© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 14, Number 1, p. 83, (2010)

Who's Afraid of Politics? On the Need to Teach Political Engagement

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> "[K]nowledge is already political, and it is our task . . . to make that explicit, in order to take responsibility for *how* it is political."—Elizabeth Minnich on John Dewey

> "I've learned very much about how important I personally am to this democracy. Everything that needs to be done starts with one person and the organization of ordinary people. I have become increasingly aware that if I don't do something personally about a problem I care about, nothing may ever get done."—Chris Manor, student in "Reclaiming Democracy"

Introduction

There is a crisis in the political body today and we, as professors at institutions of higher education, share responsibility for it. The crisis of which we speak is widespread cynicism, inaction, and disengagement from the political realm and from political processes. While bemoaning students' political apathy, individualism, and obedience in the name of grades, we rarely ask about our role in this state of affairs. Dare we admit that students have learned all too well what we have taught them, even if we have taught it unintentionally through our own aloofness and disengagement? It is clear that most of us have given up on venturing into political territory, for many reasons. We have to recognize that in doing so we feed the machine of disengagement. We are in part to blame, but we are not the only ones. Primary and secondary schoolteachers are our partners in this apathy-mongering. Chris Wilkins, a researcher in Britain, found that future teachers had their own deflated political views: they consider politics irrelevant to their daily lives and inaccessible even if they want to participate *(1999)*.

Indeed, the long-term prospects for an engaged citizenry look bleak. Despite increased community involvement by college students—due in large part to the service-learning movement and to the small but hopeful upsurge in the elections of 2008—a disconnect remains between young citizens and the political world, leaving them outside the collective decision making that affects

their own lives. They have been taught well: we largely abdicate public decisions to presumed experts, their organizations, and government officials. Whatever good comes of those decisions is "lucky" for us. Whatever bad or misguided decisions ensue prompt a flurry of criticism, but this is often devoid of an understanding of the processes available to effect positive change. Of course, this is not the case for all people in all locales, but it represents a disturbing trend. And the trend is intensifying. With this view as a backdrop, how can future teachers make politics and democracy, in particular, meaningful to new generations of citizens?

In this article we propose an older view of politics that the now-dominant narrative driven by neoliberalism has almost entirely drowned out: the republican tradition, which understands politics as collective responsibility-taking. Politics, from this view, is about the relationship not between the ruler and the ruled but between citizens. Furthermore, if politics is collective responsibility, then we have been political failures as we have shirked our own coresponsibility for this current state of affairs. We begin by looking at some of the common reasons faculty avoid teaching for political engagement. We then turn to a critical historical analysis of how and why this has come to be the norm. We follow with the assertion that college-level professors must accept the responsibility to engage students in political matters. Finally, we highlight a few programs of study that successfully blend more traditional academic instruction with engagement in current political struggles, along with student responses to those experiences.

The (Failed) Quest for Nonpartisan and Unbiased Teaching

Professors who refrain from introducing politics into courses espouse many reasons for doing so. In fact, a top ten list of articulated and unarticulated reasons might read, in no particular order:

- The desire or need to keep personal (political) feelings separate from public (professional) expertise.
- A reluctance to invite strong reactions, conflicts, and disagreements into the classroom.
- Fear of being labeled partisan or biased by students, colleagues, and senior faculty in light of the consequences that might come from this label (such as student ratings or, more publicly, being listed in conservative writer David Horowitz's "101 Most Dangerous Academics in America").

- Lack of deep awareness about and engagement in current political concerns.
- Inability to see the connections between political issues and discipline-specific topics.
- Fear of unfairly influencing student values, feelings, and beliefs.
- Recognition that public (political) teaching and scholarship is not highly valued in many promotion and tenure decisions.
- Lack of hope that teaching for political knowledge and political engagement will garner any good results.
- Not knowing what constitutes a proper balance of engagement and neutrality.
- Having ourselves been taught in ways that reinforce the preceding reasons.

