Executive Summary

Pedagogical Catalysts of Civic Competence:
The Development of a Critical Epistemological Model for Community-Based Learning

by
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Abstract

Civic competence is critical to the successful functioning of pluralistic democracies. Developing the knowledge, skills, and motivations for effective democratic participation is a national and global imperative that many higher education institutions have embraced through the teaching strategies of community-based learning and service-learning. Yet, scant research literature has focused on the relationship between pedagogical approaches and civic competence outcomes. This five-year longitudinal study of 11,000 students in 700 senior-level capstone courses at an urban research university empirically tested a new theoretically constructed model of civic competence development. Eight epistemological domains embedded within 4 civic competence components (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions) were analyzed utilizing item and factor analysis. The model was extremely robust (r = .917) for civic competence development and indicated strong effect size for multiple pedagogical elements of course design, teaching strategies, and integration of community service. Significantly, the greatest effect for developing civic competence is pedagogical incorporation of diversity and social justice issues. Thus, the Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence offers faculty a heuristic taxonomy of teaching and learning strategies to utilize diversity of thought and interaction in community-based learning as a catalyst for transforming students into competent democratic participants.
**Purpose of Study**

Civic competence is critical to the successful functioning of pluralistic democracies. A thriving democratic society depends upon active participation of its citizens, characterized by informed deliberation and collaboration to address public problems and work toward common goals (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007). Education has long played a part in preparing citizens to effectively engage in democracy (Bowen, 1977; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Dewey, 1916; Ehrlich, 2000). Indeed, developing the knowledge, skills, and motivations for effective democratic participation is a national and global imperative that many higher education institutions have embraced through the teaching strategies of service-learning and community-based learning.

Previous research indicates that community-based learning offers unparalleled opportunity to develop civic competence in students (e.g. Battistoni, 1997; Chickering, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Mendel-Reyes, 1998; Saltmarsh, 2005). Community-based learning has been consistently characterized as having modest but positive effects on students’ academic, personal, and civic development (Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gallini & Moely, 2003). Further, O’Meara and Niehaus (2009) found that most community-based learning faculty want to shape the civic dispositions of their students, and many postsecondary institutions have responded to Boyer’s (1990) call to acknowledge, value, and reward the scholarship of engagement (O’Meara, 2005).

Despite positive student outcomes and increased faculty participation in community-based learning, however, instructors have relatively little evidence-based guidance on how to craft their courses for civic competence. For over a decade authors have recognized the complexities of community-based learning and recommended research to help practitioners untangle the variables that affect outcomes (e.g. Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998), but a clear pedagogical model of community-based learning for civic competence has not yet been articulated. Faculty who strive to develop competent citizens need to know what civic competence looks like in the specific and unique contexts of community-based learning. The purpose of this study was to empirically test a new theoretically constructed model of civic competence development in community-based learning courses.

**Conceptual Framework**

Based on an exhaustive review of the literature, a new pedagogical model of civic competence was developed for empirical analysis. Traditional conceptualizations of community-based learning and civic outcomes have implied that combining knowledge and skills gained in class with community service leads to academic and civic gains in a linear fashion (as shown in Figure 1), neglecting the interaction among various components and leaving the impression of civic outcomes as separate and static ends. The new model builds on the work of Saltmarsh (1995, 2005), Eyler and Giles (1999), Wang and Jackson (2005), and others who have discussed knowledge, skills, values, efficacy, commitment, and responsibility as civic outcomes of service-learning, as well as its social justice aims. The social justice perspective of community-based learning empowers students with the tools to question social structures and power dynamics to create a more just and equitable society, emphasizing the importance of learning for the purpose of taking action (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2003; Wang & Jackson, 2005). The underlying assumption is that a social justice orientation leads to analysis and critique of social systems and the impetus to change them through civic participation.
In the proposed pedagogical model of civic competence, four components with eight embedded epistemological domains are overlapping and interactive, offering a fresh and parsimonious approach for understanding the process of civic competence development in community-based learning. This epistemological model incorporates service as the conceptual linchpin, recognizing that action is not just the culmination of competence but an integral part of it. Through community-based learning students can develop civic competence that is tested in action and therefore becomes more than acquired capacity for civic engagement—it is a way of knowing civic engagement. Civic competence is not just the sum of various components, but an integrated and interactive way of knowing.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the four key components of civic competence are knowledge, skills, dispositions, and identity. Different domains, or areas of competence within each component also emerged from existing scholarship (e.g. Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bandura, 1997; Dunlap & Webster, 2009; Knefelcamp, 2008; Mitchell 2008; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002; Perry & Katula, 2001; Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008; Saltmarsh, 2005; Stewart, 2008). Knowledge is awareness and understanding of various subject matters related to democratic society and the systems and processes of democratic decision-making and governance. Skill is the developed ability to do something well. Knowledge and skill both have academic and civic domains. Disposition is an inclination toward action, manifested in the domains of attitudes and values and encompassing social justice as implicit to the notion of democratic society. Identity is the commitment to civic responsibility, comprised of the efficacy and action domains.

