

The Gulf Coast Civic Works Project:
Using Service-Learning to Change Social Structure

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Abstract

This paper explores what happened when a professor decided to see whether it was possible to change social structure using service-learning. What grew out of this effort is the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, which is the national effort to develop federal legislation to create 100,000 WPA-like jobs for Gulf Coast residents to rebuild their communities.

Bio

Scott Myers-Lipton is the author of numerous scholarly articles on education, civic engagement, and racism. To explore solutions to poverty, Myers-Lipton has taken students over the past eighteen years to live at homeless shelters, the Navajo and Lakota nations, and to Kingston, Jamaica.

Service-Learning and Social Structure

In the fall of 2003, I set out to see if service-learning could be used to change the social structures of society. I had been involved in the service-learning movement since 1989. I had personally taken 20 student groups on domestic and international summer service-learning trips, taught over 30 service-learning courses, developed three service-learning leadership programs, and wrote my dissertation and six articles on service-learning. I had basically dedicated my entire professional career to service-learning; however, I began to have my doubts about the effectiveness in what I was doing.

Yes, I, and hundreds of others in the service-learning movement, had transformed individual lives. We had made our student more civically and intellectually engaged, more racially tolerant, and more globally concerned (Myers-Lipton, 2002, 1998, 1996). Based on all the research that has been done in the past 20 years, it is clear that service-learning can transform individual lives. Yet, at the same time, we had not fulfilled the promise of service-learning, which as I understood it, was to change society. Heck, we hadn't even changed our college campuses!

Academe was basically running as it had before the service-learning movement. Yes, our university used service-learning to demonstrate to the community how it was involved in the community, but the movement had very little effect on the culture of the campus, or the social structures in the larger society. In fact, we had gone backwards (e.g., poverty rate) on many of the issues that service-learning was supposed to be addressing.

So several years ago, I set out to see if it was possible to bring about social transformation at my campus and community. The focus was not to be on individual change,

even though this would still occur, but rather on changing social policy. I decided to develop a social action service-learning course where the students would be on student teams that would work on local and global issues, and that were designed to be self-sufficient so that the community work could continue after the class ended.

Sociology 164: Social Action

Sociology 164: Social Action is an action-oriented, solutions-based, course on community activism. In this course, we explore issues such as community organizing, strategy, tactics, small group skills (i.e., active listening skills, facilitation, consensus, group dynamics and process), coalition building, and working with the media. Through interactive methods in the classroom, including group activities, small and large group discussion, videos, guest speakers, the readings, and service-learning projects in the community, we explore the variety issues surrounding community organizing.

What is unique about this course is that it is designed to actually *do social action*. Instead of just reading about it in a book, students learn about how to bring about social change by *doing* it. Of course, we still use “book knowledge,” but the hope is that this knowledge is challenged by the students’ community experiences, and that they will develop a more critical and deeper understanding of public issues and community change by integrating action and book knowledge. Practically, we spend about one-half of each class talking about the community action project and the other one-half talking about the text. Of course, we integrate praxis with text.

Over a two-year period, four viable student organizations were created from this social action course: the Student Homeless Alliance (SHA), Students Against Intimate Violence

(SAIV), Students Advocating Global Education (SAGE), and a student chapter of the Worker's Right's Consortium (WRC). To support their work, I became the faculty advisor to these groups, and the university has recently awarded me a one-semester course release to continue to help these groups grow and develop strategy.

Critical Education Theory

Critical education theory, which is the perspective that guides my research and pedagogy, comes from critical social theory in the subdiscipline of the sociology of education. This perspective focuses on how dominant socioeconomic groups maintain power over the educational process, as well as how subordinate groups resist this domination. Critical education theory is interested in discovering the various types of curricula and pedagogy that allow teachers to become “transformative intellectuals” and students to become active, critical, and engaged learners (Giroux 1988).

Critical education theory is best described as a perspective that has several common elements rather than a single shared theory. Influenced by macro conflict theory, interactionism, Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and the Frankfurt School, this perspective is unified by the objective “to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. . . . to heal, repair, and transform the world” (McLaren 1989: 160).

