

Practicing Politics in Higher Education: Community Organizing Strategies for the University

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Editor's Note

Can—and more importantly, should—academic professionals practice politics with their students and community partners? In line with the prevailing view that the academy either is or should be apolitical, many of us would probably say no. In this article, Eric Fretz says yes. He tells us the story of why and how he came to reenvision and transform his academic work in ways that are enabling him to facilitate the development of both his own and his students' public lives. Drawing on his experience of incorporating and adapting concepts and strategies from community organizing, he reflects on the promise and difficulties of practicing a democratic politics of public work in our classrooms, on our campuses, and in our communities. In doing so, he challenges us to reflect on our own views of and approaches to the politics of academic work.

Agitation

Greg Galluzzo, executive director of the Gamaliel Foundation, paces across the classroom in the Techny Towers Conference Center twenty miles north of the Chicago Loop. If you ran into Galluzzo on the street, you'd take him for an ordinary guy. With his shock of white hair and bushy moustache, blue serge suit, starched white shirt, and red power tie, he comes off as a cross between a banker and a professor. In his presentation, Galluzzo is both intimidating and compassionate, and it's this contradictory set of traits that keeps me alert after a long day of traveling from my home in Denver. Galluzzo's stare, though, sets him apart from regular folks and at the same time connects him to the crew of Gamaliel organizers who will regale, challenge, and teach us for the rest of the week. I call it the "Gamaliel Stare," and the next morning, I'm so taken by this performance that I begin practicing it in my bathroom mirror. By midweek, I've practiced enough, and have also marshaled up enough chutzpah, to mirror The Stare back at my Gamaliel interlocutors.

It's Sunday evening, the first day of the week-long training, and Mr. Galluzzo is agitating the group of forty training participants. He's asked us to introduce ourselves by stating our name, organizational

affiliation, the reason we are attending Gamaliel training, and to identify a historical figure who is important to each of us. Most people do okay with the first two questions, but when they get to the reason they are at a week-long community organizing training, Galluzzo's eyes sharpen with intensity. One moment he's standing with his back to you, haranguing a sorry trainee who really has no clue why he's here, and the next moment he's turning on his heels and launching into a set of questions that *always* produces wide eyes, a backward motion in the chair, and a state of attention from the recipient of Galluzzo's questions.

I'm beginning to feel like I've stalled at the intersection between boot camp and Sunday school.

Galluzzo stands in front of a Catholic parishioner from Minneapolis who's just surrendered her name and organizational affiliation.

"Why are you here?" Galluzzo barks.

After a moment of hesitation and then a deeply drawn breath, the poor woman hesitatingly says, "Well, I want to find a way to let my passion come out."

Galluzzo waits a moment and then pounces. "You won't ever succeed by 'letting your passion come out'! You have to practice asserting yourself! A leader is someone who *gets other people to notice them!* Courageous people—not passionate people—make things happen."

You can imagine Galluzzo's response to the fifty-something Presbyterian woman from Milwaukee who says she's at Gamaliel because she wants to learn how to "empower" youth: "Empower is a disgusting term!" Galluzzo whines. "It sounds like you're giving someone an enema! You can't 'empower' people, and you can't say that you are doing something for someone else. If you are going to do anything in this world that's worthwhile, you are going to have to understand your own self-interests, what motivates *you*, what troubles and angers *you*, what *you* want to change and what *you* want to transform."

The Gamaliel Foundation was founded in Chicago in 1968, and it is still based there. Initially, the organization was designed to advocate for the rights of African American homeowners on the west side of Chicago, but in 1986, under Galluzzo's leadership, the organization reorganized itself as an Industrial Areas Foundation-styled community organizing institution committed to training low-income individuals to create change in their communities.¹ Currently, the foundation focuses most of its attention on training

leaders from its affiliate organizations to develop a set of community organizing skills that will allow their organizations to become part of broad-based organizing initiatives. The foundation hosts over twenty training institutes each year, and these activities constitute its primary manner of supporting its affiliates.

My interest in Gamaliel began when I started incorporating Public Achievement projects and ideas into my university classes. Public Achievement (PA), an initiative from the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, is widely known for its effective approach to youth organizing. PA's cofounder, Harry Boyte, was active in the civil rights movement, and he created PA from a community organizing model that is based on the Citizenship Schools and organizing groups like Gamaliel and the Industrial Areas Foundation. In PA, groups of college and K-12 students work across lines of race, class, and age in a variety of urban, suburban, and rural schools. PA students practice a variety of community organizing skills. For instance, they begin the process by discussing their community's needs and consider what they want to change. They host an issues convention, where all can express their concern for a particular issue and persuade others to join them in their efforts. The young people then create teams of six to eight participants, with each team focused on a particular issue. The teams work with a coach, usually a local college student, to research their issue and to develop an action project. Coaches work with their teams to reflect on what has been learned throughout the process. Past projects include antigraffiti and anti-gang work, community and school dialogues to address racism and immigration reform, and environmental projects addressing global warming. Throughout the process, students learn to think and act like community organizers; that is, they learn how to analyze an issue, write persuasive letters, speak in public settings, understand who makes policy decisions, and develop public relationships with those people. They use their collective imaginations to practice active listening, build consensus, define community problems, and implement actions to solve the problems.

Dennis Donovan, national director of Public Achievement at the University of Minnesota's Center for Democracy and Citizenship, attended Gamaliel trainings and consistently spoke of his experiences there as transformative. As I grew to know Dennis and his work at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, I became interested in the way he accomplished his work, the way he developed public relationships, and his clarity of vision in directing the Public Achievement program. I saw something in Dennis that I knew was

lacking in my own professional life as a higher education professional: namely, clarity and vision around holding the university accountable to its public mission and teaching the art of democracy to my students. Since this missing piece was something I recognized as critical to my effectiveness as an educator and administrator, I began thinking seriously about attending Gamaliel training.