Moreover, the pedagogy of community-based learning is unlike most teaching in postsecondary education (Howard, 1998). In fact, many scholars have argued that it is not enough to acknowledge civic competence as a goal—it must be deliberately integrated into educational practices in order to achieve desired civic outcomes (e.g. Colby et al., 2007; Gottlieb
& Robinson, 2002; Howard, 2001). How community-based learning faculty align their teaching with the goal of civic competence, however, is largely unexplored. Based on existing scholarship (e.g. Ash & Clayton, 2004; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2000; Heffernan, 2001; Pribbenow, 2005), Figure 2 depicts the elements of pedagogical practices associated with civic competence: course design (e.g. setting goals and objectives, determining readings), teaching strategies (e.g. class discussion), integration of service into the course (e.g. the community partnership), and the iterative process of assessing and revising a course. In order to capitalize on the potential of community-based learning for civic competence, it is essential to understand these pedagogical elements and their effect on learning, but a paucity of research examines how faculty teach for civic competence in each stage of the pedagogical process. The intent of this study was to identify specific pedagogical strategies leading to the development of civic competence.

**Methods and Data Sources**

The overarching research question guiding the study was: *What are the pedagogical catalysts of civic competence in community-based learning courses?* Two sub-questions guided this research and drew from student survey data for analysis. In community-based learning courses, (1) What are the student characteristics of civic competence? and (2) Are there identifiable patterns of relationship between elements of pedagogy and development of civic competence? The data came from the required interdisciplinary community-based learning program at an urban research university. The sample consisted of 10,974 students between 2005-2010, representing about 150 courses a year or approximately 700 sections. The instrument was the course evaluation survey students take to assess the course and report their learning. This survey includes indicators of student learning and of teaching methods, offering the opportunity to both test the proposed model and examine the relationships between pedagogical elements and civic competence outcomes in a way not yet offered through previous research. Item analysis and factor analysis were used to examine the data. The pedagogical elements were correlated with outcomes using cross tabulations and the Pearson Correlation Coefficient, revealing whether there was any association between instructional techniques and students’ civic competence.

*Iterative Teaching was not analyzed in this study.*
Results

Student Characteristics of Civic Competence. Results indicated that the epistemological conceptualization of civic competence was sound as proposed but strengthened further with slight revision, such as realigning items and simplifying constructs. The 14 outcome items held together conceptually as a representation of civic competence (r = .917) and for the individual components (e.g. r = .848 for skills) and domains (e.g. r = .753 for civic knowledge). Cronbach’s alpha never fell below r = .500, indicating moderately strong relationships among the items, but the results also ranged from r = .592 for efficacy to r = .848 for skills. It is unclear from these procedures alone whether these same constructs would emerge when not “forced” upon an existing instrument or whether any other combinations of items could contribute to the theoretical foundation of the model.

Principal component analysis was thus used to determine how the items group together without the researcher’s imposed constructs, following procedures for best interpretability (Green, Salkind, & Akey, 2000; Field, 2009). This approach retained four factors that offered strong confirmation of the proposed epistemology of civic competence, although slight variations in how items combined further informed the model (see Figure 3). For example, attitudes (r = .707) and actions (r = .506) emerged as more salient and appropriate labels for what had been termed dispositions (r = .593) and identity (r = .652), and efficacy was redistributed throughout all of the concepts. Another item analysis of the newly grouped items further supported the shift and led to generally higher Cronbach’s alphas.

Patterns of Relationship between Community-Based Learning Pedagogy and Civic Competence. Correlations were run between the instructional items and each of the four components, each of the domains, and the overall construct of civic competence using new outcome variables computed from mean scores. The pedagogical practices with the strongest relationships to civic competence are (1) exploration of diversity (r = .552), (2) a syllabus that clearly connects service work to course content (r = .569), and (3) activities that engage students in their learning (r = .539). The results showed both effective faculty strategies (e.g. 80% of those attaining knowledge outcomes indicated that their instructors used class discussion) as well as what might enhance outcomes if utilized more frequently (e.g. topics of race or political issues, used by only half of faculty but associated with civic competence).

