Real Service = Real Learning: Making Political Science Relevant Through Service-Learning

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> When we open ourselves up to those around us, asking for and offering help and support, we discover our strengths and passions we never knew we had. We begin to reconnect with our fellow human beings, with our wisest and most human instincts, and with the core of who we are, which we call our soul.
>
> —(Paul Rogat Loeb, Soul of a Citizen)

The perennial problem for the scholar and educator is how to combine scholarly interests with classroom material. Academics have often been castigated for living in the "ivory tower," for being uninterested in the real world, and for being unable to connect with their students. One would think that this would be less so in a dynamic discipline like political science, but like other academics, many political scientists get caught up in covering theories without making those theories real for their students.

Service learning has become one of the ways academics can link life in the 'real world' with life in the ivory tower. Numerous service-learning courses and programs in higher education have developed since the 1990s. According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse,

> "Service learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content" (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse 2001).

Service-learning by definition, then, should bring the theories we examine as academics to life outside of the classroom. When students ask "why should we study this theory?", academics should be able to show the relationship between theory and the real world. Service-learning courses give students an opportunity to become active participants in their learning experience and engaged citizens in their community. Although important, service learning is not mere charity or volunteer work. Service learning is not simply about fixing the broken windows of low-income residents, baby-sitting for single-mothers, or having students file papers for local advocacy organizations. Service learning is not a college student's charity contribution to the wider community. The key is in combining "service" with "learning." Here the academic role is essential. Service, without a connection to theory or facts (for example, on poverty, the cause of human rights abuses, or the structure of social service bureaucracies) simply tends to reinforce prejudice and the gap between the students and the "other."[1] Service learning, when done properly, weds academic rigor with real civic engagement.

Service learning should force students out of their comfort zones culturally, economically, and socially. It should involve hands-on experience working with others from the community, should challenge students to revisit their prejudices and stereotypes about the "other," and should be able to connect what students learn from theory with reality. I present my course, "Human Rights/Human Wrongs" below as evidence that a service-learning course can successfully blend academic rigor with service and can integrate a community-based experience into the political science classroom.

Real Learning

Through a service-learning summer workshop sponsored by the National Corporation for National and Community Service at Franklin and Marshall College, I put together a new course called "Human Rights/Human Wrongs" in the spring of 2002. This course was structured as a senior government (political science) seminar that examined the literature on human rights and had students apply that theoretical knowledge to political asylum cases in the York County Prison, INS detention facility. Students worked in groups of two on current political asylum cases from Haiti, Nigeria (2 cases), Uganda (2 cases), Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Togo, and Liberia, with the help of our non-profit community partner, CIRCLE (Coalition for Immigrants Rights at the Community Level).

Students read several books in preparation for the asylum work, including *Soul of a Citizen* (by Paul Rogat Loeb), *In Our Own Best Interest: How Defending Human Rights Benefits Us All* (by William Schulz), and *Do They Hear You When You Cry?* (by Fassiya Kassinja and Layli Miller Bashir). Kassinja's book was particularly appropriate to this course because it documented the plight of a young woman from Togo who was fleeing female genital mutilation (FGM) and was seeking asylum in the United States. She actually ended up in York County Prison. Shortly after students read the book, they were given a tour of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention facility in York County Prison.

Students, working in groups of two, were assigned a current asylum case on the first day of class. They then had to read through the intake information provided by CIRCLE (which varied according to how much had already been processed).[2] They would work on this asylum case throughout the semester, culminating in an immigration court-ready document (with evidence tables, asylum seeker affidavits) and a legal brief (either in support of asylum or in favor of deportation).[3] This material would be handed over to CIRCLE which would submit the packet to Immigration Court for the benefit of the asylum seekers. Because the students were not law students, they could not actually represent the asylum seekers in court, but they were required to present their case to the rest of the class and our community partner in a mock trial.

Students were required to read the main human rights documents and the philosophy behind human rights. Seminars were interspersed with guest lectures from community leaders and activists in the field. Students had to apply the readings (like the *United Nations Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading*

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Treatment or Punishment, the 1951 *United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees,* and the United States *Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1980*), to their particular asylum seeker's situation. To aid in the technical aspect of the asylum process, students had to read the invaluable *Basic Procedural Manual for Asylum Representation Affirmatively and in Removal/Deportation Proceedings* provided by the Midwest Immigrant and Human Rights Center, and remain in weekly contact with CIRCLE to ensure that the process was proceeding as smoothly as possible.

