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Active Democratic Citizenship and Service-Learning in the Postgraduate Classroom

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This article investigates the use of service-learning in teaching active democratic citizenship in the postgraduate classroom. In particular it draws on a case study of an MBS Government module (GV6104) entitled “Political Participation and Mobilisation” that explores the relationship between democracy and participation. Students of this module are trained in the nonpartisan, internationally respected Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VSPJ) voter education/active citizenship program and have delivered it to Irish and foreign nationals in community settings in advance of the 2009 European Parliament and Local Government elections. In order to critically evaluate the project this article investigates service-learning as a pedagogy reviewing the literature on the relationship between it and civic education and explores service-learning best practice. It evaluates the performance of the University College Cork (UCC) project against service-learning standards of best practice using data from the students’ assessment of their service-learning experience gathered from a survey; an analysis of their learning journals; and feedback from the community partners. It finds that the students overwhelmingly agree that the service-learning experience contributed to their civic education and recognizes the need for further scholarly work in an Irish context to ascertain the merits of this pedagogy and to mainstream it in Irish higher education.

Keywords active citizenship, civic education, community partnership, service-learning

Introduction

Recognizing service-learning as a pedagogy that “seeks to engage students in activities that enhance academic learning, civic responsibility and the skill of citizenship, while also enhancing community capacity through service” (Furco and Holland, cited in McIlrath and MacLabhrainn 2007), this article investigates its use in teaching active citizenship in the postgraduate classroom. It concentrates on a taught MBS (Masters in Business Studies) module GV6104 (“Political Participation and Mobilisation”) that explores the relationship between democracy and participation and examines theories of active democratic citizenship, empowerment, and political participation. As part of this module students are trained in the nonparty political,

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internationally respected Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VSPJ) active citizenship/voter education program. In advance of the 2009 European and Local elections students in this module delivered the active citizenship program to Irish and foreign nationals in the Carrigtwohill St. Vincent de Paul family resource center in October 2008. They also facilitated workshops for participants of University College Cork's (UCC) nonaccredited certificate in political issues and community action, which is offered to refugees and asylum seekers. As part of their service-learning experience the students developed, designed and produced additional materials tailored to the needs of their respective groups.

In order to critically evaluate this project this article investigates service-learning as a pedagogy focusing on the link between it and civic education and explores service-learning best practice. It evaluates the performance of the UCC project using data from the students' assessment of their service-learning experience gathered from a survey, an analysis of their learning journals, and feedback from the workshop participants in Carrigtwohill and UCC.

Service-Learning, Civic Education, and Best Practice

Democracy requires active citizens, for "without citizen participation and the rights, the freedoms and the means to participate, the principle of popular control over government cannot begin to be realised" (Beetham et al. 2002, 14). Citizenship is a contested concept that tends to be discussed in terms of the relationship between the State and the individual where rights and responsibilities are confined to territorial boundaries. Liberal theorists view the protection of and the maximization of individual interests as the core role of a political system and thereby stress the legal dimension of citizenship. Communitarian perspectives, on the other hand, highlight individuals' relations within society and argue that citizenship is "socially embedded" (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2006). The latter perspective is most closely linked to active democratic citizenship, particularly in the context of the recent Irish debates on the topic that have drawn on theories of civic republicanism.¹

The liberal and communitarian perspectives are reflected in Honohan's two dimensions of active democratic citizenship, status, and practice (2005). Legal status grants certain rights such as equality before the law and certain duties or obligations such as obeying the law. In this sense being a citizen is essentially a matter of laws and of fixed rights and obligations. The practice of citizenship, on the other hand, refers to people's attitudes and behavior and involves such things as participating in self-government, sitting on juries, informing oneself about the democratic process, supporting the public good, and defending one's country. Active democratic citizenship that "emphasises freedom in self government where citizens, who do not necessarily share cultural or ethnic identity but are interdependent in terms of a common fate, form an involuntary community to act in solidarity, share common goods and jointly exercise some collective direction over their lives" (Harris 2005) includes cognitive, dispositional, and practical dimensions. It requires civic education to raise awareness, to promote interest, and to encourage participation in the public sphere.

