Beyond Service Learning: Civic Engagement in Philosophy Classes

Authors: P and Q

In the past 20 years, particularly over the last decade, research into the benefits of service learning and tips on how service learning and civic engagement might be incorporated into philosophy classrooms has dramatically increased.[i] Many of the authors subscribe to the idea that such experiences involve students doing volunteer work—helping out at a school, homeless shelter, soup kitchen, hospital, park, library, or senior center—and reflecting on it.[ii] In this paper, we will refer to assignments that involve volunteer work and reflection as "traditional service learning." P used to employ traditional service learning assignments in her ethics class but she found that rather than coming up with their own ideas about what needs change, attention, and action in the world, students seemed content to follow direction and authority. She wanted to challenge them and get them to try something new—to find ways to exercise their own agency and to develop skills to become good world citizens. She also worried that she was producing moral skeptics by encouraging students to question all sides of a moral argument, leaving them without the skills to identify what *does* matter to them. So she devised a civic engagement project designed to meet these goals.

P's central model asks students to become socially engaged by identifying an issue they feel passionate about, devising a plan to tackle this issue, and implementing this plan. Q adapted this assignment; her variation for her environmental ethics class allowed students the option of volunteering for a local organization or doing a creative project—photography, art, writing, etc., that experienced or examined the environment or environmental problems—as long as they also engaged with the public through some medium. In either model, by choosing and implementing

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

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

Why Not Traditional Service Learning?

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

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

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

opportunities to engage in problem-solving by requiring participants to gain knowledge
of the specific context of their [project] and community challenges, rather than only to
draw upon generalized or abstract knowledge such as might come from a textbook. As a
result, [the project] offers powerful opportunities to acquire the habits of critical thinking;
i.e. the ability to identify the most important questions or issues within a real-world
situation."[iii]

Yet, we had goals—and constraints—that made traditional service learning not the ideal
vehicle. In synch with the goal of independent thought, we did not want students to simply obey
someone else's instructions or directions. We wanted them to design their own project and
identify their *reasons* for choosing these, bringing critical analysis to bear—a central skill for
engaged citizens in a democracy. In fact, a main difference between our civic engagement
projects and traditional service learning is that our students have to devise and carry out their
own plans. They cannot rely on someone else to hand them their topic or their plan of action.

Our students take on a wide range of projects, such as organizing educational workshops
on social and economic injustices, advocating on behalf of animals, teaching informal logic to
high school students, promoting alternatives to bottled water, assisting non-profit organizations
that focus on world hunger, and starting a bike sharing program in the residence halls. They have
to be self-directed, creative, flexible and willing to take some risks. They have to be organized
and disciplined. And most importantly, they have to figure out what is important to them and
why. By creating the project, the assignment changes drastically.

Students also were required to keep a weekly journal in which they reflected on their
experience and made connections to the readings covered in class. They also created a portfolio
(e.g. a binder) in which they collected anything related to their project: documentation,

correspondence, photographs, research done, etc. P's students had the option to choose a topic for their final paper for the class that incorporated their civic engagement project; Q's students were required to make their project public in some way—as a blog, an event, a display, or by working with others. Because they need to initiate, carry out, and communicate the assignment to a public audience, the assignment helps students develop analytical, organizational, leadership, problem solving, and communication skills. Because they must draw explicit connections between class material and the work they do, students understand the relationship between theory and practice and see new connections between the readings done in their philosophy class and the "real" world. These skills also work toward the overarching goals of helping students become informed and active citizens who can engage in critical reflection on their thoughts and actions, and those of others.

Fitzgerald and others show that one of the problems with service learning assignments is boredom (Fitzgerald, p 263); neither P nor Q ever had any students complain about boredom. Because students design their own project, around an issue they are passionate about, they are more likely to make it overly challenging than boring.

Implementation: The Details

Expectations and Structure. In terms of class requirements as well as pedagogical importance, the projects are a major part of the class (30% in Q's case; 20% in P's). This meant the projects could be fairly extensive, requiring students to spend 3-4 hours per week throughout the semester, for a total of about 40-50 hours. This time included everything related to the project: contacting people, meeting with the professor and mentor, getting organized, writing weekly journal entries, etc.

