Election Participation:  
An Integral Service-based Component for Social Studies Methods

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Most educators recognize that social studies methods courses emphasize connecting knowledge to life, through experiential learning and actions based on individual and civic values. The authors developed a required participation lesson for secondary methods students to assure that future teachers had personally experienced and evaluated a civic service learning activity. A goal was to motivate these pre-service teachers to include such experiences in their future teaching with middle or high school students. The pre-service teachers established their own way of being actively involved in the election process in a manner that complimented their interests and complex schedules. This paper describes the assignment and its related discussions. Evidence of personal experiences and reactions from students’ reflection papers is presented describing newly gained perspectives about how exhaustive and significant the election process is. Pre-service teachers’ written reflections indicated they considered this experience critical for future social studies teachers.

Key Words: Civic participation, Elections, Experiential learning, Observations, Reflection, Service learning

Introduction

If citizenship is to be based on action within civil society, how can social studies methods courses be complete without some form of meaningful civic participation? Finding time within the short semester when methods instruction is usually taught is a challenge. In 2004, as an attempt to encourage experiential learning with secondary methods students and to examine civic participation, pre-service teachers were given the assignment to work in the election process for a period of 10 hours. Then, they wrote a reflection paper regarding this participation, their experiences, and their feelings. The range of activities and favorable comments from the students stimulated our interest in duplicating the same assignment and format in the 2008 election that the media indicated would bring many youth into the political process.

Rationale

Recalling Shirley Engle’s (1960) identification of decision-making as the heart of the social studies, and curriculum theory stressing the importance in teaching and learning of real life involvement, we, as methods instructors asked ourselves challenging questions about methods course content. What really is the role of a citizen and how does that apply to the obligation of a social studies teacher and educator? And how do we get teacher candidates to see themselves as role models for active participation in government beyond being a role model of a scholarly citizen who seeks out the facts to present multiple sides of
issues or to separate facts from fiction or false assumptions?

In recent years social studies educators, politicians, and the general public have advocated the use of volunteer service learning or participation activities (Wade, 2008). Some states and school systems require such activities for high school graduation and many prestigious universities place participation in service activities high on the list of required student characteristics for admission. Clearly, there is a movement for more experiential learning opportunities. The authors agree that it is essential for social studies teacher candidates to acknowledge the issues and tensions of their professional life and to do so with input gained from interacting with many resources and a range of experiences. Politicians, civil servants, and citizens are all required to make decisions and choices.

R. Freeman Butts (1950), Shirley Engle (1960), and Walter Parker (2005), have asked questions about issues still facing society including its youth today, such as: Are secondary social studies students examining and making more decisions in the classroom? Are the decisions students make outside of the classroom, on the Internet, and among their friends, reflective of sober, reasoned, intelligent decisions? Are students’ actions representative of the more deliberative citizen who assumes responsibility within a democratic society? We also asked a further question, will our future teachers be motivated, as active citizens, to encourage their students to participate in governmental service?

In May 2000 the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) adopted a position statement titled, “Service Learning: An Essential Component of Citizenship Education.” Yet, experience reveals that in the area of social studies methods, teacher candidates who should lead the way for recognizing and performing service learning fall woefully short. Perhaps it is the level of development as a professional social studies educator that reinfors, in college seniors, the desire to focus on the content of history and the social sciences leading to the neglect of the recognition of the role of skills, attitudes, and participation. Or, perhaps it is a misconception that allows many to equate being a good person with democratic citizenship.

We know that many secondary social studies methods students tend to view college assignments as something to get through in order to earn course credit, and not necessarily as practical, let alone authentic, learning experiences. Todd Dinkelman (2001) describes such pre-service teachers as operating in “survival-mode” (p. 633). We sought to create an opportunity to prepare our teacher candidates to increase their own political efficacy as citizens and social studies teachers.

Lesson Objectives

The following objectives guided the lesson.

1. Pre-service teachers will actively participate in the electoral process in support of a candidate, party, or the local governmental office charged with conducting elections.

2. Pre-service teachers will write a reflection paper that includes comments and recommendations on issues related to arranging the implementation of civic oriented service learning.