As Dewey argues:

[T]he problem of democracy becomes the problem of that form of social organization, extending to all areas and ways of living, in which powers of individuals shall not be merely released from mechanical external

constraint but shall be fed, sustained and directed. Such an organization demands much more of education than general schooling, which without a renewal of the springs of purpose and desire becomes a new mode of mechanization and formalization, as hostile to liberty as ever was governmental constraint. (1963, 31)

To meet the cognitive, dispositional, and practical dimensions of active citizenship, democratic civic education requires three essential components: intellectual understanding, civic skills and attitudes, and civic action (Battistoni 1997) to provide citizens with the critical thinking and deliberative communication capabilities required to keep democracy healthy. It is particularly appropriate that political scientists should be concerned with exposing students to this necessary knowledge and skills (Redlawsk and Wilson 2006).

Service-learning, sometimes referred to as community service-learning, can be a “particularly effective method of civic education” (Battistoni 1997, 155). It has been defined as

a form of experiential education that combines structured opportunities for learning academic skills, reflection on the normative dimensions of civic life, and experiential activity that addresses community needs or assists individuals, families, and communities in need. (Hunter and Brisbin, 2000, 623)

As a form of experiential education service-learning “develops student’ abilities as change agents, gives them a sense of belonging, and fosters the development of competence” (Carver 1997, 149).

It differs from other forms of experiential education, such as work placements/professional internships, as it incorporates another dimension, civic awareness. Yet it is not charitable or philanthropic work as it does not view community engagement as a form of personal generosity. Instead it “seeks to develop in students an ethos of civic and social responsibility—an understanding of the engaged role individuals must play if communities and democracies are to flourish” (Zlotkowski 2007, 43). As Barber and Battistoni argue:

[T]he idea is not that the well-off “owe” something to the less fortunate, but that free democratic communities depend on mutual responsibility and that rights without obligations are ultimately not sustainable. Here the focus is on the nurturing of citizenship and the understanding of the interdependence of communities. (1993, 237)

According to Redlawsk and Wilson (2006) typical elements of service-learning are: working in the community; reflecting on the work; and connecting the work to the course content where critique and self-reflection for course credit are essential to ensuring the academic credibility and integrity.

It is argued that for an activity to be considered service-learning it must contain:

- Explicit assessable learning objectives;
- Community-sponsored activities that promote civic responsibility;
- Structured multilayered reflection opportunities;

- Reciprocity between academic and community partners with regard to the resources, needs, objectives, and priorities that define the partnership (Zlotkowski 2007).

This is also mirrored in Redlawsk and Wilson's three main goals in service-learning: partner with the community to determine and fulfil a need of the community or community organization; engage the student in the community immediately and increase the potential for future engagement; and assignments that connect with and enhance theories students are learning in the classroom (2006).

In their analysis of service-learning best practice Barber and Battistoni state that it should be classroom based, civic rather than philanthropic, for academic credit, offered as a multicourse program and emphasize critical thinking. They also argue that students should serve in groups, be part of the planning process and work in partnership with the community (1993).

Service-learning, therefore, involves four stakeholder groups: community/neighborhood organizations, student learners, instructors, and academic units/institutions. Community agencies should be full partners in designing and specifying the intended pedagogical purposes of the service-learning program. There should also be a specific participatory role for students: they should have the opportunity to shape and develop the service-learning program. As Battistoni argues:

[T]he focus on participatory democracy and equal citizenship should also cause educators to make genuine student input central to the service learning program's design and management. Students should play an active role in planning the program and serve as leaders in it... as this can help students learn the lessons of democracy. (1997, 155)

In this regard service-learning differs from what Freire calls the traditional "banking" model of education where "the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (1970, 53). It also reflects Dewey's philosophy (cited in Battistoni 1997, 154) that argued that any educational approach that consisted of "authorities at the upper end handing down to the receivers at the lower end what they must accept" was an education "fit to subvert, pervert and destroy the foundations of democratic society." Service-learning's emphasis on reciprocity means that students and community members are both simultaneously teachers and learners (Sternberger, Ford, and Dale 2005).