A number of factors initially held me back from making the commitment to attend Gamaliel training. From what I gathered about Gamaliel, which takes its name from an obscure New Testament figure, it was very much a faith-based organization, and it attracted a majority of its participants from faith-based institutions. As a young boy and man who attended a fundamental-

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ist church and a denominational undergraduate institution, I had had experiences with faith-based institutions that led me to feel a great deal of suspicion and anxiety around spending an entire week with “church types.” Moreover, as a secular humanist who received a doctoral degree in English in the mid 1990s, I cultivated a worldview populated by critical theories, a deep distrust of institutional religion, and a kind of intellectual pretension that I was only vaguely aware of. My path to Gamaliel was

made up of the pursuit of advanced degrees in the humanities, the anxiety and then the joy of securing an academic job followed by a successful bid through the tenure process, a deep questioning of the relevance of higher education in a democracy, a resignation from a tenured position, and then, finally, a reconstituted career in higher education as a director of community-based learning programs. I’ve made up all kinds of noble excuses for leaving a tenured position, and I quickly came to realize that I was not alone: many of my friends were quietly opting out of academic life for exciting careers in other fields. On those rare occasions when I was honest with myself, I faced up to the two basic reasons why I left the professoriate: I was tired of talking, and I wanted to find ways to make my academic work relevant in communities.

I did not imagine Gamaliel participants to be Focus on the Family and Moral Majority extracts. Rather, I imagined a cadre of politically disenfranchised, *Sojourners*-reading, Lefty Unitarians,

Presbyterians, and peace-and-social-justice Catholics. I wasn't really excited about spending a week with any of these groups. However, my reading of Harry Boyte's notion of "everyday politics" challenged me to think in a broader, more pluralistic way about the kind of public relationships I should develop. There's a passage in Boyte's recent book, *Everyday Politics* (2005), that particularly resonated with me and helped me rethink some of my reservations around Gamaliel's faith-based focus:

To renew public life in America will require a new politics in which citizens, acting at every level, from local community-building to national policy-making, reclaim ownership of politics. In practice such repossession of politics involves citizens in diverse environments learning the skills of political work with people unlike themselves on the public tasks of communities, the society and the world. (p. 13)

Boyte argues that the renewal of democracy depends upon people building powerful, broad-based citizen organizations that provide opportunities for diverse groups to participate in the everyday life of their communities. In his redefinition of democracy in the United States, Boyte shifts the focus from electoral politics to the development of the kind of associative democracy that John Dewey talked about early in the twentieth century. I began to realize that if I wasn't part of the solution, I was part of the problem, and if I was afraid of spending a week with "church types," I would certainly never make much of a contribution to the renewal of American democracy. This line of thinking was certainly not how I was trained to think or view the world as an academic. However, I was always just a little uncomfortable with the intellectual homogeneity of my academic peers, and I was constantly searching for ways to connect my academic interests with people and organizations outside the university, so Gamaliel seemed worth the try.

I was not alone in my desire to develop better organizing skills. One hundred twenty participants showed up for the Gamaliel week-long training in Chicago. Upon arrival, we were divided into three groups—two English speaking and one Spanish speaking. Participants represented mostly midwestern states: a large Minneapolis contingency and a good number of people from Milwaukee and Chicago. Each day of the training consisted of three sessions led by a different Gamaliel trainer. Over the course of the week, seven different trainers worked with our group. The diversity of the

trainers was impressive: two Mexican Americans, three white men, and two white women.² As the week wore on, the sessions began to take on a familiar rhythm. Most sessions were two to three hours long, and each session began with the trainer pacing the room and making eye contact with five or so participants before engaging someone. Session topics included power, self-interest, one-to-one relational meetings, the qualities of a leader, running effective meetings, agitation, conducting strategic campaigns, and performing community actions. The questioning process was direct and agitational—this was not church basement coffee conversation. This was serious, pointed questioning that demanded equally serious, pointed answers. Trainers looked for halting responses, blank stares, and an inability to clarify. They would gradually increase the tension in the room for fifteen to thirty minutes, then back off, reflect on what just happened, and begin a critical discussion on the session topic.

Power

During the first few days, Gamaliel trainers begin each session by asking people if they want power. In a typical exchange, Galluzzo or one of his training partners approaches a participant: “Do you want power?” A negative answer results in a barrage of questions around the individual’s motivation for attending the training: Why are you here? What do you want to accomplish? A positive response results in a whole series of different questions: What do you want power for? How will you get it? Are you willing to make people mad? How will you stand up for yourself?

When used in English, *power* generally connotes an individual or a group exerting a will over another, less fortunate person or group. In this way, Max Weber’s definition of *power* resonates with many people: “By power is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one’s own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests” (Weber 1964). Most people in this country see power as a by-product of wealth, privilege, gender, or race. In other words, power is seen as something that comes from innate characteristics, or things that you are born with.