3. Pre-service teachers’ written reflections will include personal observations and information about the electoral process acquired through their active experience of working in the electoral process.

4. Students will discuss their commitment to the importance of the role of active learning experiences as an instructional strategy worthy of being implemented with secondary students.
Procedures for the Lesson

With the objectives in mind, the authors prepared and distributed the Election Day Participation Directions sheet outlining individual responsibilities and the written reflection assignment early in the semester. The directions sheet is appended to this article. We explained the assignment and rationale for the assignment, and answered questions the teacher candidates might have. We asked, how is this assignment related to the citizenship goals of social studies and the themes of the 10 standards for social studies developed by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994)? We stressed that candidates had the freedom to select a type of participation that would meet their own schedules within the framework of the assignment.

In subsequent weeks we inquired about the candidates’ personal progress in arranging for their service in regard to the election and whether new or special concerns had arisen about the assignment. Class was dismissed the week of election. The reflection paper was to be written and turned into the instructor at the beginning of the class session in the week after Election Day.

At the next class session there was a discussion of the candidates’ experiences and observations. We encouraged the class to draw conclusions about their experiences as examples of experiential learning and about the role of service learning in social studies classes.

Assessment of Learning

Through class discussion and their reflection papers, students revealed how they saw the election experience contributing to their development as prospective teachers. In comparing the similarities and differences among these teacher candidates’ ideas, attitudes, and choices, it was possible to infer what student knowledge (concepts and principles) was synthesized into attitudes related to elections, and service learning.

While it was assumed and encouraged verbally to work at the polls on Election Day, in both the original experience and its duplication, the students independently found nine additional opportunities to fulfill the lesson’s objectives. The specific activities were grouped into three categories with short job descriptions listed beneath the categories and displayed in Table 1. The number of candidates performing each activity was shown by the election years. The experiential assignment was originally assigned in 2004 and then duplicated using the exact same procedures and directions in 2008. Candidate’s service choices were displayed in the chart separately by year to allow for comparisons. Both elections experiences were for presidential elections where there tends to be greater voter interests and turnout.

These secondary social studies methods preservice teachers indicated that they would not have taken part in the election beyond voting had they not been required to perform the service-learning assignment.
Table 1. Participation Activities of Secondary Social Studies Methods Students in 2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Roles Performed</th>
<th>Number Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked in Voting Process Roles or at Poll Election day</td>
<td>5 (total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Poll worker</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Party greeter</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered voters</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up polling places</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivered voters to or assisted at voter headquarters</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for a Candidate or Party</td>
<td>5 (total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor or Party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write-in candidate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked Party phone bank or headquarters office prior to election</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed candidate literature</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked for the opposition party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Several students reported performing more than one role.

During the two elections more than half of the students chose to work on Election Day or in preparation of the polling place within 24 hours of the election. Perhaps this is not surprising because students had to return to their local communities to vote. Although schools and the university were in recess on Election Day, only some of the students working the polls did so in states where they were paid. Of special note was that in each of the elections, one student volunteered to work for a political party whose philosophy he or she did not support. Neither of these students gave any indication of the reason for that choice in their reflection papers, although each indicated that the learning experience was difficult but meaningful. Most of the candidates performed tasks that were conventional to the electoral process. Experiences were largely associated with getting out the party members to vote or working at the polls on Election Day under the direction of the County Clerk’s office. Perhaps the most unique experiences were those of the one candidate in 2004 who worked to elect a write-in candidate for a county sheriff.

The major difference between the 2004 and 2008 political landscapes was a greater focus by political parties in 2008 on the participation of younger citizens. These secondary social studies methods pre-service teachers indicated that they would not have taken part in the election beyond voting had they not been required to perform the service-learning assignment. Having told our students when making the assignment, “Through this activity you should learn something about the electoral process that you would not get through reading or in the classroom,” we were pleased to find that their reflection papers illustrated the fulfillment of this prediction and more.

These conclusions were supported throughout the reflection papers as illustrated here by a series of representative quotations.

