What is Active Citizenship?

DePaul University

Prior Learning Assessment

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Abstract

Most people think of civic engagement as voting or being involved in politics. However, civic life is so much more than that. Active civic engagement produces communities that people want to live in by creating an environment where people are informed about issues and engage with their neighbors in meaningful, respectful and positive ways. Meaningful participation requires strong partnerships and compromise, especially with people we disagree with in order to build resilient communities and a healthy democracy. This paper identifies the goals of active citizenship, the value of community involvement, the obstacles to engagement, and advocates for promoting community engagement through partnerships, dialogue, social, and corporate responsibility.

Introduction

As a young child, I was encouraged to volunteer in many different activities. From working with the Maryknoll missionaries to distributing food boxes to neighbors in need, I understood the importance of helping those less fortunate than myself. When I reflect on these early experiences, I realize I was taught to be a passive participant in events organized through the leadership of others. It wasn't until I was older that I realized the need for active participation. I contribute this enlightenment to my high school soccer coach and religious education teacher. Both taught me what it meant to be part of a team, to care for the welfare and development of others in the community regardless of differences, and to understand what it meant to create shared values, and to invest in the social and economic development of everyone in my community.

As I have grown, the basic tenets of my faith and beliefs have spread beyond my immediate friends and family. As a youth soccer coach for preschoolers ages 3 to 4 and for kids in grades 3 through 5, I was able to share my love of the sport and continue instilling the value of team work and cooperation first taught to me by my own coach. As a home room mom, I encouraged artistic activities that gave thanks to the teachers, janitors and other personnel, rather than following the typical program previously engaged in by other parents. As a hospital volunteer, I was able to help care for individuals who needed more attention than the nursing staff was able to provide.

Volunteering as a Cub Scout Leader, I was able to influence a younger generation about the importance of taking care of our environment by organizing activities focused on cleaning up parks, recycling, and learning about endangered species. I collaborated with other parents to help raise awareness of poverty in our local community and created fundraising events for children in need. As a group, our scouting parents decided to adopt families in need through the year and delivered groceries and items. In scouts, we also focused on respect for ourselves, our community, our country and our flag.

Whether advocating and collaborating to fundraise for a new school playground with disability access, creating a summer camp for twice exceptional children, creating a support group and resource website for twice exceptional children, volunteering through corporate activities to Feed the Children, or hosting neighborhood block parties to integrate our multi-cultural non-English speaking and bi-racial families into our social network, I have learned the value of active participation and what it means to be socially responsible in creating a holistic society that everyone can share and participate in.

What is Active Citizenship?

It is my personal belief that an active citizen is an individual who has a responsibility to participate in their communities. This is a simplified way of stating the obligation that people should have to get involved in democracy at all levels. According to the Open Society Foundations, active civic participation is one of the most important steps in creating a healthy, democratic society (Nosko & Szeger, 2013).

To better understand what it means to be an active citizen, I agree with what Paul Rogat writes in his book *Soul of a Citizen*. You need to ask yourself, "are you simply wasting time on the planet or are you spending your time in an enriching manner?" (Rogat-Loeb, 2010).

American Democracy and Activism

In my own philosophical and ethical development, I have embraced the concept of the common good envisioned in the works of Plato and Aristotle to mean a society where people learn to make modest sacrifices and comprises rather than protecting their own self-interests. Historically, fellowship federations, or organizations which promoted a variety of humanitarian and civic engagement, developed in the U.S. between the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars and experienced explosive growth during the industrial revolution when the federal government mobilized the entire collective efforts of American society for war, also referred to as the arsenal for democracy. What this mobilization accomplished was a sense of togetherness and purpose towards a common goal. The effects continued

post-war as the U.S. built a cultural infrastructure that made it easier for people to be politically active and create policies to benefit everyone such as social security, unemployment insurance, a national minimum wage and more (Rogat-Loeb, 2010). Historically, these movements flourished because advocates could conduct almost every aspect of their lives with fellow activists by creating the group participation we see today: food pantries, sport leagues, church choir, summer camps, school board meetings and so much more. Ultimately, the integration of cultural institutions with business created a powerful partnership that banded together to develop social institutions which shaped public policy forming an institionalized economic, military, political, social and educational structure designed to benefit an elitist class of citizens.

Theda Skocpol believes that as organizers and participators in voluntary organizations, Americans are portrayed as the preeminent force that shapes and supplements government activities that create the face of modern democracy (Skocpol, 2004). There are some political theorists such as Harvard graduate Robert Putnam who believe the complexities of modern day life are contributing to a decline in activism. Putnam expressed concern that since the mid-1960s, more and more nonprofit groups have been launched that are run by professional lobbyists as Americans continue to reduce their participation in voluntary groups that meet regularly (Rogat-Loeb, 2010). Putnam attributes this decline to women working, the influence of television, and increased working hours by corporations for causing isolationism and causing people to mistrust and become pessimistic about human nature. I would argue that an ingrained class system is creating a social environment that limits civic engagement as Americans are increasingly disenfranchised from healthcare, education and economic opportunities that would permit more time for active participation thereby creating a perpetual cycle of limiting influence.

