Interrogating the call to service: Contesting notions of citizenship learning through institutional ethnography

Sara Carpenter
OISE/University of Toronto, Canada

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Understanding the relationship between learning and participation in democracy is central to the social purposes of adult education and has a long historical legacy in the field, particularly in relation to social movements. Recent theoretical re-iterations of the centrality of civil society in citizenship learning have directed adult educators attention towards the possibilities of this sphere, with civil society being identified as the “privileged domain of non-instrumental learning processes” (Welton, 1998 p. 369 emphasis in original). Civil society is most often identified as a third-sphere, both non-governmental and extra-economic in its nature. The extension of Welton’s argument for adult education is that civil society is the domain where adults learn in the service of hermeneutic and emancipatory interests and thus, to be active, deliberative citizens free of the constraints of rational-economic interests and ideological incursion from the state. However, debates concerning civil society posit a complex and contradictory relationship between this sphere and the state, historically understood as the locus of democratic activity, and private corporate wealth, through the funding mechanisms of corporate foundations.

I have previously argued that research into adult citizenship learning displays a strong reliance on idealized notions of “the good citizen” and an orientation towards learning citizenship as the acquisition of democratic skills and values (Chum, et al, 2008). I have further argued that research into these theoretical constructions are predicated on an ideological approach to knowledge production, which relies on understandings of democracy and citizenship that are abstracted from the material, social, everyday relations of adult learners’ lives. This body of research can be understood to be ideological not solely in terms of its ideas, but because it is based on the generation of theoretical concepts and frameworks that are ‘ideological by virtue of being distinctive methods of reasoning and interpreting society’ (Smith, 1990, p. 36). From the perspective of critical feminist research, this reliance on ideological practices calls into question the usefulness of this research for truly transformative political learning. This dialectical historical materialist understanding of ideology would lead us to conclude that radically different forms of research
into citizenship learning and democratic participation are necessary in order to address the ideological tendencies of the social sciences as well as essential to research that is both politically useful to communities and community organization as well as radical in its learning dimensions. This paper explores some of the complexities of the state, civil society, and democratic learning as well as their repercussions for “useful research” by examining the dynamics of a state-sponsored, civil society based adult citizenship learning program in the United States, the AmeriCorps national service program. This paper reports on the first stages of an institutional ethnography research project on the AmeriCorps program.

An Imbricated Project: The State and Civil Society in AmeriCorps

The state, by which I mean a historically specific social relations of government including juridical, military, and ideological components, engages in a politics of citizenship through a variety of mechanisms. Citizenship, understood as legal status, begins when the state sets the legal boundaries of citizenship. Secondly, the state legislates what rights a citizen is guaranteed by their government and, conversely, what entitlements a citizen may demand from their government. The state also sets the framework for how these rights and entititlements will be promoted, protected, and afforded. However, these legal definitions are not the only ways in which a state engages in a politics of citizenship.