Critical theory, as an overarching framework, is well suited for service-learning because they share three key assumptions. First, critical theory and service-learning are both interested in the development of a curriculum and pedagogy that transforms school into an agent of social change. Second, critical theorists and many service-learning educators share the assumption that students should actively question the power relationships in society and that through this questioning,

transformational change of the student and society is possible. Third, critical education theory and service-learning both make the assumption that humans are active agents of change. Because these two perspectives share these key assumptions, service-learning can be grounded in critical education theory.

Creating Democratic Spaces

At the same time I created this new course focusing on institutional change, I became involved in a student-led effort to build a statue for Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two SJSU student-athletes. Tommie and John were students at San José State in 1968; they were also gold and bronze medal winners in the 200 meters at the Mexico City Summer Olympics. However, their athletic feat was not the reason why the students wanted to honor them with 20 foot-statues; it was what they did when they were on the Olympic podium, and that was to raise their fists in protest against racism and poverty in the United States.

I began to see this work with the students as part of my larger project to change social structure, for if change was going to happen, students and faculty needed to have democratic space for them to meet and gather. After several years of hard work by the students, the statues were dedicated in the spring of 2006, and with Tommie and John present, 4,000 people were there to say "thank you" for taking this courageous stand. These statues now serve as focal point for student activism, and it was here that 40 student leaders gathered on election night, 2006.

The students, many of which had either taken or were taking the Social Action service-learning course, had gathered to protest the recently released Census Bureau report showing that Santa Clara County--home to Cisco, Adobe, and many other wealthy high-tech corporations--had

become the Northern California county with the highest homeless population. The report stated that on any given night, over 7,600 people did not have a place to call home in Silicon Valley.

The student protest was entitled “Poverty Under the Stars.” Accordingly, the students had put up signs around the statues stating such things as:

- ? 18% of all U.S. children live in poverty
- ? 37 million Americans live in poverty
- ? USA is #1 in child poverty in the industrialized world
- ? 727,000 homeless in America on any given night

The highlight of the evening was Spike Lee's film, “When the Levees Broke: A Four-Part Requiem.” A large screen had been setup up directly in front of the statues. Each one-hour “act” of the film was shown, followed by a discussion.

The students were composed of America: Black, Latino, White, and Asian students were present. They also represented a variety of groups: SHA, SAIV, SAGE, WRC, Hip Hop Congress, and several African American fraternities were in the house. But while they were of different ethnicities and groups, they had one thing in common—they were all Americans, and they had come together to discuss poverty in America, and what was happening in the Gulf Coast in particular.

As a college professor, it was a highlight event. Students had come together on their own volition to dialogue and debate one of the most important events that had taken place in recent American history. Students said many important things. What I took away from the conversation was this: Students were upset, and even outraged, at what took place in New Orleans. They couldn't understand how it was possible for the richest country on the planet to

respond in such an ineffectual manner, both in the first week of the flood and in the year that has followed.

The film started at 7 pm, but with all the dialogue, the film ended around 1:30 am. The students then slept out on campus to be in solidarity with the homeless. The students had asked me to camp out with them, and I felt obligated to stand with my students, so I slept out with them. When they awoke, the students decided to march over to San Jose City Hall, which recently was completed. Ironically, this one-half billion-dollar building towers over both SJSU and the First Christian Church; the latter opens their doors each night to over 30 homeless adults and kids. Once at City Hall, the students marched, drummed, and sang about the need to end poverty and homelessness in America.

Civic Work

After returning from City Hall, I went to teach my morning class, which happened to be on the Civil Works Project (CWA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). These three programs were developed as a response to the social suffering that was caused due to the poverty and unemployment during the Great Depression.