Imagine how teachers who understand politics as distinct from university education would feel if they were to take the risk and introduce political subjects into the classroom anyway, only to have their colleagues call them "radical." In fact, the fear of being deemed an extremist for challenging modes of classical instruction translates into a fierce internalized chilling effect to instead be "objective," or outside the fray of community conflict. What many do not recognize is that such manifest impartiality and dispassion toward the world has not always been the gold standard for academic excellence—in fact, as we will show, this view's hegemony over the classroom and politics at large is rather new—and has important consequences, whether intended or not.

Historical Accounts of the Roots of Nonpartisan and Unbiased Goals for Teaching: The Republican Tradition Surrenders to the Neoliberal View of Freedom

In his 2005 essay, "America's Search for a Public Philosophy," Michael Sandel—working within the alternative tradition of republican political theory—calls into question our common way of thinking about the political spectrum in terms of liberal and conservative. Instead, he shows that there is an older and, he argues, more fundamental distinction. Sandel says the focus on the liberal/conservative dichotomy has overridden a more important distinction, the one between a contemporary use of a classical liberal view

of freedom and a view of freedom that comes from the republican theoretical tradition. We argue here that this distinction is crucial for teaching, for considering what role teaching ought to have in our community, and for determining more explicitly the appropriate role of teaching democratic arts and democratic thinking.

Specifically, Sandel argues that contemporary liberals and conservatives both base their positions on a similar view of freedom, even if they apply that view differently. For both, the central assumption is that "freedom consists in our capacity to choose our ends for ourselves"; from this it follows that politics and political actors "should not try to form the character or cultivate the virtue of [other] citizens, for to do so would be to 'legislate morality'" *(2005, p. 9)*. Those we usually call liberals use this argument when religion enters into spheres they hold dear: for example, to block prayer in schools and to argue against legal restrictions on abortion and gay marriage. Those we consider conservatives similarly utilize this view of freedom when making arguments against what they see as government's infringement into the market economy and its "free" operation, and into religion, where they oppose the teaching of evolution as the only viable scientific theory.

Two important points about the neoliberal view of freedom warrant consideration here. The first involves the implausibility of bracketing private concerns from public consideration. The second examines the inevitable certainty that professors will teach values, if only to support this neoliberal view of freedom.

That we can or should leave private opinions out of the public realm is itself a controversial claim, hardly neutral, and quite new as an organizing principle. Though now so familiar as to appear "a permanent feature of the American political tradition," the neoliberal view of freedom has been, as Sandel points out, the "reigning public philosophy" for only the past half century *(2005, p. 10)*. Sandel recognizes Thomas Jefferson as an early advocate of republican theory—which holds, among other things, "that public policy should cultivate the qualities of character that self-government requires" *(p. 12)*. Sandel further points to the public debates on how to slow the unfettered growth of large corporations as examples from our recent history when the neoliberal paradigm of individual choice was challenged by the communal visions of freedom and democracy. Nevertheless, the intensification and now almost total dominance of the neoliberal view is crucial. Sandel notes that Keynesian economics, though promoting government intervention in a free-market system, maintained its focus on the accrual and distribution of national wealth rather than questioning

how a democratic government could be preserved and nurtured in the face of concentrated economic power. Keynesian economics grew through World War II into the 1960s, achieving dominance at the "decisive moment in the demise of the republican strand of American politics and the rise of contemporary liberalism" *(p. 19)*. The importance of this fundamental shift was, in Sandel's view, twofold:

> First, [Keynesian economics] offered policymakers and elected officials a way to "bracket," or set aside, controversial views of the good society, and so promised a consensus that programs for structural reform could not offer. Second, by abandoning the formative project, it denied government a stake in the moral character of its citizens and affirmed the notion of persons as free and independent selves. *(p. 19)*

There was, in fact, a nearly wholesale endorsement of separating economic decisions from political consideration. Sandel notes that President John F. Kennedy Jr. proclaimed that matters of economics were simple, requiring not full discussion of ideological claims, but only practical management to keep the economic engine running in America.

With the divorce of civic concern from key economic decisions came an accompanying shift in citizen identity.

