What If?[*]

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When we talk about higher education civic engagement, we normally talk about the students' civic engagement. We talk about instilling in them a sense of moral obligation, *noblesse oblige*, community connectedness. We talk about encouraging their political engagement, even if that is usually limited to voting. We talk about promoting their spirit of volunteerism.

What if all our efforts toward those goals, especially in the service learning form of higher education civic engagement, are on the wrong track? Indeed, we have difficulty showing much impact on those goals. Yes, the literature is replete with studies on how students learn better and have an improved social consciousness (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 2001; Novak, Markey, and Allen, 2007) through service learning. But we can find little evidence that students are more civically engaged in any substantial way, and particularly in any politically forceful way (Koliba, 2004; Byrne, 2012), and even the academic benefits are slight (Warren, 2012; Parker-Gwin and Mabry, 1998). Our theories supporting these practices are also problematic. Experiential education, the hallmark of much civic engagement pedagogy (Mooney and Edwards, 2001), misses the mark in too many cases. While our models are based in the belief that placing students in social service agencies will provide the "experience" of what it is like to be a person who struggles with poverty or disability, in reality it only provides the experience of what it is like to *provide services to* people who struggle with poverty or disability. There is

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even less evidence that those people "in the community" who are subjected to higher education civic engagement receive much tangible benefit (Stoecker and Tryon, 2009; Sandy and Holland, 2006; Blouin and Perry, 2009) so it is important to consider whether our current attempts are on the right track.

What if, instead, we consider an entirely different starting point for higher education civic engagement? Rather than using community members to provide an ill-fitting experiential education for our students to learn a perhaps inaccurately theorized form of civic engagement, we use higher education to support and enhance the civic engagement of community members?

What If I Start With The ~~Community~~ Constituency?

When I was a graduate student 30 years ago, a neighborhood activist challenged me to justify my request for his and his community's information for my research. The challenge propelled me to my first community commitment as an academic—and I maintain my commitment to that neighborhood still today. Ever since, I have thought about all my academic work—my teaching, my research, my service—with that challenge echoing in my ears. A few years after that first encounter with academic civic engagement, when I was a newly minted assistant professor, another neighborhood activist in another city guided me in a collaboration that helped bring $2 million and a new respect to neighborhood-based development organizations (Stoecker and Beckwith, 1992). That success remains a standard I still strive, unsuccessfully, to match.

So my higher education civic engagement has always been guided by community activists. And today I have a uniquely privileged position in higher education that allows me to continue following that model. While a tenured full professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2005, I also hold an "integrated faculty" position with the University of Wisconsin-

Extension. An idea traceable to the British Isles in the late 19th century (The University Extension Bulletin 1894:141), the practice of Cooperative Extension was made official in the United States through the 1914 federal government Smith-Lever Act.

As the holder of an integrated faculty position with Extension, I am expected to spend significant time "in the community," and am provided with a reduced teaching load to do that, but am left pretty much to my own devices to figure out how and what to do in service of the Extension mission.

I continue to figure out how to make the most of this privileged position and, because of the freedom I am afforded, I have chosen to define my work as the enhancement of civic engagement. Not *student* civic engagement, but *global citizen* civic engagement. In a context where the models, theories, and practices all point to how to improve student learning, and obtain university grants, and publish journal articles, an wholistic theory that can help me understand the practice I have learned from activists eludes me. But I have discovered some of the pieces, and this essay will explore what I think I have learned.

I think the first thing I have learned is to stop relying so much on the word *community*. So the strikeout in the section title is purposeful, and illustrates the most recent development in my thinking. The word community has been misused to the point where it means everything—a workplace can be a community, a city can be a community, an interest group can be a community, even the whole world can be a community. When a word is used to refer to everything, it no longer means anything.

So I shift to *constituency*, and for me the switch clears up a lot of confusion. A constituency is a bunch of people who have important life experience in common—they have a similar racial experience, or a similar class experience, or a similar gender experience, or any kind of similar social structural experience. When they all show up at the soup kitchen, the typical model of

higher education civic engagement sends students out to treat them as individual service recipients. The model and practice I have learned from activists is to treat the people at the soup kitchen as constituency members.

