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Encouraging Pre-Service Teachers' Civic Engagement "In a Box"

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Abstract: This practical reflection describes a faculty learning community course focusing on Service-Learning (S-L) in which the authors engaged which prompted them to implement a S-L project with their pre-service teachers that focused on creating election-themed activities for families to do together to learn more about civic engagement. In this piece, the authors briefly describe the content of the S-L course, the original plans for the S-L project, and the ways in which the project had to be adapted due to COVID-19. The authors also describe the election-themed products their students created, which were distributed by our local public library partners. This article should be of interest to teacher educators and to pre-service and in-service teachers who are interested in implementing activities designed to promote and enhance civic engagement and electoral participation.

Keywords: service learning, civic engagement

As teacher educators, we tell our students--pre-service teachers (PSTs)--that it is their responsibility to advocate for their students. In Texas, there is even a state standard that explicitly states that teachers must “serve as an advocate for students and the profession” (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). While PSTs may genuinely want to fulfill this responsibility, educator preparation programs often fail to teach them how. Additionally, they may not have models of teachers or teacher educators who undertake this important work from whom to learn and follow. As teacher educators, we are also sometimes unsure of how to best go about preparing our PSTs to undertake this important work.

Several researchers assert that teacher candidates need to develop a greater understanding of the political nature of teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ukpokodu, 2007). And while there is a significant body of research focusing on civics education and teaching secondary

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level students to vote (Dunn, Sondel, & Baggett, 2019; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Noddings & Brooks, 2016; Shapiro & Brown, 2018), there is a noticeable lack of research that focuses on how to develop and sustain educator activism (Dunn, 2016). While Freire (1968) argued that “teaching is never a neutral act” (p. 19), many educators continue to struggle to determine how to best teach about politics and, in particular, elections (Sondel, Baggett, & Dunn, 2018). This gap between educator preparation and the realities of teaching can breed an environment in which some educators remain politically apathetic or disengaged, choosing to avoid political activism and occupying, instead, a quieter, more “neutral” space as educators (Ross, 2019). Research suggests that some educators even “staunchly advocate that election-related issues do not merit inclusion” in the curriculum (Dunn, Sondel, & Baggett, 2019, p. 450).

Background Information

In the regional comprehensive university where we teach in an educator preparation program, we are actively working to teach our PSTs how to undertake advocacy and civic engagement to benefit their future students and their families. Because we want to contribute to “transforming the concept of the teacher from that of an isolated, passive, technical worker to a connected, sociopolitically active, knowledge-building agent of change” (Baker-Doyle, 2017, p. 2), we developed a unique cohort of our university’s educator preparation program called C.R.E.A.T.E. (Community Responsiveness and Engaged Advocacy in Teacher Education), which focuses on creating and nurturing

connections to the community and engaging in advocacy on students’ and families’ behalf. This element of C.R.E.A.T.E. mimics other community-engaged teaching programs that strive to work in solidarity with families and communities through “sustained engagement, wherein family and community members become mentors to, and co-collaborators with, both teacher educators and PSTs for the purposes of transforming the curriculum and learning environment in both teacher education and K-12 schools” (Zeichner, et al., 2016, p. 280).

In addition to the school-based clinical experiences common to most educator preparation programs, the C.R.E.A.T.E. program adds three unique experiences to the PSTs’ preparation (Olson Beal and Burrow, 2021). First, it requires PSTs to partner with the local public library or one of several other community organizations as volunteers and as engaged participants in organizational events and programming. Second, it partners PSTs with a local family with school-aged children. PSTs spend ample time with the families over the course of the semester, attending typical school-related events (e.g., parent-teacher nights, IEP meetings, etc.) and participating in family-focused events not usually accessible in traditional teacher preparation experiences (e.g., soccer matches, quinceañeras, family dinners, etc.). Third, it provides PSTs with opportunities to engage with the political process by attending events held by candidates running for local and state-wide elections and by learning about the electoral process both for themselves and as future teachers.