> The image of persons as free and independent selves, unbound by moral or communal ties they have not chosen, is a liberating, even exhilarating, ideal. Freed from the dictates of custom or tradition, the liberal self is installed as sovereign, cast as the author of the only obligations that constrain. *(Sandel, 2005, p. 21)*

The rise of the autonomy of the individual and the view that the individual can and should make choices for "himself" by "himself" are fundamental here.[1]

This view of the self is the basis of the claim that we should not teach for political engagement or that we should not foist our normative views on our students. However, even if we accept the neoliberal notion of freedom—asking that citizens not infringe on the freedom of others—we, as teachers, would nonetheless be called to prepare our students by teaching and fostering respect for differences and for limits. We would need to help students with the

skills, values, and dispositions required to choose one's own ends, and, as Marcia Baxter Magolda *(2001)* shows throughout her work, this is no small feat, and requires no small set of skills. For example, to genuinely choose one's own ends requires understanding a variety of ends one might choose—without options, there can be no choice, but only acquiescence to what is given. Thus, where the government and other public persons and groups might overstep their bounds if they were to seek to impose certain morals and were we to hold a notion of freedom that is negative and see the best life in purely private terms, we as educators would still be called to prepare students for this life; even if we hold a neoliberal view, we are drawn into political matters.

The Lingering Impacts on Teaching and Society: Absent the Political, How and What Do We Teach?

If in our courses we do not discuss political issues or address societal concerns in ways that engage students with contemporary problems, we constrain our thinking (and our students') and pedagogy so that we (1) teach subject matter in disengaged, contemplative ways, (2) lean on service-learning to nominally fulfill a school's civic mission while avoiding the political, and/or (3) refrain from addressing systemic, cultural conditions that impact freedom.

In the first method, teaching in disinterested ways, teachers assume there is no need to be explicit in the discussion of a particular philosophy as it relates to our lives and our communities. Instead, teachers leave students to learn the integrative aspects on their own. Yet this higher order of thinking and analysis—thinking with a theory or philosophy and the ways it can inform our understanding of the world and of ourselves—is perhaps the most difficult learning of all *(Michael, 2005)*. On first or second or even third try, most students will fail to adequately engage *both* the theory and the world in their oral or written responses. Without adequate practice and feedback, students have a tendency and good reason to fall back on the default position, that of simply asserting an opinion devoid of grounding or supporting evidence. Furthermore, they are likely to hold the view that each person is entitled to his or her own opinion, not wanting to bother others or convince them. In other words, they learn quickly to emulate the professor model of not imposing one's views on another, but they do this in their own way. The result leaves little hope of establishing reasoned, reliable communal values necessary to promulgate a democracy.

In the second approach, professors who want to teach through community engagement often do so via service-learning courses

where students work with a community partner to further the mission of a (typically) nonprofit agency. This practice rests on two assumptions: first, that a focus on the world outside the classroom—the "real world," as students like to say—is appropriate because this is where community and engagement occur; and, second, that service-learning courses lead to active political engagement.

Both are problematic assumptions. The first is problematic because the classroom is in reality already imbued with political and power dynamics, where students all too often feel and are taught, whether intentionally or not, to be impotent and to not take responsibility for their own work, growth, and future, nor for their classmates' learning *(Manor, Bloch-Schulman, Flannery, & Felten, 2009)*. Thus arguing that getting students involved in politics requires community engagement yields a further erosion of the learning potential in the classroom itself. This view results from the belief that democracy and politics are forms of action, and that the work more traditionally done in the classroom—thinking and reading and analyzing—is somehow not active or political. In the end, students learn—often with our encouragement—that what occurs within the classroom is not real and thus is of little consequence. For them, looking to what happens outside the classroom for "real-world applications" discounts the very political and important work in their everyday encounters. Service-learning, as it is practiced, all too often neglects to ask: How can the classroom be a space where students are prepared for their full citizenship by learning to take responsibility and to think in democratic and nuanced ways? That is, we think of politics in relation to others, yet give little thought or attention to our own relationships and our ways of thinking and perceiving the world and to the political implications thereof *(Minnich, 2008)*.

