To print this page, select "Print" from the File menu of your browser

Community Service Learning as Democratic Education in South Africa and the United States

Meta Mendel-Reyes and Jeremy Weinstein
Swarthmore College

This paper describes the development of the first community service learning program for democratic education in South Africa. The Democracy Education Project, which is based on Swarthmore College's innovative Democracy Project, was designed and implemented by a Swarthmore College student working with a high school in a Black community near CapeTown. This case study demonstrates that the successful transposition of a model of community service learning from one country to another requires recognizing the complex relationships among history and culture, and theories and practices of democratic education. It is also crucial to involve the new community as an equal partner at every step of the process. Together, the Democracy and the Democracy Education Projects suggest the potential of community service learning for strengthening citizenship, and for bridging the gaps between races, in the United States as well as in South Africa.

In 1994, South Africa embarked on its inspiring transition from apartheid to democracy. The new Government of National Unity led by Nelson Mandela has recognized the urgency of educating the citizenry in new forms of democracy, and of rechanneling the strategies of protest that helped to bring about democratic change into participation in fledgling political institutions. Schools can play a major role in educating young people about democracy, and in providing opportunities for them to practice new democratic skills through activities such as community service learning.

The first service-learning program for democratic education in South Africa was designed and implemented by Jeremy Weinstein, a Swarthmore student working with a high school in a Black community near Cape Town. The program is based on the innovative Democracy Project directed by Dr. Meta Mendel-Reyes, in the Department of Political Science at Swarthmore College. The challenge of adapting a model of service-learning that originated in the United States to the South African context raises a practical as well as an ethical question: Can, and should, a model of service-learning as democratic education for an "established" democracy be transposed to an "emerging" democracy?

The universal popularity of the term, "democracy," masks important debates about its meaning. Although the root definition of the word is simply stated as "the rule of the people," the interpretation of this phrase varies from the direct participation of citizens in political decision-making that characterized ancient Athens to the election of representa-

tives that occurs in modern democracies. Defining democracy becomes even more problematic when theory is compared to practice; for instance, Athens denied citizenship to many, including women and slaves, who would be considered citizens today. Ironically, many of those eligible to participate in the chief democratic ritual of contemporary democracy, elections, decline to do so; in the United States, voting turnout averages less than 50%, even during the most significant recent Presidential elections. The fact that turnout has been much greater in South Africa, a so-called "emerging" democracy, than in one of its "established" predecessors, is further evidence of the complexity of the concept,"democracy."[1]

For the purposes of this essay, democracy is assumed to rest on a universal principle, the equal right of all human beings to rule themselves, with the understanding that democratic practice occurs in the context of particular political institutions and cultures. It follows that a model of democratic education ought to reflect the unique characteristics of the democracy for which citizens are to be educated. The transposition of a model of community service learning for democracy from one country to another requires more than simply taking differences in political history and culture into consideration. It is also essential to develop and implement the new program with the full participation of the students, teachers, and leaders of potential host organizations. Above all, the exchange should be understood as reciprocal, in that both countries have much to teach and to learn from