In addition, students were required to keep a daily "reflection journal" documenting their activities as well as their perceptions, experiences, and feelings regarding their experience with service learning and political asylum. The reflection journal served as an opportunity for students to reexamine what they learned in their readings and through their real life experiences with their asylum seeker about human rights and the asylum process in the United States. Many students were stunned to learn that asylum seekers are actually detained in detention facilities and local prisons in the United States. Several of their reflection journals document that as students became more familiar with the asylum process in the United States and became more familiar with their asylum seeker's story they became more confident and motivated to commit their time and effort in helping their asylum seeker.[4]

The Process

Most of the asylum seekers we worked with were detained because they had illegally entered the United States (without a visa, or with a forged passport or expired visa). The detainees already had a "credible fear interview" with an Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) official at the port of entry, and the decision on asylum was deferred to an immigration judge with the Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR). The asylum seekers were then transported to an INS detention facility to await a "merits" hearing before an immigration judge. Here, the immigration judge would hear the detainee's story to determine if the detainee had, in fact, suffered past persecution or if he/she had a well-founded fear of future persecution on the basis of political opinion, religion, nationality, race, or membership in a particular social group. Human rights conditions within the country of origin as well as the applicant's credibility are taken into account in this hearing. While an INS attorney represents the U.S. government, most detainees could not afford a lawyer (nor are they entitled to the equivalent of a public defender). Few speak English as a second language, if at all, and most are completely unfamiliar with U.S. Immigration law.

For a service-learning course to be effective, it has to provide a real service to the community as well as real learning for the student.

My students not only interacted with their detainee and learned about another culture first hand; they also gave a human face to the United States outside of INS officials, prison guards, and common criminals. More importantly, my students gave the detainees a fair chance at political asylum. Students went to the York County Prison to interview their asylum seekers, often through plexi-glass windows, using prison telephones.[5] Through these interviews, they could piece together their asylum seeker's story which would be translated onto the INS I-589 form (application for withholding from deportation) and the asylum seeker's affidavit.

The interviews were often painstaking processes of trying to communicate with an asylum seeker whose native tongue was not English, and whose culture was totally foreign to most of the students. Once the students got all the details necessary to communicate the asylum seeker's story, they would get to work on finding evidence and case law to support their asylum seeker's story. Students would search multiple documents from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United States State Department Reports on Human Rights conditions, and case law, focusing specifically on their asylum seeker's story and country of origin. Students would then properly document, tabulate, and present this information in a court-ready legal document. So, if the asylum seeker did not have an attorney at least this file could be submitted as evidence in support of the asylum seeker's case.

The specifics of the cases varied. Some asylum seeker's stories were sad or tragic, but did not meet one of the requirements for asylum (past persecution or a well-founded fear of future persecution based on political opinion, religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, or membership in a social group). Students worked on asylum cases focusing on all of the above categories.

But, what impact did this have on students? One student opined in her reflection journal, "We're expanding our minds and hearts to be more compassionate citizens; we're learning how to truly be better people, not just memorizing facts and dates and how to apply formulas. I'm learning how to live, not how to make a living. It's refreshing."

Another student working on a case from Sierra Leone wrote:

> Your class makes students go out into the real world to try to analyze and solve real problems. It also shows us that what we take for granted here in America is not universal and is missing in most of the world. When I communicated with my asylee through the plexi-glass of the jail, I found out how human life can be so drastically different but essentially the same. What I mean is that even though [asylum seeker's name withheld] has experienced more misery and pain than I will ever know he can speak the same language and laugh at the same things that Ryan and I laughed at. He is just a young adult like us yearning to be part of a society that can nurture his amazing potential.[6]

Most telling, one student wrote,

> . . . through service learning, I have broadened my horizons, learned to think outside the box, and have begun to learn how to be a better person. This class taught me things that I could not have learned through reading a book or listening to a lecture. It has taught me greater compassion and greater acceptance for things and people different from myself. It has taught me how very lucky and fortunate I am to have been given the life and opportunities that I have been given. . . . I have learned that individuals can make a difference and that sitting idly watching the world go by is the greatest crime against humanity. I feel my eyes have been opened and a shield has been lifted. . . . This course is what liberal education is all about. It would be a grave injustice to the students of this school to be denied such an extraordinary opportunity to truly encounter this valuable and unique learning experience.

