

# ***Pedagogical Catalysts of Civic Competence: The Development of a Critical Epistemological Model for Community-Based Learning***

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## **Abstract**

Democratic problem-solving necessitates an active and informed citizenry, but existing research on service-learning has shed little light on the relationship between pedagogical practices and civic competence outcomes. This study developed and tested a model to represent that relationship and identified pedagogical catalysts of civic competence using five years of survey data from over 10,000 students in approximately 700 courses. The results strongly substantiate the proposed model, with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions as epistemological components of civic competence. Most importantly for the social justice aims of service-learning, the study found that diversity significantly enhances all civic competence outcomes. Finally, the results demonstrated that service must be thoroughly integrated into a course through the syllabus and community partnership to maximize civic competence. These findings and the new Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence through Service-Learning provide direction for faculty development and future research related to cultivating competent citizens through service-learning.

## **Introduction**

A thriving pluralistic, democratic society depends upon the civic competence of its citizens, characterized by informed deliberation and collaboration to address public problems and work toward common goals (*Bowen, 1977; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007*). Developing the knowledge, skills, and motivations for effective democratic participation is a national and global imperative that many higher education institutions have embraced through the teaching strategies of service-learning and community-based learning (*Battistoni, 1997; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000*). Previous research has consistently found that community-based learning has modest but positive effects on students' academic, personal, and civic development (*Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Gallini & Moely, 2003*), yet has not focused on the relationship between pedagogical approaches and outcomes. Thus, instructors have

relatively little evidence-based guidance on how to craft their courses for civic competence in the unique context of community-based learning. The purpose of this study was to empirically test a new theoretically constructed model of civic competence development in community-based learning courses

## Conceptual Framework

The new model builds on the work of Saltmarsh (1996, 2005), Eyler and Giles (1999), Wang and Jackson (2005), and others who have discussed knowledge, skills, values, efficacy, commitment, and responsibility as civic outcomes of service-learning, as well as its social justice aims. As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed pedagogical model of civic competence includes four components with eight overlapping and interactive epistemological domains that emerged from existing scholarship (e.g. Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bandura, 1997; Mitchell 2008; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002; Perry & Katula, 2001). This epistemological model incorporates service as the conceptual linchpin, recognizing that action is not just the culmination of competence, but an integral part of it. Through community-based learning, students can develop civic competence that is tested in action and therefore becomes more than an acquired capacity for civic engagement—it is a way of knowing civic engagement.

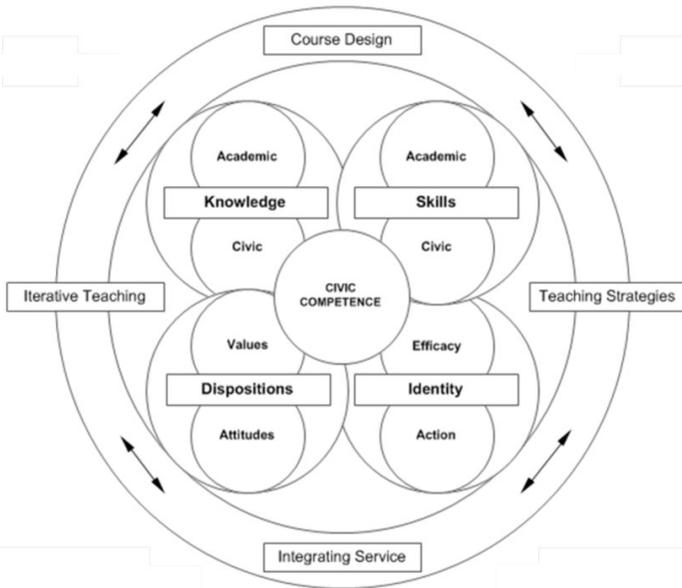


Figure 1. A pedagogical model of civic competence

Moreover, civic competence must be deliberately integrated into educational practices in order to achieve desired civic outcomes (Howard, 2001). How community-based learning faculty align their teaching with the goal of civic competence, however, is largely unexplored. Figure 1 also depicts the elements of pedagogical practices associated with civic competence: course design, teaching strategies, integration of service into the course, and the iterative process of assessing and revising a course (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2000; Heffernan, 2001; Pribbenow, 2005). This study identified specific strategies leading to the development of civic competence in each stage of the pedagogical process.