Prior to 2020, the C.R.E.A.T.E. program (which was started in Fall 2018) loosely adhered to best practices in Service-Learning. We allowed our students to sign up to volunteer with one of three local community organizations: the Nacogdoches Public Library, the African American Heritage Project (a local organization that works to preserve and promote the history and culture of African Americans in our county), and C & R Kutt Bottle (a grassroots organization that collects, cleans, and re-purposes discarded glass into art in order to reduce the amount of glass being dumped into our local landfill). Students sign on to engage with the organization based on the organization's needs, which could mean meeting early mornings at the local glass recycling dumpster to salvage glass that could be made into art, serving food at BBQ fundraising events, and helping coordinate library events for children and adolescents. Students document their hours in a log and submit a reflection at the end of the semester identifying what they learned from the semester-long experience that is applicable to them as future teachers.

We both understood that some of the experiences we were facilitating for our PSTs were types of Service-Learning (S-L), but we also knew that we were missing some important elements and that we were not being as intentional or thoughtful with the S-L experiences as we should have been. Thus, in Spring 2020, we engaged in a faculty learning community (FLC) focusing on S-L. Burrow is much more knowledgeable about S-L research and experiences, was the course content creator and facilitator; Olson Beal signed on as a

participant in order to improve the S-L experiences we were facilitating with our PSTs in C.R.E.A.T.E.

Our goal with this project was to provide them with a real-world experience in which they would create age-appropriate election-themed activities that could involve entire families in the electoral process. Many of our students expressed worry about how to engage their students in dialogue and instruction about elections--especially since the 2020 election seemed particularly controversial and divisive (Dunn, 2016). We wanted them to have an experience developing non-partisan age-appropriate election-themed activities so that, when they have classrooms of their own, they are not afraid to delve into these topics.

The FLC: Service-Learning Course

In spring 2020, Burrow offered a new Faculty Learning Circle (FLC) she was commissioned to design by the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at our institution to promote faculty knowledge in and application of course-based Service-Learning (S-L). Burrow centered her 6-week, fully online course around defining and exploring S-L through Heffernan's (2001) six models for Service-Learning: discipline-based service-learning, problem-based service-learning, capstone, community-based action research (C-BAR), pure service-learning, and service internship. Course participants were expected to work through the course content and engage with other participants through discussion posts. To graduate from the course and earn \$500 project support funding, participants had to propose a S-L

project with direct service, indirect service, or civic action within the community for implementation in a future course. Participants' projects had to demonstrate how the core principles of engagement, reflection, reciprocity, and public dissemination within S-L would be met and summarize expected benefits to students and community. The following plan was submitted by Olson Beal right before we broke for spring break:

- Have our students plan and implement a voting simulation activity for families at the Nac Public Library in anticipation of the November 3 federal election
- Have our students prepare fun and educational activities for a range of ages so that parents / families can have the experience of learning about the candidates and some of the issues. And maybe some historical information about voting / voting rights--since it's the 100th year of the anniversary of (white) women's suffrage
- Create some boxes that teachers could check out so that they could use the materials in their classes in subsequent years

Olson Beal identified the planned project as being a discipline-based capstone project with an existing community partner (i.e., the local public library). The planned project would ask students to offer direct service in the form of civic action by having a routine and sustained presence in the community throughout the semester including experience reflections situated in course learning to aid their analysis and understanding [i.e., discipline-based S-L (Heffernan, 2001)] and then drawing upon

their knowledge obtained throughout their coursework to complete relevant service work in the community [i.e., capstone] (Heffernan, 2001).

And then we paused to enjoy spring break. At the time, it seemed like maybe the COVID-19 pandemic would be like the 2009 swine flu epidemic, which greatly impacted countries around the globe, but from which we remained largely unscathed.

