



Citizenship Education and Service-Learning

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Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement for the Long-Term Success of Service-Learning and Citizenship Education

By Anthony Welch

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“When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all . . . would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

– Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have a Dream*, speech delivered on August 28, 1963

“. . . Everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve.”

– Martin Luther King Jr., *The Drum Major Instinct*, speech delivered on February 4, 1968

Introduction

We recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic “I Have a Dream” speech. At this juncture in history it seems appropriate – even necessary – to reflect on what has become of King’s dream and to consider what lessons from his work might inform our work today as we seek to make service-learning a core element of the educational experience of all young Americans.

Often I’ve wondered what King might say to us, if he were again to share his dream. If King were alive today, he might say his heart was overjoyed when the Vietnam War ended; when the Berlin Wall fell; when Nelson Mandela was fully elected into the presidency of South Africa; and when almost all industries and sectors of our society began to fully recognize the talents and diligence of people of color and women. King would probably have many new dreams to share with us today. He would have something to say about our ongoing struggles with war, and with poverty, and even with racism, three areas in which he devoted so much of his time and life’s work.

But I think there is another area that would be of great concern to him. I believe that if King would speak to us today, he would share with us his dream about preparing America’s next generation for the challenges of this new century. He would ask us to imagine a country in which each and every young person was civically responsible and meaningfully engaged, fully developed socially and emotionally with strong character, excellent in his or her academic studies and equipped for work or entrepreneurship.

I believe King would applaud our efforts thus far in helping to prepare many of America’s next generation for the challenges of this new century. In so many ways, I believe he would be pleased. But I’m certain he would encourage us to redouble our efforts to do more. He would encourage us to do more because too many of our young people are not sufficiently prepared for life in this new century. He would point to recent studies showing that less than 60% of Native American, African American and Latino students are graduating from high school.

He would express alarm that merely 6% of young people from the lowest-socioeconomic quartile obtain a four-year college degree. He would be deeply concerned that less than 40% of 18- to 25-year-olds voted in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. He would remind us that the development of habits of active civic participation are effectively begun at an early age and when young people have relevant, meaningful opportunities to interact with the democratic system.

King would recognize the difficulties we face in making service-learning a core element of every young person's educational experience. He would be concerned the current mechanism of standards-based high-stakes testing, while well-intentioned, is not sufficiently providing the context in which young people can excel as learners, civic participants, workers and entrepreneurs. He would understand that service-learning and civic education are not yet "household words," and the wonderful work of so many service-learning and civic education organizations is too often lost in the noise of the larger society.

But I believe King would ask us not to be discouraged, to never forget the growing research base that outlines the positive impact service-learning can have on a host of vitally important areas: academic achievement and school climate, civic responsibility, workforce preparedness, social and emotional development, and an understanding of tolerance.

When service is linked to learning and placed at the core of the curriculum, the combination opens the door to the multifaceted education we Americans want for all young people, equipping them for their roles not just as learners, but also as community members and workers. In addition, there is growing agreement that school-based civic education is critical to the development of a new generation of young people with the values, knowledge, skills, sense of efficacy and commitment that define an active and principled citizen. Properly seen, there are meaningful connections between service-learning and civic education; service-learning can be a critical pedagogy for students to acquire and enhance citizenship knowledge and skills, and civic education can be a critical avenue through which students connect their academic learning to serving their communities and country.

In our continuing efforts to provide ongoing, quality service-learning and civic education experiences to every young person in the country – to prepare the next generation for the challenges of this new century – there are several lessons from the civil rights movement that can inform our work in meaningful ways.

There are so many ways in which the civil rights movement can be viewed and so many possible lessons that can be drawn from it. I offer one person's opinion, with the hope these opinions can spur additional thinking and discussion.

There are at least six factors underlying the success of the civil rights movement from which lessons can be drawn for service-learning and citizenship education: ensuring opportunities for everyone to be involved, policy, media and message dissemination, engagement of the business community, developing a strategic agenda and courageous leadership.

Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: A Role for Everyone

In the civil rights movement, anyone could march, anyone could sit-in, anyone could attend a mass meeting or workshop and anyone could share his or her story with a reporter, newsmen or cameraman. A critical factor in the success of the civil rights movement was the fact that almost everyone who wanted to get involved in some meaningful way could do so.

For our work, I propose we begin to think of *everyone* – young people, parents, teachers, district leaders, community organization leaders, policymakers, corporate leaders – as a potential advocate for service-learning. Whether it's convincing a school district's leadership of the need for quality service-learning in every classroom or writing to Congress in support of an increase in the Learn & Serve America budget, there is a role for everyone to play.

Everyone, at some level, understands the need to prepare America's next generation for this century's challenges. Everyone, therefore, is a potential advocate for our work.

Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: Policy

There are many examples of the importance of policy in the civil rights movement, but citing two of them will be at least moderately illustrative. To this day, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act represent two of the most far-reaching pieces of legislation in the history of the nation. By working in a comprehensive fashion to remove the barriers of segregation and disenfranchisement, these federal laws permitted millions of Americans to more fully enjoy the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness promised by the founding fathers.

In large part, these pieces of legislation were made possible and necessary by dramatic, symbolic and compelling acts of nonviolence by citizens in communities across the South, which connected policymakers intellectually and emotionally to the need for changes in policy. Peaceful marches in which young people and adults were set upon by police dogs and fire hoses, or in which people attempting to register to vote were arrested and imprisoned, created a drama almost impossible to ignore. Many of these citizens had been trained in the philosophy of nonviolence, and the tactics and strategies of nonviolent action.

While it is not reasonable to suggest that our current work directly lends itself to this exact type of symbolic, dramatic action, our current work can certainly be informed by it, and in many ways, already is. Building upon lessons related to policy that can be drawn from the civil rights movement, the following are ideas for service-learning supporters to consider:

- **Advocacy Action Teams.** An advocacy action team in every state could be trained to coordinate and catalyze their state's ongoing advocacy efforts at the local, tribal, state and national levels in support of more and better service-learning. For example, these teams could be trained to effectively build support among their state's U.S. Congressional representatives for increased service-learning funding in the budgets for the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the U.S. Department of Education. As another example, each team could advocate for school district leaders to increase policy supports for more and better service-learning in 100 school districts in their state over a four-year period.
- **A National Day of Service-Learning.** Each year, a national day of service-learning could draw widespread attention to the importance of service-learning. The national day would have several components. First, peaceful marches would be held at the capitol of each state. One thousand people at each rally would listen to wonderful speeches about the power and impact of service-learning. Second, participants would visit the offices of key state lawmakers, as well as the state offices of their U.S. Congressional representatives to share powerful stories, and to submit specific proposals for legislation and other policy supports. Third, one week after the national day, and every week thereafter for the entire legislative session, participants would call, e-mail and write letters to their state and Congressional policymakers, encouraging those policymakers to support the legislative proposals submitted on the national day.

Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: Media and Message Dissemination

The previous section outlined the importance of policy in the civil rights movement and the significant role that symbolic, dramatic and compelling action played in bringing about historic legislation. Of course, essential to the idea that a set of marches in Washington, D.C., or Birmingham or Selma, Alabama, could deeply move the entire nation is the fact that TV, radio, newspapers and magazines spread the powerful messages across the country.

One four-month period in 1963 illustrates this point well. From May through August 1963, pictures of cruelty being visited upon peaceful demonstrators, the widespread distribution of King's philosophical and moving *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, President Kennedy's stirring (and televised) address to the nation in support of strengthened civil rights laws and King's historic "I Have a Dream" speech galvanized a critical mass of Americans with the belief that change was both possible and necessary.