This has important implications for who I work with and how I work with them. Normally, in traditional higher education civic engagement, we academics work with the service provider. But when we think in terms of constituencies, our partners are the constituency members. My work is about the constituency, not the agency. When I start thinking about the constituency, I necessarily start thinking about organizing that constituency. Because constituencies are just a bunch of people with a common experience. They may not even know each other. And that means they are definitely not a community. But the goal is to build a community with them, and by community I mean a collectivity in a local setting whose members interact in many different ways that results in the mutual enhancement and sustainability of the collectivity and its constituents.

The practice I have learned to follow in working with constituencies is community organizing. Most associated with Saul Alinsky (1969; 1971) in the United States, the craft of community organizing is about working with constituencies to build their collective power—essentially to build their civic capacity in a way that also builds their political power. In its most successful manifestations, the community organizing practices developed by the Civil Rights Movement, and especially Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003) led to changes that were local, national, and even global. Today, the craft is widely practiced around the globe (COMM-ORG, 2013a), with a variety of resources and trainings to learn how to do it (COMM-ORG, 2013b).

That doesn't mean I do community organizing. If my work is to matter, the constituency needs its own community organizer who can build relationships and strategy that can help the constituency come together to create change and wield power. A good community organizer can fit my work (and my students' work) into the bigger social change effort. But principles of community organizing, brought together from a wide variety of sources such as Minieri and

Getsos (2007), Sen (2003), and Staples (2004) guide my higher education civic engagement.

1.   The people shall lead: it's not the organizer's job to decide what issues the group should work on or even how they work on them. It's to pull people together to develop the capacity to make their own decisions and lead themselves.

2.   Never do anything for anyone that they can do for themselves: the organizer's job is to promote collective self-help. The organizer doesn't call the housing inspector, but gets the constituency to call the housing inspector.

3.   The short-term goal is to gain a victory on a specific winnable issue.

4.   The long-term goal is to develop a powerful self-sustaining community that can fight back against and resist current and future oppressions, exploitations, and exclusions.

I use these principles to guide my work with a constituency. I look for, and work to build, their leadership to determine what I can best contribute. I make sure that I involve the constituency in my work in such a way that they can learn to do it themselves, especially when that involves research. I either look for a group that has an issue and a strategy that I can contribute something to or I help them choose an issue and develop a strategy. And I work with the group in such a way that supports their becoming involved with each other in an ongoing way.

The question is how do I know what can I contribute?

What if I Focus on Knowledge Power?

Among the many challenges posed by the service learning model of higher education civic engagement is its emphasis on turning volunteerism into a requirement to engage in unskilled labor. It is a contradiction of the core spirit and philosophy of volunteerism to make it a requirement. And it is a contradiction of the core spirit and philosophy of higher education to promote unskilled labor as education. Painting the offices at the local community center for course credit only makes sense if it is part of a course being taught by a painter. Such cases are quite rare, but they illustrate the underlying point. Higher education is in the knowledge

business. Our civic engagement, consequently, should express our institutional strengths. And our greatest strengths lie in our skills at knowledge development.

When I think about knowledge development as civic engagement, however, I need to do so from the standpoint of the constituency, not the university, and that requires some shifts in my thinking about knowledge. One perspective that has been helpful to me in making these shifts has come from Michel Foucault (1975; 1980) and his thinking about power/knowledge. My understanding of this idea is that power and knowledge are mutually reinforcing. When someone has power, they are in a better position to produce knowledge that will in turn enhance their power. For me, power is the ability to engage in goal-directed action. And knowledge is not simply information, but information that has been sifted and sorted and critiqued and organized in a way that facilitates power. I then use the phrase *knowledge power* to refer to the capacity to gather information and use it to develop knowledge that can effectively inform goal-directed action. My job in higher education civic engagement is to work with constituencies to help them build their collective knowledge power.

Building the collective knowledge power of constituencies that have been denied access to knowledge and to power means that I am engaged in a struggle to change the social relations of knowledge production. Adapted from Marx's (1999[1867]) concept of the social relations of production by John Gaventa (1993), the social relations of knowledge production refers to who controls the process of producing knowledge, and who engages in the labor of producing knowledge. The important point is that, in contrast to material production that is controlled from the top-down by profit-directed corporations, we academics have a relative amount of autonomy from top-down authority structures in our ability to produce knowledge. Consequently, we can act to share control of knowledge production much more easily, if we are willing, than corporations whose profit and power is at stake.

