Ethnic Studies as a Site for Political Education: Critical Service Learning and the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights

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ABSTRACT Service learning in political science is driven by a commitment to expanding what is meant by civic education. Following this tradition, this article presents an example of a course informed by critical service learning centered in a grassroots social movement. Partnered with the California Domestic Workers Coalition and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, this course involved students in direct political engagement to explore cultural citizenship, the legislative process, and the possibilities and limitations of grassroots movements for social change. Challenging traditional notions of what counts as service and who counts as an expert, the example of this course speaks to the promise of service learning pedagogy as a strategy to connect students in meaningful ways to critical social issues and as a tool for political education.

DOMESTIC WORKERS RIGHTS AND POLITICS EDUCATION

On September 26, 2014, immigrant Latina and Filipina nannies, housekeepers, eldercare providers, and personal-care attendants surrounding Governor Jerry Brown cheered as he signed the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights (AB 241-Ammiano) into law. To win passage of the bill, workers organized labor unions and clergy and also led a coalition including employers, parents, children, elders, and people with disabilities to craft and pass the legislation. The final version of the law was modest in scope but of enormous significance to the workers who struggled to pass the bill over six years, three legislative sessions, and two vetoes. As domestic worker leader Enma Delgado said, in responding to Governor Brown's veto in 2012, "The governor may have vetoed our bill, but he cannot veto our movement." (Delgado 2012).

This legislative campaign was part of a larger movement of immigrant women of color to build political power by demanding legal and cultural recognition for their contributions as workers and human beings. The organizations that comprise the California Domestic Workers Coalition and the National Domestic Workers Alliance developed grassroots political analyses that embody practices of intersectionality and cultural citizenship prominent in contemporary social theory. These organizations welcomed our course, which integrated direct political participation with the workers, advocates, and policy makers leading the campaign. Robinson (2000) and other scholars argue that direct engagement can enhance student learning in the study of politics. This article describes an ethnic studies course on grassroots citizenship organized on principles of critical service learning (CSL) (Mitchell 2008). In partnership with a grassroots movement for racial and economic justice, this course provided rich conditions for student learning about politics.

ENGAGED POLITICAL EDUCATION IN ETHNIC STUDIES

Ethnic studies programs emerged from student-led movements "because the research, education, and service needs of

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[communities of color] were either ignored or ineffectively addressed by the academy" (Garcia 2007, 208). As programs developed, a dearth of resources in libraries and textbooks encouraged faculty to partner with local communities where residents were authors and experts on related histories, cultures, and policy issues. Centering the perspectives and lived experiences of "those who have been historically excluded" (Calderón 2014, 85), ethnic studies scholars and curricula embrace racial politics, community struggles, and "the reality of problems that [marginalized] communities are confronting" (ibid., 92). They also used university resources to address issues that disproportionately affect and concern people of color (Garcia 2007; Stevens 2003).

Ethnic studies pedagogy recognizes the situated knowledge that students bring into classrooms and their imbrication with people and communities central to the curriculum. Ethnic studies embrace the fact that knowledge production is not simply from engagement with academic material but also is rooted in dialectical relationships among lived experience, history, politics, and activism. Therefore, an intention to engage and contribute to a contemporary political struggle is a valid academic exercise. For all of these reasons, ethnic studies can be a privileged location for service learning with social justice aims, or what Mitchell (2008) termed "critical service learning" (CSL).

SERVICE LEARNING AS POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

The National and Community Service Act of 1990 (§12511, sec. 101) supported the expansion of service learning in higher education. This legislation defined "service learning" as a method "under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences." This definition has guided much of service learning practice, deploying tens of thousands of students into volunteer experiences each year. The emphasis on student learning through charitable work has resulted in a "depoliticized rendering of direct services to needy populations" that limits possibilities for social transformation (Robinson 2000, 607). Morton (1995) first questioned the different paradigms within which service learning could exist, and he encouraged the field to consider its spectrum of potential forms, from charity to engagement in transformative political action. Whereas much service learning work continues within a charitable frame, it can take various forms, including advocacy and public works responsive to community concerns and even "doing politics" (Robinson 2000).

