

Review:

Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu. *Civic Work Civic Lessons: Two Generations Reflect on Public Service*

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C*ivic Work Civic Lessons: Two Generations Reflect on Public Service* by Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu is a reflective, intergenerational examination of the key skills and attitudes necessary to engage actively and productively in civic work. The authors, Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu, are fifty-seven years apart in age. Throughout the book, they reflect on their unique experiences with civic engagement from two different generations and perspectives. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Ehrlich held public-service positions in the President John F. Kennedy and President Jimmy Carter administrations as well as worked in academic administration. At the time of the book's publication, Ernestine was an undergraduate at Stanford University and had recently started her own non-profit organization.

Ehrlich and Fu's main goal in co-authoring *Civic Work Civic Lessons* is to encourage young people to become more civically engaged, particularly in politics and public policy (in

terms of genre, the book is a type of ‘how-to’ or ‘lessons-learned’ text, intended for a general, mainstream audience. It would be most useful to assign to students as an introduction to civic work or service-learning, alongside similar texts such as Peter Levine’s *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* and Stephen Preskill and Stephen D. Brookfield’s *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*. The authors also maintain that their book contains lessons for any reader interested in civic work or interested in mentoring young people to engage civically. They note: “We believe that our democracy requires men and women of all ages and all walks of life to find their own civic paths and to pursue them with determination, compassion, respect for others, and humility about the limitations of their own perspectives” (xii). The book offers seven “lessons” for civic engagement, based on the authors’ own experiences, which they propose can help young people to find and pursue civic work that is both meaningful to them and beneficial for the public good. These seven lessons, which are also the chapter titles, include:

1. “Role models, mentors, and teachers are key in civic work”
2. “Civic work should serve the public interest”
3. “Focus on the big picture in civic work—but don’t forget the details”
4. “Motives to engage in civic work are always mixed”
5. “Moral leadership is essential to civic work”
6. “Clear goals must be set in civic work”
7. “Civic work should be its own reward” (v).

A final chapter discusses how to leverage technology for the future of civic work. These chapter titles and “lessons” reflect the conversational, upbeat, ‘how-to’ tone of the book overall.

Civic Work Civic Lessons enacts the tenets it promotes in that the book is itself a partnership. Each chapter begins with an introductory section written by Ehrlich and Fu, which summarizes both authors’ experiences regarding that lesson. Then, each chapter is separated into two sections, one written by Ehrlich and one by Fu. This structure allows the book to perform the very type of collaboration that it endorses in that each author asserts a clear, unique voice

while also establishing a unified message. This structure also offers a comprehensive view of how each lesson might apply in different types of civic engagement. As Ehrlich's experience is primarily in government, his sections emphasize how each lesson applies to politics and public policy. As Fu comes to civic work through her experience starting a non-profit and her commitment to volunteering, her sections show how each lesson operates in more social settings. Although not a scholarly work, *Civic Work Civic Lessons* can provide scholars interested in intergenerational engagement with an informal perspective regarding the differences in civic engagement across the generations.

In their respective sections, Ehrlich and Fu recount anecdotes from their personal experiences and reflect on what those experiences taught them about how and why to conduct civic work. For example, in the chapter on the importance of mentors, Ehrlich explains how his parents were his first role models for civic engagement due to their commitment to political participation and volunteering. Fu recounts how her high school music teacher served as an early mentor for her non-profit, Visual Arts and Music for Society, which supports high school students to share their musical and artistic talents with people in need.

The book's conversational tone makes for easy reading—the book reads as if you are chatting with two friends. As such, *Civic Work Civic Lessons* could provide undergraduate students in service-learning courses with a good introduction to some of the motivations, goals, and tenets of civic engagement. Although the book does not discuss service-learning directly, several of its “lessons” are applicable to service-learning contexts, such as setting clear goals and learning from mentors. The book could also provide undergraduate service-learning students with a model for generative reflection, as the authors do a good job throughout their prose of drawing lessons and making larger connections from their personal experiences with civic engagement. Thus, select chapters of the book could be assigned to provide service-learning students with strong models of reflection. Students might, for example, structure their reflections according to a ‘lessons-learned’ model, in which they describe their service-learning experiences and then critically reflect on how they

might generalize a lesson for civic work from those experiences, as exemplified by the book.

It is important to note, however, that *Civic Work Civic Lessons* does not address many of the complexities of civic engagement argued for by service-learning and community engagement scholars over the past ten years. For example, with its emphasis on service—either public service or volunteer work—the book does not engage the issue of how to establish reciprocity and equity among civic partners, taking rather a more *noblesse oblige* approach. Through its primarily positive and sometimes patronizing tone, the book does not engage any unintended effects or consequences of aiming to ‘serve’ others. As such, the book could provide an opportunity to discuss and analyze with students how they might approach ‘service’ with more attention to reciprocity and collaboration than the book offers. To be fair, *Civic Work Civic Lessons* does not aim to take a critical stance but rather to offer an inspirational and pragmatic reflection on the importance of civic engagement. Thus, despite these shortcomings, *Civic Work Civic Lessons* offers a unique perspective through its attention to generational differences in how people contribute to the public sphere and the common good. The book’s faith in democratic, civic participation offers a refreshing read, particularly in our current moment of increased political and social division and apathy.

Kathryn Yankura Swacha will be graduating this year with her PhD in English from Purdue University. Her research focuses on health and medical rhetorics, methodologies for community-based research, and service-learning pedagogies.