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Strengthening Democracy and Personal Development Through Community Engagement

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I am writing here personally and practically, not academically. One meaning of academic is, “theoretical and not expected to produce a practical result.” My aim is to urge us toward practical actions that can augment key dimensions of personal development necessary for effective citizenship and for behaviors that strengthen our democracy.

Strengthening Democracy

Bill Moyers wrote a powerful short article, titled *Which America Will We Be Now*, in the November 19, 2001 issue of *The Nation*. He said,

“The soul of democracy -- the essence of the word itself -- is government of, by, and for the people. And the soul of democracy has been dying, drowning in a rising tide of big money contributed by a narrow, unrepresentative elite, that has betrayed the faith of citizens in self-government... Democracy won’t survive if citizens turn into lemmings. Yes, the President is

our Commander in Chief, but we are not the President's minions. ...The greatest sedition would be our silence. Yes there's a fight going on -- against terrorists around the globe, but just as certainly there's a fight going on here at home to decide the kind of country this will be during and after the war on terrorism.

We must define ourselves not by the lives we led until September 11 but by the lives we lead from now on. If we seize the opportunity to build a stronger country we too will ultimately prevail in the challenges ahead, at home and abroad. We will prevail only if we lead by example, as a democracy committed to the rule of law and the spirit of fairness..." (Pp. 12-14).

Times of crisis chill dissent in colleges and universities just as in the body politic. Just when the country can most benefit from the diverse perspectives that academe should provide, there are growing pressures to repress those views. Since the Middle Ages colleges and universities have been safe places to search for truth and to criticize injustice and oppression. We must protect our ability to educate students about our changing world, the clash of cultures, the great issues of world poverty and hunger, global warming and environmental degradation, alienation and apathy.

In *Let Your Life Speak* Parker Palmer suggests the orientation we need. "I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about – quite apart from what I would like it to be about – or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions. ... I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live – but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life." (Pp. 3-6)

Listening for the truths and values at the heart of our own identities, clarifying the standards by which we will live our own lives, is a fundamental developmental challenge. It lies at the core of every developmental theory. Loevinger's ego development moves from the

impulsive and self-protective stages through conformist, to a conscientious level characterized by self-defined standards and self-criticism. It moves on through an autonomous stage to an integrated level that cherishes human dignity, tolerates ambiguity, and struggles with the affective and cognitive complexities of our daily lives and public policies. William Perry's scheme of intellectual and ethical development takes us from Dualism, through Multiplicity and Relativism, to Commitments in Relativism, anchored in self-realized values subject to recurrent critical scrutiny. Kegan proposes a helix of five evolutionary stages struggling to balance the yearning for inclusion and the yearning for independence and individual integrity. At Stage 4, "Institutional", emotional life becomes internally controlled and at Stage 5, "Interindividual" a satisfying sense of identity is achieved, a self that can reflect on its values and purposes, that recognizes interdependence as the fundamental context for existence. In *Women's Ways of Knowing* Mary Belenky and her colleagues describe a continuum that goes from Silence, through Received, Subjective, and Procedural knowledge, to Constructed knowing, where knowledge is personally important, woven from reason and emotion, objective data and subjective experiences. Rather than compartmentalizing thought and feeling, conscious and unconscious perceptions, work and home, self and others, learners at this level look for ways to transcend boundaries and resist oversimplification. They recognize that answers and solutions vary depending on the context in which they are raised and on the frame of reference of the persons involved.

Unfortunately our typical ways of knowing are received, subjective, and procedural when we desperately need contextual, constructed knowing. Penetrating and responding to the sound bites, the lies and distortions, the ideological appeals, that daily besiege us, requires high levels of cognitive and affective complexity

Fortunately, by now, we have some experience with intentionally helping adult learners achieve developmental change. *Developing Adult Learners*, by Catherine, Marienau, Morris

Fiddler, and Kathleen Taylor, with its conceptual foundations, strategies and exercises, and teaching approaches, is one of the most useful resources available. I commend it to your attention. Resources like this can help us achieve the kinds of outcomes critical for personal growth and for responsible citizenship. Each of you readers will have your own list and priorities. My own candidates are knowledge pertinent to key social issues, intellectual competence, interpersonal competence, emotional intelligence, integrity, and a level of motivation that invests time, energy and emotion in concerns larger than our own immediate self-interest.

Back in 1981, in his chapter on *Developing Humanitarian Concern in the Modern American College*, Robert White noted that service to others provides some of the most developmentally powerful experiences we can have. There is now solid evidence concerning the contributions of service learning to wide range of desirable outcomes that are consistent with increasing the kinds of affective and cognitive complexity noted by the theorists I mentioned. Alexander Astin and his colleagues examined thirty five student outcomes concerning civic responsibility, academic development, and life skill development. Here are some of their findings.

“The most remarkable finding of this longitudinal study was that all 35 student outcomes measures were favorably influenced by service participation. In other words, participation in volunteer activities during the undergraduate years enhanced ... academic development, civic responsibility and life skills....