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The second assumption, that service-learning teaches students how to be politically engaged, is largely false. In *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement*, Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Josh Corngold *(2007)* reviewed 21 college-level courses and cocurricular programs and found stress on community service but little or no attention to actual political engagement. Their research

confirmed what Tony Robinson *(2000)* found in a review of 600 service-learning experiences compiled by the National Library of Education in 1998: less than 1% of those 600 programs involved political advocacy where students partnered with the community to address policy, institutional, or structural change. So, while student involvement in a service-based experience is generally intended to bolster civic literacy, these experiences devoid of political discussions leave a vacuum of specifically political understandings. Students are often happy to go feed the hungry but may remain unchallenged regarding the deeper political questions about why there even are hungry people. This lack of inquiry into systemic causes is especially troubling in the United States, where the differential between rich and poor continues to increase and where our students' lifestyles, spending, and voting habits may exacerbate the very problems that service-learning brings us together to address.

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Finally, we need to ask: Who benefits from the way that we teach now? It is not just a matter of students' activities during school: also at stake are the know-how, habits, and content knowledge students acquire. As Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan note in their introduction to a special *Hypatia* volume on epistemologies of ignorance, we "cannot fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of features that account for why something is known, without also understanding the practices that account for not knowing" *(2006, p. vii)*. We, as teachers, need to be cognizant not just of what we teach students intentionally, but also of our unintentional ways of training and habituating them. We must always keep in mind what our focus hides from ourselves and our students. What are students learning and paying attention to such that they do not know what citizenship consists of, for example? And when our students do not know this type of information and what to do with it, does it genuinely advantage them?

Strategies for Teaching Politics to Sustain a Democracy

For Carmen Sirianni, who has studied and published extensively on youth civic engagement, reclaiming our democracy depends on teaching students not only traditional modes of political engage-

ment such as voting and campaigning, but importantly, other kinds of political work that bring institutions, communities, and people together *(2005)*. Colby et al. *(2007)* concur:

> Institutions of higher education have critical roles to play in helping to ensure the vitality and evolution of our culture and democratic system, and preparing students as thoughtful, responsible, creative citizens is an essential element of this. *(p. 2)*

Our future citizens depend upon the enculturation they receive in school to know how to be effective members of a democracy.

To those who claim bias in the academy when professors examine such topics as raising the minimum wage, combating the effects of global warming, or challenging the high-stakes standardized testing that the No Child Left Behind Act has encouraged, we might point out, as Robinson *(2000)* has, that we have entire business schools on our campuses devoted to training students to be corporate managers intent on maximizing profit as a moral necessity in accord with Milton Friedman's vision of capitalism. Critiques of capitalism by other faculty might arm students with the tools to engage in serious economic debates, but business school instruction generally omits these critiques, leaving fundamental questions masked from scholarly inquiry. In the pro-corporate, pro-"free market" climate that dominates nearly all aspects of our culture, the impact of courses in the humanities that seek to improve the social condition for the poor is rarely a match for the common vernacular in business classes, in the media, and in governmental decisions focused exclusively on profit margins, economic "development," and other Wall Street interests and instruments.

Some professors argue that politics in the classroom is fine as long as all sides are presented, somewhat in the spirit of ideal journalistic practices *(Colby et al. 2007)*. It is, of course, quite debatable how objective journalism really is or has ever been. Still, some professors retain the sentiment that teaching politics and political engagement works best when "taking sides" is avoided. The argument continues that there is good reason to follow this method as students can be unaware of many of the positions on an issue in the community. For instance, to talk about a rezoning battle to allow for building more industrial plants in a previously agricultural and residential area calls for a discussion among developers, homeowners, city planners, and others who can explain how their interests are served or threatened by the rezoning. Before any

discussion, students may be unaware of how the city makes decisions, how zoning is determined, and how changes to a master plan are made and why. They may be equally unaware of how industry in a residential area can drive down home prices on the one hand, and on the other hand, make possible jobs close to home for low-wage workers. Other issues, such as water quality, transportation, pollution, and sprawl, also enter into the conversation.