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Although the students may have felt these strong feelings during and immediately after their service-learning experience, this alone does not prove that this course would have lasting impact on the students or encourage them into civic engagement; student's actions after the class do. One student quit a lucrative computer science job to pursue a Master's degree in human rights theory and practice at the University of Essex. Another became Franklin and Marshall College's post-graduate intern for service learning, a third completed an internship with the Tahirir Justice Center in Washington, D.C., a fourth will work on an independent study on political asylum reform in the United States, and two others completed a summer internship for credit with CIRCLE. Several others decided to attend law school, with several indicating that they would further pursue human rights or immigration law.[7]

Students did not have to be pushed and prodded to do their work. This is because this course had more than just the traditional course pressures (i.e., getting a good grade, being able to answer professor's questions, not letting down the community partner). The students knew that if they did not put in the time to properly research their asylum seeker's story, case law, and find evidence in human rights reports to substantiate the claims, their asylum seeker would most likely get deported. And, if in fact the asylum seeker was telling the truth about his/her human rights abuse, deportation could mean further torture, abuse, or even death. Other human beings, from different cultures, speaking different languages, living completely different realities were depending on my students to make sure that their story was heard. There is no greater motivator than that. Students learned an important lesson in civic engagement: their commitment to their asylum seeker's case made a difference to another human being, even if they were not granted asylum.

Real Service

But does this success with the students mean that this course provided a meaningful service to the community? At any one time, the U.S. government incarcerates about 22,000 non-citizens in INS detention facilities and jails, like York County Prison (Mallone 2001). In fact, the INS detention facility in York County Prison is the second largest in the United States. In 2001, 60,853 asylum applications were received, 7,839 were granted, and 14,960 were denied (U.S. Department of Justice 2001). The U.S. government spends an average of $78 a day to detain a non-citizen. For the whole process, including the initial hearing in front of an immigration judge, the cost is approximately $7,259 per single asylum seeker (Walth 2001; Vera Institute of Justice 2000).

The political asylum process is a huge cost for the U.S. taxpayer, and not a very pleasant experience for the asylum seeker. INS lawyers are often so overworked that they are flipping through affidavits while they rushed into immigration court. Some immigration judges have become so jaded over the incredible cases that they often don't take the time to read through the asylum seeker's story. Yet, these are not just stories but someone's life experience.

Our community partner, Kathleen Lucas of CIRCLE noted,

> . . . certainly, the research and organization that the students brought to the asylum packets were invaluable to the asylum seekers in their court proceedings. In the cases that have gone to court during and since the class, the evidence was submitted to the judge and was a strong positive factor. There is another more subtle benefit for the asylum seekers that is hard to measure and yet, intuitively, I know it made a huge impact. Asylum seekers in prison usually have no visitors and don't have the opportunity to talk about their cases. They are hesitant to discuss them with other detainees because prison is just not an environment that encourages self-disclosure. Therefore, without the students' involvement, the respondent is telling his or her story to the judge in a fairly raw format (Lucas 2002).

My students helped win three asylum cases, five cases are either still in process or under appeal, and one asylum seeker is in final deportation proceedings. Contrary to the perceptions of many, the United States deals very harshly with asylum applicants. Fewer than 20% of all asylum applicants win their asylum cases. Only one in five cases are reversed in front of an immigration judge (Midwest Immigrant and Human Rights Center 2002, 4). Given these figures, my students did quite well. Students also helped asylum seekers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As Lucas suggests,

> Students would ask many clarifying questions, would listen actively and show genuine interest and be supportive of the asylum seeker. Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder are very common among detained asylum seekers and having someone to process the trauma with helps counteract those conditions as well as helping the individual to present their story in a more cohesive manner in court (Lucas 2002).

It would take time for students to build the necessary level of trust with the asylum seeker to make them feel comfortable enough to re-tell their story. Students were guided by our community partner and myself on the importance of being culturally sensitive, patient, and thorough. By the end of the semester, students would feel a very deep bond to their asylum seeker, even if they did not think they had a strong case for asylum. The feelings were mutual. Asylum seekers, often separated from family members and friends and bewildered by being detained would have little contact with the outside world. Asylum seekers would send students letters telling them "God Bless You" for helping us, and expressing that they were, "overwhelmed with joy to have the students visit them and help them on their cases."

Given the fact that most asylum seekers cannot afford legal help, the students working with CIRCLE were in many ways the asylum seeker's last hope of having their story documented and supported by evidence. Courses like Human Rights/Human Wrongs may help encourage more lawyers to take on *pro bono* cases and represent asylum seekers if students do most of the groundwork through research and affidavit writing.

Putting it all Together

Convincing faculty to start a service-learning course may be difficult. The amount of time and effort put into a service-learning course far exceeds that put into any traditional college-level course. At the same time, the immense satisfaction realized from teaching such a course can never be matched by any traditional college-level course.

