



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION.

Instilling a Sense of Community and Citizenship

Three distinct but intertwining issues form the basis of our society, and we accept them without question—rights, privileges, and responsibilities; however, the success we have balancing these three abstractions determines how effective we are as individual citizens and as a collective of citizens. In my "Applied Leadership Theory" class, I have used these issues for structuring group discussions with my students as they examine their service experiences. I ask students to explore how these concepts are played out in the lives of those they are serving, as well as in their own.

Rights are individual in nature, and they are abstractions which rely on unique egocentric interpretations. Rights are also constitutional guarantees dependent on the governance structure of each country. Frequently, in America, rights are attached to different groups via our continuing struggle with selfishness. In short, rights are all about power.

Privilege is individual in nature but is almost always related to the group to which one belongs. Various factors come into play such as wealth, social status, and individual achievement. Birth factors include gender, race, and ethnicity. Privileges rely on the existence of inequality and many times are at odds with rights. And yet, they serve as a primary motivating force for individual action.

Finally, there is responsibility. Responsibilities are both individual and group in nature; the common factor is internal choice. Often, one has a choice: "doing what is right for all" versus "what I have a right to do for me."

The leadership factor determines how well we learn to meet our responsibilities. Leadership helps us translate individual ideas, morals, values, and expectations into group norms—our laws. In the absence of agreed-upon group standards of behavior which provide the basis for one's internal control, individual action becomes divisive and destructive. As individual behaviors create more open conflict between individuals and/or groups, our legislators lean toward passing more laws which are, in simple terms, more external controls. More laws, in turn, lessen the need for internal controls and short-circuit the development of accepting responsibility for others first.

The vitality of our society depends on our finding ways to choreograph this dance of abstractions because the results of our efforts are all too real in the day-to-day actions of our citizens. We have basic rights, and we can earn distinct privileges; yet, we must always take responsibility for assuring that our privileges do not impinge upon the sanctity of another's basic rights. It takes a lifetime to become better at managing this balancing act, and that is citizenship in action.

Should postsecondary education have an explicit role in instilling a sense of community and citizenship? Most assuredly, yes!

How might that role be defined and implemented? One effective means is through the teaching pedagogy of service-learning. In its simplest terms, service-learning is a strategy to improve the student's ability to learn course material through experiential learning in service to the community. It is applicable for almost any course and can be integrated into nearly every aspect of the collegiate experience.

Our experiences at Miami-Dade Community College, where we have had more than 3,000 students participate in service-learning over the past three years, indicate that students gain civic literacy, which we define as the awareness and acceptance of one's responsibility to one's community. When we surveyed our students to find out what motivated them to become involved, we found that only 29% were concerned with social issues affecting society. And yet, upon completion of their service, 75% reported that they had a positive attitude toward community involvement and citizenship.

Service-learning is good teaching, as evidenced by responses from our service-learning students. For example, during the winter term 1996, 16 professors from a broad array of disciplines had 340 students complete service-learning. Although only 44% were involved in community service prior to taking the service-learning course, 92% indicated that now they are more interested in service, and 88% indicated that they will continue volunteering in the future. Ninety-two percent agreed that more service-learning classes should be taught at the college, and nearly 100% (99.4) felt that the service-learning class was successful in



helping them learn and integrate their learning into their behavior.

How can we foster collaboration between the not-for-profit sector, the business sector, and higher education to achieve increased civic literacy? If corporations partner with higher education service-learning programs to develop centers for community involvement and civic literacy, the centers could provide ongoing service-learning programs. Moreover, they could coordinate major volunteer activities involving the business employees and college faculty, staff, and students; establish service-based scholarship endowments; and serve as facilitators for training servant leaders for both the private and public sectors.

Service-learning is a powerful teaching strategy. It

Comics in the Classroom

A delegation of English-as-a-Second-Language students, unable to attend regular summer classes, wanted to keep practicing their English so as not to lose their skills before the fall semester. In particular, they wanted to form a class that would teach them how to read the newspaper. We talked about the newspaper, and eventually I came to understand that the comic strips were their most difficult section. "Ah-ha!" I thought. I have been interested in comic books, from Peanuts to Dilbert, since I was a kid. I love humor and thought this would be a great way to share some laughs with the students. We started a club and decided to meet weekly throughout the summer.

It quickly became clear that explaining the comic strips and fostering discussion on the topics they contained would be difficult for second-language learners for several reasons. The humor in the strip is based on what is *not* said. ESL students are usually very concrete; picking up the nuances of words and phrases is a sophisticated language skill. I remember making a comment about Data, the android in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* taking things too literally, but the students just looked at me like I was from another planet. The amount of culture inherent in the strip is astounding. As I looked at the different levels of humor encapsulated in only one strip, I realized that the author was striving to share several common perceptions—each was kind of a "nudge-nudge, wink-wink." Finally, I remembered hearing Jerry Lewis say: "All humor is based on pain." I thought he was probably commenting on how tired he was at the end of his telethon; and at the time, his comment passed right over me. But when I started to explain and discuss comic strips and saw the concerned looks on the students' faces, I began to listen to myself: "No, it's really funny because the cow is going to kill

requires serious collaboration between a college's academic and student development leaders. It must be faculty-led to maintain academic integrity, and it must engage members of the community in the educational process for students. The most valuable contribution service-learning makes is increasing students' appreciation of the importance of citizenship even as they work toward achieving course competencies.

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the chicken!" and "The humor is in how the IRS is going to charge this guy a million bucks for nothing!" I remember one student saying, "Teacher, why is it funny for the disrespectful boy to make fun of his mother?"

The answers lay in how well the reader could identify with the author and depended upon their sharing the same notions of right and wrong. The discussions these comic strips generated were woven around gender relations, family, age, violence, love, slang and, of course, O. J. Simpson.

By the end of the summer, the students were contemplating their own comic strip—created for and by students. This led to discussions of propriety and how to craft a joke that is least harmful, based on the aforementioned pain principle. Perhaps that would be a good title for a strip, too, about a sadistic school administrator, "The Pain Principal."

Having a good sense of humor and understanding metaphors have been correlated with lowered blood pressure and decreased risk of heart attack. Humor stimulates the limbic system which, in turn, charges factoids and makes them more accessible to memory.

This comic club helped students retain their language skills over the summer, stimulated discussions about a variety of issues, and provided opportunities to talk about culture and communication. And it was good for our hearts!

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August 28, 1998 Volume XX, No. 16

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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals postage paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to INNOVATION ABSTRACTS, SZB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712-1293.
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