

Facilitating Democratic Praxis: A review of *The Civically Engaged Reader*

By Shanti Elliott for *Schools Journal*

Adam Davis and Elizabeth Lynn, eds. 2006. *The civically engaged reader. A diverse collection of short provocative readings on civic activity*. Chicago: Great Books Foundation. 325 pages. ISBN: 0945159498.

There is a moment described in an introductory passage of *The Civically Engaged Reader* that highlights the importance of reflection and dialogue about civic engagement. An Americorps volunteer is painting in an inner city school on Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, and two ninth grade boys come up to ask her what she is doing. She explains to them that she is “serving...making a difference.” “Who are you helping?” the students ask. “You,” she answers. The boys walk away with a caustic “Well, happy Martin Luther King Jr. Day”(85). The scene makes one wonder if Martin Luther King Jr. would have wanted a day of service named after him, when many of the acts of service that are rendered neither address the underlying causes of decrepit inner city schools and neighborhoods nor, perhaps still more critical, promote democratic relationships across race and neighborhood lines.

The painful mismatch between the volunteer’s good intentions and the socially divisive impact of her matter-of-fact statement is a familiar one in the domain of service learning. To me, it is just such moments as these – which may cause more harm than good – that demand that the field of “service” be carefully circumscribed, and the field of democratic relationships substantially widened. I think it is vital to ask how the terms of this scene might be recast in such a way as to promote dignity, respect, and justice, in a manner worthy of Dr. King?

I suggest that the Americorps volunteer would serve the needs of the students – and herself, *and democratic society* -- more fully by sitting and talking with the kids in that school as a fellow human being, entering into the possibilities of relationship that emerge when dialogue is framed by mutual curiosity rather than the social stratification that “service” implies. But what does talking DO?

Entering into the readings in this book opens up the prospects afforded by talking. But just as the name of Dr. King does not sanctify a good deed done on a day of service, reading the stories, poems, and essays included in this anthology has little value if one is not concurrently practicing and reflecting on civic engagement. Reflective practice, or *praxis* as Paulo Freire calls it, enables us to get up on to the bridges laid by the thinkers and activists whose work makes up this volume.

The democratic possibilities of education in America are explored in a number of important publications addressing civic engagement. They go beyond the moral and character-education emphasis of service learning to promote youth leadership and social action. Kahne and Westheimer’s article “Teaching Democracy,” Frances Lappe’s *Democracy’s Edge: Choosing to Save Our Country by Bringing Democracy To Life*, Harry Boyte’s *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life*, and Benjamin Barber’s *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* are all important resources that provide fruitful methods and approaches to democratic engagement. There is something about real democratic engagement, however, that emerges from sources

deeper than political philosophy and more mysterious than planned structures for grassroots social projects. It has a ritual energy which books have a hard time summoning forth – this ritual energy comes from people being together in their ideals, their suffering, and their delight.

The real accomplishment of *The Civically Engaged Reader* is that it taps into this energy, with the stories, questions, dilemmas that are most human. Bringing together the perspectives of writers as diverse as Kafka, Maimonides, and Lincoln, the anthology highlights and mediates *relationship* more effectively than any other book I know.

I recently attended a workshop for young leaders, who were ready to charge out to spread awareness about health issues in Africa. One student held back, asking, “But how do we get people to care about this?” The workshop leader responded, “The people who you bring this back to probably don’t have a connection to the issues you are concerned with, but they do have a connection to you and an investment in you. When you show them how you care, it opens a door for their caring.” To me, this means that empirical reasoning has a very limited place in the domain of social responsibility, which is more caught than taught.

For young people to develop a strong and dynamic sense of social responsibility, they need to spend time in the company of committed people. This can be difficult to achieve in traditional school settings, where students have little access to people of strong social commitment aside from their teachers, who are living out their social commitment through their teaching itself.

At Parker, we practice democratic dialogue and action through involving teachers and students throughout the school as leaders for small social interest-based groups that have the aim of bringing together groups of people who are usually kept apart. All students engage in a wide range of arts, social health, and social justice partnerships with other students throughout the city. By nurturing possibilities for the organic development of solidarity, we seek to root social action in genuine social commitment.

While all the other students work in groups, Seniors carry out individual social action projects, and they meet monthly in colloquium groups to discuss civic engagement, often with texts from *The Civically Engaged Reader* as their launch pad. We encourage the Seniors to engage in meaningful social action, but equally important are the conversations that emerge from their experiences. Engaging in social action can be transformative – and confusing, and frightening -- and calls for deliberate processing structures. Thus, at Parker, students’ conversations are facilitated by both administrators and teachers at the school *and* civic leaders from the wider community, who live lives of social action and social service and can help students navigate their experiential learning process. Involving civic leaders not just as guest speakers or as hosts to a service visit but as ongoing partners in educational processes allows us to bridge the divide between social processes and learning. This is one way that we seek to emulate fellow Chicagoan Jane Addams’ settlement house movement, which both brought together different ethnic groups in a network of mutual support and educated young people for social connectivity and civic action.