There are several key factors that make for a successful service-learning experience for all. One of the most important factors is a strong working relationship between the faculty member and the community partner. There must be mutual respect, trust, and inclusion. Trained in international and comparative politics, I was not an "expert" on the asylum-seeking process in the United States. I had served as an expert witness in asylum cases on Uganda so I had knowledge of how the system worked, but the strengths that I brought to the course focused on the research and theoretical aspect of human rights. I relied heavily on my community partner,

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especially the first year that I taught the course, to field students' specific asylum questions and to direct students on case law. It was this consulting work (as an expert witness on Uganda) that gave me the greatest personal sense of achievement and involvement in making a real, concrete difference in people's lives. I developed the Human Rights/Human Wrongs course in an attempt to give students the same.

But, of course, this is not Hollywood and not everything works as planned. One of the most frustrating things about service-learning is that as the professor you do not always have control over what will happen. For example, I had no control over whether York County Prison would continue to keep INS detainees,[8] whether there would be another chicken pox outbreak resulting in another quarantine, or even if there was a snow storm that would result in the cancellation of our prison tour. The key to success is to remain flexible (and calm) and to make sure that you have a backup. In the case of the INS-YCP dispute, our community partner was able to provide a list of "paroled" or "affirmative" asylum seekers with whom the students could work.[9]

This course helped bridge the conceptual separation between human rights at the national and international level. Human rights abuses occurring half way across the globe came to our backyard in York County Prison and into my student's consciousness. As educators, it is our responsibility to make learning real and relevant to students, even if in the interim it is more time consuming than we could ever have imagined. However, it does get easier and even more satisfying with time. For a service-learning course to be effective, it has to provide a real service to the community as well as real learning for the student. In an age where America questions its citizen's civic engagement, this course offers hope and a vehicle for students to become more involved and engage in life-long learning and activism.

The true litmus test for successful service-learning is if we have been able to fully integrate the community service into the course, involve our community partners in the planning and teaching, and provide countless opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and service. In this way, students become more than mere tourists in their learning experience; they reap the benefits of their engaged citizenship.

Notes

1. I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

2. Because we were working with real political asylum cases, we did not have control over what stage of development the cases were in. For example, some students gathered evidence for appeal cases to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) while others were handed cases that did not even have the I-589 (Application for Withholding of Removal) filled out. All of the cases provided students with different challenges but similar levels of time commitment.

3. Obviously, if the students wrote a legal brief in favor of deportation based on their evidence and critical assessment of the case, the legal brief would not be submitted to Immigration Court in order to avoid any sort of double jeopardy for the asylum seeker. But, it was important to allow the students to critically assess the cases that they were working on, and not to simply assume that all asylum seekers had credible asylum cases.

4. One student wrote, "While it is very exciting to be doing homework that will actually be useful to someone else's life, it is also very overwhelming thinking that if I make a mistake the consequences could be more damaging than just a bad grade on my part." Another student, equally troubled about the burden of working on asylum cases at the beginning of class wrote: "Despite all the stress, anxiety and trouble this class caused, I am glad I took it. I feel I am better off with this experience, including the good and bad thereof than I would be if I had taken a lecture class. I think that's because I was doing something I never thought I'd do, feeling things (stress, relief, and pride) to degrees and in ways I never thought I would in a class, and learned more about me, my work style, stresses, values even though I thought I already knew all those things. They were challenged as never before and that's why the experience, no matter how I felt I succeeded or failed, was worth it." This student worked on an asylum case from Cameroon which was granted asylum.

5. Students usually have to wait two weeks before they can visit their detainee. At YCP, students must write a letter to their detainee identifying themselves and indicating that they are working with CIRCLE. Detainees will then request the students' names be placed on his/her visitor list. This process can often take longer at times. For example, several wings within the INS detention facility had been quarantined for chicken pox. Students, unable to interview the asylum seeker for his/her story, had to focus on familiarizing themselves as much as possible on the human rights conditions within their asylum seeker's country of origin.

6. This year, the asylum seeker from Sierra Leone won asylum in the United States. One week after he won asylum, I invited him to our class. He forcefully made his case about the relevance of this service-learning course: "Without the student's help, I would not be standing in front of you now, free, telling you my story" (name withheld for confidentiality).

7. Some students became so involved in their asylum seeker's case that they continued to visit the asylum seeker at YCP, even after the course was over.

8. York County Prison (YCP) and the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) were engaged in contract negotiations over the acceptable cost of housing INS detainees in YCP. For the first two months of 2003, the INS pulled about half (400)of the INS detainees out of YCP and moved them to other detention facilities and country prisons in an attempt to make YCP lower the daily costs (and profits) associated with housing INS detainees.

9. Students never worked with any detainees that had criminal records. But the INS sometimes "paroles" asylum seekers who do not present a flight risk for humanitarian reasons. An affirmative application for asylum occurs when the asylum seeker comes to the U.S. legally or illegally and has not been placed in deportation/removal proceedings by the INS.

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