These results strongly substantiated the pedagogical ring of the model, with the pedagogical catalysts most strongly and consistently associated with civic competence exemplifying the proposed pedagogical elements of course design (exploring diversity, r = .552), teaching strategies (engaging activities, r = .539), and integration of service (clearly connected in the syllabus, r = .569). Most importantly, the exploration of diversity significantly enhances all civic competence outcomes, reinforcing the connection between competent participation in a pluralistic democracy and community-based learning for social justice, and suggesting alignment between critical pedagogy and this model. Thus this new conceptualization has been deemed the Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence.

Significance

The results of this study have important implications for community-based learning theory, practice, and research and further Kuh’s (2008) claim that service-learning is a high-impact educational practice. Three key findings are significant contributions to the field.

The proposed pedagogical model of civic competence was supported with minor revisions and finalized as the Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence. The data supported the structure and defining features of the proposed model of civic competence, such as the
mutual reinforcement among components and domains and the epistemological conceptualization of civic competence as efficacy in action. Knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions together can bring students to a new way of knowing. Understanding civic competence as an epistemological construct is an important theoretical advancement. This study’s findings also maintained the pedagogical ring encompassing civic competence. One immediate implication for faculty is to consider developing each epistemological component of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions throughout the course, though future research is needed to further elaborate the model and the interaction among components. The Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence therefore offers a comprehensive but straightforward approach for conceptualizing the relationship between pedagogy and civic outcomes.

Diversity is essential to the development of civic competence, supporting pluralistic democracy and community-based learning for social justice. This finding suggests that diversity of thought and experience should be creatively woven into all types of community-based learning to enhance civic competence. This result also supports practices such as international service-learning to develop global citizenship competence (Battistoni, Longo, & Jayanandhan, 2009). Moreover, critical pedagogy is necessary to most deeply and effectively help students understand community-based learning in the broader spectrum of civic participation for social change, to create space for dialogue around issues of privilege and difference, and to challenge systems of oppression (Kitano, 1997; Souza, 2007; Yep, 2011).

The need for critical pedagogy opens a path for faculty development, using Tatum (1997) and Bennett (1993) to help faculty move their courses (and perhaps themselves) from denial of difference and privilege to intercultural competence and shared power. Furthermore, campus administrators are obliged to commit resources to support faculty development around critical pedagogy in community-based learning to institutionalize best practices (Colby et al., 2003; Furco & Holland, 2004). If democratic society is to thrive, faculty must be willing to delve into the topics of diversity and social justice and institutions must be willing to support them in doing so, lest they risk reinforcing the systems of oppression that community-based learning could otherwise help dismantle (King, 1964; Freire, 1970; Mitchell, 2008).

Service should be thoroughly integrated into a course through the syllabus and community partnership in order to maximize civic competence. For over ten years scholars have maintained that in order to maximize benefits and make genuine contributions to community, service-learning must be well integrated into course work (Cress, 2011; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthia, 2004; Eyler, 2002; Howard, 2001). This study offered a practical rubric for revising syllabi to most effectively catalyze civic competence adapted from Kitano’s (1997) concepts of Exclusive, Inclusive, and Transformed syllabi for multiculturalism. The Stokamer Taxonomy of Course and Syllabus Change for Civic Competence could be invaluable for faculty professional development workshops, program assessment, or individual review of course syllabi, and it could also be adjusted for co-curricular programming. Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956) and Kolb’s (1984) cycle of action and reflection could also be used to assess course syllabi. Of course, well integrated service hinges upon community work that is meaningful to both students and the community, suggesting that community partner collaboration could be one way of effectively creating a transformed syllabus for civic competence.

Conclusion

Future research should be conducted to elaborate the results of this study. Expanding this research to multiple institutions, refining the instrument (such as to include more indicators of learning at the domain level), and adding qualitative data sources (e.g. interviews with faculty or
document analysis of syllabi) are all needed. Additional research could also explore external influences such as student development, faculty motivation, institutional structure, or community partner issues.

Nevertheless, this study has filled a gap in the existing scholarship by developing and testing the Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence. Rooted in a comprehensive review of the literature and informed by the current evidence, this epistemological conceptualization highlights the overlapping and interactive components of civic competence and their relationship to pedagogical practices. Moreover, this research underscores the importance of diversity for community-based learning to enhance civic competence. Multiplicity of perspectives, understanding the lived experiences of others, and ability to collaborate across difference are essential to democratic society (AAC&U, 2010; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003).

While exploring diversity in community-based learning courses can help to achieve civic competence outcomes, critical pedagogy is needed for students to deeply consider the implications of diversity for democracy and social justice. Faculty can also capitalize on the potential of community-based learning to develop civic competence with careful integration of service into the course through the syllabus and community partnership. Thus the Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence offers faculty a heuristic taxonomy of teaching and learning strategies for utilizing diversity of thought and interaction in community-based learning as a catalyst for transforming students into competent democratic participants.
References


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