Adult Education Research Conference   2011 Conference Proceedings (Toronto, ON, Canada)

Learning Democracy and 'Difference' in Civil Society

Sara Carpenter
OISE/University of Toronto

Learning Democracy and 'Difference' in Civil Society

Sara Carpenter
OISE/University of Toronto

Abstract: Civil society has captured the imagination of many adult educators and has become a central focus of both local and international development work. Volunteerism has come to be seen as a source of democratic learning and this emphasis calls adult educators to deeply interrogate its contours. This paper reports on an American volunteerism program organized to recruit young people into participation in civil society and examines the relationship between learning about citizenship or democracy and understanding social inequality, or 'social problems'.

Civil society, an arena of citizen organization theoretically free from incursions by the state or the market, has captured the imagination of many adult educators and become a central focus of both local and international development work. While adult educators working in the social purpose tradition argue for a more activist-oriented engagement, the primary mode of participation in civil society within the educational literature of North America is community service and volunteerism. Advocates claim that through volunteer work in civil society, everyday citizens learn more about the riches of democracy, the duties of citizenships, and the diversity of public life. This powerful claim has lead to the pedagogical movement of service-learning, increased volunteerism by individuals, support from the private sector, and, in the case of the United States, massive federal resources aimed at promoting volunteer service. Similarly, volunteer opportunities abound for privileged members of advanced capitalist nations to participate in the 'development' of the Global South.

This emphasis on volunteerism as a source of democratic learning calls adult educators to deeply interrogate the contours of the kinds of learning that can happen through volunteerism. This paper reports on an institutional ethnography of the AmeriCorps program, an American volunteerism program organized to recruit young people into participation in civil society through a dedicated year of volunteer community service. This paper expands on an analysis of the institutional regulations of AmeriCorps and their elaboration at the local level in practice. An unexpected finding from this research, and the subject of this paper, concerns the relationship between learning about citizenship or democracy and understanding social inequality, or 'social problems,' in the AmeriCorps program and thus, the forms of social difference related to these forms of inequality.

"Meeting community needs': The development and appearance of AmeriCorps

National youth service appears in several national contexts in different formations. Many nations, for example, maintain policies on conscription or compulsory military service. Some offer forms on non-military service to conscientious objectors and others who cannot or will not serve in military capacities. Still other countries offer non-militarized forms of national service to young people, following the rationale that compulsory service to the nation cements national

identity, builds democratic participation, engenders a sense of social and civic responsibility, and provides for the public good. In the United States, national service exists in a non-compulsory form; as voluntary service to the nation through volunteer work in civil society in exchange for increased access to higher education.

The idea of non-militarized national service grew in the United States throughout the 20th century and has a specific history connected to notions of 'development.' William James, founding father of the pragmatist school, made the first proposal for national service in 1906. James asserted that national service performs a similar function, or a 'moral equivalent,' to war by disciplining the nation in particular values, national identities, and forms of labor. While participants in the populist social reform movements of the early 20th century embraced James' proposal, it made little headway within the federal government. Twenty-six years later, Franklin Delano Roosevelt organized what some call the first national service program in response to the employment crisis generated by the Great Depression. The Civilian Conservation Corps is the first example in the United States of a nationalized labor force deployed for the dual purposes of forestalling the collapse of the economy and the major development of the United States for the purposing of growing the economy. The CCC shared very few characteristics with subsequent forms of national service, but did offer the notion of the importance of 'national work' to solve various social problems. Following the success of the CCC, similar methods were suggested in conjunction with Harry Truman's post-war international development plans, such as the Point Four plan. These efforts eventually culminated in the founding of the Peace Corps, the United States' most explicit and transparent effort to utilize volunteer labor for the purposes of 'development.'