Efforts to engage students in contemporary political issues can run counter to disciplinary traditions and ethical commitments to nonpartisanship in the classroom. Mendel-Reyes (1997, 15) considered this a "crisis...defined by the gap between the theory and practice of democracy." Jones (2006, 1) called this American political science's "ambivalent position relative to civic education and civic engagement." As teachers, we share an ethical imperative to encourage students to reflect critically on their beliefs to develop their own analyses and viewpoints, through debate with one another, with texts, and with their teachers. Engaging students in intensely political processes requires sufficient curriculum flexibility so that students can observe, participate, and contribute to the class and partnership in ways that enrich their learning, that are equitable among different students, and that help them define their own political values and terms of engagement with the issues being studied. Yet, direct engagement through service learning can be complementary to other modes of active learning in political science, from campaign simulations (Caruson 2005) to training students in applied analytic methods and consulting through partnerships with community organizations[1] (Wong 2015).

There is a shared sense that higher education should do more to develop young people as active political agents (Galston 2001). If we understand civic education as supporting students' political socialization and developing their civic knowledge and democratic values (Galston 2001; Owen 2000), then service learning is an important institutional response. Additionally, service learning courses are where many non–political science majors receive their first significant exposure to the importance of political institutions and public policy in their life as future professionals and citizens (Rocha 2000). As Battistoni and Hudson (1997, 7) perceived it, "Service-learning renews political science's commitment to civic education and, thus, moves our students from being subjects to citizens." This article argues for the careful integration of political engagement opportunities through CSL to support political socialization, civic knowledge, and democratic values.

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CSL courses are marked by an intentional commitment to a more just and equitable society through "a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships" (Mitchell 2008, 62). In the context of CSL, "authenticity" requires a sense of belonging and commitment to one another and the community in which the work occurs. It asks stakeholders to recognize their positionality and place of power in the relationship, honoring the vulnerability that this requires. As Calderón (2014, 92) argued, "Without an education that looks at the systemic and structural foundations of social problems, students will be taught the symptoms of the problems instead of understanding the character of the structure that is placing individuals in those conditions." CSL links classroom and community to bring attention to structural injustice, shifting the emphasis from student learning through service to social transformation through engagement (Rosenberger 2000).

Through readings and discussions, CSL courses address issues of power, privilege, history, and systems that undergird specific social problems. Community engagement is organized toward actions that can create and sustain meaningful change. CSL aims

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to redistribute power in how community engagement experiences are identified and entered. It draws knowledge from diverse constituents and reconfigures the classroom through changing locations; sharing facilitation between students, instructors, and community leaders; and other practices that disrupt the dynamic of a traditional classroom. CSL includes academic sources that identify and question the unequal distribution of power that creates the "service need" in the first place. It encourages long-term partnerships to build dialogue, trust, and solidarity that last beyond the end of the course.

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GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS: IMMIGRANT WOMEN, DOMESTIC WORKERS, AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

The embodiment of intersectional analysis and political practice by the domestic workers' rights movement provided the framework for the course's structure, themes, and content. Community activists were already engaged in ongoing discussions of their movement's multiple locations within and particular contributions to racial, gender, immigrant, disability, and labor rights struggles (Clarke et al. 2014). Whereas the national movement was multiracial and multilingual, most workers in the California legislative campaign were Latina and Filipina. Therefore, education about the history of slavery in the United States and the persistent racism against black women in particular was a focus of popular education for both workers and solidarity-minded employers. Workers were trained on the history and principles of the disability rights movement, and they established careful alliances with employers that larger, for-profit agencies portrayed as potential "victims" of any worker rights legislation.

These complex political conditions meant that the course needed to prepare students for engagement through careful attention to the history of domestic work's relationship to slavery and colonization, global geopolitics of migration, feminist political theory on the devaluation of care work, and critical disability analyses of in(ter)dependence and citizenship. The course framed citizenship and political subjectivity as dynamic cultural fields in which people not only claim equity and equal rights but also demand respect for differences rather than assimilation. Students were told to expect a class based on specific assumptions undergirding ethnic studies and feminist studies traditions—for example, that inequality and injustice are products of systemic and structural rather than individual and attitudinal problems. They were also told that they must be flexible in terms of scheduling to adapt during the 10-week quarter to the dynamic conditions of a community campaign in progress.