Within service-learning programs, dialogue journals or other group-oriented written reflections, group projects, and presentations are encouraged to enhance students' critical thinking and deliberative skills. Service-learning "needs to be connected to faculty's research and scholarly agendas, be tied to university's research mission and be integrated into the discipline based academic work of departments" (Furco 2007, 69). High-quality service-learning projects require institutional infrastructure to support the heavy time obligations on the part of faculty, staff, community partners, and students and to assist in the development of long-range planning needs and deliberate reflection on desired learning outcomes (Mathews-Gardner, Fitzgerald, and Gitelson 2005).

Service-learning is the teaching dimension of Boyer's scholarship of engagement that calls on the academy to become a "more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems" (1996, 11). It is also the "clearest pedagogical model that takes seriously Freire's challenge

about education” (Doorley 2007, 135). Service-learning has transformative potential for the scholarship of teaching and for the livelihood of the wider community. It plays a part in creating civic space and strengthening civil society and in the “deliberate reconnecting” of citizens with the public sphere by facilitating the collaboration of relevant stakeholders to solve public problems (Barber in Zlotkowski 2007).

Advocates of service-learning emphasize its capacity for “creating and reinforcing civic minded citizens and generating democratic responsibility among our students while serving and empowering communities” and refer to its transformative potential for students as it has been linked with “changing or at least rethinking political attitudes and behaviour and political efficacy” (Mathews-Gardner, Fitzgerald, and Gitelson 2005, 424).

Eyler et al. (cited in Sternberger, Ford, and Dale 2005) note that service-learning promotes personal outcomes (personal efficacy), interpersonal development (leadership skills), social outcomes (reducing stereotypes), and learning outcomes (critical thinking). In their study of the effects of service-learning on students’ political attitudes, Hunter and Brisbin concluded that students who have a service experience “will view the experience positively and will be inclined to seek out other service opportunities” (2000, 626). They also found that students who do service “will learn about their community, further develop some academic skills, and feel that they have helped members of their community” and that students who engage in voluntary service activities come away with a heightened sense of “the value of paying attention to politics, racial diversity, and community responsibility for addressing problems like poverty and hunger” (Hunter and Brisbin 2000).

Astin et al. (cited in Redlawsk and Wilson 2006) found that participation in service-learning had a stronger effect on future “commitment to activism” than did simple community service activities not tied to coursework while Birney (cited in Redlawsk and Wilson 2006) suggests that service-learning activities help increase political efficacy on the part of students involved in these programs.

Service-learning programs that are developed and implemented by the four stakeholders in a spirit of reciprocity can provide Battistoni’s three essential elements of a democratic civic education: intellectual understanding, civic skills and attitudes, and civic action.

To reconcile the tensions that may arise between the affective requirement to socialize students and the cognitive needs of critical thinking skill development, service-learning has to “inhabit the core curriculum, where critical inquiry and discussions are the rule” (Battistoni 1997, 152). This can be achieved by awarding credit for reflective academic exercises and group discussions based on academic readings and reflections.

Civic attitudes and participation skills can be developed through service-learning. De Tocqueville argued that in democracies “all the citizens are independent and feeble; they can do hardly anything by themselves, and none of them can oblige (others) to lend their assistance. They all therefore become powerless if they do not learn voluntarily to help one another” (cited in Battistoni 1997, 152). Service-learning experiences that provide for participation in community organizations educate people “to overcome this powerlessness and isolation” (cited in Battistoni 1997, 152). It is also argued that one of the learning objectives of any service-learning program should be to develop students’ persuasive communication skills so that they might be equipped for participation and deliberation in the public arena (cited in Battistoni 1997). This is achieved through appropriate reflection strategies.

Finally, democratic citizenship is also about taking action, “both individually and together with members of one’s community” (cited in Battistoni 1997). This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges for service-learning and is a clear move from the traditional top-down pedagogical approach criticized by Dewey and Freire. Reciprocity between academic and community partners on objectives, resources, needs, and priorities can achieve this.