The confusion around the concept of power comes from our received notion of power as an oppressive force associated with compulsion and authoritarianism. Despite its negative associations, power is actually a neutral term; it is neither good nor bad until it is applied to specific human acts. Philosophers and theologians spend

a good deal of time trying to understand power as a concept and explaining it as an element of human experience and behavior. For instance, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about a “will to power” that he explained as an innate, creative force of human nature. Picking up on Nietzsche’s ideas, the German theologian Paul Tillich argued that power is an effort to overcome non-being, or death, and in this way, power becomes associated with a life-affirming force. For Tillich, “[p]ower actualizes itself through force and compulsion. But power is neither the one nor the other. It is being actualizing itself over against the threat of non-being” (1954, 47). Another German philosopher, Hannah Arendt, discussed the concept of power in her famous work of political philosophy, *The Human Condition*. For Arendt, power is a *possibility*, and it only “. . . springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (1958, 179). In other words, power cannot happen when people are isolated—it is the direct result of human connection and human relationships. Michel Foucault, a postmodern French philosopher and historian, has done a great deal to shape the postmodern definition of power, and while it is impossible to distill Foucault’s voluminous writings on power into a few sentences, it is worth noting that for Foucault, power is a process and a force that allows humans to understand, define, and, in many ways, control the phenomenal world. It works through human beings and institutions, and it determines how we see and evaluate the world around us, but it is very difficult to identify. Although he made many statements indicating that power is not an oppressive force, it is difficult to read Foucault and come away with a sense of power as something ordinary people can access to change their lives and worlds.

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Most Gamaliel participants have serious problems with power because they see it as something held by the enemy. This is generally true in the culture of higher education as well. As a result, Gamaliel trainers immediately deconstruct this idea of power and redefine power as “an ability to act.” Part of the problem is simply linguistic. According to Ed Chambers, executive director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, English speakers consistently misunderstand power because they typically use it as a noun or an adjective. Spanish speakers, however, have the verb *poder*, which

means “to be able” and “to have the capacity to make an influence” (2003, 28). For Spanish speakers power is related to action. What we are left with, then, is a tension between power as the ability to act and power as a force that acts *upon* us. The Gamaliel Foundation’s power equation looks like this:

Organized People + Organized Money = The Ability to Act

Gamaliel training is about helping would-be community organizers understand power as relational, and thus those folks (regardless of their race, wealth, or privilege) who can create trusting, public³ relationships with the right people are the ones who have the abilities to act and to change their worlds.

The Gamaliel redefinition of power caused me to reflect deeply on my previous notions of power, especially as they played out in my role as an expert/professor working with students/citizens in a technocratic higher education environment. The Gamaliel definition of power was also closely aligned with Harry Boyte’s ideas of public work or the production of public, tangible products that are accomplished with diverse groups of people and designed to improve and deepen community life.⁴ I had been trained to be the “expert on top” when it came to the teaching and learning of English studies, and while I was pretty good about respecting my students’ intellectual positions and generating class discussions, I rarely, if ever, thought about my students or their potential academic work within the contexts and possibilities of relational power. In essence, this new way of thinking about power, coupled with Boyte’s ideas of public work, began to open new teaching and learning techniques for me. I began to think of my students as coproducers in our academic pursuits, and I also began to see them as individuals with a host of capacities and assets that were, perhaps, obfuscated by my sense of myself as the expert and students as the passive receptors of knowledge.

Self-Interest

In the language of community organizing, self-interest is about “the self among others.” Bright lines are drawn between self-interest, selfishness, and selflessness. As a concept, it sits between selflessness (the denial of the self) and selfishness (greedy, stingy conceit). It’s a concept that is connected to self-preservation, and for the Gamaliel trainers, developing understanding of one’s self-interest becomes the starting point of a public life. In order to

organize people, it is necessary to get clear on your own self-interests and the self-interests of others.

As Mark Warren notes in *Dry Bones Rattling*, the concept of self-interest in community organizing has gone through a number of permutations. Saul Alinsky built the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) on the principle that community members would rally around practical self-interests—new schools, roads, water and sewer systems, and the ousting of corrupt politicians. Alinsky believed that the promise of tangible, public changes in communities that directly benefited locals was enough to spark participation in community actions. Shortly after Alinsky's death in 1972, IAF directors Ed Chambers and Ernie Cortes began to connect the IAF language of practical self-interests to a language of religious values. In this way, the IAF began appealing to potential participants on a deeper, more spiritual level of self-interest. In his history of the IAF, Mark Warren (2001) explains the IAF's shift in focus:

A self-interested motivation may have been sufficient for the kind of short-term campaigns that Alinsky's projects pursued. But the IAF wanted to build institutions that would last for the long term, not rise and fall around one issue. To sustain people's participation, something more than self-interest would be necessary. The new IAF approach did not reject self-interest as one critical basis for political action. But the IAF began to see the possibilities for religion to provide a set of value commitments to combine with practical self-interest. (p. 58)

Cortes and Chambers found a formula that allowed the IAF to remain effective into the twenty-first century: they connected Alinsky's secular, hard-boiled principles of self-interest to a faith-based value system that helped people of faith see the political mission of the Gospels and then live out those values in their everyday public lives. Warren (2001) writes about Cortes's late-night discussions about faith and politics with priests in Los Angeles, and he shows how Cortes reread and reinterpreted the Old and New Testaments: "He found many religious traditions that spoke powerfully about the obligations of people of faith to intervene in public life" (p. 59). In this vein, Gamaliel trainers fondly remind participants of Jesus' words: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," noting that this idea illustrates a New Testament focus

on self-interest over selflessness. In addition, self-interest as a core concept of community organizing allows the Gamaliel trainers to set themselves apart from “do-gooders,” communitarians, and volunteers: they doggedly ask participants to articulate their self-interests. God help you if you respond that you do community work to “serve” or “help.”

The Tuesday afternoon session on self-interest is led by a lanky Phil Jackson look-alike named David Hatch. Hatch swaggers like a cowboy and his hooked nose, salt-and-pepper hair, south side Chicago accent, and out-of-fashion goatee make him a formidable presence in the room. He talks quickly, and his emotional register vacillates from insouciance to red-hot anger. I try to size him up during the first ten minutes, but I can’t decide if I like him or if I think he’s an idiot. I quickly realize, though, that this is exactly what the trainers want you to be thinking about. They don’t really want us to trust them or to like them, but they also don’t want to turn us off so that we stop listening to them or challenge everything they say. It’s another way of creating tension in the room and, for me, it works: I’m feeling that now-familiar sense of fear, anxiety, alertness, and anticipation.