The largest differential change... occurred with the values “promoting racial understanding,” “participating in community action programs,” and “influencing social values.” As a consequence of service participation students became more strongly committed to helping others, serving their communities, promoting racial understanding, doing volunteer work and working for non-profit corporations. They also became less inclined to feel that individuals have

little power to change society....

Service participants ... were nearly 50% more likely to spend at least an hour per week interacting with faculty.... Despite the additional time for service participants, students ... actually spent more time with studies and homework than did non-participants. (Astin & Sax, 1999, pp. 255, 256, 259)

Subsequent studies have shown that service learning has the most powerful consequences when it is integrated with courses and classes.

Of course we need to recognize that this prior research was carried out with typical college age students, not with sub-samples of adult learners. But the findings certainly suggest powerful potentials and they also suggest a useful research agenda for our particular students.

Practicalities for Personal Development

I imagine most readers are familiar with David Kolb's experiential learning theory with his cycle of concrete experience, reflection observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. I won't belabor the critical importance of experiential learning here or take time to elaborate that part of his ideas. But I do want to call attention to his Experiential Learning Theory of Growth and Development that has received much less attention than his experiential learning theory and his Learning Styles Inventory. I think it helps us understand why these outcomes occur.

He posits a continuum with three major stages: Acquisition, Specialization, and Integration. This is a continuum of increasing complexity and relativism. Progress is made "via the integration of dialectical adaptive modes" among his four major quadrants: Divergence, Assimilation, Convergence and Accommodation. Growth involves increasing the Affective, Perceptual, Symbolic, and Behavioral Complexity associated with each quadrant. Kolb suggests that human development occurs by achieving "higher level integration through dialectical

conflicts” generated by increasing affective, perceptual, symbolic, and behavioral complexity. I like to think of these as different dimensions for learning, or as "capacities for learning." Our capacity to learn, to convert life's challenges into broadly applicable learning that lasts, grows as we develop increasing affective, perceptual, symbolic and behavioral complexity.

Increasing affective complexity means recognizing and responding to internal stimuli in less totalistic and more differentiated fashion. A powerful personal attraction may become understood to result from a mix of lust, caring, respect, affection, and longing for a past love. An angry outburst may be seen to contain defensiveness based on low self-esteem, hostility toward authority carried on from childhood, a desire to look strong and to impress others

Increasing perceptual complexity means that we can see distinctions, recognize subtleties, taste differences, feel gradations, which were formerly not accessible. The differences between a novice and expert wine taster, appreciating good music, painting, or sculpture, rest on recognizing increasingly fine or subtle distinctions in form, taste, texture, expression. Working effectively with persons diverse in gender, race, ethnicity, or national origin calls for perceptual awareness of subtleties concerning language use, speech timing, and posture.

Lack of such awareness can cause major misunderstandings. Alaskan Athabaskan Indians typically pause three to five seconds between sentences. We anglos from the lower 48 seldom wait more than a second at most. When folks like us work with Athabaskan adults in groups or when teachers like us work with students, that difference in timing leads us to assume that the Athabaskans don't know what they think and never can complete a thought. They find us to be rude, and assume we do not care what they think, do not value their opinions.

So increasing perceptual complexity and awareness is a critically important capacity for learning and for improving performance.

Increasing symbolic complexity occurs when our knowledge base, conceptual

sophistication, and cognitive skills help us name the parts of things formerly seen as unitary. It occurs when we come to understand interactions underlying apparently simple cause and effect relationships, when we can give meanings to what we are experiencing as a result of increasing perceptual and affective complexity. For example, when we learn to apply Kolb's experiential learning cycle to our own teaching, when introduce that conceptual framework to our students and have them complete his Learning Styles Inventory, both we and they move our teaching and learning together to more complex levels.

Increasing behavioral complexity occurs when our words and deeds become more finely responsive to the situations we encounter, when they more accurately reflect the affective, perceptual, and symbolic complexities that characterize the context calling for action. Think of the differences on the basketball court between a Michael Jordan and a high school star. Think of two teachers. One commands a wide range of exercises, group processes, print, visual and technological resources, and evaluation strategies, enriched by solid human relations skills. The other commands lecture notes, a text, and mid-term and final exams which combine multiple choice and essay questions. There is an enormous difference in the behavioral repertoires available to each teacher. And it is likely that there are large differences also in perceptual, affective, and symbolic complexity, with regard to students, learning, and teaching.

Strengthening these capacities is necessary for many areas of complex learning. When our learning helps us achieve increasing complexity in all four areas we greatly strengthen our capacity to learn whatever we need in order to achieve career success, to create a happy marriage and healthy children, to be effective citizens, and to generate a full and satisfying life. And certainly, as our experiences in Lebanon, the Sudan, Bosnia, and currently in Iraq make clear, our leaders and the persons representing us on the ground there, need all the affective, perceptual, symbolic, and behavioral complexity they can muster.

I bring that conceptual framework to your attention because service learning has

powerful potentials to help learners become more complex in those four major domains. If we are intentional about each of them with our students we can increase the chances they will make progress. Not only service learning, but all our educational practices need to include these four elements if developmental change is to occur.

