): 198-211.
- Cushman, E. (1996). "The rhetorician as an agent of social change." *College Composition and Communication*, 47(1):7-28.
- Dolmage, J. T. (2014). *Disability rhetoric*. Syracuse University Press.
- . (2020). "What is mêtis?" *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 40(1).
- Edmondson, A. (1999). "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2): 350–74.
- Dunne, J. (1993). *Back to the rough ground: 'Phronesis' and 'techne' in modern philosophy and in Aristotle*. University of Notre Dame Press.

- Fields, C. (2014). "Dangerous reciprocity: Creating a madness narrative research methodology." *Reflections: Public Rhetoric Civic Writing and Service Learning*, 14(1): 40-47.
- Forester, J. (1999). *The deliberative practitioner: Encouraging participatory planning processes*. MIT Press.
- Ganz, M. (2000). "Resources and resourcefulness: Strategic capacity in the unionization of California agriculture, 1959-1966." *American Journal of Sociology*, 105: 1003-62.
- Han, H. (2016). "A program review of the Promoting Electoral Reform and Democratic Participation (PERDP) initiative of the Ford Foundation." *Ford Foundation*.
- Hitt, A., & Garrett, B. (2014). "Special editors' introduction: Engaging the possibilities of disability studies." *Reflections: Public Rhetoric Civic Writing and Service Learning*, 14(1): 4-14.
- Kemmis, D. (1990). *Community and the politics of place*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Latino Leadership Institute. (2024). *Latino Leadership Institute*. latinoleadershipinstitute.net/
- Letiche, H., & Statler, M. (2005). "Evoking *mêtis*: Questioning the logics of change, responsiveness, meaning and action in organizations." *Culture and Organization*, 11(1):1-16.
- Stewart, T., & Alrutz, M. (2012). "Meaningful relationships: Cruxes of university-community partnerships for sustainable

and happy engagement.” *Journal of Community and Engagement Scholarship*, 5(1).

Wheeler, S. K. (2018). “‘An open mesh of possibilities’: Engaging disability studies as a site of activist and leadership possibilities.” *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing and Service Learning*, 17(3): 87-110.

About the Author

Stephanie K. Wheeler is an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Programs at the University of Central Florida. Her research focuses on disability rhetoric, eugenics, civic engagement, popular culture, and Holocaust studies. She has published works in *Continuum*, *Composition Forum*, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, and *Reflections*.

© 2024, Stephanie Wheeler. This article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY). For more information, please visit creativecommons.org