The approach that we advocate in teaching politics in the classroom urges the professor not to be beholden to the myth that every side is equal. We know that the agenda for a city, state, nation, or global concern is often set by those who have power and influence. Today, the narrative of economic development frequently trumps moral and community considerations. If a nuclear or coal-fired plant can provide more energy so we can have more industry, displacement of communities may be seen as a reasonable price to pay by those who have the power to make the decision. However, equally if not more important to the discussion and decision making are debates surrounding community preservation, global environmental protection, government subsidies, and political gain. For those advocating social change to existing policies, an in-depth critique of the status quo is necessary. Thus in the classroom, more time may be needed to question the economic development narrative that is often accepted as natural and inevitable today. To unpack the contributions and consequences of development practices, the professor and students need to engage in readings and research on topics that are hidden, dismissed, or deemed unreliable by those promoting the dominant narrative. In this way, students acquire important critical thinking and discourse skills suitable for a pluralistic society.

Though mainstream instruction does not generally venture into political territory, there exist plenty of rich examples of teachers who do carry a torch for engaging students in political matters. How they do it is worth discussing and questioning. For professors who can see and use conflict as a source of engagement for students, the outcomes can be promising. Doing so, however, requires avoiding polemic tendencies that rule the airwaves and too often become the model of argument in the classroom. There, as in homes and businesses everywhere, we have been offered inadequate advice to reduce friction: "Don't talk about politics, religion, or money if you want to keep your friends." In fact, politics, religion, and money are among the very topics we *need* to discuss if we are to vet our values, beliefs, and hopes for what a good life is. We also need to talk about health care, wealth and poverty, the

environment, race, war, and imperialism. These subjects need not disintegrate into shouting matches; rather, they offer great opportunity to advance evidence-based arguments that will deepen the conversation.

Using current events and the people involved in them to make instruction concrete has the potential to instill a citizen ethic among students. The reports clearly indicate that, where they work, service-learning programs work because they engage students wholly—involving the intellect, the body, and the emotions in a social arena to assert an ethical posture. These programs thus provide opportunities for civic engagement where "young people step forward and do all kinds of ambitious, creative, and very effective things" *(Sirianni, 2005, p. 3)*. If we can add to that mix an engagement with the deep, structural roots of inequality, such as the systematic discrimination against women and minorities that has had lingering, cumulative effects, we would be making a giant leap forward in assisting students to develop the capacities to engage not only with community partners, but also with other citizens, elected representatives, civic groups, and policy makers.

Teaching the Political—Student Responses to Reclaiming Democracy: Dialogue, Decision Making, and Community Action

Our course, "Reclaiming Democracy: Dialogue, Decision Making, and Community Action," explored what it would take to have a democracy that meets the needs of all its citizens. This class that we cotaught with six others brought together students from six colleges and universities with members of the community. Class members grappled with the politics of education, institutionalized racism, and truth and reconciliation.[2] They also worked to define democracy, not as an abstract principle but as a living activity and way of being with others. Their responses are presented here as testimony to why we believe there is great need to teach political engagement if we are to uphold our democratic ideals.[3]

At the beginning of the course, we asked class members to write their definitions of democracy. We paid attention to how these initial views changed. Crucially, as a result of the experiences within the class and through the community issues that class members got involved with, students came to understand that they fulfill their responsibility to sustain a democracy through their everyday actions. Many students initially held the view that their responsibility, as citizens, was exclusively or primarily to vote—they saw democracy as primarily about the relationship between the governing

and the governed—but came to see democracy as reaching into all spheres of their lives rather than in the domain of government alone.

> Wesley Nemenz: The biggest shift in perspective for me was realizing that democracy was not simply just the way a government is set up and voting on election day. It [the class] showed me that democracy is a fully participatory process that exists daily, in personal relationships, communities, etc.

Many students echoed Wesley's sentiments as they discovered that collective action can bring about the changes they believe are important to a community and how it can do so:

> Stephanie Patton: I think many people see democracy how I used to see it—as an unattainable goal—but I disagree now. In fact, we practiced true democracy in this class. We came together as a collective group and talked freely. . . . We were given a chance to really tackle the idea and definition of democracy and talk about how we felt. In addition, we were given a chance to take these ideas and apply them to REAL LIFE.