Unlike other readers that focus on civic engagement, this reader is not designed to inspire or guide. It takes up in earnest the complexities of civic relationships, which are heartrendingly beautiful at one second and disturbingly messy the next. Though it has sections on Associating, Serving, Giving, and Leading, the weight of the book is centered

on the importance of association, not only in its choice of readings but also in the methodology of reading it promotes, which emphasizes shared reading: “To be human is to live among and with others. We are born out of – and into—association” (3). The range of readings in the anthology enables discussants to explore questions of power and the relationship between self and other – they include philosophical essays, stories, poems, speeches, and sacred literature. Some choices are both necessary and predictable, like the excerpt from Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, but some are surprising and daring. I was pleased to see an Ursula K. Le Guin story included -- “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is one of the most important parables of social justice of our time.

Editor Elizabeth Lynn offers her perspective on civic engagement in an article entitled “Four Traditions of Philanthropy,” co-authored by D. Susan Wisely. The authors explore philanthropy as relief, as improvement, and as social reform, pointing to the assets and liabilities of each as an expression of action for the common good. Lynn and Wisely suggest a “fourth philanthropic response,” that of civic engagement, where the focus is on “building up connections among ordinary citizens” (216). They point to Jane Addams’ work at Hull House as the embodiment of this response. The article’s turn to civic engagement seems to represent a final rejection of philanthropic responses, but the authors put forth a direct appeal to philanthropists “to promote civic engagement and encourage public moral discourse, by cultivating hospitable spaces for reflection and by bringing diverse people and perspectives into conversation” (217). I think it is important to ask why, in the hundred years since Jane Addams’ time, we have not yet learned to really develop this cross-cultural conversational space, which is such a vast resource for the growth of democratic relationships.¹

The book includes two pieces by Jane Addams, including the seminal essay “The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements.” Addams speaks to the importance of “socializing” democracy: “the good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating in midair, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life” (121). Jane Addams’ praxis of social responsibility focuses on connection, and conscious struggle against the social habits that breed disconnection, including segregation, economic and social inequality, and ignorance. To include substantive excerpts from her work in civic education was a good move on the part of the editors. Her insights into the dangers to democratic life posed by class-distinct social service, and honest recognition of how social class complicates relationships are most clearly articulated in “The Subtle Problems of Charity,” which I wish had been included in this reader.

Some of these complexities do surface in the essay of co-editor Adam Davis, “What We Don’t Talk About When We Don’t Talk About Service.” He addresses the relationship between service and inequality with keen questions: “do acts of service move us toward equality? Might some acts of service enshrine, and even extend the very gap they mean to bridge? [...] How has this transaction, this series of transactions, contributed to the socioeconomic and perhaps especially to the psychological positions in which these people find themselves?”(154). Davis asks questions that should be asked, and begins to

¹ The Highlander Folk School in Appalachia represents a notable exception, however, its focus is regional and the model of social organizing that it grew has not spread in the United States as much as in developing countries.

evolve a language that is sorely needed for the growth of democratic dialogue. To ask how service might act in harmful ways on the feelings of dignity of service recipients is to introduce a necessary social-emotional focus into the field of social action which makes for much slower, and much more careful going. Davis approaches this difficult terrain with a heavy hand of cynicism that can be overwhelming for a lone and tender reader – I recommend reading his article in the company of activists with strong commitments and a healthy sense of humor!

The choices made for the reader fall in territory between a service orientation that would include more idealistic pieces and a social justice orientation that would include more politically radical pieces. I find that this particular orientation stimulates conversations about social responsibility that are drenched in explorative questions, self-awareness, and listening.

The one choice of selections that I did not understand has to do with the predominance of perspectives from the developed world. A more multicultural focus would have extended the range of this reader in ways that might open up the relationship between certain modes of service and colonialism, of which we catch inklings in the opening Americorps volunteer scene. The most striking scene of developing countries in the anthology comes not from a writer in a developing country but from the point of view of an immature philanthropist in Dave Eggers' "Where Were We," an uncomfortably up-close look at the disconnect between American idealism and the urge for the quick fix.

There is also an important dimension of race and class contexts of service learning and social action that surface in pieces like Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" and Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson," but careful leadership is needed to explore these contexts in ways that are safe for all discussion participants. The Reader does not offer guidelines for this dimension in particular; I would urge facilitators to explore supplementary guides for engaging in cross-race, cross-class dialogue.

The Appendix of discussion questions for each piece is a crucial part of the book. The questions are specific, experience-oriented, and open-ended. At times the questions seem bland compared to some of the reading. This aggravated me, until I saw that this blandness provides fertile soil for discussion that can, from the organic dynamics of the people in the room, move in far more radical directions without the external intervention of controversial questions.

This reader opens up space for a participatory democratic energy to emerge between and among people. It mediates a praxis that helps us to counteract the social processes that prompt us to categorize and mistrust our fellow human beings, particularly those we do not know. It invites us to enter into the hole in the fence that Pablo Neruda writes about in "The Lamb and the Pinecone," where we can

feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses – that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things.

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