The extent to which service-learning can provide civic education rests on a state/university/faculty/student definition of the same. Due to the political and ideological interests embedded in varied conceptions of citizenship there are competing interpretations of what is meant by civic education. Some describe it as the education of “tolerant, rational political actors” while others claim it is one that gives students the “organizational and participatory skills necessary to negotiate democracy” (Dale, Elliot, and Scourfield 2007, 584). Some suggest it teaches the “critical and deliberative skills necessary to participate effectively in contentious public debates” yet others are uncomfortable with approaches that “encourage dissent and critique of current policies” (Westheimer 2004, 232). Westheimer and Kahne note that many programs emphasize the personally responsible citizen and identify three visions of citizenship that may be incorporated into programs of civic education (2004):

1. Personally responsible citizens (citizens must have good character). For example, this citizen will donate to a food drive;
2. A participatory citizen (a citizen must actively participate and take leadership positions in community structures). For example, this citizen will organize a food drive;
3. A justice-oriented citizen (a citizen must question and change established systems and structures when they produce patterns of injustice). For example this citizen will question why there is a need for a food drive and seek to change the root causes.

In conclusion, there is a body of research that documents the role played by service-learning in enhancing students’ civic engagement (Battistoni 1997), sensitivity to diversity (LeSourd 1997), understanding and development of research methods (Reardon cited in Reinke 2003), interpersonal skills (Eyler 2000), and communication skills (Battistoni 1997). Having provided an overview of literature on service-learning, its role in providing civic education and outlining criteria of best practice, this article now turns to the particulars addressing the effects of service-learning in a postgraduate module on democratic civic education.

Service-Learning and Democratic Civic Education: GV6104 – A Case Study

Service-learning as a teaching tool within the context of higher education in Ireland is at its infancy. Historically within Ireland the primary and post educators as well as the informal youth sector have been charged with advancing the skills and competencies of active democratic citizenship (Harris and McIlrath 2008). However in the last five to seven years there has been an increasing recognition of the role that higher education can play through service-learning and service-learning modules are being introduced in a myriad of disciplines across Irish universities (Harris and McIlrath 2008).

Concerns relating to active citizenship and social capital in Ireland were a priority for the former Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Mr. Bertie Ahern. To redress the shift from the collective to the individual, the civic to the material, which he feared was a

consequence of Ireland's economic growth, he established the "Taskforce on Active Citizenship" in 2006. Its remit was to advise "the Government on the steps that can be taken to ensure that the wealth of civic spirit and active participation already present in Ireland continues to grow and develop" (Taskforce on Active Citizenship 2006). Reporting the following year it made two recommendations regarding higher education: firstly, to establish a network of higher education institutions (HEIs) to be led by an Higher Education Authority (HEA) to promote, to support, and to link citizenship activities, including volunteering and service-learning and, secondly, to develop a national awards/certificate system to recognize students' volunteering or community activity. These recommendations coupled with the recent funding opportunities offered by philanthropic and state bodies (such as Atlantic Philanthropies, the Higher Education Authority, and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs) have driven the piloting and development of institution-wide service-learning projects (Harris and McIlrath 2008). This has led to the recent establishment of a number of active citizenship projects to support and advance practice related to service-learning; for example, the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) at National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG); the University College Dublin (UCD) Centre for Service Learning, Community Engagement and Volunteering; the Community Learning Project at DIT; and DCU Civic Engagement Strategy.² It has also led to the creation of the "Campus Engage" initiative of five universities within the Republic of Ireland (NUIG, UCD, National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), University of Limerick (UL), and Dublin City University (DCU))³ with a commitment to a "national organisation/framework for the promotion and support of volunteering, service learning and active citizenship in higher education" (Harris and McIlrath 2008, 7). These developments by a number of Irish universities to formalize their commitment to civic and community engagement are in keeping with what Furco highlights as the importance of mission when institutionalizing service-learning. In particular, he stresses the need to link the civic engagement agenda within wider institutional agendas, such as teaching and research agendas as well as the aspirations of academic departments (2007). Yet a recent study of the missions or visions of Irish HEIs shows that, although there is widespread support of civic and community engagement contained within these statements, the practice tends to be informal, contained, and on the periphery (Perez-Gonzalez et al. 2007). This is certainly true for University College Cork, the home of this case study, which in its strategic framework plan 2006–2011 outlines its commitment to "meeting society's changing needs The graduates we produce will not only contribute to our society through their cultural, social and economic activities, but they will also enrich society as active global citizens" (UCC 2006, 4). Yet unlike many of its fellow Irish institutions of Higher Education is not a partner in the Campus Engage initiative nor has it established its own center to support and advance service-learning.