The Peace Corps then became a model for the massive domestic development project deployed in the 1960s under the guise of Lyndon B. Johnson's 'War on Poverty.' The War on Poverty was a nation wide policy agenda that created thousands of local development projects to combat the effects of continued rural and urban poverty, particularly within communities of color, and funding national social programs such as Head Start, social assistance, public housing, slum removal, rural infrastructure development, and numerous social service programs. The first incarnation of today's form of national service appeared during this period as the VISTA program, or Volunteers in Service to America. Their purpose was to develop local capacity to respond to the problems generated by poverty. Targeted for elimination by Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan, and only mildly encouraged by Carter, the program found an advocate in the late 1980s in President George HW Bush. Bush organized the first Commission on National and Community Service, charged with exploring the possibilities of promoting voluntary national service as a response to the continuing struggles of communities in poverty. President Clinton envisioned that two problems could be solved through a nation youth service program and institutionalized the work begun under Bush's administration. On the one hand, he believed that young people could be mobilized to meet local social and community problems through volunteer service; on the other hand he believed that they could exchange their labor for increased access to higher education through a system of debt management and monetary rewards. Clinton's administration spearheaded the founding of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the creation of three national service programs: AmeriCorps (including a re-organized VISTA program), the Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America.

Clinton's initiatives with national service coincided with an administration-wide project to re-evaluate the role of government in the provision of public services. Almost immediately upon taking office, Bill Clinton and Al Gore began an assessment of the scope and efficiency of

government, which was highly influenced by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's (1992) text *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*. Osborne and Gaebler argued that government had to change, and to some extent already had, in response to the encroaching global economy, citizen dissatisfaction, and new information technologies. 'The Gore Report (1993),' as it is commonly referred to, advocates the implementation of an entrepreneurial management paradigm for government and is based on what Gore referred to as the report's four principles for government: results before rules, customer satisfaction, decentralize authority, and work better, cost less. The report recommended the creation of independent federal agencies which would combine public financing with private money to set agendas for the provision of public services. The CNCS was the first of these agencies created by the Clinton administration and served as Clinton's model for the reinvention of government (Waldeman, 1995).

The CNCS is charged with the promotion and administration of national and community service in the United States. The AmeriCorps program, which is the focus of this research, is the largest of the national service programs and offers American permanent residents between the ages of 17 and 65 the opportunity to volunteer full time in a non-profit organization for up to two years in exchange for a living stipend and, upon completion of the program, a tuition award for higher education. While the program is open to adults of working age, and does enroll a diverse population in terms of age, the vast majority of participants are young adults who have recently completed either secondary school or university. The education award, the only monetary incentive for participation, allows student to either pay tuition or to make payment on certain education related loans.

The AmeriCorps program exists as a diffused system of federal grants dispersed to local non-profit organizations. Once an organization secures a grant, they are free to hire a specified number of individuals into AmeriCorps positions. As part of the conditions of the grant, the AmeriCorps members must perform particular service activities and participate in trainings and member development programs. For many in the non-profit sector, AmeriCorps volunteers often look like entry-level workers in non-profits. AmeriCorps members are organized in local 'corps;' they may all serve at the same nonprofit organization or be out-sourced to multiple community organizations while retaining a central identity as a 'corp' associated with a particular non-profit. They participate in all training and service activities as a 'corp' and the sponsoring organization, which holds the grant, is responsible for their training and supervision.

The AmeriCorps program is the largest state-sponsored mobilization of community-based volunteerism in the history of the United States. The most recent legislation re-authorizing the program, the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act, includes plans to expand the program from the current number of 75,000 participants to 225,000 over ten years and resulted in a Congressional appropriation of $1.14 billion for the CNCS for 2010-2011. Given the size and scope of the program, which operates in every state and territory of the United States, and the claim of the program that it is building citizen participation in both the United State and the world it is important to interrogate the ways in which the program organizes young peoples' participation in civil society.

Participation in civil society

On the surface, AmeriCorps programs appear decentralized, fluid, and, in some instances, even disorganized. It can be difficult to see, from the grassroots level, how a diffused army of volunteers is, in reality, part of a highly bureaucratic and regulated state apparatus. AmeriCorps

volunteers themselves arrive at their work everyday without an understanding of how their daily activities, the nature of their work, and the context of their interactions in local communities are coordinated at federal and state levels of government. Much of this coordination takes place through the grant funding process in which the CNCS designates what are acceptable sites and forms of service for AmeriCorps volunteers. These conditions are dictated by a complex set of federal regulations that grant applicants must navigate in the design of their program and in their formation of the service activities performed by AmeriCorps volunteers. Taken together these regulations act to narrow the field of civil society to a particular form of participation in particular settings and which allows volunteers to interact with constituents of civil society in particular and restricted ways. There are at least four levels of this 'narrowing' process, which I refer to as the 'non-political', the 'sustainable', the 'permissible,' and the 'logical.'