Through taking collective action, students experienced the pain and frustration of moving slowly, but also the joy and exhilaration of celebrating accomplishments.

At the beginning of class, many students had disparaging views of protest action. Brandon said, "It's a waste of time. They just don't know who the right people are to talk about to get the change they want." After readings and visits from activists, many students came to a new understanding of the role of dissent.

> Ryan Larkins: To be quite honest, I never thought of protest as being an act of democracy, but this class has opened up my eyes to see that it is in fact one of the key components of democracy.

Related to dissent, but different from it, was the eye-opening experience for many that who protests, or who has a say in a decision, is important. That is, the goal may not be equality, but fairness.

> Jenna White: I never considered [before] the difference between fair representation and equal representation. I

> am beginning to understand the importance of participation by those affected most by a decision.

Following the completion of the class, Jenna, along with classmates who attended a neighboring college, formed APPLE, a grassroots organization that among its initial projects supported parents at low-income or Title I schools to advocate for their rights with school district officials.

In the spirit of the republican tradition and the concern for unchecked corporate influence championed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, some students learned that the relationship between corporate ownership and government policy was more profound than they had known.

> Joanie Fuhrman: I don't think that I realized how much money influences democracy. . . . [As a result] the biggest problem is that society is set up for some people to fail and [others] to succeed.

This conclusion was based on material students gathered illustrating how corporate roundtables have influenced not only tax policies, but also public education goals in the United States.

Finally, we asked students to consider what democracy would require of them. Amy Wagher commented, "Open communication and dialogue will help us reclaim our democracy." For Shari Tate, working with others in the community to make democratic decisions is the first step in a long process to demonstrate that democracy is a daily practice, not just a government structure or an ideal.

Developing Student Voices

Another way to consider involving students in democracy puts them in the spotlight of community controversies. In some courses, we have had students read the local newspaper and related materials to explore current community issues. Importantly, we also assign philosophical readings that provide a launching pad for asking questions and considering alternative paths to solutions. We have relied on Martin Buber, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt, to name just a few 20th century philosophers, to shed light on the boundaries of public and private concerns, the ethics of care, and the ways we might consider others as strangers or friends. Equipped with philosophical grounding, the students shape positions to share in public forums and to participate with grassroots organizers.

In another adaptation of this approach, college students met with 9th-grade high school students at a low-performing school to encourage civic engagement. In weekly meetings, university students showed high school students how a newspaper is organized, the process by which letters to the editor are printed, how to present their position on a community issue, and how to have respectful, productive dialogues on differing views.[4] To showcase the learning that transpired in these interactions, the high school hosted public events that brought together community and business leaders, teachers, high school and college students, and parents. The high school students presented their developed viewpoints on presidential politics, interactive media, uniform dress codes, and diversity's promise and pitfalls. This experience, in which students' voices were raised for all to hear and then engage with, yielded pride, confidence, and interaction with community members as additional benefits.

Service-learning courses, as we have suggested before, may point toward political engagement *if* political questions are addressed. In a class that provided tutoring to Montagnard children and adults—people sequestered in a mountainous region of Vietnam for nearly 40 years following the war there and then eventually relocated to the United States—students spent their time in the homes of the Montagnards focusing on language acquisition skills. However, in class assignments, the students also learned the limits of refugee resettlement assistance, the processes by which refugees can secure additional community services, and how the faith community often extends the reach of government-issued benefits. The students also learned vital cultural lessons from their Asian partners, including how infants are cared for by older siblings and how a school field trip in an American public school can frighten immigrant parents unfamiliar with the custom of sleepovers.

Conclusion: Politics in the Classroom as a Catalyst for a Strong Democracy

To develop the kind of critical consciousness necessary for a democracy, Paulo Freire upholds the work of the radical, someone he defines *positively* as committed to a (political) position and someone who is "critical, loving, humble and communicative" *(1973, p. 10)*. For Freire, teachers need to be radical, not by asserting domination in the classroom or elsewhere, but by critically interrogating contemporary problems, being open to others' interpretations, rejecting passive positions, and engaging in meaningful dialogue. We would argue the same is needed and required of college students as

preparation for active citizenship. Freire argues that teachers need to take responsibility to address unequal conditions in the world through education, action, and reflection. We agree with this approach and suggest that it provides important modeling for students.