The specific way that I implement these ideas invokes C. Wright Mills' (1959) famous work *The Sociological Imagination.* Mills distinguishes between what he calls personal troubles and public issues. A personal trouble is a characteristic of an individual—the cause lies within the individual and quality of the trouble is unique to that individual. A public issue is common to many people and the cause lies in the structure of society itself. Following Mills, if one person is unemployed where there is otherwise full employment, that is probably a personal trouble. But when over 15% of the population is unemployed, as was the case in Ireland in 2012, and ranged as high as 23% in major U.S. cities in 2010, there is something systemically wrong with the society and that is a public issue, or should be. Those who control wealth and power want us all to use a "personal troubles" frame, and the challenge is for us to work with constituencies so they can see their personal troubles as common and caused by systemic conditions, and thus transform them into public issues.

But to do so we academics have to learn how to share control over the knowledge process. Two of the dominant knowledge models promoted as higher education civic engagement today are knowledge transfer (Ison, 2000; Russell and Ison, 2000), often found in my field of Extension, and translational research (Woolf, 2008), often found in medicine. These methods, however, retain control over the research process in academic hands, and simply transfer or "translate" the results of the knowledge to constituencies. Essentially, these approaches take knowledge and turn it into information that is to be followed as a recipe (Freire, 1974). Sometimes they also get turned into "evidence-based" interventions (Rubin, 2008; Grinnell and Unrau, 2011) where knowledge is developed in one place, or a number of places, and the modes and means of that knowledge is then assumed to apply in other places (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004).

I have felt compelled, consequently, to shift to a model of knowledge power called *popular education*. Popular education comes from the famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and also from Myles Horton in the United States. Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is quite well known. Horton is less well-known, but the Highlander Folk School (now called the

Highlander Research and Education Center) that he led was a crucial institution in the United States union movement and Civil Rights Movement (Adams, 1975). The two of them form the backbone of the popular education movement (Horton and Freire, 1991).

The method of popular education is problem-based and assumes that the people experiencing the problem have their own expertise about the problem. Popular education is then the process of gathering the people with a common problem together to share their experiences with it, and collectively develop strategies for tackling and resolving the problem. They may bring technical experts in, but only in limited ways to contribute information that they can use to build their own knowledge to inform their own action. You should have a glimmer here of how such a process can transform personal troubles into public issues and become part of a community organizing process. Those of you who have heard of Rosa Parks probably do not know her links to popular education. Already an activist with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—the NAACP—Rosa Parks went to Highlander as part of a workshop on how to achieve desegregation in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education that outlawed school segregation. Her experience in building knowledge and connecting with so many others—black and white—who wanted to end segregation informed her decision a short time later to refuse the order to relinquish her seat on that bus in Montgomery Alabama (Adams, 1975).

When I work with a group under the banner of higher education civic engagement, then, I try to channel C. Wright Mills, Saul Alinsky and Ella Baker, and Paulo Freire and Myles Horton. And the specific piece of the puzzle I feel like I am most capable of offering is what is known as community-based research (CBR) or any one of a few dozen other labels (Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, and Scoones, 1995; Chandler and Torbert, 2003). The particular vein of CBR I draw upon was originally called *participatory research* (Brown and Tandon, 1983), and I use that particular version because it most fits with Mills, Alinsky, Baker, Freire, and Horton. Participatory research is focused on using research to support action challenging oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. As we have used the model as CBR (Strand et al., 2003), the

important principles are that the research question comes from the "community" (which I now define as the constituency), the methods are developed and carried out in collaboration with the constituency, and the purpose of the research is to support social justice and social change.

When I and my students work with a constituency group then, we sit down to hear what it is they are trying to change, to either learn or develop what the specific social change goal is. Then we explore together what knowledge the group needs to achieve that goal, and then we work with them to get the knowledge. I have learned to use a CBR model that starts with *diagnosing* an issue to understand the issue and its causes, and then moves on to gathering information on possible strategies and interventions to come up with a *prescription*. We then might use service learning in *implementing* the prescription and more CBR to *evaluate* our progress (Stoecker, 2013). In one recent project, we collaborated with a local environmental organization through three separate courses. The first class helped the group diagnose environmental issues in their city. Between the first and second classes the group came up with a prescription that the second class implemented. The third class worked with the organization to evaluate the effects (Hidayat, Stoecker, and Gates, 2011). In our latest effort, I brought two capstone courses, one in the spring and one in the fall of 2012, to work with a neighborhood group that wanted to start a small community center in a vacant duplex in their neighborhood because there was no indoor public space anywhere near this low income neighborhood. The diagnosis—lack of community space—had been well established by the neighborhood residents but, even so, my students and I did some research to verify the impracticality of spaces that were too far away to be walkable. Then we worked with the residents to understand the zoning, building code, and accessibility issues facing the building, as well as the possible activities for the center and what area youths and adults wanted from such a center. It was a lot of research, and the residents took the results to the Madison city council—testifying at committee meetings and then the culminating council meeting where they received a unanimous vote from the council for the city to purchase and rehabilitate the building for a community center.