The first instance of narrowing involves the kinds of organizations that can host an AmeriCorps program and where volunteers can perform their service. In the United States, groups that are neither entities of the state or private organizations are organized under twenty-seven different statutes for tax-exempt, or non-profit, status based on their commitment to promoting the common good. The vast majority of organizations fall into the status of 501c3, 501c4, and 501c5.[i] The primary characteristic differentiating these types of organizations from one another has to do with the extent to which the organization engages with the state and public policy around an issue of public concern. Despite some ambiguity within the federal regulations, the statutes governing the AmeriCorps program expressly prohibit any organization other than a 501c3 organization from receiving any benefit from the AmeriCorps program. The primary point of differentiation is whether or not an organization can be said to be 'political.' AmeriCorps members are confined, through this regulation, to organizations that are recognized for *not* participating in politics and for approaching a social problem through the delivery of direct human and charitable services. This, of course, does not mean that there is no political discourse within 501c3 organizations. However, it does mean that this politics will exist on an informal basis and will not be integrated into the mission, mandates, or officially sanctioned and funded activities of the AmeriCorps volunteer. The *intentional* engagement with politics is removed from daily experience at first through the ways in which the organization directs human labor towards the amelioration of human need.

The second instance of narrowing involves the emphasis within grant selection criteria that bias the grant process towards organizations that are deemed 'sustainable.' In 2005, the CNCS reorganized its grant selection criteria to reduce the levels of federal cost sharing associated with programs. This demand amounted to an edict to increase private sponsorship of public programs or, in the lingua franca of neo-liberal policy, to increase the number of public-private partnerships. A series of regulations, specifically funding match requirements, were instituted and exist as a barrier to the participation of smaller, less well-funded community organizations. The funding matches require that an AmeriCorps program generate between 25% and 50% of their total program budget from external, private sources. AmeriCorps program sites that will survive in this funding environment will not necessarily be those that run the most effective programs or those whose members go on to serve the nation, but rather those nonprofits that are able to cultivate their 'entrepreneurial' skills despite the fact that there is evidence to suggest that 'entrepreneurial' nonprofits are actually less effective in meeting their missions (Foster & Bradach, 2005). These requirements raise questions as to the political form of organizations that are large, well funded, and able to sustain AmeriCorps programs with decreasing levels of support from the federal government. Much of this focus on sustainability

has to do with promoting sustainability in the nonprofit sector through the expansion of volunteer mobilization. This also presents a picture of an AmeriCorps program that not only meets a compelling local need in a sufficient manner, but performs this service in such a way as to create a program that spins out of the federal government and into the realm of civil society.

The third instance of 'narrowing' is found in the regulations concerning 'permissible' and 'prohibited' activities in AmeriCorps. These restrictions begin by confining the work of AmeriCorps members to two broad categories: direct human service and organizational capacity building. Based on these two qualifications, AmeriCorps activities are further restricted through prohibitions of involvement in 'political' or 'partisan' activity. Findings from this research reveal that although local-level administrators are technically 'free' to interpret these regulations at the individual programmatic level, these processes of interpretation take place in an environment characterized by fear, threat, instability, and arbitrariness. Interpreting the programs in an open way requires program directors to be 'brave.' Others, who are 'nervous' about the consequences, will tend towards a conservative interpretation. Why would program directors be 'nervous' about violating regulations and threatening the stability of their programs? As most are employed by the same AmeriCorps grants that fund members, their own livelihood is implicated in their organization of the program. Although they may feel empowered by the vagueness of the regulations to stretch their interpretations, that same vagueness can be the cause for punitive action. As such, in an environment where ambiguity and subjectivity are the rule, it is entirely likely that the most logical and defensive position is to drift towards the center. Through these regulatory mechanisms, AmeriCorps members' actual volunteer tasks will be confined to activities that are deemed 'apolitical' and which constitute direct service to a local population.