This case study centers on a taught postgraduate module GV6104 "Political Participation and Mobilization" offered on the MBS Government program in UCC; a university established in 1845 that forms one of four constituent universities of the federal National University of Ireland and that has 16,000 full-time students.⁴ Exploring the relationship between democracy and participation this module examines theories of active democratic citizenship, empowerment, and political participation. A core component of this module is the day-and-a-half long "training for trainers" workshop given in conjunction with the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VSPJ).

Students are trained in the VPSJ's participative, nonpartisan, and highly respected Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme (VEP) that is aimed at increasing voter awareness and participation amongst those living in socially disadvantaged areas of Ireland. It consists of three workshops underpinned by a theme of social justice. The first links voting with "voice," the second examines the issues that are important to the individual and his/her community while the final workshop explores matching candidates and issues. As a nonpartisan program, it examines fictional candidates. Its approach to active democratic citizenship takes a justice-oriented approach as defined by Westheimer and Kahne.

In keeping with the tradition of service-learning this project offers students an opportunity to integrate and relate theory to practice. In the academic year 2008/2009, students had a choice of two related service-learning experiences. Links were developed with the Carrigtwohill Saint Vincent de Paul family resource center to run the program there in advance of the Local and European Parliament elections of 2009. The students of GV6104 ran the program in this center from October to December 2008. The participants included Irish and foreign nationals. In total there were 14 participants of whom two were Nigerian and two were Polish. The students also delivered the program as part of UCC's certificate in political issues and community action in February 2009. Of the 39 registered students, 24 managed to attend all three workshops. This group was very diverse and included participants from Somalia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Hungary, Cuba, Chechnya, and so forth.

Applying the Service-Learning Criteria

Explicit Assessable Learning Objectives

This module differentiated between learning objectives and learning outcomes where the objective of a module or program is usually a specific statement of teaching intention and the outcome of a module is a clear outline of what the student is expected to achieve and how he/she is expected to demonstrate this achievement. As the service-learning component of this module was voluntary, a distinction has been made between the module's overall learning outcomes and the service-learning outcomes with the acknowledgement that they would overlap for some students.

The module's learning outcomes are:

- To explore the relationship between democracy and participation;
- To document and analyze the direct, participatory, representative, and deliberative forms of democracy;
- To list and examine various methods of participation;
- To identify groups that under participate in the political process;
- To classify and assess obstacles to participation; and
- To make recommendations on how these barriers can be removed.

Some of the above can also be found in the service-learning outcomes, which are to:

1. To explore the relationship between democracy and participation;
2. To identify groups that underparticipate in the political process and explore the reasons why;
3. To classify and assess obstacles to participation;
4. To make recommendations on how these barriers can be removed;

5. To analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and opinions to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions; and
6. To apply classroom learning and course materials to addressing community needs.

These were developed with the three essential components of democratic civic education; intellectual understanding, civic attitudes and skills, and civic action in mind. Learning outcomes 1–4 promote intellectual understanding and civic attitudes and skills and learning outcomes 5–6 foster all three components.⁵ Table 1 captures the service-learning outcomes and how they are assessed.

Community-Sponsored Activities that Promote Civic Responsibility

Both of the service-learning experiences offered to the students promote civic responsibility as they involve voter education programs and culminate in a registration drive. It should be noted, however, that voter education is only one aspect of the active citizenship program. It also contains workshops that focus on defining the issues relevant to the community and communicating those issues to elected representatives and that explore the ways in which individuals and the community can hold elected representatives accountable after elections.

Structured Multilayered Reflection Opportunities

These were provided for in the assignments and in the classroom discussions of the literature on participation. The learning journal, in particular, offered a clear structured opportunity for reflection. The students were asked questions during the term to guide their individual and group reflections on their service-learning experience. These questions included:

- What do you already know about participation in Ireland?
- What is your experience of being trained in the active citizenship voter education workshops?
- What are your expectations of delivering the workshops?