In tandem with these de jure parameters of citizenship, the state also deploys a normative politics through which is promotes a public de facto discourse of what it means to be a citizen. A historical example of this relationship in the United States is thoroughly articulated by theorists who have examined the legal frameworks that established citizenship as a whites-only enterprise, such as the Naturalization Act of 1794, and the resulting cultural notions of national identity predicated on capitalist social relations of white supremacy. It is important to recognize that citizenship, as both a legal formation and a cultural notion, is constantly shifting and changing. The boundaries of membership flux and retract, the meanings of membership and participation shift. In this way, “citizenship” is a historically specific notion. Throughout the civic history of the United States various iterations of what it means to be a good citizen have come and gone (Schudson, 1998). These relations often arrive through a complex conflagration of discourses from the state and civil society. They also constitute actual social relations between citizens, the functioning of political institutions, and the lived reality of everyday life. For example, Shudson argues that the modern ideal of the “informed citizen” in the United States developed largely as a response to political corruption and electoral fraud. Today, another notion of what it means to be a good citizen has arisen in the United States. Although it seems to have reached its fervor with the rhetoric of service promoted by the Obama administration, its momentum has been building since the mid-1980s. Its message is enshrined in the federal governments efforts to “activate a culture of citizenship through
service” and through the efforts of the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency administering national volunteer service programs such as AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps is often referred to in the United States as a domestic Peace Corps, and in some ways the structure and intentions are similar. The AmeriCorps program’s roots are partly found in the Civilian Conservation Corps of the Great Depression and the War on Poverty of the 1960s. It draws from the idea that citizens can and should contribute to the well being of their country not just through voting, but through actual labor to meet community needs and public infrastructure. Further, the predominant approach to the alleviation of poverty in the United States is neoliberal; the aim is to limit the involvement of government to the greatest extent possible and turn local needs over to the institutions of civil society, particularly non-profit and faith-based organizations. AmeriCorps accepts adults between the ages of 17 and 65 to perform one year of community service, approximately 1700 hours for full time participation, at a non-profit 501c(3) organization or local government under the auspices of three different programs. AmeriCorps State/National members perform direct service. AmeriCorps NCCC work primarily to build public infrastructure and provide disaster relief. AmeriCorps VISTAs work to expand the organizational capacity of non-profit and public organizations, with great emphasis on volunteer mobilization. Participants receive health insurance, child care subsidies, and a living stipend, which varies based on the cost of living in different regions of the country, but hovers around the single person poverty line in the United States or about $8500. As such, most AmeriCorps participants are eligible for food stamps. Upon completion of a year of service, or 900 hours part time, participants receive an education award amounting to approximately $4700 before taxes. In addition to the education award, participants can have some kinds of university loans remitted through the National Service Trust. Interest accrual and payment schedules for loans restart upon completion of the program. Furthermore, the education award can only be used to pay back previously held education loans or to pay tuition. Currently, funding exist to support around 75,000 members in AmeriCorps who provide around 62 million hours of community service per year. In late April of 2009, President Obama signed into law the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act, which reauthorizes the AmeriCorps programs with plans to expand participation to 225,000 members per year.

AmeriCorps is structured as a federal grants-based program. Non-profit organizations across the country compete at the national level to be awarded an AmeriCorps contract from the CNCS. If an applicant is unsuccessful in the nation-wide competitive grants round, their state commission can choose to fund them for one year through a limited discretionary budget. Once a grant is secured, these organizations are free to hire AmeriCorps members who will provide service to the organization for approximately one year. AmeriCorps members are highly restricted as to the kinds of activities they can engage in
and the places these activities can take place. The regulations begin before a grant is even submitted; organizational grants are restricted to non-profit organizations, including faith-based organizations, which engage in negligible amounts of lobbying or electoral activity and absolutely no partisan activity or “political platforms” (Kennen, 2007). These organizations are designated by the tax-exempt status code 501c(3). National service as a form of civic engagement is thus restricted to organizations that primarily engage in direct human and social services. In other words, a homeless shelter would be eligible, but not an affordable housing lobby group. When an organization submits an application for the national competitive grants program, they will have to meet additional requirements. These include the ability, over time, to generate funds to match 50% of their grant. The funding-match requirement has increased from 35% in recent years as part of new AmeriCorps rules concerning sustainability and federal cost sharing. These new rules included an increased weight in cost effectiveness in the review of applications. The new provisions also allow for technical support in assisting programs to meet the increasing match needs. However, programs participants have reported that applying for assistance in cost sharing is stigmatized and made their application less competitive and thus, they did not ask for help. Because of this restriction, many programs must charge fees for community sites that host an AmeriCorps, such as public schools. These costs make hosting an AmeriCorps cost prohibitive for many community-based organizations and local municipalities. In this way, participation is further restricted to organizations that can sustain the fiscal requirements for participation. Some participating organizations, which have relationships with large foundations and corporate donors, reported that matching funds is not a challenge to their participation. These organizations seem to primarily be large human service agencies.