## Methods

The overarching research question guiding the study was: What are the pedagogical catalysts of civic competence in community-based learning courses? Specifically, in community-based learning courses, (1) what are the student characteristics of civic competence, and (2) are there identifiable patterns of relationship between elements of pedagogy and development of civic competence? The data came from the required interdisciplinary community-based learning program at an urban research university. The sample consisted of 10,974 students from 2005 to 2010, representing about 150 courses a year or approximately 700 sections. The instrument was the course evaluation survey in which students assess the course and report their learning. This survey includes indicators of student learning and of teaching methods, offering the opportunity to both test the proposed model and examine the relationships between pedagogical elements and civic competence outcomes. Item analysis and factor analysis were used to examine the data. The pedagogical elements were correlated with outcomes using cross tabulations and the Pearson correlation coefficient, revealing associations between instructional techniques and students' civic competence.

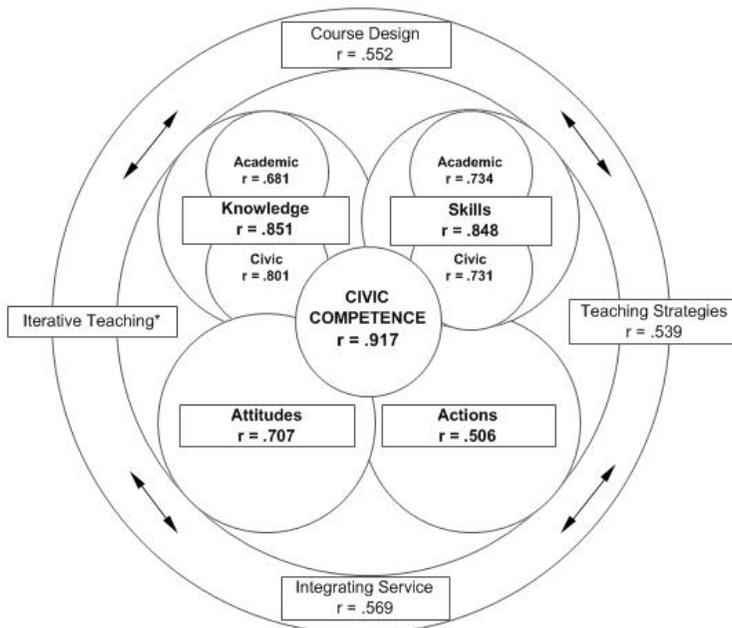
## Findings

The course evaluation instrument used for this study provided material for analysis. The quantitative data were both a representation of civic competence that helped clarify the constructs proposed, and a measurement of civic competence that elucidated pedagogical catalysts. This section reports the results of analysis and suggests points for further discussion. The results supported

the epistemological model of civic competence and specific pedagogical approaches that can increase civic competence outcomes.

## Student Characteristics of Civic Competence

Results indicated that the epistemological conceptualization of civic competence was sound as proposed; however, it was strengthened by slight revision, such as realigning items and simplifying constructs. The 14 outcome items held together conceptually as a representation of civic competence and for the individual components and domains. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from  $r = .592$  for efficacy to  $r = .848$  for skills, indicating moderately strong relationships among the items. Principal component analysis determined how the items group together without the researcher's imposed constructs (Field, 2009; Green, Salkind, & Akey, 2000). This approach retained four factors that offered strong confirmation of the proposed epistemology of civic competence, although slight variations in how items combined further informed the model (see Figure 2).



\*Iterative teaching was not analyzed in this study.