In my class, I discussed how the CWA employed 4 million workers immediately in construction work (i.e., school repair, sanitation work, road building, etc.). Within two weeks of starting the project, 814,511 were on the payroll; within two months, 4.2 million were working. The Works Project Administration (WPA), which replaced the CWA went on to employ a total of 8 million people in its seven year history, and its accomplishments were many: the WPA built or improved 5,900 schools, 2,500 hospitals, and 13,000 playgrounds. And the CCC provided the opportunity for 500,000 young men (ages 18 to 25) to work on environmental conservation

projects at 2,600 camps each year. The goal was to employ restless and discouraged young men, many of who had previously roamed the nation looking for work.

When I returned home from class, I was exhausted from the lack of sleep from the previous night. I sat down and read the newspaper about the victory of the Democrats nationally. Interestingly, there was an article about a Green Party candidate who was winning her bid to become mayor of Richmond, California, a predominantly African American city. One of her main platforms had been the development of a public works project for 1,000 youth to combat poverty and crime.

Then, the idea came to me. This is what is needed in the Gulf Coast: living wage jobs and the opportunity to rebuild their community. I started to think that if the USA could put almost 1 million people to work in two weeks in 1935, we could put 100,000 people to work immediately today in the Gulf Coast. And if the Works Project Administration (WPA) employed 8 million people, and built or improved schools, hospitals, and playgrounds, we could rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast today.

That is how the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project was born. The project is based on the research I conducted for the book "Social Solutions to Poverty: America's Struggle to Build a Just Society" (Paradigm Publishers, 2006). The general proposal for the Civic Works Project would be to hire 100,000 Gulf Coast residents to rebuild New Orleans and the surrounding region. The residents would be given subsidized tickets back to their neighborhoods, and would build and repair houses, levees, schools, parks, and forests.

After I wrote the proposal, I emailed it out to my friends and colleagues. The response was overwhelmingly positive. One of my colleagues, who was a leading expert in the country on

hunger, was so supportive of the proposal that he provided me with his contacts to key Congressional lawmakers, and promised to phone many of them personally. We also received initial support from the NAACP Gulf Coast Advocacy Center.

The students were also equally positive. I had presented it to a group of students in my Poverty, Wealth, and Privilege class, the same course that had been discussing the WPA, and five students were interested enough to start meeting outside of class on how we could move forward with the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. The students decided to join me at an upcoming conference in New Orleans, and in addition to attending the conference, we would spend our time discussing the project with citizen groups in the region. At this point, a student asked if we could take some photographs and up link them to our web site, so that students at SJSU and at other campuses might be able to view what we were seeing. I told the student that rather than doing this, we should invite students from around the country to come with us to the Gulf Coast, and half-jokingly said that we should call it “Louisiana Winter”, in a play of words and reference to “Mississippi Freedom Summer.”

Later that night during my service-learning internship course, we were discussing solutions to their issues at their sites, and I was encouraging them to “think big.” After they had discussed their solutions, I told them, a bit sheepishly--because this idea was “so big”--about the idea for “Louisiana Winter.” After a brief discussion of it, I told them that if they were interested, they should stay after class, and we could discuss it further. I fully expected only one or two students to stay after, but I was surprised that 10 students stayed after. This group formed the beginning of the student movement in support of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project.

I believe that the reason that the student interest was so high was that: (1) everyone saw the images of social suffering of Katrina, (2) many students have a relative or friend living in the Gulf Coast who has been effected, (3) Katrina represents our domestic failure, as Iraq represents our international failure. But these are only musings, and need to be corroborated through research.

Louisiana Winter

Hurricane Katrina damaged over 250,000 Gulf Coast homes. In addition, Katrina destroyed schools, hospitals, roads, community centers, bridges, parks, and forest lands. The government's response to this unprecedented disaster has been ineffective and weak. To date, over 100,000 Louisianans have applied for funds to rebuild, but only several thousand have received funds. Insurance companies have found ways to avoid making payouts, and residents can do little more to rebuild until these insurance companies come through. Today, the Gulf Coast is in crisis. There is an urgent need to jump-start the rebuilding process. What is needed is a "rebuilding surge" in New Orleans and in southern Mississippi.