The Portfolio. Students' portfolios served several purposes: they documented the project and its results, documented the time students spent on the project, recorded the students reflections about their own efforts, and provided an opportunity to make connections to class activities and readings.

Journals. P's and Q's journal assignments differed. Q required students to make connections between their project and the weekly readings for the class. P only gave students optional prompts—often triggered by the class readings and discussion—throughout the semester. For example, her students read about the Milgram experiments and the "banality of evil", Hannah Arendt's analysis of how ordinary people can do terrible things—as in the Holocaust—if these are rendered ordinary and are condoned by those in power. The prompt asked students to reflect on how their projects might challenge such actions and attitudes. Similarly, when analyzing Martin Luther King's remarks about "white moderates" or "extremism" in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," she and her students talked about what this might mean for how they might approach their CE projects. Are they afraid as coming across as extremists? What might be ethical or unethical about being an extremist? Does it depend on the issue, the intention of the "activist", or do only results matter? Both P and Q also asked their students to relate their project to ethical theories learned in class.

Mentors. Each of us was able to hire a student mentor to assist with the projects. This was very helpful and saved us a lot of time. Q's mentor was funded by her university; P's received course credit by enrolling in an independent study project with her.

Other Philosophy Classes. This assignment is flexible enough to accommodate a variety of classes and teaching styles. We've thought about different ways in which one could adapt our

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

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

Results: Skills, Attitudes, and Achievements

We gauged the results of our classes and the civic engagement assignments according to student comments within their portfolios and on confidential student evaluations of the courses, supplementing these with our own observations of their involvement and progress. From these, it seems clear that students value their experience. Most students chose to work on an issue they felt passionate about. The fact that the project was one that they chose, centered on wanting to make a difference in a certain area, and the fact that the plan was one that they devised, motivated them to work hard and to succeed. The civic engagement project was probably the most time consuming part of the course for them, and some complained about this, yet their course evaluations often singled it out as particularly rewarding. Even students who were not able to achieve what they set their mind to felt that they learned a lot: "Overall this was a great project, I learned how to be more organized, especially with time and work with people in a group to achieve a desired goal."

Results vary by student and project, of course, but students report that they gained many specific skills and attitudes as a result of the projects: organizational abilities, follow-through,

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other students wrote similar things about their choices to recycle, compost, become a coach or a teacher, go to church, bike, be an athlete, etc.

More generally, students seem to be motivated to study philosophy when they can see its relevance, and the civic engagement projects help them do this. Through their projects and journals, students made clear and insightful connections; one said that the project "served as a conduit for me to understand the connections between philosophy and the environmental world—something that I had been searching for in many of my other philosophy classes." One of Q's students wrote, "It gave me a lot of experience that I can take with me to advocate in 'the real world'…I've grown in ways I never expected to due to the structure and implementation of the curriculum, especially in terms of exercising agency in environmental justice," and one of P's students said, "This project was definitely a highlight of my year in terms of really feeling

challenged and doing something tangible that makes a difference, as opposed to just learning for the sake of learning."

Overall, students have exceeded our expectations every semester. With the exception of 1 to 3 individuals per class, students came up with ambitious projects and did an incredible amount of work to make them successful. Not everyone produced the results they had hoped for, but the amount and quality of the work they put into the projects has amazed us every semester.

Theoretical and Practical Objections and Solutions

Some people might think that service learning and civic engagement are good experiences, but they do not belong in a philosophy class. In the 20th century, as Anglo-American philosophy took its analytic turn and Continental philosophy tended toward post-modernism, the main focus of philosophy became words (conceptual analysis) or discourse. Adept handling of words/concepts by way of argument, discussion, and writing became, for many professional philosophers, the distinguishing marks of the profession. Teaching students to master analysis, then, became the professor's role.

As Giebel argues, however, the recognition that much philosophy is highly abstract can be turned to an argument that favors service learning—and, we would add, civic engagement more generally. As Giebel puts the point,

> Because philosophical arguments tend to be abstract, some students have
> difficultly understanding them and applying them to "real life" situations. A
> concrete experience demonstrating an application of a philosophical concept or
> theory often may be helpful in such situations but is difficult to achieve in a
> classroom setting. Service learning can provide the experience many students

need to see, and even bring about, concrete application of abstract theory and

thus come to a better understanding of the theory itself (Giebel 102-103).