Once the site of service has been chosen, AmeriCorps members are further restricted in the tasks they can perform. Legislation regulating the political activity of federal employees applies to AmeriCorps State/National members when they are “on the clock” and to AmeriCorps VISTA members at all times. These regulations are regularly attributed to “the Hatch Act,” a piece of legislation passed in 1939 and officially termed An Act to Prevent Pernicious Political Activity. Originally passed to prohibit nearly all political activity by public employees, the Hatch Act is often seen as symptomatic of the “red-scare” in the United States, a public witch hunt of communists in the 1930s-1950s meant to purge radicals from government, unions, and cultural institutions. Over time the restrictions were relaxed and today public employees may engage in private political activity, but face tight restrictions on what they may and may not do in the course of their work, including regulations that sometimes blur the boundaries between professional and private activity. The inclusion of these regulations in the AmeriCorps program is somewhat curious given that the same regulations state that AmeriCorps members, with the exception of VISTAs, are not understood to be federal
employees, but rather are volunteers. The regulations of AmeriCorps activity include:

(1) Attempting to influence legislation; (2) Organizing or engaging in protests, petitions, boycotts, or strikes; (3) Assisting, promoting, or deterring union organizing; (4) Impairing existing contracts for services or collective bargaining agreements; (5) Engaging in partisan political activities, or other activities designed to influence the outcome of an election to any public office; (6) Participating in, or endorsing, events or activities that are likely to include advocacy for or against political parties, political platforms, political candidates, proposed legislation, or elected officials; (7) Engaging in religious instruction, conducting worship services, providing instruction as part of a program that includes mandatory religious instruction or worship, constructing or operating facilities devoted to religious instruction or worship, maintaining facilities primarily or inherently devoted to religious instruction or worship, or engaging in any form of religious proselytization; (8) Providing a direct benefit to— (i) A business organized for profit; (ii) A labor union; (iii) A partisan political organization; (iv) A nonprofit organization that fails to comply with the restrictions contained in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 except that nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent participants from engaging in advocacy activities undertaken at their own initiative; and (v) An organization engaged in the religious activities described in paragraph (g) of this section, unless Corporation assistance is not used to support those religious activities; and (9) Such other activities as the Corporation may prohibit (Code of Federal Regulations 45, 2005 p. 83).

Other regulations that limit AmeriCorps activity to direct service and some limited amounts of “capacity building” accompany those above. It may be that AmeriCorps is caught between its two purposes: to meet “community needs” and to enliven the citizenry. Nevertheless, we can clearly see through these regulations that the state is naming the terms under which it will support citizen participation in civil society.

**Learning Citizenship through Community Service**

It is difficult to categorize the AmeriCorps program in the language of adult education. It consists, obviously, of an experiential component in the form of community service and through which most learning takes places informally. AmeriCorps members also receive skills-based training in the service they are expected to perform. For example, members working in schools learn tutoring and mentoring skills as well as content-based knowledge about the public school system in the United States. Further, AmeriCorps programs are expected to include civic engagement trainings and activities in their program design. In the state where the fieldwork for this study was conducted, civic engagement is considered a performance measure for grant recipients and grantees are required to facilitate a civic engagement curriculum including trainings, civic engagement action plans for members, and a civic engagement evaluation at the end of the year of service. The formalized
learning components of the civic engagement programs vary. Of the participating programs, all facilitated a training session introducing the concept of civic engagement and the civic engagement requirements of the program. The requirements included participating in all civic engagement trainings and activities, including the outlining and completion of a civic engagement plan. The trainings included meeting with panels of local people who were “civically engaged,” visiting the state capitol to learn about how non-profit organizations engage in advocacy, attending a county commissioners meeting and a city council meeting. For some participating programs, the formalized civic engagement activities, meaning activities facilitated by an AmeriCorps program director, consisted of monthly volunteer service projects with local non-profit agencies. For others, the only required activity was the completion of a civic engagement action plan. A civic engagement action plan consists of five goals that each AmeriCorps member sets for himself or herself with the purpose of increasing their civic engagement. The civic engagement goals include virtually anything that falls under the definition of civic engagement advanced at a particular program site, as the AmeriCorps program does not provide a definition of the concept. None of the members participating in this research felt their program provided a cohesive framework of the concept for their members to use in their goal setting.

