Learning in Youth Organizing

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Abstract

This response identifies several strengths of the article, "Pushing the Boundaries: What Youth Organizers at Boston's Hyde Square Task Force Have to Teach Us about Civic Engagement" and draws connections to recent developments in sibling fields, including social and emotional learning and internet activism. These developments offer ideas for next steps in youth organizing research.

This paper is a response to:

Mira, M. Pushing the boundaries: What youth organizers at Boston's Hyde Square Task Force have to teach us about civic engagement. *Democracy & Education*, *21*(1), Article 2. Available at: http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/iss1/2

R ECENTLY I MET with the founder and leader of an intergenerational community-organizing group to discuss emerging findings from research about what and how young people learn by engaging in community organizing. One of the intriguing patterns we discussed was that certain kinds of learning appeared to occur precisely because the group did not define its main goal in terms of youth development or learning. As the leader said to me, the organization has never been about just helping young people develop political skills for the sake of their development. The priority is to organize in order to make changes for democracy and justice.

This emphasis on getting work done in the world rather than providing sheltered practice for future activity strengthens young people's learning rather than diminishes it. Consistent with Halpern's (2005) recommendation that youth programs should privilege joint work around craft or artistic production as a vehicle for relationship building, it is my view that treating learning as a consequence of authentic work, rather than its object, creates robust opportunities for civic development.

One can see evidence for this position in Mira's (2013) excellent paper "Publishing the Boundaries: What Youth Organizers at Boston's Hyde Square Task Force Have to Teach Us about Civic Engagement." Mira's analysis shows a rich learning ecology available to youth organizers in Boston's Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF). Mira's nuanced empirical account of two distinct learning trajectories for youth at the HSTF—one toward greater awareness of inequity and the other toward greater awareness of life choices—captures something few prior studies have done, which is the internal diversity within such groups. Mira, drawing upon Watts, Williams, and Jagers's (2003) model of sociopolitical development, finds useful lessons in her study in terms of how organizing groups can support youths' personal development and community awareness.

In this commentary I discuss two implications from Mira's paper. I first consider the role of youth organizing in social and

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emotional development; I second discuss the relevance of a new framework for conceptualizing youth organizing as a learning environment.

Youth Organizing and Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to a growing body of literature that examines many of the noncognitive elements of human functioning that matter for school performance and human development. Can a person resolve a conflict with a friend through verbal communication? Are you aware when you are becoming angry, stressed out, or anxious, and can you manage those emotions rather than let them manage you? Several recent meta-analyses document the positive impact of SEL for young people (Payton et al., 2008). SEL participants, across a range of demographic backgrounds, experience a host of developmental outcomes, including reduced emotional distress, positive social behaviors, positive attitudes toward school, and improved test performance (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011).

I see SEL in Mira's account of the HSTF. One research participant describes the "love off the rib" (p. 7) he experiences from people every time he goes to the HSTF. Another reports that the HSTF is "a place where you can be stressed or mad and just come here and know that you can sit down and air out what you have in your head with somebody" (p. 8). Accounts like these—of love, of mutual respect, of receiving permission to air one's feelings—are common in youth organizing. Dig beneath ethnographic studies of youth organizing, and you will often find many of the practices called for by SEL researchers, even though they are not always designed as the primary purpose of the organization. As Ginwright (2010) has written convincingly, many young people growing up in poverty or other forms of marginalization struggle with various kinds of trauma and stress. Part of becoming a forceful and skilled activist involves time and support for social and emotional learning.

Youth organizing groups, however, rarely get credit for the cutting-edge SEL work that they do in the course of engaging youth in planning and implementing social justice campaigns. This is unfortunate to the extent that it means they miss out on funding streams available to SEL programs. But it also means the emerging SEL movement misses out on critical insights from the youth organizing field about the importance of sociopolitical context and young people's collective agency. Effective SEL with marginalized youth means acknowledging structural barriers to their healthy development and partnering with youth to dismantle them. Current SEL interventions, including those in schools, could learn a great deal from youth organizing groups similar to the HSTF. Although Mira (2013) rightly points out some of the difficulties of facilitating sociopolitical activism in school settings, several existence proofs point to the promise of school-based efforts that support a mix of personal development, community awareness, and civic action (e.g., DeMeulenaere, 2012; Irizarry, 2011).

Conceptualizing Agency in Youth Organizing

At a 2013 conference examining digital media and learning, Ethan Zuckerman, the director of civic media at MIT, presented a
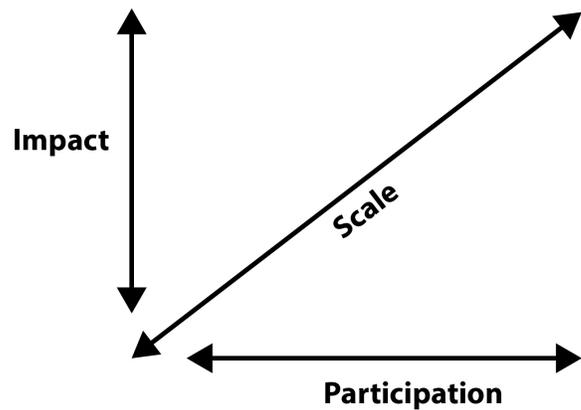