Hatch is a community organizer with Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations, a Gamaliel-affiliated group in Chicago that mobilizes Chicago churches around social justice issues. Hatch approaches a kindly, elderly priest from Scranton, Pennsylvania. Scranton is a rust-belt city in the Pocono Mountains that’s been suffering from a loss of manufacturing jobs as well as an influx of New Yorkers who are snapping up cheap real estate, driving up prices for locals, and rending the social fabric of this already down-and-out region by turning it into a bedroom community of long-distance commuters. Social and economic tensions run high, and the priest is at Gamaliel training to develop a set of public skills that will allow him to do tangible public work in the community. The following exchange is representative of the kind of challenging, agitational line of questioning favored by Gamaliel trainers:

“What’s your self-interest, Father?”

“To develop more confidence.”

“How are you going to develop more confidence?”

“I’m going to trust in myself and get over my timidity.”

“What’s at risk for you, should you get over your timidity?”

“A fear of talking to people I’ve never talked to before.”

“About what?”

"The need for them to get involved in our issues."

"What are your issues, Father? Name them."

"Drugs and violence in our community. It's gotten so bad that parishioners are afraid to leave their houses and be involved in the life of the church."

"Father, have you taken any risks this morning?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I'm not used to working in the public environment."

"Father, if you can't take risks here, how will you ever be able to take a risk and speak your mind in Scranton? Father, are you prepared to be unpopular?"

Hatch's line of questioning sets up a tense environment. I've never heard a lay person talk to a priest like that, and it's shocking. "What's so bad about wanting more confidence and getting involved in public issues?" I wondered. If one of my students talked like this, I'd simply praise her, feel good about what I was doing, and then move on to the next point in my lecture. But what to do with Hatch? There's a part of me that wants him to take me on, and then there's another part of me that worries and fears that he'll uncover something in me that will be embarrassing, that will uncover my weaknesses, contradictions, and vulnerabilities. With two graduate degrees on my office wall and fifteen years of university teaching behind me, I've experienced (and doled out) a fair amount of intellectual hazing, so I'm not worried about this Hatch character uncovering What I Don't Know, mostly because What I Do Know doesn't really matter here. What I am worried about, though, is coming across as someone without a vision and a sense of purpose. I also realize that this fear is probably keeping me from becoming the kind of leader I want to be. At this point in the training, I'm also beginning to think about something I've never really thought about before: I never learned any of this stuff through my years pursuing a bachelor's, master's, and then a doctoral degree. This just was not a part of the conversation, nor was it a part of the teaching and learning environment, and I am beginning to wonder if I had not perhaps missed something.

Since connecting with self-interests is the foundation for effective community organizing, the Gamaliel trainers lead their groups through an exercise that helps individuals get to their own self-interests. In the center of a large piece of butcher paper, participants draw a representation of themselves. To the left they write

“Who/What Made Me” and then list a set of specific stories and experiences that illustrate how they became the person they are today. To the right of the drawing, participants write “Who Am I” and then list a set of abstract principles and beliefs that guide their daily and spiritual lives. Underneath the representation participants then list their most powerful and their most powerless relationships. This exercise becomes a critical piece to the entire week. The rationale for beginning a public life with an assessment of self-interests is clear: without an understanding of who you are, what makes you angry, what you believe in, and what you are willing to become unpopular for, it’s impossible to create relationships with others and to make it through the messy, trying, and oftentimes humiliating thickets of public life. Without that deep understanding of what motivates us, it becomes that much easier to walk away, or to get burned out from the challenges of institutional reform and working toward the associated life of a democracy.

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After we complete our individual self-assessments, we are called forward to explain our stories to the rest of the group. A young white woman from Cleveland approaches the front of the room, identifies herself as a public school teacher, and begins to tell stories about a series

of part-time teaching jobs she’s held and then lost. Her presentation, unsurprisingly, begins to sound like a job interview—she’s trying to convince us to “hire” her by believing in her capacities and passion for education. She comes across as bright and ambitious as well as frustrated about her inability to hold a job in her chosen profession. Hatch lets this go on for a minute or two, and then he does something remarkable: he stops her and begins to ask a series of questions that agitate this young woman to tears and, at the same time, come across as loving, compassionate queries designed to help her identify what’s really motivating and troubling her. Rather quickly, she reveals that for the past six months she’s been victimized by a stalker who leaves letters at her doorstep and who she knows lives in her neighborhood. Tearfully, she tells Hatch that she’s being forced to leave her apartment and the neighborhood

she loves because she feels unsafe and terrified when she leaves her home and returns each evening.

At this point, the room is silent and full of tension, and I'm experiencing a host of emotions that range from feeling emotionally manipulated to deep compassion for this young woman. Hatch continues to question her, and then he wheels around, raises his hand, and asks the group: "Does anyone here feel a connection to this story?" Nearly every hand in the room shoots up and Hatch asks, "Why?" One guy is enraged that this could happen in a civil society; another man says he has a daughter about the same age and would hate to see this happen to her; a woman says she's friends with the young woman and has seen the trauma this has caused in her life.

Hatch doesn't even have to say it because the point is so clear: stories connect us, and they move us to action. If you don't know what makes your neighbor or your colleague tick, then you can't create powerful relationships that change communities and institutions. Hatch illustrated an incredibly powerful way of learning: telling stories and then connecting them to the interests and values of other people in the room. I wasn't used to this sort of thing, and the high level of emotional intensity made me a little uncomfortable. At the same time, though, I was struck by the simplicity and the power of this way of teaching. I began to wonder if there was anything I was learning here that would translate into my university life back home.