We can see through the provisions and regulations of the AmeriCorps program that what constitutes “a culture of citizenship through service” in the United States is confined to volunteerism to meet community needs. AmeriCorps directors and members largely meet the regulations governing the activity of AmeriCorps members with ambivalence. The approach of the directors participating in the research, and the interpretation they pass to their AmeriCorps members, is that the regulations are functional; the government won’t pay you to do something partisan. Questions and concerns about “being partisan” are brought up at program meetings about as often as the restrictions on alcohol consumption during sponsored AmeriCorps activities. Throughout this fieldwork, I have observed that “partisan” is equated with “political.” Activities are completely restricted to volunteerism and visiting local government agencies to learn about their responsibilities and procedures. This means that not only do AmeriCorps not engage in any kind of activity that could possibly be construed as “partisan/political,” it has further meant that at trainings and reflection sessions they do not discuss issues that are “partisan/political.” This has further manifested itself as limitations on the extent to which participants utilize their own experiences both in AmeriCorps and “outside” of the program for pedagogical purposes. For example, at a special training session on “diversity” for AmeriCorps working in public schools, the facilitator went to great lengths to avoid discussing racism, in either institutional or interpersonal forms. Research participants reported that the important message of the training was “we all have biases.”
What should be obvious to us as adult educators is that politics is present, whether acknowledged or not. My initial observations of the AmeriCorps program are that the restrictions governing permissible activity exert a strong influence on the pedagogical processes and horizons of the program even in a context characterized by the appearance of an open framework for civic engagement. By avoiding contentious conversations that could be construed as “partisan/political,” AmeriCorps directors are implicitly promoting a particular way of addressing the social problem, or “community need,” the AmeriCorps members are working to address. Further, by emphasizing a notion of civic engagement that hinges on community service as the ideal expression of citizen engagement, the AmeriCorps program promotes a highly politicized conception of democratic participation. The avoidance of discussing competing political perspectives on the social problem at hand as well as the experiences and opinions of members indicates that civic engagement is formulated in AmeriCorps as a largely external framework that imposes itself on the experience of learners. While many are open to the values being offered, several participants in this research have indicated that they are uncomfortable with the politics of citizenship promoted through the program. Although civic engagement largely goes undefined, members nevertheless reported that they felt pressure to conform to a particular understanding of what it means to be a good citizen. This is a curious aspect of the program that requires further exploration.

Conclusions
One of the most important issues raised in these observations is the extent to which learning citizenship through AmeriCorps and community service constitutes an ideological learning practice that exerts influence on how individuals and organizations in civil society understand their role in democracy. There is an enormous body of research in citizenship learning that accepts the basic premises of the communitarian norms promoted through service-learning based programs such as AmeriCorps. This research is focused on understanding best practices and the impacts of this program on the continued service or “civic engagement” of former participants, although a small body of work exists that critiques the political implications of service-based civic learning. This indicates to me that we should interrogate assumptions in our research that restrict ideological practices to the state and understand civil society to be the ideal sphere of democracy.

Further, we should be wary of the extent to which learning citizenship can become an idealized and reified process within adult education, subject to ideological constructions of the “citizen” and abstracted from the social and material relations of learners. Knowledge that further serves to subjugate learners by separating them from the full, dialectical experience of their political, social, cultural, and material lives can only be useful to hegemonic interests. However, knowledge that attempts to undo the ideological nature of citizenship learning by returning to a fully radical notion of consciousness and
learning can serve the interests of communities engaged in resistance. My initial findings indicate that citizenship education is a project that both serves to reproduce the prevailing neoliberal social order and offers potentials for resistance. Resistance, however, comes only when the material relations of citizenship are fully explicated and its ideological nature is addressed. Research that follows in this vein, with an emphasis on historical analysis and praxis, can truly serve the potential of adult education to generate knowledge that is useful to communities in struggle.

References

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