Educating Citizens as well as Professionals: Using Service-Learning to Enhance the Civic Element of Social Work Education

Tracey Kathleen Burke

Abstract: *Schools of social work have put considerable energy into civic engagement and community partnership. Despite the attention paid to the civic mission of the university and/or of the profession, however, very little attention has been paid to the civic education of social work students. It will be argued here that social work education must include discussions about citizenship and democracy, about participating in our communities apart from our work. Service-learning, with its emphasis on civic learning and a complementary focus on social justice, provides both a lens and a pedagogy for accomplishing this.*

Keywords: *Service-learning, citizenship, civic education, social justice, professionalization*

INTRODUCTION

Schools of social work have put considerable energy into civic engagement and community partnership. Published accounts of such activities describe research linked to community development initiatives (Allen-Meares, 2008), an MSW concentration organized as a partnership effort (Ishisaka, Farwell, Sohng, & Uehara, 2004), even an entire MSW program with a single Community Partnerships concentration (Wertheimer, Beck, Brooks, & Wolk, 2004). Programs that have not wholly restructured still are likely to offer community-based service-learning courses, which feature a reciprocal relationship between the classroom and the community (Furco, 1996), in addition to the student-centered internships that are the "signature pedagogy" of social work education.

Despite the attention paid to the civic mission of the university and/or of the profession, however, very little attention has been paid to the civic education of social work students. A growing body of literature attests that service-learning enhances students' mastery of and engagement with professional (academic) material (Anderson, 2006; Faria, Dauenhauer, & Steitz, 2010; Kapp, 2006; Knee, 2002; L. A. Lowe & Medina, 2010; Rocha, 2000; Scott, 2008; see also numerous chapters in Nadel, Majewski, & Sullivan-Cosetti, 2007). As illustrated in this special journal issue, service-learning can provide the means for assessing key social work competencies. Service-learning also promotes certain personal traits and attitudes social work educators deem important (L. A. Lowe & Medina, 2010; Williams, King, & Koob, 2002). Yet, particularly at the bachelor's level, we are "educating citizens" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003) as well as social workers. Service-learning has the potential to promote civic learning as well. A review of social work's partnerships and service-learning literature, however, reveals that even when on occasion civic education is acknowledged in course design (Droppa, 2007; Poulin, Kauffman, & Silver, 2006), it is conspicuously absent in discussions of outcomes (Lemieux & Allen, 2007).

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Why has social work neglected this element of education? Perhaps we assume that social work values categorically incorporate civic values (King, 2003; Lucas, 2000). Certainly we highlight our professional commitment to social justice and social change, even identifying the ability to "advance human rights and social and economic justice" and the ability to "engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being" as two of ten core professional competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). There is evidence to support the use of service-learning in promoting a social justice orientation (Poulin et al., 2006; Sather, Weitz, & Carlson, 2007). Some suggest that social work should be a leader in service-learning *because* of our long-established commitment to social justice (Campbell & Bragg, 2007). Instead, social work is a relative newcomer to service-learning (though not to other forms of community-based education) and a minor player on the national service-learning stage.

It will be argued here that social work education must include discussions about citizenship and democracy, about participating in our communities apart from our work. We must attend to our students' civic education because the most intractable issues that social work has claimed as its professional purview – such as poverty, violence, and discrimination – are, in the civic engagement parlance, "public issues." Everyone has a stake in addressing them. By reducing them to social work issues, we risk communicating to our students that they need only care about them during business hours; we risk communicating a myopic vision that only professional social workers can legitimately resolve them. Service-learning provides a platform from which to resist such a message.

JANE ADDAMS AS CIVIC ROLE MODEL

It is common in the social work and service-learning/civic engagement discourse to see references to founding mother Jane Addams, and indeed, Addams is an exemplar for what we might wish our students to become. Crucially, however, she did not establish and lead Hull House *as a social worker*. She saw herself and was seen by contemporaries as a sociologist, albeit a female sociologist based in the community rather than the university, one who was relegated to the margins as (male) disciplinary sociology solidified (Deegan, 1988). More importantly, she also saw herself as a citizen whose lot was intrinsically tied to that of the people around her (Elshtain, 2002; Knight, 2005). Her first book, a collection of reflective essays she wrote and re-wrote over the course of a decade, she tellingly called *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Addams, 2002/1902). Being a member of a democratic society means much more than voting to Addams, who as a woman could not vote for most of her life. It means openness to "perplexity" and rethinking one's certainties given new experiences; it means valuing the contributions of all, not just those who share her elite background. She begins her essay on education:

> As democracy modifies our conception of life, it constantly raises the value and function of each member of the community, however humble he [sic] may be….We are gradually requiring of the educator that he shall free the powers of each man and connect him with the rest of life. We ask this not merely because it is the man's right to be thus connected, but because we have become convinced that the social order cannot afford to get along without his special contribution (Addams, 2002/1902, p. 80).

Even before Addams' ideas of democracy were fully formed, she intuited its importance. She frames the "subjective necessity for social settlements" in an 1892 speech as more about the democratic impulse of the upper-class settlement residents (including herself) than the concrete and cultural needs of the neighborhood. Settlement residents "are taking to the notion of human brotherhood…. These young men and women, longing to socialize their democracy, ...[live in the settlement as] an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city" (Addams, 1961/1910, pp. 75, 76, 83).

Addams became president of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, a precursor to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), arguably a signal that she did eventually identify with social work. Still, in her presidential speech, Addams (1910) downplays "relief and charity" and elevates "prevention, amelioration and social justice" (p. 441/3) – not words associated with emerging efforts to build the profession. "Social work" for Addams was coalescing into a compelling means of addressing public problems, but professionalizing social work was not itself an end.[i]

Since Addams' time, professionalization has become an end, some would say an obsession. Numerous accounts trace the relationship between social work's professional identity and its relative emphasis on services or reform (Ehrenreich, 1985; G. R. Lowe & Reid, 1999; Walkowitz, 1999). In periods of increased anxiety over social work's professional status, the pendulum has favored services or direct practice. The suggestion is that in these times, the commitment to social justice is diminished. It has been argued, too, that social work's professional project has subsumed its social justice project (Olson, 2007). The best-known indictment of social work's turn away from poverty and related issues to psychotherapy remains *Unfaithful Angels* (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

If we are consistent in following Addams' lead, however, these critiques prove to be distractions. It is not enough for social work to renew its commitment to reform-oriented, macro practice, if social workers still think of it merely as a job.[ii] It is exactly this compartmentalization that threatens the integrity of social work's role within a social justice project that is bigger than the profession.

PROFESSIONALISM IN SOCIAL WORK

Sullivan (2005) examines the public, or civic, commitments of the professions, and argues that the status of the professions is threatened because the social contract is not being kept. Professionals must meet "expectations of high standards of competence coupled with public responsibility" (p. 3) to the citizenry served. In return, the manner in which professions are structured grants more autonomy and more discretion for making judgments than occupations organized strictly as part of bureaucracies or only as a function of market forces (i.e. Freidson's (2001) "third logic"). Social work, like other professions, is increasingly subject to bureaucratic regulation and the market. Nonetheless, in Sullivan's analysis, the professions remain distinctive (social work, for example, largely regulates itself as through NASW, licensure, and accreditation), and he

argues that there is at least the perception that professionals are betraying the public trust, that expert knowledge has been put up for sale.

On the face of it, it seems absurd to accuse social work of not keeping its contract with the public. Surely it is we, more than most others, who do the dirtiest work with the people of least status, for relatively little remuneration and status ourselves. It is here that *Unfaithful Angels* (Specht & Courtney, 1994) and similar critiques become pertinent: is social work, in fact, doing this kind of work? A study commissioned by NASW (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006) answers, in effect, "Yes, but." Of the licensed social workers sampled, fewer than 2 per cent identify working with homeless/displaced people, income assistance, or community development as their primary practice area. Likewise, in the description of social workers' clientele and their challenges, poverty is not identified. We know that members of the client-groups that are named (e.g. people with behavioral health issues, people involved with the criminal justice system, families involved with child welfare) are disproportionately likely to be poor and from historically oppressed racial and ethnic backgrounds. Perhaps the social workers most committed to community work and/or work with the poor do not pursue licensure, and thus are excluded from this study. Nonetheless, licensed social workers' apparent neglect of poverty as a practice area in its own right, combined with the relatively high proportion of these workers who identify as in mental health and particularly in private practice, does suggest that social work is not immune to Sullivan's (2005) critique.