Adaptations Brought on by COVID-19

A lot changed during that one spring break week (March 9-15, 2020). We were scheduled to come back on Monday, March 16. That Sunday night, we received word that our university was closing down for a few days to give us time to plan adequately for COVID-19. We ultimately remained closed for a few days and then opened back up fully online. The S-L course remained largely paused as we struggled to move all our instruction to synchronous and asynchronous learning and to find ways to help our students, many of whom were scared, sick or afraid of becoming sick, and under-resourced with regard to adequate technology (and even broadband internet in our largely rural area) to transition to fully remote learning. As the semester wore on, Burrow hoped to motivate our commitments to complete the course by notifying all course participants that she had advocated for a \$500 mini-grant to help us implement our plans. We were thrilled! Olson Beal finished the semester, naively believing that by the time the fall semester started, we would be "back to normal" and we would be able to implement the original

election activities fair at the public library.

At some point during the summer, it became clear that we would not, in fact, be “back to normal” by the time fall course started. Most of our state was largely shut down and our summer courses happened online only. The public library did some amazing asynchronous and virtual work for our community, but remained closed to visitors. We turned our attention to modifying the original S-L implementation plans so that they could happen mostly or completely virtually.

The class that we co-taught in Fall 2020 included 27 total PSTs: sixteen EC-6 certification students, nine 7-12 certification students, and two EC-12 certification students. The 7-12 students were certifying in biology, history, speech, family & consumer sciences, and agriculture; the two EC-12 students were certifying in art. Of the 27 students, there were 25 females and 2 males. There were 22 white students, 2 Latinx students, and 3 Black students. All the students were enrolled in their final semester before clinical teaching.

We decided to keep our plans to partner with the local public library. They were the partner with whom we collaborated the most. And they were continuing to find ways to keep working during the pandemic, albeit remotely; the other two organizations paused their activities while we waited to see how things would unfold. We also decided to keep an electoral focus. The 2020 presidential election was on the horizon and 2020 was the one-hundredth anniversary of the passage of the nineteenth amendment, which granted

suffrage to white women. We did not want the semester to go by without delving into both issues. The previous year, in a class on assessment, we had tasked them with creating rubrics to evaluate candidates for statewide office; they then attended a candidate event where they were able to meet 6-8 candidates for state office and evaluate them based on the rubrics they had designed (Olson Beal and Burrow, 2020). Numerous students noted in end-of-semester reflections how much they had learned both from the process of creating a rubric to evaluate a political candidate *and* from getting to meet and talk one-on-one with candidates. We hoped to create an equally valuable learning opportunity for them, despite the restrictions and challenges brought on by the pandemic.

As the summer wound down, we had to make final decisions about the assignment so that we had time to use the \$500 grant money. Many of our students had gone home in March 2020 and did not return to in-person classes in the fall, choosing instead to engage in synchronous courses from home. Furthermore, the public library was still closed and we had no way of knowing whether it would re-open. We made a decision to cancel plans for an in-person family election activities fair and move forward with a remote option. The public library had been creating literacy-based activity bags for patrons to come pick up outside the library. We decided to borrow their idea and have our students create some election-themed activity boxes. Because everything was more difficult due to the pandemic, and because we only had maybe 8 weeks between when the semester started and the 2020 presidential election, we opted to select

and order the materials ourselves. In normal times, we would have worked together with the students to select materials and create supply lists. We used the \$500 mini-grant to purchase the following:

- 60 boxes of colored pencils
- 60 flat laptop-style boxes
- “I voted” stickers
- Pre-printed postcards
- Postage stamps
- 20 copies each of three different books:
 - Shamir, R. (2018). What’s the big deal about elections? Philomel Books. [appropriate for ages pre-K thru 3rd grade]
 - Gunderson, J. (2018). Understanding your role in elections: Kids’ guide to government. Capstone Press. [appropriate for grades 2-5]
 - Dionne, E. (2020). Lifting we we climb: Black women’s battle for the ballotbox. Viking Books. [appropriate for grades 5-8]