In the class discussion students shared many ideas and impressions they had about their service in the election process. These included comments on the many laws related to elections, the varied and great volume of effort that goes into an election, and the public’s commitment to voting. Students specifically shared comments on the long waiting lines, the special efforts to provide for those with disabilities, the pride and excitement of first time voters, and the number of mothers who came to the polls with their children. In 2008 students also commented on the confidence of the older population when voting.
electronically for the first time instead of on paper ballots of years past.

In the rural areas, students indicated that the election was, for many, a social event as much as the civic duty of voting. Students expressed the idea that they would be better teachers because they had been involved in this experience.

In the written reflection papers, individual students offered detailed descriptions of their experiences and more readily revealed attitudes and personal beliefs that they did not express in the class discussion. Many indicated they were looking forward to taking part in the election process again.

After reading and comparing comments from the reflection papers four major conclusions were developed. Samplings of student comments are offered as evidence of the impact of the election participation project.

**Conclusion 1:** Teacher candidates expressed a new awareness of greater depth of knowledge about the election process including the work needed to prepare for the election and the legal processes governing the election.

The county clerk taught me a lot about local politics that we don’t teach much in our civics books. They say that the most important politics are local politics, and I think he showed me that just might be true.

From this election I really learned just how much goes into an election process and how many people worldwide participate to get their opinion out there.

The most important thing I learned about the election and campaign process was that it’s long and takes a lot of energy to get out the vote and get people eager to volunteer and ultimately vote for your specific candidate.

(The volunteers) have to take time from their jobs, classes, or family life to advocate for their party and candidate.

**Conclusion 2:** Teacher candidates expressed a willingness to participate in the electoral process in the future and a desire to take a more active role in future elections.

I’d want to work for a campaign in the future as the opportunities present themselves, because I’ve seen in my experience with this election and project how a politically active population is essential to the political process.

I would be willing to repeat this participation, but next time, I definitely want to become more involved with the campaign. Being that I am a political science graduate, I have a very strong interest in politics and government...this election exhibited how important it is to become involved and how it can help make change happen and I know I will ensure my future students to understand that very important point so they too can influence their futures.

I will be participating in the next election and will help my candidate in any way. Furthermore, I hope to be in a position to run for House of Delegates in either 2012 or 2014. There are few things that are more important to me than government and choosing candidates who share my philosophy on government.

Not only would I be willing to participate again in elections, but I have been inspired to actually participate in government and someday run for local, state, or federal government positions.
**Conclusion 3:** Teacher candidates reported this type of participation experience as being critical for developing better social studies teachers.

Participating in this Election Day activity was the most civic activity I have done besides voting. I now feel empowered because of it. I think that I will be a better social studies teacher because of my participation in this election activity.

I feel that an assignment such as this is critical for students of social studies because of the different perspectives you receive about the electoral process and the closer it brings you to the election itself.

I told my neighbor, who was passing out information for a local candidate outside, that what began as a course requirement quickly turned into a life-changing political experience.

**Conclusion 4:** Teacher candidates stated they have respect for the American public and the efforts they observed being shown toward the processes of the elections.

I admired the passion that these people showed towards their candidates. I was interested to see a few single young moms present and volunteering at the meeting… I think passion revolves around the hearts of those at the planning meeting. I never fully understood the work and importance of volunteers in elections before.

My state has an initiative where children can come along with their parents and cast a vote on a paper ballot in a mock election. The children seemed very excited and curious about the whole election process and I believe this experience was very helpful in getting their attention and interest in the voting process.

**Evaluation**

Admittedly, some candidates were fairly blunt about their lack of initial enthusiasm as seen in one statement in a reflection paper.

I must admit, I was not thrilled about setting up the polls at 5:30 in the morning in preparation for their opening at 6:30, nor was I thrilled about working throughout the whole day till their closing at 7:30 pm. And I certainly did not want to write a reflection report afterward… however, I have to say that the overall experience was awesome, (sic.) and I will likely be more involved in future elections for the rest of my life.