Perhaps there is confusion as to what exactly our contract with the public is. As social work has wrestled for turf within a system of helping professions (Abbott, 1988), there have been few arenas over which social work can claim exclusive authority. Mental health, child welfare, gerontology, etc. are contested domains, but they are more contained – and the battle for jurisdiction over them is more winnable – than social justice issues such as poverty and discrimination. Social justice is firmly ensconced in the professional Code of Ethics and now accreditation competencies, and this core value is central to why many people become social workers in the first place. But because social justice cannot be restricted to one profession, or even to the expert knowledge of the professions more broadly, it must undergird how social work approaches its work rather than be the focus of polarized debates over what the work *is*.

"The great promise of a profession is the possibility of institutionalizing vocation in the modern economy. Professionals have traditionally been ascribed vocation as well as a career or job. Besides earning a living and striving to distinguish themselves in their domain of activity, professionals have been expected to carry out their work as part of a larger collective project," Sullivan asserts (2005, p. 15). The challenge for social work education is to remind ourselves and our students of what Jane Addams understood: social work can be a powerful means of enacting a social justice vocation, but a social justice project is a "larger and collective" one, not social work's own. Service-learning provides both a lens and a pedagogy for accomplishing this.

SERVICE-LEARNING FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Most definitions of service-learning include a civic dimension, such as the oft-cited definition from Bringle & Hatcher (1996): "a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such ways as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and *an enhanced sense of civic responsibility*" (p. 222, italics added). Civic responsibility includes a recognition of oneself "as a member of a larger social fabric" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, Rosner, & Stephens, 2000, p. xxvi) and therefore takes public problems seriously and engages in "behaviors that produce public benefits" (Perry & Katula, 2001, p. 333; cf. Saltmarsh, 2005). It is no coincidence that we hear echoes of Addams here – though most commentators cite the influence of John Dewey, her friend and contemporary (Seigfried, 1999).

Across disciplines, many faculty use service-learning to foster civic dispositions in their students (Chickering, 2006; Eby, 2001; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009). Others use service-learning to promote social justice (Cuban & Anderson, 2007; Farnsworth, 2010), though there is not uniform support for faculty choosing pedagogical strategies for political purposes (Butin, 2010). In short, faculty members from myriad fields find service-learning to be a useful means of responding to Boyer's call to increase the civic importance of academic work (Boyer, 1990). Reflection activities are a key component to service-learning, linking the service experience to the broader questions of the class. Although instructors can use reflection to focus only on narrowly-defined academic issues and/or personal growth (e.g. confidence), commentators generally assume a focus on civic learning as well (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler, 2002).

The ways in which civic learning is operationalized sound a lot like social work. Civic skills include "collective action, community/coalition building, and organizational analysis" (Saltmarsh, 2005, p. 55). Measures of civic commitment include "understanding of service users" and "concern for disadvantaged groups in society" (Ngai, 2009, p. 381). "[C]ivic professionals are those who work *with* citizens, rather than acting *on* them" (Boyte & Fretz, 2010, p. 83; emphasis in the original) we are told, arguably summing up a social work empowerment orientation.

What distinguishes the civic dimension of the service-learning literature from social work is the emphasis on the public realm. Many civic skills, values, and bodies of knowledge mirror social work skills, values, and knowledges – but their import is at a different level of magnitude. What students learn in class matters not only in relation to that course and that discipline or profession, but in relation to students' shared lives in community. It matters to democracy, as Jane Addams pointed out over a century ago.

An example is in order. A community partner, a local elementary school in a low-income neighborhood, has requested language arts tutors for its students. Education majors and English majors who tutor learn lessons related to teaching and language, important issues for their disciplines, and perhaps the principal reason their instructors include this service-learning component. They also may learn some value-added lessons about the lives and concerns of fellow citizens. Reflection activities can be structured to

highlight the importance of resource distribution for the children and their families – a civic lesson that may carry over into how these college students engage with their communities, and how they vote.