The community component of the course expanded notions of "service" to all activities that supported efforts to pass the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. Marching on the state capitol was as acceptable a service activity as providing childcare at events. Students also were involved in "collecting stories" for the campaign, researching key legislators, offering their own testimonies to legislators in worker-led delegations, and organizing education and outreach activities. Some students participated more actively in legislative visits and others painted signs, served food, and provided childcare—in other words, performing tasks that made it possible for domestic workers to participate fully in the movement. They learned, as Yep (2014, 43) contended, that "creating community, sharing resources, and listening can be political acts." Whether students lobbied legislators or did arts and crafts with children, their contributions were valued equally. The course emphasized building relationships within the classroom, as well as between students and community members, instead of transactional exchanges focused on producing an immediate "deliverable" product. Through accompaniment and participation with domestic worker organizations, students learned firsthand how this movement sought to transform the care-work industry through multilingual and multicultural alliances led primarily by non-English-speaking working women of diverse immigration statuses.

Reading and writing assignments put scholarly studies of citizenship in dialogue with the theory and practice of the domestic workers' rights movement. Students read historical, sociological, and political-theory literature on domestic work in the United States, and they learned how contemporary legal exclusion of domestic workers from formal recognition and protection is a legacy of slavery, patriarchy, colonialism, and xenophobia. Reading about the history and sociology of migration, citizenship, and domestic labor emphasized the role of systems of oppression in the struggle to legitimize domestic work. The coursework built on intersectional analyses and theories of change from black feminism and disability studies, which helped students to appreciate organizing strategies that challenged both structural injustices and cultural attitudes around care work. The voices of domestic workers were central to both readings and guest lectures. Community leaders—including María Reyes, a 60-year-old undocumented Spanish-monolingual domestic worker—were not only a source for personal testimonies but also recognized experts and analysts. Course readings and guest lectures by worker–leaders and organizers in the domestic workers' rights movement situated this state-level legislative campaign alongside national and international issues.

Assignments included popular education exercises, such as reflecting on the students' own relationships to domestic work and their family's legacies, interviewing family members and friends, and writing and speaking activities to situate themselves in the academic literature and contemporary issues of domestic workers. This created opportunities to build solidarity and connections across differences and allowed students to better articulate how (and why) everyone is implicated in the struggle for domestic worker rights. Students from working-class immigrant families, including children of domestic workers, saw familiar people and stories similar to their own recognized as legitimate sources of academic knowledge and political leadership. The classroom was a space in which workers' experiences—as well as those of their children and grandchildren—were valued. The course also offered a unique opportunity for those who were raised in a home

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with domestic worker employees to reflect on their family's complex and diverse relationship to this type of labor and the people who provide it. Many students who began the class with a clear sense of their family identity as "workers" or "employers" discovered multiple and overlapping identities and affiliations that they had not understood about their own heritage.

Students reflected on conflicted feelings as representing not only individual moral struggles but also the product of a society that does not want to confront the living legacies of slavery, racism, poverty, and xenophobia. This critical stance avoided the romanticizing of the contemporary movement being studied, thereby allowing for a more complicated understanding of the challenges and contradictions faced by people working for social change.

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ENGAGED POLITICAL EDUCATION

Although once derided as "flaky" or "suspect" (Mendel-Reyes 1997, 15), service learning in political science is driven by a commitment to expanding what is meant by civic education—that is, providing educational experiences that supplement theories, dates, and voting with active and engaged participation in the community (Cook 2008; Ehrlich 1999; Rimmerman 1991; Walker 2000; Yep 2014). Indeed, our aim in this course aligned with Rimmerman's (1991, 494) encouragement to "challenge traditional ways of conceiving of citizenship." Students came to understand citizenship as "a dynamic, intersubjective and contentious process" not granted but rather claimed through collective and collaborative action rooted in relationships of struggle (Coll 2010, 20).

The course was an engagement with a political action—a grassroots social movement that utilized a legislative campaign as one of many tools for building power for immigrant and working-class women of color. The pedagogical strategies centered the voices and experiences of domestic workers in this movement while simultaneously allowing students to develop agency as political actors. They studied the political education of immigrant women who taught them about grassroots political organizing and legislative reform. The course reinforced to our students and the immigrant women working in this grassroots movement that "they could create knowledge, empower themselves and enact change in the world" (Yep 2014, 39).