One-to-One Relational Meetings

The next day, a fifty-something Mexican American named Mary Gonzalez reflects with us on yesterday's self-interest sessions. She challenges us to think about how we can begin creating powerful public relationships with other people. The answer is through the implementation of one-to-one relational meetings. One-to-ones are a staple organizing technique used by the IAF and the Gamaliel Foundation to connect people within communities and to create a shared vision from hosts of individual anecdotes, experiences, passions, and tribulations. In *Roots for Radicals*, Ed Chambers describes one-to-ones as "one organized spirit going after another person's spirit for connection, confrontation, and an exchange of talent and energy" (2003, 44). And in *Cold Anger*, Mary Beth Rogers notes that Ernie Cortes established the framework for the mighty COPS organization by spending an entire year conducting one-to-ones with community members in San Antonio, Texas. One-to-one

relational meetings seem fairly straightforward—just sit down with someone and have a conversation about their self-interests, ideas, motivations, and visions for their institutions and communities. However, they demand a set of interpersonal and listening skills that don't necessarily come naturally to me and take a good bit of practice and, as Mary says, courage.

Mary tells us that the function of a one-to-one is to open a public relationship with another person and to get to the root of that other person's self-interest and their belief system. What are they angry about? Where are they seeking social justice? Mary cocks her head, drops her voice an octave, and intones, "But you need courage to ask the difficult questions—it's not easy to ask the kind of questions that get you to the grounding of who this other person is and what makes them tick." I know this is true. I had read about one-to-ones before my Gamaliel experience, and I'd even tried to do a couple with students and colleagues, but until I had a chance to witness Mary's model one-to-ones and then practice fifteen one-to-ones over the course of the Gamaliel week, I really had no idea what I was doing.

Mary drags two chairs into the center of the room and asks a Jesuit priest from the Midwest if he would do a one-to-one with her. Mary begins with pedestrian questions: Where are you from? Where did you go to school? Where do you live now? What separates this from the everyday conversations we have with colleagues, neighbors, and friends, though, is that Mary asks a series of strategic follow-up questions to the information she is receiving from the priest. The psychology behind the one-to-ones is this: in conversation, people are constantly tossing up little nuggets of information that are gateways to deeper, more meaningful discussions into the foundation of who they are, what makes up their worldviews and their vision of what the world is and could be. Perceptive, attentive listeners like Mary are constantly listening for the nuggets, and when she hears them, she simply asks more questions. Five minutes into their one-to-one, Mary has this man reflecting on his life as a gay priest. He's shared stories about struggles he's faced with church leaders around issues of his own sexuality, and he's reflected on the tension he feels around his loyalty to the church and maintaining the integrity of his inner life. It's clear, too, that Mary is not into this conversation in order to dig into the priest's personal life for salacious or dramatic stories. One-to-ones are not analogous to confessionals. Her pinpoint-focused questions are geared toward uncovering his self-interest. What makes him angry? What animates his public

life? How can she connect her own public interests with his? How can the two of them be involved in a public relationship motivated by a shared interest? After Mary completes her one-to-one with the priest, she reflects with us that what distinguishes one-to-one relational meetings from everyday conversation is the fact that when you are conducting a one-to-one, your first concern is about being in relationship with the person you are talking to and giving that person one hundred percent of your attention. The one-to-one involves a kind of attention to the Other that demands razor focus.⁵

Mary's words about courage are still ringing in my ears the next day when Hatch waltzes into a session and begins telling a story that forces me to realize something I don't want to admit: I'm not very brave, and in order to become the leader I need to be, I'm going to have to get comfortable making people uncomfortable. Hatch's story is called "The Parable of the Dead Bodies," and it goes like this: there's a peaceful village in the mountains, and one day a few men go down to the river to fish only to find a dead body washed ashore. They respectfully wrap up the body, give it a proper burial, and pay for everything from their own pockets. The next day, they go to the river and find two dead bodies, so they do the same thing: respectfully wrap them up and provide a proper burial from their own means. The next day it's three bodies, the day after that it's four, then five, six, seven bodies wash ashore, until finally someone says it's not enough to be respectful and provide proper burials. Someone's got to go up into those dangerous mountains and find out who's killing these people. In other words, where are the bodies coming from, and what are we going to do about them? The point here is that it's easy to take care of the victims of society, to be servant leaders and caretakers of the poor. Galluzzo compares this servant leader model to "cleaning up the boiler room of the Titanic." It's a hell of a lot harder to ask the harder questions and hold accountable the people, institutions, and corporations who are causing the trouble. So the questions we really need to be asking are: Who's putting the homeless on the streets? Who's kicking the kids out of school? Who's starting the wars we don't want to fight? Who's streaming images into our homes that we find offensive? These, of course, are the scarier, more difficult questions to ask, and they will inevitably cause trouble. For hosts of reasons that have been explained by thinkers like Derek Bok, Benjamin Barber, and Thomas Bender, these are questions that higher education, for the most part, has either obscured or ignored.

Post-Gamaliel Reflections: Teaching Like an Organizer

I want to see how some of the community organizing strategies I learned at Gamaliel will play out in the university classroom, so on the flight from Chicago to Denver I significantly revise the syllabus of a second-year seminar course on community learning I will teach in the fall. In the syllabus revision, I develop classroom exercises to create and then work with tension, one-to-one training, and theoretical discussions followed by practical applications of self-interest and the use of power in community settings. I realize that the power dynamics of a week-long community organizing training is fundamentally different from what is at stake in a college classroom, and I try to base my revisions on this fact. Unlike Gamaliel participants, for instance, my students will get a grade (from me) at the end of the semester. Additionally, the students I work with are young adults whose learning styles and needs differ greatly from those of the (mostly) early to late middle-aged Gamaliel participants. Moreover, I realize that the confrontational, experience- and narrative-based culture of learning at Gamaliel is quite different from the way university students expect to learn and “to be” in the classroom.