In social work, learning about the lives of the children and their families might be the intended outcome of the same tutoring activity, but the same lesson about resources is framed in a professional/academic context rather than a civic one. The children and their families are positioned as clients, not fellow citizens. There are risks here for students interested in both direct practice and macro practice. First, for students and instructors focusing on direct practice, the lesson from the tutoring may be reduced to one of finding resources for these children. The issue of resources is addressed, but in a narrow way that does not require questioning how they were distributed in the first place. Social justice issues may be sidestepped entirely.

For students and faculty interested in macro practice, the risk is more subtle. Issues of resource development and policy change may be seen as social work-specific issues rather than as public issues regarding which social work is one player. At worst, social work students may not consider – may not even welcome – the participation of their education- and English-major colleagues in addressing these issues because they do not see the other students as having a legitimate role. Later, a similar attitude toward non-social workers may limit social workers' willingness to collaborate with others, be they professionals or not.[iii]

The civic component of service-learning directs attention outward; for social work students, it directs attention beyond the profession. Through structured reflection in particular, social work faculty can bid students (in line with the previous example) to notice other volunteers; how do their contributions differ, what motivates them, how do they conceive of the (public) problem and their stake in the well-being of the clients? In other contexts, civic-oriented reflection may challenge students – and faculty – to articulate the public purposes that led them to social work. What has been their non-social work involvement in addressing the issues about which they are most passionate? If they should decide that the social work profession is not for them after all, how will they remain involved; would they still have an interest and a stake; in what ways? What does it mean to address social justice issues *as a social worker* – or not?

Community-university partnerships are embedded within a web of interpersonal relationships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Schools of social work have pre-existing relationships with many social service agencies through their field education programs. This provides a foundation for growing those relationships in new directions, but also puts the scope of such growth at risk of being defined too narrowly – i.e., only in "professional" terms. Even if social work faculty are committed in principle to civic education, community partners may assume that social work service-learning students seek field-specific experiences. Faculty may need to work harder with service-learning partners to create projects or tasks that move beyond social work skills, and that lend themselves to a citizenship dimension.

CONCLUSION

Research suggests that holding "a combination of career attitudes that incorporates favorable perceptions of one's *ability to express oneself in the world of work* through a successful career" is negatively correlated with aspects of burnout among some social work students (Ngai & Cheung, 2009, p. 115; italics added). In other words, engaging in social work as an expression of a larger commitment rather than as an end in itself may foster professional satisfaction. In contrast to medicine, where some doctors are consciously moving away from seeing medicine as a vocation in favor of seeing it as "a job and part of a work-life balance" (Jones & Green, 2006, p. 937), social work educators may want to re-emphasize the vocational aspects of social work. Social work is a powerful means of participating in a social justice project that encompasses but is bigger than social work itself. Taking sides in polarized debates about micro vs. macro practice misses a key point: poor people, old people, victimized people need both services themselves and changes to the structures that shape their social environments (Hugman, 2009). Social work does all of this.

But it does not do it alone, and social work educators must take care not to let students think that only social work should be doing it, or that they need not worry about it after they leave the office. Other professionals and other citizens have a stake in each others' well-being and in the health of their communities. Emphasizing the civic component of service-learning, already a valued pedagogy within social work education, helps us frame social work issues as public issues so that our students can view their activities both as social workers and as citizens.

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[i] The decision to exclude other specific social workers from the discussion is made not to minimize their contributions to the profession or to broader society, but to acknowledge Addams' prominence in the social work/civic engagement discourse and to challenge the assumption that her activities demonstrate something about social work per se.

[ii] Two recent studies support the notion that paid social work may undercut other community engagement activities. Gibelman & Sweifach (2008) identify a pattern of licensed social workers volunteering less than in the past. Focusing on political engagement, Rome & Hoechstetter (2010) find a pattern of NASW members being very engaged but "most often [in] those [activities] that require the least amount of effort" such as following the news and knowing their elected representatives (p. 118). The more actively engaged social workers are those whose jobs incorporate the "engaged" activities.

iii The concern described here is inspired by Karger & Hernandez's (2004) analysis of social workers as public intellectuals. Again the legacy of Jane Addams is evoked; now she is a model public intellectual. She was engaged with the issues of her day not just at Hull House but through her speeches and writings, sharing her observations and thoughts with public audiences. Karger & Hernandez argue that more recently, social work's quest for professional status has led to parochialism, such that we no longer engage with a generalized public audience.