For me the most neglected element is reflection. Reflection is the process by which we metabolize our experiences so they nourish us. The food we chew and swallow only gets converted to blood, bones, and energy when it is metabolized. It does us no good if it is only regurgitated or otherwise excreted. But that's basically what most of our teaching practices involve. We are force fed and then asked to regurgitate, so there is little learning that lasts. Experiential learning, especially service learning, dramatically enriches what we are asked to ingest. But without significant opportunities for collective and individual reflection, the resulting developmental nourishment is much less than it could be.

To help drive that reflection I am proposing two simple instruments: A Service Learning Personal Development Planner, and Evaluating Service Learning for Personal Development. Just copy them off to use with your students prior to and following each service learning experience.

Service Learning Personal Development Planner

It is best to complete this Service Learning Planner prior to making a final decision about where to pursue your service learning. Then you can reflect on how well the organization and activities you are considering will serve your personal development purposes. If you have already made your decision then completing this Planner before you begin will help maximize the areas of development you desire. Some of the possible areas for gain might include:

- Skills in oral and written communication
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills;
- Interpersonal competence, (The ability to “read” non-verbal behavior, increased capacity for empathy, ability to strengthen others’ competence and contributions);
- Increased clarity of purpose which helps you integrate vocation, avocation, and life style concerns;
- Self-confidence (The sense that you can make a difference concerning things that are important to you, that you can handle complex and challenging situations.)
- Emotional intelligence (The ability to be aware of, and to manage, your emotional reactions.);
- Increased recognition of interdependence (The capacity to give and to receive direct assistance and emotional support.);
- Developing integrity so there is internal consistency between word and word, word and deed, deed and deed.
- Which of these you will be able to strengthen will depend on what the organization asks of you and the degree to which you seek out pertinent challenges within the organization. (Use as much space between each heading as you need.)

Name of the organization _____

Purposes of the organization _____

Major activities of the organization _____

Why do you want to contribute to this organization? _____

From what you know now about the organization what activities would be associated with your responsibilities?

Concrete experiences? _____

Reflective Observations? _____

Abstract Conceptualization? _____

Active Experimentation? _____

What are the major areas of personal development you might strengthen by your participation?

What activities would most help you strengthen those areas in the context of this organization?

Concrete Experiences? _____

Reflective Observations? _____

Abstract Conceptualizations? _____

Active Experimentation? _____

What additional information do you need in order to make good judgments about maximizing your personal development from the time and energy you invest in this service learning?

With whom might you talk to get the information you need? (Other participants? Leaders? Faculty members and other university personnel?) _____

What other things might you do to make a sound judgment about contributing to this organization or about maximizing your desired areas of personal development?

Evaluating Service Learning for Personal Development

Use these questions to evaluate the areas of personal development you may have strengthened through your service learning participation and contributions. It may be helpful to respond at an appropriate point part way through your experience to help get some perspective for the rest of your experiences, or you may wish to wait until this particular engagement is complete.

Name of the Organization _____

What have been the major areas of personal development you aimed to strengthen? _____

Which of these areas showed signs of gain? _____

Which areas did not evidence much gain? _____

With as many words as you need, describe any evidence, anecdotes, comments by others, changes in your own behaviors, attitudes, or feelings, that support your thinking or feeling about the gains you made.

With as many words as you need, describe the concrete experiences, reflective observations, abstract conceptualizations, and active experimentation that seemed to contribute most to the areas of personal development you aimed to strengthen. _____

If you made no gains, why do you think that was the case? _____

Conclusion

Service learning can be a powerful force for encouraging personal development and for strengthening democracy in our multi-cultural, globally interdependent, battered world. But to do so it needs to pervade all our curricula, degree programs, and learning plans or contracts. That is a challenging agenda. But we must tackle it.

During my lifetime -- at least since I became a bit socially conscious during the 1950's and 60's, in my late 20's and early 30's -- encouraging adult development, strengthening affective and cognitive complexity, has never been more important. Culturally and politically we seem to be stuck at the self-protective, opportunistic, conformist levels described by Loevinger.

The good - bad, evil-righteous, saints and sinners, mode of fashioning global and domestic policies perfectly fits Perry's dualism, his lowest level of intellectual and ethical development. Amid this barrage of words and pictures listening for the truths and values at the heart of our identities and clarifying the standards for living our own lives because a daunting challenge, -- for ourselves and for our students. But we, and they, must not turn from it.

Twenty years ago I wrote, "Frenzied, unbridled passion, whether in love or work, seldom serves us well. Indeed, it often harms more than helps. To be enflamed, carried away, by an affection, ideology, or cause is easy., but such a state shrinks from reflective thought, public scrutiny, and tough-minded testing. Maintaining a steady fire that is critical as well as creative is more difficult, especially when it suffers frequent doses of icy logic and frigid resistance. Cool passion seeks fulfillment by joining the forces of heart and mind, commitment and critical analysis." (Chickering, pg. 783) This is the posture we need.

References

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