The classroom is already a political space, requiring that as instructors we apply care and attention to explore the political as it surfaces in our own structures. It thus makes sense to start with classroom dynamics and progress into discussions of how politics surfaces in the community and beyond. Tapping into the political, and engaging students with it, offers the promise to nurture the kind of radicals Paolo Freire presents: people who care deeply and take action to promote social justice. In teaching politics and political engagement, we can teach our students to be "maladjusted" to racism, sexism, classism, militarism, environmental degradation, and other inequalities where they persist *(Wood, 2003)*.

> *"[W]e need to counter the practice of merely teaching students* about *democracy by using activities and assignments that get students involved* in *democracy and that do so democratically."*

Walter Parker, in his book *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life (2003)*, asserts that democratic education is not a neutral project. He upholds the characterization the ancient Greeks made of the idiot as self-centered, aloof from public life, and thus immature in the most fundamental way. In contrast, the Greeks affirmed the citizen as someone who deliberated with others to make decisions for the common good. Understood this way, democracy is a way of being, a way of living with others. Like Freire, Parker suggests that teachers need to teach, not assume, principled reasoning and just ways of being with others in the world. Teaching the art of dialogue is among the key elements of such an education, one that will pave the way to participation in political concerns. Parker maintains, and we concur, that we need to counter the practice of merely teaching students *about* democracy by using activities and assignments that get students involved *in* democracy and that do so democratically.

We need to show students politics not only as related to elections at the voting booth, but also in the classroom, in the community, and in everyday life. To do so provides a rich avenue to explore dimensions of freedom, responsibility, and communal well-being. Elizabeth Minnich, agreeing with John Dewey, sees ongoing free

communication as central to highlighting and questioning the political in our educational experiences:

> Thinking, I will then say, is the gift we have that underlies and realizes an experience of the freedom of mind without which no other kind of freedom is literally conceivable. This is why, for Dewey, classrooms in which differing people gather to learn are also pictures of moral and political relations as they are, and in the making. *(2006, p. 161)*

Thinking and acting with one another, while respecting divergent political views, are arts that need to be nurtured to sustain democracy.

We want our students to know and feel their place in the community, rather than to only see themselves as consumers within a society led by experts. To do so, they need to understand the interdependent roles of government bodies, organized citizens, and business enterprises. The result of negotiating among competing interests and visions to accommodate a diverse society is what Harry Boyte calls healthy democratic governance that involves "collaboration and empowerment more than hierarchy and control" *(2005, p. 537)*. As professors, we can and should teach students to find their place in the web of community relationships so that they recognize and feel their accountability to participate and the responsibility and opportunities that come from so engaging in our collective enterprises.

Endnotes

[1]We use the gendered terms "himself" here intentionally. Elizabeth Minnich (2008) argues there is a link between those ways of thinking that see the masculine as neutral, and the neoliberalism model of democracy that she and we critique.

[2]The course was shaped by community members together with instructors and students. Instructors of record who planned the course included Gwendolyn Bookman and Karla McLucas, Bennett College; Stephen Bloch-Schulman, Elon University; Ed Whitfield, Fund for Democratic Communities; Dan Malotky, Greensboro College; Sherry Giles, Guilford College; Larry Morse, North Carolina A & T State University; and Spoma Jovanovic, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. We are grateful for the assistance also offered by Isabell Moore and Ellen Bateman, graduate students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

[3]We received students' approval to quote them through Institutional Review Board approval at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

[4]This project received grant assistance from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Offices of Leadership and Service Learning and Undergraduate Research for the program at James P. Dudley Senior High School, in cooperation with the Guilford Education Alliance and Greensboro's daily *News and Record.* Professors Spoma Jovanovic and Christopher N. Poulos, with undergraduate research assistant Christina Valenta, coordinated the college students' activities.

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