One of the most important lessons I’ve learned from the Gamaliel training is that tension is a powerful educational tool. Gamaliel trainers act like thermostats rather than thermometers—they set, rather than register, the temperature in the room. In my effort to experiment with some Gamaliel pedagogical techniques, during the first class of the semester, as students introduce themselves, I ask them to name one thing that makes them angry. As they identify a range of social problems, including global warming, a cultural lack of respect for youth, the war in Iraq, and others, I write their issues on the whiteboard under a column titled, “The World As It Is.” I also stop along the way and ask each student what, specifically, they are doing to resolve these issues that they have identified. This, in itself, slightly raises the tension in the room, because very few students are doing anything about the problems they so passionately identified. With some of the students, I take it a step further and ask them what they could do—how they’ve imagined working with that issue—and again, tensions rise because very few are able to articulate concrete ideas beyond engaging in protest politics or simply giving up. When they finish listing the public, social issues that anger them, I add a column titled “The World As It Should Be,” and I ask them to think about how they can move from the first to the second column, and I challenge them to

commit themselves this semester to getting out of the “World As It Is” mentality and move into reshaping their lives and communities so they will be working for “The World As It Should Be.”⁶

Afterward, the students accomplish a self-interest assessment, and when they are finished, I ask them to get up and tell the group about their self-interests and the stories that brought them to this place. As the students talk, I notice them slipping into that defensive mode that favors abstractions and brushes over potentially difficult topics—the Gamaliel trainers would have said they were “in their head.” They perform their pieces like most of us who have a fledgling public life: they talk to the walls, back up against the blackboard, and drop their voices when spoken to. Prior to attending Gamaliel training, I would have just let this kind of behavior slip by and (patronizingly) explained it away as youthful inexperience or, worse, the immaturity of college students. This time, though, I take a cue from Gamaliel and gently ask them to tell me a bit more about the mother who worked three jobs to keep her sons in school, what it was like to grow up in a single-parent household, and how it feels to be pregnant and in college. After I ask these questions and receive responses, I stop and reflect with the group about what we were doing, how key questions around verbal cues could draw people out and provide a safe, if challenging, space to tell their stories and connect with the rest of the group. I encourage them to jump in on the questioning, and I model for them how they could build trust and a collective set of stories with their classmates. Gradually, the other students begin raising their hands to ask the presenters questions about the stories they were telling: How did it feel to work that much while you were in high school? Why do you think kids in public schools are treated like idiots? What was it like when you were living in Kazakhstan?

As we share ideas and try to put some form to the variety of concepts, a male student raises his hand and says, “From everything we’ve said today, I’d say that a good citizen is someone who is angry and obnoxious *in relationship with others*.” I smile and think Greg Galluzzo would like that response. Despite this student’s comments, things in the classroom don’t go as well as I would have liked. The students are wary of my line of questioning, which is quite different from what they are used to or expect from a college classroom. When I put them on the spot, even when it is done in (what I intend to be) a kind of soft, compassionate manner, they flinch and waver. At the same time, I notice that there is more energy, spirited discussion, and emotion than is normally exhibited in my classes. It feels like there is something at stake here—the academic work and

questions are grounded in the lives of the students, and that seems to add a depth charge that animates the conversation as much as it makes all of us a little uncomfortable.

As a Public Achievement practitioner, one of my greatest pedagogical challenges is teaching Public Achievement's Core Concepts, a set of abstract ideas that form the theoretical foundation of Public Achievement. In the past, I've fallen back on received pedagogical strategies to teach these concepts to my students: I lectured. This year, though, inspired by some of the teaching strategies of the Gamaliel trainers, I introduce the Core Concepts by writing the following statements/questions on the whiteboard:

"You are powerless."

"Would you rather be selfless than selfish or self-interested?"

"Are your public and private lives distinct from each other?"

I tell the students that I will repeat one of these phrases to them and that I want them to respond from their own experiences and beliefs. I look around the room, pick out a young man, and say, "John, you are powerless." This comes across as a direct accusation—I'm *telling* John that he's powerless, and that's very different from giving him an opportunity to respond to this statement as if it were a question. John pauses for a moment and then begins a halting textbook definition of power that entirely skirts his own relationship to power and abstracts the response. I let him speak for a few moments and then turn to a young woman: "Emily, you are powerless." She responds by conceding, "Yes, I am powerless, and it makes me very uncomfortable to admit and think about this." I allow her to wind that out for a few moments and then turn to another young man: "Bill, you are powerless." Bill's response: "No, I'm not. I don't feel powerless and I don't really like you telling me that I am." Bill goes on to detail ways he feels power in his life: he's a middle-class kid from New England who has above-average writing and communication skills; he feels that he has a direction in his life and understands his privilege as a white man pursuing a higher education degree.

At that point, I halted the proceedings, came out of the role of the interrogator, and asked the class, "What just happened here?" What followed was a spirited discussion around the variety of responses to the question. John abstracted the answers because that's what he thought I was looking for. He was so used to "doing regular school" that he couldn't imagine telling me what he really thought. Students picked up that Emily was operating from a conception of power as an oppressive force that intimidates and victimizes the

weak, and Bill turned the whole thing on its head by injecting a personal definition of power that implicitly challenged the responses of the first two students. My role, up to this point, was to simply ask questions, to draw out responses from students, and to give them opportunities to experiment with the concepts and place them in the contexts of their own lives. When they finished, I summarized what they were saying and then stepped in to offer my own definition/explanation of the Core Concepts.