In order to encourage Congress to develop and pass a bill based on the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, a group of over 100 college students from 15 universities traveled to New Orleans and Mississippi from January 14-20, 2007. This week-long student campaign, which was entitled "Louisiana Winter," was inspired by a previous generation of college students who came to the Gulf Coast to register African American voters during "Mississippi Freedom Summer" in 1964. Most students had heard about Louisiana Winter through our "national call" we put out through the internet.

Everywhere the Louisiana Winter students went, they were greeted warmly, whether it

was in Gentilly, Pontchartrain Park, Lower Ninth Ward, Uptown, or St. Bernard Parish in New Orleans, or whether it was in Gulfport, Pass Christian, Long Beach, or Biloxi in Mississippi. And perhaps even more importantly, the idea for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project was seen as a potential solution by almost everyone the students met.

In fact, support for the Civic Works Project cut across political orientation, as conservatives saw it as a hand-up and not a handout, while liberals appreciated the fact that the government would play an active role in relieving the social suffering. Importantly, both conservatives and liberals felt that the federal government had not lived up to its responsibility of taking care of its people, and overwhelmingly supported the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project as a way to rebuild their communities. Clearly, this is not a Democratic or Republican idea, but an American solution.

Louisiana Winter students traveled throughout the Gulf Coast, where they passed out 10,000 fliers, held two rallies, conducted two town hall meetings, gave multiple interviews to local, state, and international media, and perhaps most importantly, asked Gulf Coast residents for their opinions about what they wanted to see included in the Civic Works legislation. The responses given to the students will serve as a guideline for any future bill that comes out of congress. The parameters for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project are the following:

- ? The civic work jobs will be in the areas of construction, plumbing, electrical, brick building, air conditioning, etc.
- ? If workers do not have these skills, paid apprenticeships will be provided. These skilled jobs will soon become the backbone of the middle-class.
- ? The civic work jobs will pay a living wage—no lower than \$12, and preferably \$15—so people can have enough money to feed, clothe, and house themselves.

- ? The civic workers will have the right to join unions.
- ? The local Gulf Coast residents and displaced citizens will have the first opportunity for the civic work jobs.
- ? The process to obtain a civic works job should be simple. A streamlined process will be conducted at county employment service offices and/or at faith-based and community initiatives connected to the White House.
- ? The local communities affected by Hurricane Katrina (as well as Hurricane Rita) will decide which structures will be given priority to rebuild. Some communities may focus on housing, while others focus on schools, hospitals, community centers, or parks.
- ? A Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)-like agency will oversee the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. This TVA-like agency will ensure transparency so that the American public knows exactly where the money is going.

We are proposing that the federal government, state government, and insurance companies will finance this \$3.9 billion project. The projected cost is based on a ratio of labor to materials of 80-20—which was used during the New Deal—with a wage rate of \$15 per hour. The projected cost of wages is \$3.1 billion, while the cost of materials is \$775 million. The amount of \$3.9 billion is roughly one-half the cost of the war each month in Iraq according to the Congressional Budget Office. And while the Iraq War has been plagued with graft and corruption, similar large-scale public works projects have operated in the United States with little or no corruption.

Importantly, the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project will not only rebuild homes, but it will also rebuild individual lives. There is a sense of hopelessness in many residents. Sadly, this lack of hope has already cost the lives of too many elderly, since some seniors lost the will to live in the face of such limited rebuilding.

The youth have also been impacted, as their sense of community has been destroyed, and

they literally have no place to play since the parks and community centers have been destroyed. By having Gulf Coast residents rebuild their own communities, the people will regain their sense of empowerment and hope, and see that a better future is possible.

The Gulf Coast Civic Works Project can also repair the frayed social compact between the government and citizen. As citizens, we have various responsibilities (e.g., pay taxes, sit on juries, and serve our country), while at the same time the government has responsibilities, and one of them is to respond effectively when its citizens are in crisis. Passing federal legislation to implement the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project will be a major step in repairing the social compact that is so badly damaged.