Figure 1. Civic Agency Dimensions (Zuckerman, 2013)

conceptual framework for understanding the exercise of agency by ordinary people. Zuckerman's address does not mention youth organizing—he works in a different activist and researcher space—but it resonates for me as a way of conceptualizing the kinds of civic participation and impact called forth in youth organizing. Similar to Mira's (2013) critique of an overemphasis on civic knowledge in civic education sectors, Zuckerman argues that we should be much less concerned about alleged declines in civic knowledge and instead focus on human agency: Do people have the ability to influence their government or society around issues they care about? Motivated by this question of agency, Zuckerman puts forth a three-dimensional framework for mapping civic change initiatives and groups. Figure 1 represents my effort to visualize these three dimensions.[1]

Zuckerman's first dimension is a distinction between thin and thick participation. Thin forms of civic or political participation ask for minimal levels of involvement. Consider the ubiquitous Facebook request to "like" an organization or, perhaps slightly more difficult, donate money to a cause. Thick participation, in contrast, asks for high levels of involvement and dedication from participants. Chicago's local school councils, for example, can be seen as requiring thick participation because they call for participants to show up regularly, sit through long meetings, develop skills for deliberation, and persist over extended periods of time (Fung, 2012; Moore & Merritt, 2002). Another example is the Occupy Movement, which called for people to leave their homes and occupy public spaces for extended periods of time.

Thick forms of participation might appear to be desirable, but one must also consider a second dimension: impact. Some thin types of participation, particularly voting, lead to meaningful impact. Although some democracy activists are skeptical about the value of the vote, recent successes for immigrant movements and gay rights movements tied to the ballot box show how relatively

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1   I attended and took notes at the meeting but also rely on a live-blogged description of the talk by Erhardt Graeff located at http://civic .mit.edu/blog/erhardt/ethan-zuckermans-dml-keynote-beyond-%E2%80 %9Cthe-crisis-in-civics%E2%80%9D.

modest forms of civic action can lead to major changes in a democracy. An immigrant rights organizer I work with called the last presidential election a game changer because of her group's ability now to move policies such as tuition equity for higher education and to gain an audience with previously unresponsive legislators. Moreover, some thick types of participation can prove more symbolic than impactful. Again, this is up for debate, but Zuckerman (2013) argues that the Occupy movement ultimately played a largely symbolic role as critics of capitalism and failed to make an impact on policy deliberations in the state or federal government.

The third dimension in this framework is scale. One can find instances of thick forms of participation that are impactful, but these vary quite a bit in their reach. There are more examples of powerful and thick local social impact than national or global. Zuckerman (2013) found this in Occupy Sandy, formed to support recovery efforts in the New York area after Hurricane Sandy.

This thick, local, impactful space is, in my view, where youth organizing most typically operates. As Mira's (2013) description shows, youth organizing calls for thick participation from its participants. Consider organizers from HSTF such as Melissa or Oscar. Melissa is described as a teacher within the HSTF framework; she participated in activities for more than a year and developed mastery in public speaking skills and other kinds of leadership. Oscar achieved a designation one step higher in the HSTF framework, as a change maker, because of his ability to plan and execute organizing campaigns. In both cases the opportunity for progressively greater assumption of roles and responsibilities is found in the group linked to skill mastery and participation over time. Such ladders of engagement exemplify the best kind of structured learning opportunity that supports thick forms of youth participation.

Although Mira's (2013) purpose in the article was not to ascertain the level of political impact achieved by HSTF, evidence from other studies shows that youth organizing groups do more than provide rich developmental opportunities for youth (itself a major accomplishment)—they also make an impact on policies and institutions, particularly in the education sector (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008; Warren & Mapp, 2010). For example, in Los Angeles, youth organizing groups partnered with community organizations to successfully persuade the school district to make college-level classes the default expectation for all students (Renée, Welner, & Oakes, 2009). Studies have also documented efforts to change juvenile justice policies, promote interracial peace, and secure public funding for youth opportunities outside of schools (Gordon, 2010; Kwon, 2006). Christens and Dolan (2011), for example, describe a multiyear campaign developed by Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) in Southern California to change city approaches to youth-violence prevention. The group argued successfully for a paid-jobs program as well as other youth programs.

Youth organizing has faced greater barriers in finding resources to create an infrastructure to build and sustain larger scale social movements. Some efforts, such as the Alliance for Education Justice (AEJ), built a national network of community-based organizations working to improve opportunities to learn in schools. These networks take financial resources to nurture and sustain. It costs money, for example, to convene groups from different cities, to provide advanced training in political action and lobbying, and to support paid organizers to build membership base. Since the economic crash of 2008, resources to support national movement building related to youth organizing and social justice have, unfortunately, diminished. Networks are critical because they enable people to jump from their local context to see the broader movement of which they are part. This experience central to social movements—being part of something larger than oneself—is evoked by Horton's (1990) description of the vitality and generativity experienced by participants in the Highlander Folk School:

> People learn faster and with more enjoyment when they are involved in a successful struggle for justice that has reached social movement proportions . . . It's a much bigger experience than anything you've had before as an individual. It's bigger than your organization . . . ; sparks are flying around very fast, and they explode and create other sparks, and it's almost perpetual motion. Learning jumps from person to person with no visible explanation of how it happened. (p. 107–108)

Horton's statement provides a bookend to my beginning story about the relationship between learning and social change. As suggested by my community organizer colleague, powerful forms of learning emerge when people can observe and participate in effective movements to reclaim local democracy and create more responsive and effective institutions for youth. Now is a good time for allies of youth organizing—including researchers—to contribute to strong networks that link thick, impactful local efforts to movements on a broader scale. Mira's (2013) paper takes us in the right direction by identifying the ways that opportunity structures can be designed to reach young people in different places developmentally. Researchers can contribute to this process by reaching beyond our familiar literatures to draw on new scholarship about the changing landscape of new media, participatory democracy, and international activism.

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