Following our discussions of power and self-interest assessments, we held an issues convention where students formally presented a public issue that mattered to them. They presented on a variety of issues, including Native American rights, developing a health care center at our university, working to increase mental health funding, and developing more service-learning and diversity courses. After the presentations were complete, the class worked by consensus to identify a single issue that they all wished to work on for the rest of the semester. After nearly an hour of deliberation, the group decided it was most interested in the health care center issue. During the next few weeks we broke into two groups: an action group responsible for creating on-campus actions that drew attention to the woeful inadequacy of our university's health care provisions and a research group in charge of collecting data and writing a proposal for a health care center.

I did two things in particular to help the students develop skills that would allow them to accomplish the requisite research and create skillful community actions. First, I taught them how to conduct one-on-one interviews, and then we simulated a community action. Conducting one-on-ones would become the primary method of collecting data for the research group, and they were the action group's strategy for creating a campuswide power base.

Learning the theory and practice of one-on-one relational meetings provided opportunities for students to experiment with a public life and develop relationships with professional adults with whom they would not ordinarily converse. Like me, students find one-on-ones unexpectedly difficult to conduct. They seem fairly straightforward: sit down with someone and have a conversation. The problem, though, is that in order to be effective, the one-on-one has to be a public conversation, and most of us in this culture are more comfortable discussing the everyday realities of private life (family, weather, jobs, and recreation) than we are in raising the hard questions about what makes us angry, what we want to change, and how we intend to shape our worlds. In order to be effective, one-on-ones need to be focused around a salient public

issue—they are not private conversations, and therefore it takes a certain amount of discipline to conduct a one-on-one properly. This is especially the case for many college students, who are much more comfortable engaging in the discourse of private relationships than they are in developing public relationships with people who are different from themselves.

Simulating the community action created some tense yet exciting moments in the classroom. The week prior to the simulated action, I provided the students with the following scenario: the U.S. Marines had entered into a contract with our university. In return for \$1.6 million, the university had agreed to allow the Marines to take fifteen minutes from each scheduled class to recruit potential Marines. The following week, I told them, guests attending the class

“As we reflected on these issues and talked about what they would do differently next time, the students began to understand what it means to have a public life because they were practicing it.”

would role-play the president of the university, the dean of students, and two Marine recruiters. The students’ job over the course of the week, then, was to prepare a meeting with these individuals that included a concise agenda and a specific “ask” for the chief academic officers. The simulation was a disaster. Their agenda was too vague, they did not have a specific ask, they failed to choose one leader who acted as the voice of the group, and as their frustration began to build, a number of class members decided to go on their

own and engage in personal attacks on the president and the dean of students. In other words, they did all the things that you were *not* supposed to do during a community action. Afterward, we all took a breath, laughed a little, and then debriefed the action. What was the result of their weak agenda? What happens when there is not one person leading the proceeding, maintaining calm, and speaking as the unified voice of the group? What happens when maverick individuals leave the script of the action and engage in personal attacks? As we reflected on these issues and talked about what they would do differently next time, the students began to understand what it means to have a public life because they were practicing it.

As a result of this community organizing training, students accomplished tangible public work over the course of the semester. Throughout the semester, the action group worked with Student

Affairs personnel to form an interest group around campus health care issues, and they designed a community health care fair that brought in nurses, doctors, and other health care practitioners who discussed health care alternatives for students. Over the course of the semester, the research group conducted over twenty one-on-ones with faculty, students, staff, and chief academic officers. They developed power maps that identified key community stakeholders for the health care issue and then set up interviews with each individual on the power map. At the same time, they researched the health care offerings of our peer institutions and created and implemented a health care survey that they administered to over 150 students. After they collected all this data, they wrote a five-page proposal for the development of a health care center at the university, and on the last day of class, they arranged a forty-five-minute meeting with the president of the university, where they presented their proposal and asked him to get this issue on the board of trustees meeting scheduled for early spring.

Because we learned and practiced community organizing skills throughout the semester, students wrote a good deal in their critical reflection papers about a new understanding of politics. A second-year student noted how the community organizing strategies we practiced during the semester helped him develop an alternative to the red state/blue state polarization that currently grips this nation. He went on to redefine politics as diverse groups of people with similar self-interests identifying and resolving community problems that matter to them. In one of her critical reflection papers, another student related an incident that took place in my office near the end of the semester: A group of students working on the health care project were in my office developing a PowerPoint presentation in preparation for a meeting with the president of the university. I was meeting with a colleague while they worked in whispers on the other side of the room. In her paper, the student writes:

You (Eric) told a woman you were meeting with, “these guys have been practicing politics all semester!” I will always remember that line. When I think of politics, I (unfortunately) think of Republicans and the current Bush administration. But [Ed] Chambers uses Aristotle’s definition of what Chambers calls “politicalness”: “the capacity to gather with others as fellow citizens to converse, plan, act and reflect for the well-being of the people as a whole.”

This student goes on to detail how the research group practiced politics during the semester: they gathered and deliberated about an important public issue, planned and conducted a campuswide survey, held one-on-one meetings with a diverse group of campus stakeholders, and wrote a proposal for a new health care center.

At the end of her final critical reflection paper, one student ruminated on the relationship between the work she accomplished during the semester and her budding public life: “I don’t know if I’m cut out to be a public organizer, but this class has helped me to gain a real-time understanding of what Democracy is.” Ultimately, it is that set of questions—What is democracy? How can I participate in and work to enhance the democratic life of my community?—that I want all of my students to be answering through their experiences in my classroom. The language and the practice of community organizing—learning how to live with tension and agitation, conducting one-on-one interviews, understanding power and self-interest—have proved effective tools in helping me reenvision my work in the academy and in helping my students develop a foundation for a vibrant public life.