Reciprocity between Academic and Community Partners with Regard to the Resources, Needs, Objectives, and Priorities that Define the Partnership

Meetings with community development workers attached to Carrigtwohill St. Vincent de Paul resource center addressed issues, such as the target group, publicity for the program, and course content. In the case of the certificate in political issues and community action, a focus group containing former students of the certificate program delivered feedback on the course content, its delivery, and the future needs of the community.

Student Findings

Sixteen students registered for this module and ten of them opted for the service-learning option. Eight of them, working in groups of two/three completed their service in Carrigtwohill. This consisted of six weeks of two-hour workshops in Carrigtwohill and a final award ceremony at which local political representatives participated. The workshops for the certificate in political issues and community action were delivered by two of the students in February 2009. They consisted of three weeks of three-hour workshops and the students were assisted by an intern

Table 1. Service-learning outcomes and their assessment for GV6104

Service-learning outcome	Assessment
Explore the relationship between democracy and participation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer discussion and peer/teacher discussion led by preassigned readings on the issue and a lecture on the topic. 2. Fifteen-hundred-word report on democratic innovations. 3. The learning journal and the guided reflections required the students to link classroom learning and materials to their service-learning experience.
Analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and opinions to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer discussion and peer/teacher discussion led by preassigned readings on the issue and a lecture on the topic. 2. Fifteen-hundred-word report on democratic innovations. 3. The learning journal and the guided reflections required the students to apply their classroom learning and materials to their service-learning experience and to reflect on this application of theory to practice.
Apply classroom learning and course materials to addressing community needs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The learning journal and the guided reflections required the students to apply their classroom learning and materials to their service-learning experience and to reflect on this application of theory to practice.
Identify groups that underparticipate in the political process and explore the reasons why they underparticipate.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer discussion and peer/teacher discussion led by preassigned readings on the issue and a lecture on the topic. 2. The 1500-word report dealt with innovations that make participation more inclusive. 3. The “training for trainers” workshops and the academic literature named the groups that traditionally underparticipate. The students explored this in their learning journals and in their service experience in the community.
Classify and assess the obstacles to participation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer discussion and peer/teacher discussion led by preassigned readings on the issue and a lecture on the topic.
Make recommendations on how these barriers can be removed.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. The 1500-word report required the students to evaluate democratic innovations that make participation more inclusive. 3. The students explored this in their learning journals and in their service experience in the community. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peer discussion and peer/teacher discussion on recent reports and white papers on the issue. 2. The 1500-word report required students to examine democratic innovations to make participation more inclusive. Such innovations involve weakening/removing barriers to participation. 3. The service-learning experience was one innovation for the removal of barriers to participation. Guided critical reflection on their experiences of delivering the program should demonstrate student understanding of these matters in their learning journal reports and include recommendations on the program content/delivery and specific community needs.

based in the Department of Government, UCC. Faculty travelled with the students to the centers but were based in another part of the building. The students had requested this as a form of additional support.

To assess the impact on the students' understanding, civic attitudes and skills, and attitudes to future civic understanding, a survey was developed that asked them at the end of their service a series of questions on a scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree (see sample survey in Appendix). To measure intellectual understanding the students were asked to rate the following statements: "I have a better understanding of diverse groups and issues related to diversity"; "I better understand course content through the service activities in this class"; "I learned from other class members as well as from the instructor"; "I learned to be an active citizen by working with the community." To assess civic skills and attitudes they were asked to rate: "I have developed my skills to work collaboratively with others"; "I provided a needed service to address a community need/issue"; "I think the recipients of service had something valuable to offer my learning." Finally, to evaluate future civic action they were asked to rank: "I will use the information from this course in the future"; "I believe it is my responsibility to help solve social problems"; "I want to continue to participate in my community because of my service-learning experience."

The survey data gathered only reflects the responses of the ten students; nine of whom were female. Nonetheless it finds that an overwhelming majority (90%) of them agreed or strongly agreed that their service experience had increased their intellectual understanding. All ten agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned to be an active democratic citizen and eight of the ten agreed or strongly agreed that it had given them a better understanding of the course content. Nine out of the ten students agreed or strongly agreed that the service component of the module had enhanced their civic skills and actions. All ten agreed or strongly agreed that the recipients of service offered something valuable to their learning while nine of them believed that they provided a needed service. With regard to future civic action, 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to continue to participate in their community as a result of their service experience.