Students studied the relationships between local and regional organizing and the larger US labor movement and transnational movements of women, workers, and "global care chains" (Parreñas 2012). Research assignments (e.g., creating background briefs for community groups before legislative visits) became exercises in intersectional analyses of gender-, race-, and class-power dynamics. By studying legislators' home districts, constituencies, endorsers, donors, and personal histories, students not only learned to "follow the money" but also about possible common ground between community activists and elected officials and their staffs.

Because the lives and experiences of domestic workers were central to the course and the political movement, students were able to see low-income women of color as leaders in a legislative campaign and, indeed, a major labor-rights movement. The course required them to recognize domestic workers as social and political analysts as well as agents. They engaged in community meetings, political activities, discourses, and practices that served in dialogue with academic texts and that were discussed with domestic workers as partners in co-creating knowledge. Rather than perceiving scholars' interpretations of the raw data of grassroots practice as theory, students witnessed activists creating theory through practice. Moreover, they participated alongside those activists and had opportunities to explore and interpret theory through their experiences as researchers, lobbyists, and advocates supporting the passage of the legislation.

The domestic worker rights movement introduced students to what Young called the "heterogeneous public" (1989, 258), in which differences in wealth and status are recognized but members remain committed to working together for the common good. One purpose of this course was to show how a single issue required identification and mobilization of cross-race and -class alliances invested in the success of the bill—not only because it would benefit them but also because doing so highlighted issues of disability rights, immigrant justice, labor rights, and women's demands for a social response to the gendered division of reproductive labor. The movement struggled to include differently positioned allies in the legislation and the way that the campaign for domestic workers' rights was carried out. The domestic workers needed employer allies to win over legislators, but differently positioned employers (e.g., low-income elders and people with disabilities) generated more complex understandings of labor–employer identity groups. Therefore, both the movement and the course designed around it confirmed García Bedolla's (2007) point that an intersectional approach can create common ground among diverse stakeholders. Both witnessing and engaging in this work to build coalitions across differences was an important way to understand how political movements develop.

Furthermore, it was important that students were not positioned simply as political actors because of their membership in the class but also that they perceived themselves as stakeholders in this political movement. As their own positionality was challenged through their engagement and in the process of writing their narratives, students developed the ability to articulate their stance on the issue. To avoid "civic alienation" (Callan 1997, 11), students shared their positions by having conversations with domestic workers, lobbying politicians, and educating their neighbors and fellow students to rally support for the legislation.

This CSL course helped students to understand citizenship as not only an institutional status but also as process and practice while engaging them in myriad ways to exercise citizenship in a campaign for legislative change.

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CONCLUSIONS

Robinson (2000) questioned whether political science could "do politics." We contend, as this course demonstrated, that service learning remains a viable pedagogy for political education by engaging students in political action through direct work with community activists and leaders. This "Grassroots Movements" CSL course provided an experience for students that advanced their learning about their role and responsibility as political actors. The course generated a deeper knowledge of community-led political strategies to make change. Moreover, definitions of service were broadened to support students and community members in their efforts to pass the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. Students learned about political engagement, legislative process, and possibilities and limitations of grassroots movements for social change.

In developing a service learning course focused on a community-led social and political movement, we underscored how critically important the voices of community activists—especially those who have been historically marginalized and devalued—are to deepening our understanding of citizenship. It is a transformative experience for both students and faculty to learn with and from community actors who are generating innovative social analysis in or outside of academe.

Being responsive and responsible to the needs and expectations of our community partners requires educators to respond substantively to the requests they make of us. Our response to that challenge demonstrates ethical engagement in community work that can lead to the type of intentional, integrated learning that Musil (2003, 19) contended is needed to develop generative citizens—those who "have a deeper grasp of systems that influence individuals and groups as well as a sophisticated knowledge of the levers that can make systems more equitable." Our aim was to develop informed, engaged political actors who are well prepared to contribute to the common good. Following the encouragement of Cohen and Kahne (2014, 38), this course "engage[d] young people in the political realm, giving them greater control, voice, and hopefully influence over the issues that matter most in their lives." This CSL approach puts into action the principles of learning that allow students to see how the world and how politics work, as well as to imagine a better future and to see themselves as part of the efforts to realize it.

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NOTE

1. Wong and a team of undocumented students, for example, designed and produced the first and only national survey of undocumented millennials (Wong and Valdivia, 2014).

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