Power and Conflict

Results from the Doble study highlighted in the Kettering report is that today many people believe they are alienated from politics and community affairs and have felt powerless to do anything

about it (Remaley & Dineen, 2007). The Doble research presented the idea that people view themselves as bystanders in democracy instead of active members, or as citizens in their community but not as citizens of democracy. The research further cited that many Americans have become too focused on rights and not enough on responsibilities. The media is seen as exploiting cynicism, polarization and division as the powerful partnership between federal fellowships and businesses has created special interest groups only for the wealthy and higher-educated which lobby for self-interests and profits over the common good.

When billions of dollars are being spent on political rhetoric and manipulative advertisements, it certainly appears that mainstream politics appears to be irrelevant to the real problems facing our nation (Chou, 2014). Aristotle believed that liberty and equality in democracy occurs only when all persons share alike in government. How can mature democracies in the U.S. and elsewhere claim to represent the majority when only the needs of the 1% are perceived as being met because of the unfair distribution of resources and the widening chasm between the rich and poor (Chou)? Certainly capitalism with its intent on achieving profit, appears to create inequality in a democracy or a government ruled by money rather than people as it embraces the ideals that barriers to success are personal rather than social issues.

I believe it is only through active civic participation that the U.S. can continue to address issues of social inequality needed to maintain a healthy democracy. The advent of the smart phone, increased access to free wi-fi internet, and the widespread use and access to social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Instagram and countless others, have provided people with the opportunity to reach a more diverse and inclusive network. Technology can be the cure to social isolation by reversing the perception of active civic malaise in recent years. I have witnessed how technology has enabled boycotting of companies that proliferate elitist policies such as promoting bonuses for executives while laying of its workforce. I, myself, have signed petitions to lobby for

increased funding of education and have supported summer youth job programs in impoverished communities due to awareness brought about by social media website exchanges.

Partnering with Businesses and Nonprofits

I believe that strategic partnerships can be part of the solution for advocacy, rather than being perceived as part of the problem. Can companies still reach their business objectives while also partnering to advance society's goals? According to the Harvard Review, profit and purpose are converging as millennials are reporting that creating social value is more important than profit and recognition (Buffett & Eimicke, 2018). Simultaneously, corporate shareholders are demanding increased tracking and reporting of all negative and positive corporation action while consumers are demanding products tied to social causes. Working in accounting, I have witnessed these requests for accountability first-hand. I see more and more companies evaluating how their business is making a positive contribution to society that benefits not just their shareholders, but employees, customers and the communities in which they operate.

The Effect on Inequality

In the journal article authorted by Buffett and Eimicke (2018), they cite Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz who argued that by collaborating across the sectors of society we can continue to grow the economy and move toward equality by "creating a shared prosperity". John MacKey, CEO of Whole Foods promotes the idea of "conscious capitalism" stating that businesses existing for the sake of profit is fundamentally wrong, selfish, and greedy (Boone et al., 2020).

As the family of Polish immigrants, my mother did not complete her high school education and went on to have a child that needed intense care as a result of a physical disability. Unfortunately, social policies at the time provided little relief and even fewer options to an uneducated single mother raising three children. Her choice was either work or stay at home to receive free healthcare. Communities that partner with business can change corporate policies to aid the welfare of their employees. I witnessed

the signing of the Family Leave Act in 1993 designed to help workers who have dependents with medical needs. I have watched internet fundraisers have gain momentum in recent years as community members gather to help neighbors in need. Today, there are numerous organizations and resources that can help people who don't' have equal access to medical or dependent care and workforce education.

Unlike the policies of old, where I was once fired when it was discovered I was a member of Greenpeace, I find today's companies are actively seeking the involvement of their employees on a host of wide-ranging issues from sustainability, to addressing diversity and inclusion for women and minorities, to encouraging participation in each other's growth and welfare through professional mentoring programs and more. I have witnessed the power of companies to embrace community involvement by creating policies and resources that connect people and skills with the information needed to change communities. The last company I worked for promoted corporate responsibility by creating a committee dedicated to engaging employees in community events and actively sought out participation through policies that allowed extra days off for community activism. The committee was dedicated to establishing relationships and matching skilled employees with nonprofits such as DuPage County's Resource Center which promotes the teaching of computer literacy to unemployed residents, helping with resumes, practicing interviews and much more. The company also formed a strategic partnership with Feed the Starving Children to raise awareness of poverty by involving employees in group fundraising events, promoting the event on the corporate website, and providing employees with pictures and language to post on social forums such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