These findings were also echoed in the students' learning journals. Students initially found the prospect of service-learning daunting, stating:

[U]nlike the other modules in the course, I was immediately removed from my comfort zone, where I could no longer be passive; I now had to engage.

I commenced the class with an immense feeling of trepidation. I dislike group work and shy away from voicing my opinions during classes. This made the course incredibly intimidating for me and I believe that had it not been a core module element I would have quit it immediately upon realizing how interactive the format is.

Yet they appreciated the opportunity to have direct and active input into their course and to take responsibility for their learning. Comments included:

[A]s a student it is often hard to find opportunities to merge the academic with the practical. This module provided my first real chance to link my college work with a valuable service to the community as well as my own personal development.

I like the element of devolving autonomy to the students.

In their learning journal reflections students spoke of their deeper understanding of the course topics as a result of their service-learning experience. They also contained a strong critical analysis of the challenges faced in political mobilization and participation. Some adopted a comparative approach to possible solutions and others considered the application of the democratic innovations covered in the course. These issues were outlined in the following comments:

I felt that the democratic innovations we studied as part of our course could be solutions or ideas for the reform the participants clearly felt was needed.

[T]he participants wanted a more integrative approach to agenda setting apart from representative democracy. (This student suggests the use of consensus conferences and New England town hall meetings.)

They told us of the types of government in their native countries and it was very interesting to hear their views on the Irish situation and also to hear their recommendations.

Others revealed how their service-learning experiences challenged their preconceived expectations of the groups they were going to be working with:

[I]t was very interesting to see the same issues come up in discussions in Carrigtwohill as did in our in-class workshop. Though the participants in both groups were of various ages and backgrounds the same issues seemed important to all.

[T]he level of interest that those who were foreign nationals had in Irish politics was phenomenal.

I suppose I had a very incorrect perception that asylum seekers may have a narrower focus on what's important to them, for example, being allowed to stay in the country.

All spoke of the impact their service-learning experience had on their civic attitudes and their levels of self-awareness. In particular one student wrote:

[P]reviously I had a very isolationist and personal view of what it means to participate in the sense that I found it hard to make a connection between the actual process and the issue that was at stake and the connection to wider society . . . I began to re-evaluate my own assumptions and beliefs on participation.

While others revealed that

the course motivated me to look at political issues as a voter and a person with a voice... it was the first time I considered my place in the political process and how I could possibly influence it.

I had never fully considered my position of a just society prior to this exercise and was stunned to realise how much less idealistic I was in comparison to other participants.

When you study politics . . . [s]ometimes you forget the basic importance of what you are studying, that the essence of democracy in whatever shape or form it comes in is essentially about allowing people to have their say.

In terms of developing their analytical and interpersonal skills a number of students remarked that

delivering the workshops was an empowering experience for me.

[T]his course proved to be challenging for me but my analytical skills have been enhanced and I am motivated now to be less passive and acquiescent, rather to challenge issues and to question matters.

[T]he workshops definitely contributed to enhancing my assertiveness.

Others recognized the role the community played in their learning and the reciprocal nature of their service-learning experience, noting:

[T]he participants in the Carrigtwohill workshop were in effect my partners in education.

[W]e were all learning from each other.

Finally in terms of the future development of the service-learning component the students made some significant suggestions calling for more time to be spent on their own training and more direct feedback on a weekly basis from the community leaders and participants.

These findings are in keeping with similar case studies in an Irish context that highlight the contribution service-learning approaches have made to the development of effective team skills, a sense of community, self-directed learning skills, and personal and professional skills (Casey, Murphy, and Van der Putten 2009; McGrath and McMenamin 2009; Randles and Commane 2009). It should be noted that none of the Irish case studies cited apply to politics/political science courses and all refer to undergraduate programs. The use of service-learning in postgraduate modules is rare and there are very few studies of it in a graduate school setting (Reinke 2003). However the service-learning approach employed in this postgraduate program with its emphasis on justice-oriented citizenship and the enhancement of critical thinking skills is in keeping with the program objectives, which are to develop an understanding of the nature, challenges, and dilemmas of contemporary government and governance at the national, local, and global levels and high-level research and analytical skills in the areas of government, political science, and public policy.

