

Community: A Path toward Participation

Margaret Anderson

When I set out to design a voter education workshop for The Literacy Project's student leadership program, I thought the project would be fairly simple. We had developed a model that worked well to teach a range of leadership skills, including communication, conflict resolution, public speaking, and board involvement. I thought I could switch the topic and have just as much success. But I was wrong! Understanding *why* I was wrong gave me a new appreciation for what it means to do effective voter education. Here's what I learned.

Voting Skills Are Not Enough

Before I started the project, I thought that our primary challenge was to explain the logistics of voting, critical thinking skills, and media education. These skills are certainly important. But as the project unfolded I understood that they are irrelevant if voters don't *want* to vote. And most of our students wanted nothing to do with voting.

We saw hostility towards the political process early in our project. We started by inviting participants to spend six weeks learning about leadership skills and voting. At the end of six weeks, the participants would become the trainers, and they'd run voter education workshops in our ABE and GED classes. We thought it was a great program design, but the response was lukewarm, at best. Instead of turning people away, as we had in the past, we were calling up past participants, trying to convince them to come.

We forged ahead with only five participants and dove into the world of voting. Our six weeks were great. And then it was time to go out to the classes. Some of the workshops were very successful: we registered over two dozen new voters, supported our core participants in their development as leaders, and inspired some students to use their vote to create positive change.

Need for a Sense of Community

But one workshop was truly a disaster. Things took a bad turn before we even *started* talking about voting. "Tell us your name and where you are from," we asked them, as usual. The answers we got were loaded with meaning. One person couldn't decide how to answer the question. "I don't really know where I'm from," she said. "I'm not really *from* anywhere." Another declared, "I'm *from* the city, but I'm living here." The answers grew more heated as we went around the circle, till one participant really laid it out for us: "I'm really *from* Worcester, but I'm stuck in this damn boring town till I get my GED." And it went downhill from there.

In retrospect, I understand why this common workshop opener – and the workshop itself – was such a disaster. This particular group of students was largely comprised of DSS- and DYS-involved youth who had been relocated from urban environments to our more rural towns. They didn't feel connected to a place. In fact, they were "placed" there by others, mostly against their own will. They certainly didn't pay attention to the local issues and campaigns, nor did they feel that the government was looking out for them. Instead, they saw "community" and "government" as forces that were lined up against them. Voting – *and any type of community involvement* – seemed to them to be meaningless gestures against such an array of powers.

I might have thought that this lack of connection to place was an isolated issue, one that arose out of the specific circumstances of these young people. But I heard about the importance of "connection to place" again, this time in a workshop we ran for our own staff. We learned that the staff almost always voted in national elections, but they voted only sporadically in local and state elections. What made the difference? They needed to have a

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sense of belonging before they would take the time to educate themselves about the issues and participate in local elections. If the place they lived didn't feel like "home," they didn't vote.

As this theme of "place" emerged, I realized that it was an important lesson, one that goes well beyond voter education. So many of our students – and so many of us *all* – have had negative experiences with groups, whether it's in our families, in our schools, or in the community at large. Many students are survivors of physical or emotional abuse. Others speak of feeling left out, harassed, or embarrassed in school settings. Some have lived with the violence of war. Many live in poverty. Add to those experiences an understandable anger at injustice and the inequalities of power within our communities – and it's no wonder that "getting involved in the community" is not a compelling option.

This line of thought reminded me of why so many of our leadership programs have been successful. We start each session with a community building activity, using the range of participatory games well known to workshop leaders. As we introduce new concepts and skills, we continue to integrate them with structured, community-building activities. Our success depends on building a positive connection to a group so that participants can interact with one another in non-threatening and meaningful ways.

It seems to me that this is the most important work of leadership building – creating a safe place so that the desire to belong can emerge. Somehow, just feeling a sense of belonging seems to re-ignite the hope that it's possible to build a more just world. Once we have those intangibles – a sense of belonging and faith that change is possible – teaching the actual skills of leadership comes fairly easily. But without those core "issues of the heart," all of our skill-building – whether it's about voting or any other aspect of civic participation – is irrelevant.

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