Figure 2. The Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence through Service-Learning

## **Patterns of Relationship Between Community-Based Learning Pedagogy and Civic Competence**

Correlations were run between the instructional items and each of the components, domains, and the overall construct of civic competence using outcome variables computed from mean scores. The pedagogical practices with the strongest relationships to civic competence were exploration of diversity ( $r = .552$ ) and a syllabus that clearly connects service work to course content ( $r = .569$ ). The results showed effective faculty strategies (e.g., 80% of those attaining knowledge outcomes indicated that their instructors used class discussion) as well as elements that might enhance outcomes if utilized more frequently (e.g., topics such as race or political issues, used by only half of faculty but associated with civic competence), strongly substantiating the pedagogical components of the model (including course design, teaching strategies, integrating service, and iterative teaching). The exploration of diversity significantly enhances all civic competence outcomes, reinforcing the connection between competent participation in a pluralistic democracy and service-learning for social justice, and suggesting alignment with critical pedagogy. Thus this new conceptualization is termed the Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence through service-learning.

### **Significance**

The results of this study have important implications for community-based learning theory, practice, and research, and further Kuh's (2008) claim that service-learning is a high-impact educational practice.

### **A Model of Civic Competence**

The data supported the structure and defining features of the proposed model of civic competence, such as the mutual reinforcement among components and domains and the epistemological conceptualization of civic competence as efficacy in action. Knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actions together can bring students to a new way of knowing. Understanding civic competence as an epistemological construct is an important theoretical advancement. This study's findings also maintained the pedagogical ring encompassing civic competence. The critical pedagogy model of civic competence therefore offers a comprehensive but straightforward approach for conceptualizing the relationship between pedagogy and civic outcomes.

## Diversity Is Essential

This finding suggests that diversity should be creatively woven into all types of community-based learning to enhance civic competence. Moreover, critical pedagogy is necessary to most deeply and effectively help students understand community-based learning in the broader spectrum of civic participation for social change, to create space for dialogue around issues of privilege and difference, and to challenge systems of oppression (Kitano, 1997; Souza, 2007; Yep, 2011). If democratic society is to thrive, faculty must be willing to delve into the topics of diversity and social justice, and institutions must be willing to support them in doing so, lest they risk reinforcing the systems of oppression that community-based learning could otherwise help dismantle (Freire, 1970; Mitchell, 2008).

## Course Integration of Service

For more than 10 years, scholars have maintained that in order to maximize benefits and make genuine contributions to community, service-learning must be well integrated into coursework (Cress, 2011; Eyles, 2002; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthia, 2004; Howard, 1998). This study offered a practical rubric adapted from Kitano (1997) for revising syllabi to most effectively catalyze civic competence. This rubric, the Stokamer taxonomy of course and syllabus change for civic competence, delineates integration of civic competence into elements of a course syllabus at three different levels: exclusive (not likely to enhance civic competence), inclusive (some opportunities for development of civic competence), and transformed (optimal integration of service for civic competence). This taxonomy could be used for faculty professional development workshops, program assessment, or individual review of course syllabi, and could be adjusted for co-curricular programming.

## Conclusion

Future research using multiple institutions, refined instruments, and qualitative data should be conducted to elaborate the model and the interaction among components. Nevertheless, this study has filled a gap in the existing scholarship by developing and testing a pedagogical model of civic competence. This epistemological conceptualization highlights the overlapping and interactive components of civic competence and their relationship to pedagogical practices. Moreover, critical pedagogy and careful integration of service into the course syllabus are essential for students to deeply consider the implications of diversity for democracy and social jus-

tice. The Critical Pedagogy Model of Civic Competence through service-learning offers faculty a heuristic taxonomy of teaching and learning strategies for utilizing diversity of thought and interaction in community-based learning as a catalyst for transforming students into competent democratic participants.

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## **About the Author**

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## **Doctoral Program and Major Advisor**

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