Community/Participant Feedback

The participants in the workshops were asked to evaluate their experiences of the workshops. One of strongest issues to emerge for them was how much they enjoyed discussing political issues and problems and working together to find collective solutions for them. Participants noted:

The group exercises were very important to me. Working collectively to come up with solutions that combat current problems of humanity in today's world.

I loved the section when we talked about global problems.

The other issue was how they were empowered by the workshops, commenting:

The most important issue for me was everybody's role in voting and the effect the vote has in our lives.

I enjoyed the workshops so much — knowledge is power.

One participant described “the presence of the Garda (the Irish police force) in the registration process” as a highlight. As the February workshops took place after the deadline to join the electoral register, the participants had to join the supplementary register of electors; the application form for which requires a Garda stamp. The group was assisted by a community Garda who travelled to UCC one Monday evening for this purpose.

Assessing the service-learning programs offered in GV6104 according to Barber and Battistoni's criteria shows that they are education based, voluntary, civic, for academic credit, and developed in partnership with the community. The students worked in groups and the faculty also served. The pedagogy emphasizes critical thinking yet there was also a citizenship dimension present as the learning outcomes were designed to reflect the core components of a democratic civic education. There is some student participation in the planning process but it is quite limited due to time constraints. The module is offered in the first semester so the partnership part of the process had been planned in advance of student registration. Also the fact that it is a 12-week course limits the amount of time that can be dedicated to training the students in the active citizenship program (this group had four 2-hour sessions). Nonetheless in response to student feedback another session will be added in the future and a more formal role will be given to the community in evaluating student performance through direct feedback.

This investigation only comprised ten students. With such a small N it is not possible to come to a definitive conclusion. Yet some observations can be made. All those who opted to participate overwhelmingly agreed that the service component of their module increased their civic education. Moreover an analysis of the survey data and the learning journals' content reveal that in keeping with the findings of Eyler et al. the service promoted personal, interpersonal, social, and learning outcomes. It also met with the MBS Government program objectives, contributing to students' understanding of the challenges of modern governance and government as well as enhancing their analytical skills.

Conclusion

Service-learning, as a teaching tool to promote civic engagement learning outcomes, is in its infancy in Ireland. It is to be hoped that these results and observations along with others being documented from an Irish perspective will be pivotal to the process of embedding service-learning strategies in HEIs in Ireland. This will require the appropriate institutional infrastructure to support faculty, staff, community partners, and students in the development and implementation of service-learning programs. At the time of writing it is clear that some Irish universities have been more successful than others in formalizing their support for service-learning initiatives. How these developments can be consolidated and expanded in a time of financial crisis and potential cutbacks in stating funding is a challenge that those committed to service-learning as a pedagogy need to face. Further scholarly work to evaluate the role service-learning initiatives can play in meeting these state-funded universities' civic/community remits may be one way to meet this challenge.

Notes

1. For further discussion on this, see Harris (2008).
2. National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), University College Dublin (UCD), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), and Dublin City University (DCU).
3. National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) and University of Limerick (UL). All of the universities mentioned in this article are in receipt of state funding.
4. Thirteen thousand of these students are undergraduate while 3,000 are in postgraduate programs. The university has more than 800 faculty members.
5. Assessment for those choosing the service-learning option consists of 15 service hours (community hours/group discussion hours) completed; the active citizenship training and the development of materials for the community; a learning journal on their community experience that contains entries relating to guided reflections; and a 1,500-word report making specific recommendations on democratic innovations to enhance political participation.

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Appendix

Student Survey

This survey has been informed by the survey used by Lowell Bennion Community Service Center at the University of Utah.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have developed my skills to work collaboratively with others.						
I provided a needed service to address a community need/issue.						
I have a better understanding of diverse groups and issues related to diversity.						
I better understand course content through the service activities in this class.						
I think the recipients of service have something valuable to offer my learning.						
I learned from other class members as well as from the instructor.						
I learned to be an active citizen by working with the community.						
I will use the information from this course in the future.						
I believe it is my responsibility to help solve social problems.						
I want to continue to participate in my community because of my service-learning experience.						