It was a victory that I am proud to have been part of, and not just because this neighborhood is getting its own community space. It is also because, through this process, a constituency of residents who have historically been excluded from access to power, organized their knowledge and their voice.

I have also learned, through this process, that there is much more to this than simply good CBR, popular education, and community organizing involved. It's personal.

What if I Learn How to be an Ally?

The normal language used in the service learning model of higher education civic engagement consists of words like "reciprocity," "mutual benefit," and "giving back." The words are forged in the good intentions of co-responsibility (Jacoby, 1996:7-8), but in practice they reflect assumptions of othering and separation. In this language "communities" receive "service" from the students and students receive learning from "communities." Of course, it has historically been unclear what either the service or the learning should consist of for there to be actual "mutual" benefits (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Cruz and Giles, 2000). Such language is distinct from the use of these terms within community, where the idea of reciprocity or mutual benefit is more likely to refer to common benefit—when everyone works on the community park everyone gets to enjoy the community park.

Then there is the question of how we should think about reciprocity and mutual benefit in the context of constituencies who have historically been oppressed, exploited, and excluded "partnering" with relatively well-resourced higher education institutions and their relatively privileged staff and clientele.

The way we use the terms, and the unbalanced power relations within which we use them, gives pause. If such language is necessary, and such disparity in power exists, do those of us in higher education really have common cause with such constituencies?

I have recently become acquainted with the concept of allyship. The idea seems to have developed most widely among LGBTQ constituencies. It refers to those of us who, even though we may identify as straight, nonetheless feel a gut-level commitment to creating a world where those who identify with diverse sexualities can love and care for all others with the same legal rights and obligations that we experience. I, as someone who feels straight, believe that such a world will benefit me as well. As an ally, then, I commit to the constituency and the cause as a person, not as an academic. And I work for the cause as a person, not as an academic. I'm not an ally to any specific organization, though I may choose to spend my time and effort with a single organization. And I'm not just an ally at certain hours in certain situations, but at all times in all places. I don't just practice my allyship when I'm getting paid to do it. I also don't by myself choose what activities or words my allyship consists of, but I listen carefully and ask for guidance from constituency members to learn how to be the best ally (Adam, n.d.; Gender Equity Resource Center, n.d.; LGBTQ Allyship, 2013).

I have learned that at least some of the constituency members I work with treat me as an ally, and they develop expectations of me as an ally. When the neighborhood I described above recently organized a rally in the wake of a shooting that seriously injured a young woman, and I showed up on my own as an ally, I learned my presence was expected—not to do anything, but just to be there.

Of course none of us can be a full ally to everyone with whom we might work. But, as I have come to more fully understand the idea of allyship, the only way I can feel any integrity in practicing higher education civic engagement is when I practice it as an ally. There are times when I have only a brief encounter with a constituency group by helping them design a survey, or providing them with some things to read on a topic. And I'm happy to do it. In such cases, I

am like the "expert" who is accessed for a limited purpose by a group that is engaged in its own popular education process. But if I am going to commit a class, or multiple classes, to a constituency and a cause, I need to be an ally. The students, except in rare cases, can't be full allies because they are mostly too temporary and pulled in too many directions. But I still need them to feel some sense of identification with the constituency and the cause, and I need them to voluntarily commit to do the work (there are always alternative pathways to credit in my classes). So, as both an ally and a professional, I become the person who manages the students and their relationship with the constituency group.

That means that my spread is limited. I manage one project per class, except in rare cases where a student is already an ally to a constituency and a cause and has a long-standing relationship with an existing group. But while my spread may be limited, the impacts of the work (Willis, Anders, and Stoecker, 2011; Hidayat, Stoecker, and Gates, 2013) are far more important than they ever were before I began to understand the limitations of the dominant models of higher education civic engagement and began to uncover an alternative.

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