Although the suggested questions for the reflection paper asked students to reflect on how their observations during the participation experience impacted their views of how people regard their right to vote, these pre-service teachers also express changes in their own understanding of the importance of the political efficacy of citizens. They described voters, poll workers, and volunteers in ways that illustrated a new respect for the American public’s perspective on the importance of voting.

*I never fully understood the work and importance of volunteers in elections before.*
The pre-service teachers came to understand Election Day as an institution that belongs to the American people and is successful in large part because of the work and efforts of many Americans. We also were intrigued to read that candidates voluntarily commented on the personal usefulness and relevance of this participation experience, as a significant contribution to their preparation for teaching.

Like other social studies educators who have reported their experiences with students performing service learning, our data does not predict nor generalize about the future behaviors of these candidates as citizens or as teachers.

Nor can we report any specific lasting changes in perceptions, participation, or citizenship dispositions. While our findings for these small samples in two different elections are encouraging, they are not able to be generalized to other teacher candidates. The seemingly positive impact that this Election Day service had on the pre-service teachers in our classes leads us to conclude that we should again use the Election Day service requirement and encourage other methods instructors to consider including an assignment similar to the one we have implemented in our social studies methods classes. We welcome any who share an interest in this experiential assignment for their social studies methods classes to join us in preparation for the next election.

References


About the Author

Robert A. Waterson holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Purdue University. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Human Resources and Education at West Virginia University. He also is the director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship Education, which offers many experiential learning opportunities for social studies methods students at West Virginia University.

Mary E. Haas holds an Ed.D. in Social Studies K-12 from Indiana University. She is currently a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Human Resources and Education at West Virginia University. She tries to be a role model for her students and worked at the polls on both Election Day discussed in this paper.

Citation for this Article

Appendix A

Election Day Participation Directions

Participation in the civic life of your community is important and, as a teacher, you set an example for your students. On an Election Day there is no school in our state, including our university. Many of the schools are used as polling places. On Election Day your assignment is to be an active participant in the election beyond voting.

Through this activity you will learn something about the electoral process that you would not get through reading. You will have the opportunity to be of service to your community, as well as having a chance to interact with new groups of people involved in a unique civic experience. You will use your social skills and observation skills to gather information about how people vote and how the government conducts the business of electing the nation’s leaders.

You will choose one of the following activities.

1. Working at the polls on Election Day in the county where you are registered. In our state as of the date we are writing this assignment, you will be paid $125.00 for doing the training and working at the polls (10 hours of work is required).

2. You may work for a party or specific candidate of your choice, as they encourage you to serve, any time between Sunday, Nov. 2 and Election Day Nov. 4 for a total of 10 hours. You will need to draft a note that says when and where you worked and describes the task you performed. Your note must be and have it signed by a supervisor and submitted with your report.

3. You may work in some other way for 10 hours on the election. You will identify an experience that will help you learn more about how elections take place and the role of the state and local governments in elections. You also will be learning about the political parties and their part in getting candidates elected to public office. You must write your plan and have it approved by your instructor prior to October 1, 2008 and include a note of acceptance from the people for whom you will be working.

* Following your participation you will write a three-page reflection paper.
Suggested Guiding Statements and Questions for the Reflection Paper

- Describe where you worked and in what capacity.

- Describe the other people with whom you worked, indicating their positions and the tasks they performed.

- Describe any unusual problems that took place and how they were solved.

- Respond to the questions. What laws applied to the activities in which you took part? Do you see the need for any additional laws or regulations?

- Respond to the question. How did the public and the other workers respond to you?

- Respond to the question. From what you observed through your participation, how do people regard their right to vote?

- Respond to the questions. What new information did you learn about regarding the electoral process? Do you think the election was a fair and honest process?

- Explain if you would be willing to repeat this type of participation or describe the way you would prefer to participate in a future election.

- If you worked at the polls, describe the turnout in numbers and the characteristics of the workers and voters at different times of the day.

- Respond to the question. What did you observe about children who came to the voting polls, and their behaviors, including interest in the election, or disinterest?

- Respond to the question. How did the poll workers receive the presence of children, the elderly, and the disabled?