Civic Engagement

Understanding what it means to be an active citizen and how to engage the community in conversations about important social issues is only part of the equation. The next important step is knowing how to engage in activities that benefit society. Active civic engagement can mean volunteering, advocacy or activism. Regardless of whether the activities are political or non-political, the

goal is to secure the common good by addressing family, economic, education, health, environment and

other issues facing the communities in which people live (Longley, 2020). Civic engagement can take the

form of service through community projects, activities that family members or neighbors do together

such as exchanging favors, participation in membership associations and community organizations or

take the form of political action by staying abreast of current events, voting and much more (NCoC,

2010). The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed in 2009 by then President Obama, authorized

an annual report to be produced with the help of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census

Bureau to gauge how healthy America's communities are based on how often its residents are involved

in civic engagement, or in activities that use the collective knowledge and skills of its citizens to improve

the quality of life in the communities in which they live. In these reports, civic engagement is measured

by the number of participants that volunteer, participate in social connectedness and group

participation, connect to information, and political action. A representative sample of some of these

findings for the state of Illinois can be found in Table 1: Indicators of Civic Health & Engagement.

There are many ways to become actively involved in communities. A few examples of active

communication participation include (Longley, 2020):

Volunteerism

- Collecting and donating food to food banks.

- Joining a neighborhood watch group.

- Helping with recycling and cleanup efforts.

- Helping to grow food at community gardens.

Advocacy

- Helping to gather signatures for petitions.

- Meeting with local officials about community issues.

- Working to increase public awareness about a particular cause or policy.

Political Action

- Contribute to election campaigns or serve as a poll worker or judge on Election Day.

- Show support for candidates or causes by displaying buttons, signs, stickers or by handing out brochures. During the 2020 election, I would sign and forward petitions or information about candidates running in Illinois and joined the Illinois Democracy Advocacy Group to stay abreast of local political issues.

Promoting and Engaging in Respectful Dialogue and Debate

Social media and technology does not have to have to be the polarizing platform that divides us a nation, it is also the tool that can bring us together. During the 2020 election, I was able to use social media to reach both liberal and conservative individuals and groups across the U.S. to exchange information about the differing political viewpoints and what social issues were important and why. These conversations led me to engage in open and honest discourse with my own social network about the existing social, economic and political divides. Rather than letting emotions get the best of me, I learned to engage others is conversation by actively trying to seek and understand issues related to race, gender, or political differences. I learned to follow the advice giving to me by a friend from a column she discovered on the internet:

- Seek to understand, not to persuade

- Listen carefully and without judgment

- When others are speaking do not interrupt

- Do not pressure anyone into speaking

- Treat others with the respect you expect yourself

- Remember that everyone's views have equal value

Social Medial and Personal Activism

There are many ways to make a positive difference in the lives of your neighbors, your fellow citizens, and social media and the internet makes this easier than ever with the ability to search for volunteer needs in your local community. An issue that has held personal significance for me has always been education. From my own challenges with dyslexia to raising two boys diagnosed as both highly gifted and with ADD/ADHD and issues on the autistic spectrum, I used the internet and found the National Association for Gifted Education (NAGC) and discovered the means to advocate for 2E children, also known as twice exceptional.

While not a full-blown social media campaign or fundraiser, I used the internet and yahoo groups to advocate, maintain and create a website called the PAGE or Parent Advocacy Group for Gifted Education in 2011. Anyone could access the resource materials and members who joined were included in our meetup group events and invited to activities to help work on socialization with our children and as parents, discuss issues about learning, motivation, and discipline unique to the needs of 2E or twice exceptional children.

If I were to create this group today, I would take a much more robust approach from what I learned from other community activists. In evaluating this prior experience, I realize I didn't take full advantage of developing a strategy that tapped into the wide breadth of social capital I had at the time: my participation in homeschool groups, Northwestern's gifted education program, my social network with moms who were on their local school boards, my own active network through my volunteer work, my association with Dr. Nancy Baron, special needs teacher. All of these examples were personal associations I could have communicated with to better understand and advocate for the needs of 2E children.

In creating a social media campaign today, I would have enlisted the help of a friend with previous public relations and media experience, and subject matter experts like Dr. Nancy Baron.

Together, we could evaluate and identify who would be affected by 2E children, such as parents, schools, family members, healthcare members and more and determine what information or changes would be needed to improve the situation for the child, the school and anyone else impacted by the physical, emotional, psychological, educational special needs of 2E kids. We could collaborate to determine what approach and who would have the power or be the decision makers that would need to be influenced to make changes to school settings that would benefit all participants. For example, at our local high school level, study halls had separate classrooms for students with sensory issues where they could sit on a ball, squeeze toys, move about, or have other accommodations that were frequently needed by 2E children. However, these techniques weren't being adapted in elementary schools and a possible campaign strategy could be to identify this problem, develop a communication plan that created awareness of the benefits of implementing sensory strategies for younger students, assess what resources would be available in instruction, space, and physical purchases of materials, and work with all of the stakeholders such as parents, school administrators, teachers, therapists, and partner with local businesses to help promote a change and create a positive sensory experience (Cinco & Aquino, 2011). Furthermore, I would embrace tools designed to support social activism, provide platforms to manage members, help with fund-raising, recruitment of volunteers, technical support, best practices and much more (Socialbrite).