Meeting biweekly via Zoom, we brainstormed overall topics with our students that could be part of an election activity box for families and tried to identify activities and topics that would apply to 3 age ranges of children (i.e., pre-K-3rd grade, 2nd grade-5th grade, and 5th-8th grades). The students ranked the topics according to their interest in them. We did our best to give each student one of their top choices. The topics were as follows:

- Designing an assessment tool to help

older students evaluate a candidate

- Designing an assessment tool to help younger students evaluate a candidate
- Directions for how to register to vote and when and how to vote
- Instructions for how to write a letter to a candidate
- Art-based activities related to elections / voting
- Food/culinary arts related to elections / voting
- History of voting rights

Students worked collaboratively during class in Zoom breakout rooms as well as independently outside of class to develop their activities. They ended up producing some really great activities and assessment tools designed to initiate dialogue among children and their parents regarding voting and elections. A group of several students preparing to become culinary arts teachers created instructions for how to make the favorite desserts of incumbent President Donald J. Trump and his challenger, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden. Their instruction sheet included QR codes to two websites with simple recipes: 1) a chocolate cake made in a mug that required readily available ingredients and that hopefully would involve less mess than a full cake--a nod to parents whom they knew were experiencing incredible amounts of stress due to pandemic schooling and 2) a simple recipe for how to make homemade ice cream using a Ziploc bag. The letter-writing group created simple instructions for how to write a formal letter, suggestions for things you might want to communicate to a candidate, addresses for our elected representatives, a letter template, and

instructions for how to address an envelope. One group created a page of instructions about how to register to vote, information about who is eligible to vote, when you could vote, and where, and what to bring when you go to vote. The group tasked with creating a rubric to help grades 6-12 students evaluate a candidate created simple instructions for how to determine which candidate they preferred, based on issues that the children identified as being important to them. A group of several soon-to-be art teachers created an election-themed coloring page as well as an activity that encouraged students to design their own campaign poster. Finally, the last group curated a list of several videos and websites about the history of voting rights and designed a timeline activity for children to complete regarding the history of voting and asking them to do a free-write regarding why they think voting is important.

Once the activities were completed, students shared their activities during our Zoom class time. Two students who were still living in our area volunteered to meet me in my backyard--with masks on--to assemble the 60 activity boxes—20 per age range (i.e., pre-K-3rd grade, 2nd grade-5th grade, and 5th-8th grades). We made color copies of all the activities and assembled the boxes with the activities, colored pencils, stickers, and postcards. We labeled the boxes as to which age range they were for based on the reading level of the book included in the box. Once they were assembled, we took them to the public library and dropped them off there. Our library partners publicized that we had created the activity boxes and handled the distribution of the boxes to local families.

One local mother noted, on the library's Facebook post announcing that the boxes were available: "We picked ours up today and we were super impressed with them!"

What We Learned Together

As teacher educators, we tell our PSTs that it is their responsibility to advocate for their students. Through facilitation of this S-L project, Olson Beal and Burrow learned more about what it can look like for teacher educators to prepare and support PSTs towards a necessary commitment to civic engagement. Throughout this S-L project execution, Olson Beal and Burrow were struck by the PSTs' need for basic civic education before we could expect them to participate in a project of civic engagement on behalf of their communities. The amount of foundational knowledge and personal practice that PSTs required in order to be effective in the S-L capstone seems to support a troubling truth that while teaching is political, teacher preparation programs are often filled with students that are woefully unfamiliar with and often even adamantly adverse to "getting political." So, while the S-L project provided tangible benefits to the local community, the benefits to the PSTs was a remarkable phenomenon that further confirms to Olson Beal and Burrow that teacher preparation programs like C.R.E.A.T.E. are vital to the civic education of future teachers.

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Appendix A: Civic Engagement "In a Box" Images