The fourth instance of narrowing takes place through the processes used to develop the actual program plan for AmeriCorps community service. Member activities are organized in AmeriCorps grants and program planning through both the explicit and implicit use of logic models. A logic model is a "graphic display or 'map' of the relationship between a program's resources, activities, and intended results" (Kaplan & Garret, 2005 p. 167), which surfaces the assumptions of program planning by making "the implicit theory explicit' (Dwyer & Makin, 1997 p. 421). Research on logic models reveals that they are deeply political modes of organizing information in that they rely on pre-existing ideological interpretations of social problems (Renger, 2006). The use of logic models is combined with the Congressional mandate that AmeriCorps programs produce 'measurable results.' Thus, in the process of using logic models to develop programs, AmeriCorps grant writers are forced to conceptualize problems using the narrow logic of what kinds of apolitical, direct service activities will produce quantifiable outcomes at individual scales. The result is program planning that relies on individual behavioral interventions and technocratic approaches to social problems.

Implications for theorizing learning in civil society

While AmeriCorps is the case of a single government organizing young people's volunteer service is a particular manner, it draws from a set of assumptions about democratic learning that proliferate in the literature on volunteerism, service, and learning. AmeriCorps contends that *political socialization* and *politicization* can be separate cognitive and pedagogical acts (Diller, 2001). It promotes a vision of democratic engagement that is divorced from questions concerning social justice, social difference, and the distribution of social, economic, and cultural power. This separation is largely maintained through institutional processes that force local organizations to think about social problems in terms of individual pathologies and to imagine solutions from the standpoint of rationale technical problems. Further, the major

ideological thrusts of AmeriCorps can be found in communitarianism, specifically conservative visions that re-imagine the relationship between citizen and state as one of moral responsibility (Etzioni, 1993). This vision releases the state from the imperative to redistribute wealth in favor of a compassionate citizenship in which citizens provide care for one another. In this framework, the gaze of the citizen is directed towards the local, face-to-face dynamic of meeting humanitarian need through service and is directed away from the larger relations of political economy that shape local level interactions.

'Volunteerism' and 'community service,' as both a form of participation in civil society and a mode for promoting development on international and domestic scales, have long been critiqued for their ethical implications (Cruz, 1990; Farmer, 2005). Ivan Illich (1968/1990) famously referred to U.S. volunteers as "vacationing salesman for middle-class 'American way of life'" (p. 316). At the same time, a debate ranges within academic literature as to how the relationship between volunteerism and learning can be interpreted, controlled, and organized. These debates often miss a dynamic of volunteerism that laid bare in this research: volunteerism is not a 'found' experience in life. Rather, it is organized, in both formal and informal ways, through the relations between the individual, the market, the state, civil society, and larger social relations of power. This organization must be understood as more than just 'context' in order to see beyond the appearance of experience and into its moving components; exactly the kind of dialectical analysis required to move beyond understanding learning as the acquisition of skills, knowledge, of values (as is so often associated with learning and civil society) and into a notion of learning based in the mediation of consciousness and matter.

References

Cruz, N. (1990). A challenge to the notion of service. In *Combining Service and Learning* (pp. 321-324). Raleigh, NC: National Society for Experiential Education.

Diller, E. (2001). *Citizens in service: A challenge of delivering civic engagement training to national service programs* (National Service Fellow). Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service.

Dwyer, J. J., & Makin, S. (1997). Using a program logic model that focuses on performance measurement to develop a program. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, *88*(6), 421-425.

Etzioni, A. (1993). *The spirit of community: Rights, responsibilities, and the communitarian agenda*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Farmer, P. (2005). *Pathologies of power: Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foster, W., & Bradach, J. (2005). Should nonprofits seek profits? *Harvard Business Review*, *83*(2), 92-100.

Gore, A. (1993). *From red tape to results: Creating a government that works better and costs less; a report from the National Performance Review*. Darby, PA: DIANE.

Illich, I. (1968). To hell with good intentions. In *Combining service and learning: A resource book for community and public service* (pp. 314-320). Raleigh, NC: National Society for Experiential Education.

James, W. (1910). The moral equivalent of war. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, *1*(1), 17-26.

Kaplan, S. A., & Garrett, K. E. (2005). The use of logic models by community-based initiatives. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *28*, 167-172.

Osborne, D., & Gaebler, T. (1993). *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*. New York: Plume.

Renger, R. (2006). Consequences to federal programs when the logic modeling process is not followed with fidelity. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *27*(4), 452-463.

Waldeman, S. (1995). *The bill: How legislation really becomes law, a case study of the National Service Bill.* New York: Penguin.

---

[i] These terms refer to the numerical designation of different organizations within the federal tax code.