Obstacles or Challenges to Personal Activism

Too often we fall into the trap of convincing ourselves that "there's no way we can change things" (Rogat-Loeb, 2010). We let fear of the unknown, not knowing how or where to start, fear of acceptance, job or family pressures, social and family obligations, avoidance of conflict, stress from meeting day-to-day responsibilities, and our own self-doubt as excuses to confronting social problems in our own communities (Rogat-Loeb, 2010). Harvard economist Juliet Schor highlights this struggle in *The Overworked American*, as Americans continue to work harder just to get by and provide for their

families (Rogat-Loeb). However, if we want to change the corporate and social structures that perpetuate institutionalized elitist policies, we need to find ways to create advocacy through workplace experiences, strategic partnerships that provide support for childcare, and environments that teach knowledge and help to develop skills for activism.

Another way to civic engagement is to find a balance between the activities that nurture us, such as gardening, running, reading, posting on Facebook, or hanging out with friends and ones that need our involvement in the world (Rogat-Loeb, 2010). One way to find more time is to cut back on excessive or distracting diversions such as constant TV-watching, weekend partying, or constant texting and social media posting.

It is important to remember, change only happens through active participation of community members. It was only through the leadership by elected representatives, advocacy groups, and the actions of ordinary citizens to confront greed that legislation for financial aid, minimum wage, rent control, and job creation has been implemented thereby helping Americans participate in a democracy supportive of economic wealth and development. Further lobby against corporate greed has resulted in help for people suffering from the opioid crisis. Even taking to social media to actively solicit agreement for shared politics has created boycotts against companies perceived to be lobbying against social policy and embracing special interests.

Conclusion

I, myself, had to overcome numerous obstacles to education and inequality as a result of my dyslexia and impoverished living conditions during my formative years. As a result, I have a unique perspective on social mobility. I believe our education system can be the great equalizer. I believe instruction needs to be revamped to include a curriculum that provides for "hands-on" and "self-directed" learning opportunities to reach children with a wide range of learning styles. In addition, we need a federal mandate on how education should be funded since using real estate taxes only serves to

divide resources based on wealth and social status which perpetuates systemic inequality. When I ask

myself if I am spending my life in a meaningful way, I want active civic engagement against institutional

power, lobbying for change in education, and advocacy against economic disparities to be the legacy I

leave behind.

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Appendix

Table 1

Indicators of Civic Health & Engagement

Type of Engagement	Illinois (2008)	Illinois (2010)	Nationa (2008)	Nationa (2010)
Volunteer or Service	24.8%	28.3%	24.9%	26.8%
Work with neighbors to fix or improve community	7.1%	9.0%	8.5%	8.8%
Social or Community service (or project)	18%	14.6%	19%	14.2%
Social Connectedness				
Whole family eats together (at least several times a week)	63%	86.9%	60%	89.1%
Frequent electronic communication with others	65%	56.0%	58%	53.6%
Exchanging favors with a neighbor	9.9%	14.5%	12.1%	16.2%
Attend a meeting of a group or organization	31%	21.8%	27%	21.5%
Political Action				
Attend a public meeting	8.3%	9.6%	9.6%	10.3%
Voted in 2008 Presidential election	77%		78%	
Voted in 2014 midterm elections		41.7%		
Contacted or visited a public official about election issues	11%	11.2%	12%	10.4%
Generally follow government news & public affairs		31.6%		25.7%

Note. This is a representative sample of civic engagement produced by the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) in collaboration with the McCormick Foundation spanning the years 2008 and 2010.

Works Produced

[URL Redacted]

THE PAGE

Parent Advocacy for Gifted Education

Home Page   **About Us**   **Members**   **Events**   **Just for Kids**   **Just for Teens**   **Books**   **Today in History**   **Resources**

Want to Make the Most of Your Child's Education?

With so many schools being underfunded it's now more important than ever to advocate on behalf of your child.

This means getting more involved in how your child is learning.

•Do you know your child's learning style?

•Is your child struggling with a certain skill.

•Do you have a child that seems bored in school?

•Or a child not working to their full potential.

What if you already know your child has been identified as being gifted or has an RTI, what's the next step?

This website has been dedicated to parents just like you! It's a place to meet, connect and stay informed on how you can help your child reach their full potential!

Members Area

Sign In or Register