

Beyond Service Learning: Civic Engagement in Philosophy Classes

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In the past 20 years, particularly over the last decade, research into the benefits of service learning and tips on how service learning and civic engagement might be incorporated into

their own plans, students exercise independence, develop their own interests and agency, work to solve problems, and—in reflections that are also part of the project—make connections between their project and philosophical material, learning to think critically about both.

In this paper we demonstrate the effectiveness of this project in two different institutions, with distinctively different student bodies, and without the amenities of big city access, good public transportation, or major funding (see Part 3). First, though, in Part 1, we explain the theoretical backing of the project. Part 2 shows how to implement this project and Part 4 addresses theoretical objections and practical concerns about the project.

Why Not Traditional Service Learning?

In 1997, Patrick Fitzgerald argued that ethicists should include service learning assignments in their classes and showed how this might be done. He cites numerous studies that show that traditional service learning

improves academic learning...[and] social, psychological, and moral development: open-mindedness, personal responsibility, social responsibility, positive attitude toward others, a greater sense of efficacy, higher self-esteem, lower levels of alienation, moral development, and more controversially civic responsibility (p. 251).

Civic engagement seems especially well-suited to ethics classes; rather than just showing students how to critique and construct ethical arguments, students learn how to *be* more ethical. If ethicists do not try to get students to be more ethical, who will? In philosophy classes focused on theory, civic engagement assignments can offer a valuable chance to make connections between theory and “real-life,” offering students

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The Portfolio. Students' portfolios served several purposes: they documented the project and its results, documented the time students spent on the project, recorded the students reflections about the

assignment to different philosophy classes and we'd be happy to talk about this during the Q&A, or privately, after the session or over email.

Grading. We graded several aspects of the students work: the journal, the portfolio as a whole, and the project as a whole. When we grade the journals, we look for thoughtful, insightful, and philosophical remarks as well as clear writing. When grading the project, we do not focus so much on the results of the project as much as on the process students went through and the type of work they've done.

Results: Skills, Attitudes, and Achievements

We gauged the resu

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time management, controlling shyness and nervousness, overcoming obstacles, dealing with challenges, problem solving, learning to delegate or ask for help, communication, independent thinking, and leadership. They also commented on other results: among other things, students made new connections to course materials, cared about the class more, made a difference, started a project/movement that can continue, networked, gained experience, exercised agency, learned about future job possibilities, and impacted others' futures.

Often, too, students mentioned that they felt they could use the skills they had gained later in life. One of Q's students, for example, wrote in the final class evaluation,

This class and this project has really opened my eyes to the hard work that is needed to make even a tiny [task] happen, but the experience and satisfaction you feel when you know you have made a difference make it all worthwhile...There were many things I would have changed if I could do this all over again, but I feel more prepared to keep doing something like this for the rest of my life.

As philosophy instructors know, good teaching involves choosing one's words carefully, being precise and rigorous—and that this is an important philosophical skill. Some students are motivated to do this when writing a paper; for others, having an audience larger than one's professor, such as an audience of younger students, provides more motivation. A student who also worked on educating children about environmental issues wrote, wrote, "I'm a very strong proponent of teaching an individual to think for her or his self, and I set that strong guideline for myself in thinking of activities and discussions...I closely paid attention to my word choice and manner of speaking."

Several aspects of the projects also attuned students to philosophical argumentation. Most projects involved persuading others of a point of view. This necessity meant that they needed to understand arguments and counterarguments clearly. Picking an issue that they were personally interested in helped motivate their study. One student, who worked on implementing a Meatless Mondays campaign wrote,

I became a vegetarian at fourteen without having any real reasons...Now, I would say that I am an ethical vegetarian, not because I am morally opposed to the practice of eating meat, but because of the pressing environmental, animal rights, and societal issues surrounding current methods of meat production...Overall, I have learned so much, from facts about factory farming and disease to the ties between meat and world hunger

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challenged and doing something tangible that makes a difference, as opposed to just learning for

need to see, and even bring about, concrete application of abstract theory and thus come to a better understanding of the theory itself (Giebel 102-103).

At the same time, the view that philosophy ought *not* to be abstract and otherworldly has at least as long a history as the contrary view. Socrates in the agora, Dewey and Addams in the educational and social trenches, political philosophers and feminist philosophers wrestling with the problems of their times—all of these suggest that philosophy can be both engaged and true to itself in stimul

fact, many of them are unfamiliar with the concept of activism and even dread it. Still, students' projects are highly successful.

More generally, getting unmotivated or apathetic students involved in civic engagement or other experiential work can be a challenge. We have found that having a broad range of possible projects is helpful—even i



ⁱ For work done specifically by philosophers, see Fitzgerald, Patrick “Service-Learning and the Socially Responsible Ethics Class” *Teaching philosophy* [0145-5788], 1997 vol:20 iss:3; Giebel, H M “In Defense of Service Learning” *Teaching Philosophy* 2006 vol:29 iss:2 pg:93; Kunkel, Joseph “Introductory Philosophy as a “Service Course”. *Teaching Philosophy* 1983 vol:6 pg:1; Esquith, Stephen L “War, Political Violence, and Service Learning” *Teaching Philosophy* 2000 vol:23 iss:3 pg:241; Fullinwider, Robert K. “Mandated Service and Moral Learning,” *Philosophical Dimensions of Public Policy: Policy Studies Review Annual*, Volume 13, 2002; Voke, Heather M “Public Deliberation, Communication across Difference, and Issues-Based Service Learning” *Philosophy of Education* 2001 pg:361; Leever, Martin G “Ethics & Service-