Not all of the student reporting was positive. A number of the students in the class complained about the lack of structure, the workload, and how I sometimes came across as a tyrant or a bully. I’d be lying if I said that these comments didn’t affect me and cause me to wonder if I had made a mistake in experimenting with this new mode of teaching. I think, though, that there is always a grain of truth in what students say about their university classes, so I am willing to admit that, for these students, the class probably was too unstructured and challenging, and that, alas, I did indeed bully them at times.

Conclusion

Subsequent to these experiences, I have continued to experiment with organizing strategies in the college classroom and in my administrative capacities. In some ways, I have come to learn that the community organizing techniques I learned at Gamaliel don’t really fit into the cultural and academic side of the American university. Mobilizing large groups of people around issues that are generally connected to social justice questions, emphasizing faith to accomplish community work, and engaging in the kind of hard-boiled agitation practiced by Gamaliel organizers runs counter to the values of intellectual pluralism that serve as a hallmark of university life.⁷

At the same time, I still think there is a place for community organizing practices in the university. For me, practicing power as an ability to act, seeking out the self-interest of my students and colleagues, and looking for the kind of relationality I learned in the one-on-ones has pulled me out of the habits of isolation and institutional cynicism that I learned in graduate school and in the early years of my professional career. It's made me realize that leadership and cultural change within institutions happens when we find common ground and common interests, and it's given me some tools to seek these things out. Organizing techniques have also helped me to let go of a great deal of the control that I previously sought in my classrooms and in my administrative life. In the inimitable words of one of my students, I have

since learned "to communicate clearly that I am not always going to communicate clearly." Releasing some of that control has been liberating for me because it's opened up relational spaces and opportunities that might not have come along otherwise. For instance, the skills I learned at Gamaliel provided me with ways to let students into conversations (about teaching and learning, in particular) that I had

"[T]he skills I learned at Gamaliel provided me with ways to let students into conversations (about teaching and learning, in particular) that I had previously not considered."

previously not considered. Similarly, I have come to accept and, to a degree, even embrace the messiness and the chaos that arrive when democratic pedagogies are practiced in the classroom and when students are invited to examine class content in relationship to their own values, experiences, and stories. I have come to believe that teaching our students public skills and inviting them to practice democracy in the classroom is rewarding and important work. It's important because the vitality of our democracy depends on future generations practicing public skills in their communities and their professions. Teaching our students how to work with others, understand and work with public tension, practice relationality, get into public relationships with adults who also care about social and political issues, and, yes, practice politics is our responsibility as higher education professionals. We can't complain about the sorry state of our democracy if we aren't actively working to fix it.

Finally, I think that the writers and thinkers I taught when I was an English professor and who still mean a great deal to my intellectual and personal life—Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau,

Douglass, Melville, Stowe, Lincoln, and even Dickinson—would have approved of this work and probably cheered us on. Each of these writers and thinkers, in their own way, engaged in the grand and flawed democratic experiment in an effort to make it more inclusive and more real to a larger number of people. They took the political revolution of the eighteenth century and, through their words, ideas, and actions, they created a cultural revolution in the nineteenth century.⁸

I obviously don't think that incorporating community organizing techniques into American higher education will necessarily revolutionize the academy. However, the service-learning and public scholarship movements are clearly transforming the practices of teaching, learning, and knowledge production in higher education. I think that community organizing practices have a significant role to play within that sector of the university.

Prior to attending Gamaliel training, academic life, for me, had become overprofessionalized and technocratic. I was feeling that my reasons for staying in the academy had drifted considerably away from the reasons I chose to enter into the academic profession.

I don't feel that way anymore. The week-long Gamaliel training and my experience consistently practicing democratic pedagogies in the classroom have helped me to recapture my initial reasons for entering this work. I believe they will keep me in it for the long haul.

Endnotes

1. See <http://www.gamaliel.org/Foundation/history.htm> for a brief history of the Gamaliel Foundation.
2. Barack Obama was a Gamaliel organizer and trainer in Chicago after he graduated from Columbia and before he enrolled in Harvard Law School.
3. Public-ness is a core concept of community organizing that Gamaliel forced me to consider and my subsequent practice with organizing techniques allowed me to test. In *Roots for Radicals*, Edward Chambers (2003) argues that the public and private realms are best understood in relation to each other. For Chambers, the private realm is the world of the family and intimate relationships that are grounded in biological, selfless commitments and defined by unconditional love. Public-ness, on the other hand, is about enlightened self-interest and quid pro quo. It's a world of negotiation, exchange, and transparency, and a world of relationships that

are built on mutual self-interests. Chambers describes the public world as “[s]tanding for the whole—engaging in strong debate, reasoned compromise, and focused action for the common good . . .” (72). Clearly, as a culture, we spend a great deal of time writing and thinking about our private lives—we produce a seemingly endless stream of books, videos, and even public spaces (fitness centers, for instance) devoted to personal health, fitness, safety, and well-being. However, cultivating a public life—thinking about and *practicing* public skills—gets very little attention at all. The Gamaliel training kick made me start considering my public life and, more importantly, how I could develop and practice public skills in my professional life.

4. Boyte has written extensively on the idea of public work. See especially *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996) and *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

5. I often think about Emmanuel Levinas’s ideas of the Other when I am accomplishing one-on-ones.

6. In *Roots for Radicals*, Ed Chambers puts a much finer point on this polarization between the world as it is and the world as it should be, arguing that good organizers operate on the tension line between the two worlds and do not fall into excessive cynicism (living in the world as it is) or excessive romanticism (living in the world as it should be).

7. A stronger case could be made, I think, for practicing these community organizing techniques on the Student Affairs side of the university, although I would argue that every effort and intention should be made to think and act inclusively and to collect a broad base of support.

8. In *Minding American Education: Reclaiming the Tradition of Active Learning* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2003), Martin Bickman reminds us of the close association between current democratic teaching practices and nineteenth-century American progressive educators and cultural reformers.

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