National College Post-Katrina Summit

As this book goes to print, students and faculty from thirty-six colleges, including Xavier, Tulane, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Stanford, Cal, NYU, Princeton, Michigan, Howard, and San José State have registered to participate in a "National Post-Katrina College Summit" for April 9-14. The Post-Katrina College Summit is a nationwide, week-long effort to raise awareness about the Gulf Coast through documentary showings, speakers, spoken word, teach-ins, rallies, petition drives, and other events. The College Summit is an attempt to catapult New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast back into the national consciousness and to promote federal legislation for a New Deal-style program for the Gulf Coast.

This movement is trying to generate as many ways as possible for students and the larger campus community to engage in democracy. In addition to participating in the summit, students can also take action by gathering petition signatures, introduce resolutions to their city councils or state legislatures, and ask presidential candidates to focus their attention on the Gulf Coast.

As part of the summit, we are gathering “100,000 signatures for 100,000 civic work jobs.” Students and faculty will then hand-deliver these petitions to Congress in September 2007, in a dramatic and powerful fashion.

Another way we are getting students and faculty involved in democracy is to have them appeal to city council and state legislatures and ask them to introduce resolutions in support of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. The goal of these non-binding resolutions is to put pressure on Congress and the President to enact a WPA-like project. This idea for city council and state legislature resolutions came from Ms. Jeanette Oxford, a representative in the Missouri State Legislature. Representative Oxford contacted us in January, 2007, and said she would like to introduce a resolution into the Missouri State Legislature in support of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. She, along with 21 co-sponsors, introduced the resolution in late February. Then, in March, the 10 SJSU and Stanford students presented at a public hearing on Post-Katrina conditions called by California State Assembly member Sally Lieber. At the hearing, the students asked that the California State Legislature adopt a similar resolution to the one introduced in Missouri, and Assembly member Lieber was supportive of this idea.

Lastly, we are attempting to engage people in democracy by creating “Presidential Candidate Dispatch Teams.” We plan on dispatching students and community members to ask questions of the presidential candidates from both political parties. Examples of questions are: What is your plan to rebuild the Gulf Coast? What would you do differently than what is being currently done? If elected president of the US, would you introduce legislation based on the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project? Do you support the idea of a WPA-like project to rebuild the Gulf Coast?

At San José State, there are approximately 50 students involved in the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. There are 28 students involved in the Social Action course, and the rest are from the Community Change concentration in Sociology and the general student population. The students in the course have all decided to work on the Civic Works Project. They have broken into four teams, focusing on petitions, resolutions, the presidential candidates, and the National College Summit. The students from the larger campus community have been meeting every Thursday night, and they have been planning the week-long summit for our campus. Our event will include speakers (e.g., Congressman Mike Honda, several Katrina survivors, and Louisiana Winter students), spoken word performances, “Katrinaquest” (an afternoon and evening of Katrina videos), a dinner for the Katrina survivors, and a FEMA-like trailer in the middle of campus to demonstrate the cramped living quarters for over 200,000 Americans.

Support for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project

Support for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project has been growing over the past several months. Our biggest success was when Congressman Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, the Chair of the Homeland Security Committee, announced in one of his first public addresses as Chair that one of his three goals for the committee would be to develop a WPA-like project for the Gulf Coast, and he referenced our work. In fact, Congressman Thompson’s staff has told us that he considers the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project as a model for reconstruction. Most recently, ACORN in New Orleans has voted to support the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project.

In addition, we have received support from Jeffrey Buchanan, who is a staff member with the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights. He wrote a guest article for our blog (www.SolvingPoverty.com) stating that if the United States can create 40,000 public work jobs

in Iraq, why can't it do the same for the Gulf Coast. And Barbara Shelly, a Kansas City Star columnist has recently written about how both the market and volunteerism has its limits, and what is needed to rebuild the region is the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project

Sixty-eight years ago, Langston Hughes said, "O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, and yet I swear this oath—America will be." Let us work together to make America be. Let the American people demand that Congress rebuild the Gulf Coast utilizing proven methods that will get things done.

DRAFT 3/28/07 SML

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