At the same time, the view that philosophy ought *not* to be abstract and otherworldly has at least as long a history as the contrary view. Socrates in the agora, Dewey and Addams in the educational and social trenches, political philosophers and feminist philosophers wrestling with the problems of their times—all of these suggest that philosophy can be both engaged and true to itself in stimulating careful and critical reflection. It may, in fact, be truer to itself when engaged if a search for (some version of) truth is central—the simplifications and oversimplifications that are possible in abstract philosophy, while helpful in clearing debris, need the complications and testing of the world to show whether they stand up.

Another objection comes from the opposite end of the spectrum—from those who are enthusiastic about civic engagement but are worried about a number of potential logistical problems. Some people might think that this type of assignment is only possible if one has some funding and teaches at a school located in a big city with many non-profit organizations and good transportation options. Neither of us has any funding for this project, nor do we teach at such a school. Both of us teach in small towns with few opportunities for students. Our students tend not to own cars, and it takes a long time to get to the closest big cities using public transportation. We strongly feel that the type of assignment that we are describing in this paper would work at any university: big or small, located in a large city or a small town.

Another perceived roadblock is that students and the local community already be disposed to be activists. Q's students and the local community do tend this direction, and surely that is helpful. But the opposite is true in P's case, where students do not identify as activists; in

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

More generally, getting unmotivated or apathetic students involved in civic engagement
or other experiential work can be a challenge. We have found that having a broad range of
possible projects is helpful—even if a student is not passionate about her choice, she at least
might find a niche that helps her make a connection or develop an insight. Sometimes—not
always, of course—a student who begins the semester apathetic will experience change. As one
of P's students put it, "I realized that I have rarely gotten involved with any issue outside of class
that didn't directly serve me…[This project] made me realize … how easy and fun it can be to
spread information on important issues."

Conclusion

Although students often think civic engagement projects are challenging and time-
consuming, they also find them deeply rewarding. They are amazed that in one short semester
they are able to carry out a complicated project and actually make a difference. We have been
impressed by the work they do and their willingness to make connections between their project
and philosophical material we cover in class.

We strongly believe that others can incorporate civic engagement into their classes – for
example political philosophy, philosophy of education, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of
film classes in addition to a variety of ethics classes. We are happy to share our assignments,
which include detailed instructions, our grading forms, examples of projects students have done,
and other resources you might find useful.

i For work done specifically by philosophers, see Fitzgerald, Patrick "Service-Learning and the Socially

Responsible Ethics Class" Teaching philosophy [0145-5788], 1997 vol:20 iss:3; Giebel, H M "In Defense

of Service Learning" *Teaching Philosophy* 2006 vol:29 iss:2 pg:93; Kunkel, Joseph "Introductory

Philosophy as a "Service Course". *Teaching Philosophy* 1983 vol:6 pg:1; Esquith, Stephen L "War,

Political Violence, and Service Learning" *Teaching Philosophy* 2000 vol:23 iss:3 pg:241; Fullinwider,

Robert K. "Mandated Service and Moral Learning," *Philosophical Dimensions of Public Policy: Policy*

Studies Review Annual, Volume 13, 2002; Voke, Heather M "Public Deliberation, Communication

across Difference, and Issues-Based Service Learning" *Philosophy of Education* 2001 pg:361; Leever,

Martin G "Ethics & Service-Learning: Toward the Development of Compassionate Servant-Leadership

Teaching Ethics 2006 vol:7 iss:1 pg:15; Keller, Jean "Care Ethics, Service-Learning, and Social Change"

Michigan journal of community service learning, 2003 vol:10 iss:1 pg:39; Donovan, Sarah K "Teaching

Philosophy Outside of the Classroom: One Alternative to Service Learning" *Teaching Philosophy* 2008

vol:31 iss:2 pg:161.

ii See, for example, syllabi of philosophy classes that incorporate service learning

http://www.compact.org/category/syllabi/philosophy/. Curtis Ogden also notes in his paper, "Going

Beyond Service," that "Ultimately, many [conversations about service learning] seem to reduce service to

a rather conventional notion, such as picking up garbage or talking with senior citizens" (p. 187).

iii http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/characteristics. While this quote originally

referred to service learning, it should not come as a surprise that we think it is even more relevant to the

type of civic engagement project that we describe than to traditional service learning assignments.