The effective use of media can indeed be an extraordinary force multiplier. And now, today, we have the Internet to add to the mix of media tools. Obviously, so much is already being done through our work together in this area. Building upon lessons related to media and message dissemination that can be drawn from the civil rights movement are the following ideas for service-learning supporters to consider:

- **Media for a National Day of Service-Learning.** The national day of service-learning outlined in the policy section of this paper presents wonderful opportunities to get positive and widespread coverage for our work. Imagine if efforts in each state on the national day garnered five interviews and/or articles. That would represent 250 new and inspiring stories about our work that could be shared long after the national day was over with a variety of people, including federal and state policymakers, school district leaders and business leaders.
- **Service-Learning Videos.** Videos could be created to help spread the message of our work. For example, the Learning In Deed and National Commission on Service-Learning initiatives produced wonderful videos as part of their efforts. Other video ideas are possible, building on the concept that people often respond most effectively to their peers. For example, a video specifically for superintendents could be created. In that video, five to seven superintendents who have experienced great success with service-learning would explain to their peers how they've created successful service-learning initiatives in their districts, as well as the powerfully positive impact those initiatives have had on their students, faculty, schools and communities. Videos also could be created by young people for young people, by school board members for school board members, by teachers for teachers and so on.
- **Awards.** Awards could be created that honor and spotlight outstanding examples of service-learning to show what is possible, and to attract additional support for more and better service-learning. Awards could be given to outstanding schools and districts that are state and national models of service-learning excellence. The awards could receive prominent media attention from a variety of sources, including local and national newspapers and magazines, local and regional television, and education trade journals, as well as youth, education, community organization and other Web sites.
- **Case Study Series.** Building upon the wonderful work of several organizations, an expanded series of case studies that "tell the service-learning story" could be even more widely disseminated to a variety of audiences, including school district leaders, teachers, students, think-tanks and university schools of education. In addition to detailing the positive impacts service-learning can have in a variety of areas, the case studies could incorporate a step-by-step, how-to "feel" that provides readers with clear examples of effective service-learning implementation, from strategies for building communitywide support to successful training and technical assistance strategies.

Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: Engagement of the Business Community

Andrew Young, one of King's closest aides, and later a U.S. Congressman, United Nations Ambassador and mayor of Atlanta, once said that if 100 influential business leaders can agree that an important change in government policy is needed, government policy will be changed. In 1963, in an effort to constructively conclude the Birmingham, Alabama, campaign of the civil rights movement, the Kennedy administration encouraged, with some success, northern and southern business leaders to support the elimination of segregation in Birmingham by using their influence on recalcitrant city officials. Indeed, business leaders exert a great deal of influence in the social and political arenas.

Today, the success of businesses is increasingly dependent upon the availability of educated and skilled workers in stable, vital communities. Service-learning's contribution to the development of a generation of educated young people who are ready for work and active citizenship positions service-learning as a solution to societal challenges that businesses may find ever more attractive.

One of the corporate leaders that already understands the ways in which service-learning can contribute to the development of well-educated workers and civic participants is State Farm. State Farm has made a monumental commitment to support service-learning with significant funding and strong strategic thinking. And as importantly, State Farm firmly believes it is critically important that more of its corporate colleagues support service-learning. We are encouraged that State Farm's outstanding example can catalyze a constructive and growing affinity between the corporate community and our work.

As we proceed to engage the business community in our work, service-learning supporters may wish to consider the role corporate support can lend to a service-learning legislative agenda. We can work with State Farm and other corporate leaders to advance a legislative agenda for more and better service-learning. For example:

- Corporate leaders can lend their support to the national day of service-learning by hosting receptions for state and federal policymakers. During these receptions, corporate leaders, educators and young people could educate policymakers on service-learning's benefits and offer concrete proposals for policy supports for service-learning.
- Corporate leaders could be encouraged to sign a "letter of support" for additional state and federal funding to increase the number of schools and districts utilizing service-learning in their communities and states.

Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: Developing a Strategic Agenda

It is interesting to note that with the passage of time, a view is held by some that during the civil rights movement all of the key actors worked together in smooth harmony. In fact, very often, leadership groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee disagreed on style and substance, sometimes vehemently. And yet, through conferences, leadership meetings and even joint meetings with funders, key civil rights movement organizations found complementary ways to work together and advance a strategic agenda for the civil rights movement.

In our work, we can do the same. We may not always agree with each other, but through ongoing information-sharing and relationship-building, we can work in complementary ways to advance an important agenda. Building upon lessons that can be drawn from the civil rights movement related to developing a strategic agenda, service-learning supporters may wish to reflect upon the following ideas:

- **National Service-Learning Partnership Strategic Plan.** In an effort to help advance a common agenda for the service-learning field, the National Service-Learning Partnership has undertaken an intensive strategic planning process over the last several months, incorporating the feedback and guidance of hundreds of service-learning supporters and potential allies. The National Service-Learning Partnership's plan is focused on making service-learning essential, excellent and sustainable by concentrating on four key goals.

The first goal is for service-learning supporters to increase in number, diversity and proficiency as advocates at the federal, state, tribal, district, community and institutional levels. The second goal is for service-learning advocates to rally around an initiative to reclaim the civic mission of public education, to advance service-learning's unique contributions to this mission and to strengthen supports for schools pursuing their mission by including service-learning in their educational provision for students. The third goal is for service-learning practitioners to develop and launch a multifaceted agenda for improving the practice of service-learning. The fourth goal is for researchers to work with practitioners and advocates to increase the production and use of research that investigates the impact of service-learning, and identifies the elements of best practice. These four goals can help focus our work and amplify and unify our efforts.

- **Essential Gatherings.** The importance of key gatherings such as the National Service-Learning Conference and the Education Leadership Colloquium cannot be overstated. At such gatherings, indispensable relationships are created and nurtured, best practices are shared and a common agenda is strengthened. It is at gatherings such as these that a movement can breathe and grow.

Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement: Courageous Leadership

Finally, it is important to remember the countless examples of courageous leadership that so many people exhibited through the civil rights movement. People stood up, and sat down, for what they believed in, facing loss of employment, imprisonment, verbal and physical abuse, bombings of homes and houses of worship, the threat of death and even assassination.

But King and his colleagues pressed on in spite of the difficulties and barriers they faced. He would remind us that in 1955, very few people believed that the racist and discriminatory reality that existed in Montgomery, Alabama, could be changed. He would remind us that in 1960, very few people believed that segregation could be overcome in libraries, restrooms, hotels, department stores and on this nation's highways. He would remind us that in 1965, very few people believed that the right to vote for the disenfranchised in hundreds of communities in the South could be secured. If King and his colleagues in the civil rights movement could overcome such tremendous difficulties, surely we can overcome ours.

Summary

Every American has the opportunity – if not the obligation – to contribute to his or her local and national communities. Schools have a particular responsibility to assist young Americans to acquire and practice citizenship knowledge and skills. Service-learning offers students the opportunity to contribute to their community and apply the associated learning to their lives. Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts to eliminate social injustice offer us a set of lessons that can be applied to service-learning and citizenship education: ensuring opportunities for everyone to be involved, policy, media and message dissemination, engagement of the business community, developing a strategic agenda and courageous leadership.

Robert Kennedy was very fond of the following quote, a quote which was very dear to many of those involved in the civil rights movement: "Some people see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not." As we dream of a society in which service-learning for citizenship competencies is a core element of every young person's educational experience, it is a quote worthy of our ongoing reflection and commitment.

Web-based and Print Resources

See the following resources for additional information on the civil rights movement, service-learning and citizenship education:

Martin Luther King Jr. Center www.thekingcenter.org/

National Service-Learning Partnership www.service-learningpartnership.org

ECS National Center for Learning and Citizenship www.ecs.org/nclc

State Farm Companies www.statefarm.com/edexcell/edexcell.htm

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation www.gatesfoundation.org/Education/

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