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Civic Engagement Projects in the Religious Studies Classroom

As an applied ethicist, I am concerned with both the content of what students learn and how they choose to apply, or not to apply, their knowledge. An overarching yet somewhat unassessable goal I have set for my students is for them to become actively engaged in the world in which they live: for them to be engaged citizens. Through a Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion grant project, entitled “Pedagogies for Civic Engagement,” I was given the opportunity to explore how a classroom context could encourage students to become more civically engaged. As part of my participation in this grant, I designed a “Civic Engagement Project” (CEP) for an environmental ethics class (PHIL 340).

The assignment had a number of requirements. In groups of two or three, the students were required to:

1. Identify an issue of personal importance that also related to the subject of the course;
2. Take content and theory learned from reading, research, and class discussions, to apply it to their selected issue, and to design a presentation of some kind, such as a short performance piece, gorilla theater, a political demonstration, or an educational presentation for a selected audience; and
3. Apply the theory in a manner that actively engaged both the students themselves and a selected audience outside of the classroom, including organizations on campus, the larger

university community, and/or particular groups from the local community.

In addition, individually each student was required to:

1. Reflect critically upon the entire process through journal entries;
2. Attend a selected number of their colleagues' presentations; and
3. Write a final reflection and assessment of what they learned from their own process and the presentations of others.

This CEP assignment was introduced at the beginning of the semester, when we had a brief discussion regarding the purpose behind the project and the general idea of civic engagement itself. Throughout the semester, students were encouraged to think of topics, types of projects they would like to create, and the groups they would like to form. During the tenth week of the semester, the students formed groups, selected specific topics and intended audiences, and began designing their projects. They utilized the course material and additional research to develop their presentations. The topics of the final CEPs included how to reduce one's carbon footprint, the importance of trees and other vegetation, production and use of energy (with specific focus on coal mining), puppy mills, how nitrates and phosphates threaten wetlands and create dead zones (specifically in the Gulf of Mexico — this was, of course, before the current BP disaster), and sustainability. The CEPs themselves varied: panel discussions consisting of faculty and community experts, a signature drive on a letter to members of the Iowa State House and Senate, a tree planting event, presentations to various audiences — one group created a presentation for a local high school senior science class — and a meditation/trash pick-up event.

One immediate result of this assignment was a reminder that, as professors, we do not control how students respond to an assignment, how they choose to invest in it (or not), and what they ultimately learn. Early in the process, I was discouraged. I sensed that the students were selecting topics that were convenient or easy. I wondered whether they were simply going through the motions and not really trying to engage a topic of interest to them and their selected community; if so, would it really “count” as civic engagement? However, after carefully reading over their journal entries and reflecting back on the projects, as well as conversations with and among individual students, I was again convinced of the value of such assignments. Simply providing such a learning opportunity — one where students are required to step out beyond the walls of the classroom, beyond their comfort zones, and engage others — is important. A number of the students' journal entries reflected that they had indeed selected topics that were of particular interest to them. One group wrote that the selected topic “is near and dear to both our hearts,” another indicated the topic was a part of “my life calling,” and still others selected topics about which they wanted to learn more.

Most of the student journal entries indicated that the CEP assignment made them aware of their responsibility and their ability to act on the issues important to them. A number of students expressed sentiments similar to the following: “The most important element I learned from this assignment was that making an impact in the community and educating others is not very hard... with all the problems in the world and the need for people to be educated, I would think that more groups would try to help the community and campus by doing a project like we did.” Through this assignment, the students had the opportunity to take a stand on an issue, to present it, and to see that, through their willingness to educate themselves and others, they can influence how people think and act. They saw how they could make their voice heard and that people actually listened. Their comments indicated that they recognized that they were learning about something important, they had an increased awareness of their own actions, and, for many, they gained perspectives that would serve them in the future, both in and out of the classroom.

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