

## Teaching Community Organizing and the Practice of Democracy

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**Citation to *this* Version:** Josephson, Jyl. *Teaching Community Organizing and the Practice of Democracy*, 2017. Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T390264X](https://doi.org/10.7282/T390264X).



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APSA Teaching and Learning Conference, Long Beach, CA February 10-12, 2017

Title: *Teaching Community Organizing and the Practice of Democracy*

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Abstract: This paper calls on political science to develop a thicker and deeper idea of civic engagement, linked to building full participation with community partners who take the lead in designing student civic engagement projects and activities. Based on a current curricular experiment with a two-course sequence at an urban, highly diverse public university, the paper argues for treating community partners as leaders and full partners in the design and implementation of community engaged learning. The courses combine democratic theory, community organizing and leadership development, and partnership between students and a community organization in carrying out research and action projects on education, public safety, and affordable housing.

## **Deepening Civic Engagement**

In 2014, Rutgers University-Newark embarked on a strategic planning process intended to implement a new vision of the university and its role in Newark and as a public university. With new leadership and a new structure that gave RU-N greater autonomy to pursue its own vision, a broader and deeper form of civic engagement became central to the university's mission and to the way we pursue our goals of furthering knowledge and educating citizens. The strategic plan was written in 2014 through a democratic process, and institutional structures were also put into place to ensure that the plan became a living way for the ideals expressed through the planning process to become central to the work of the university (Office of the Chancellor, RU-N Strategic Plan, 2014).

There are many aspects to this project of reinventing the university for the twenty-first century, but a key aspect for present purposes was the use of a seed grant process to bring about curricular and programmatic innovations throughout the units of the university. The seed grants require interdisciplinary and cross-unit projects and encourage collaboration with community organizations.

The fortunate confluence of several circumstances has made this work possible. As a result of my own involvement with the strategic planning process, both in the initial phases and then as co-chair of the Diversity Action group, which envisioned new ways for the university to "do" diversity in a deeper, more meaningful, and more transformative way, I became aware of some of the work by Susan Sturm, John Saltmarsh, Timothy Eatman, and others, on "full participation" (Sturm et al 2011). Because of Chancellor Cantor's work on civic engagement, the idea of the outside-in university seemed to provide another way to think about how political science might work with community organizations on civic engagement (Cantor and Englot 2013; Lewis and Cantor 2016). And an IAF affiliated community organization, Jersey City Together, started organizing in my north Jersey city in 2014, and my congregation joined this effort. In looking into how to bring this work to the classroom, I found existing models of teaching community organizing—Marshall Ganz, and Romand Coles, among others—and decided to work out a way to teach community organizing to political science students at RU-N. In conjunction with organizer Frank McMillan, we put together a seed grant to try to implement community organizing. Here is the brief description of the project:

"This project implements the idea of the "outside-in" university through a new course sequence in political science, provides political science majors and minors an opportunity to learn about democratic theory and practice by working with community organizations that are engaged in democratic change and renewal in northern New Jersey, offers faculty and graduate students an

opportunity to implement community engaged teaching in areas related to their research, and builds community organization-driven partnerships with the university.”

### **Implementing the Courses**

When I conceptualized the project, I imagined a two course sequence where students would learn about community organizing, read some of the scholarly and popular literature on broad-based community organizing and a little bit of democratic theory, and then do more hands on work, more like an internship course, in the second course. That is how I have implemented the course this academic year. The idea is also to provide support via a workshop and, during the next academic year, a teaching assistant, to help other faculty in the political science department develop the courses and a relationship with community organizations so that the course can be rotated among the political science faculty and taught every semester.

Part of the idea of the “outside-in university”, which is related to the critique of service learning as it has developed in many universities, is that the kind of work that students do with community organizations really does not benefit the community organizations very much, and is driven more by university goals and institutional practices than by actual community needs. So the goal of this course is to have the agenda of student activities, including student research projects as well as on the ground student activities, be driven by the agenda of the organization. This requires a good deal of coordination with the organization and its leaders, as well as flexibility in how the courses are actually conducted, both things that are hard to do under standard university course development practices.

During the fall 2016 semester, then, I taught a course under our political theory topics number, called “Democracy and Citizenship”. We read two books on broad based community organizing, Michael Gecan’s *Going Public* and Mary Beth Rogers’ book *Cold Anger*, about the Texas IAF affiliate organizations, along with Hahrie Han’s *How Organizations Develop Activists*. This spring, I am teaching the course as an American politics topics course called “Community Organizing in Practice”. Students are doing more hands on projects with our affiliate organization, including door knocking, going to strategy meetings, and other projects as they develop.

In the fall course, class visits by the organizer, and by leaders from the working groups of the organization, were easily the highlights of the class. The organizer led two class sessions on negotiation, using an exercise that IAF uses in training leaders. Students were required to write a reaction paper on that exercise, and many students found it to be really powerful and eye opening in terms of understanding how power works in local political and economic life.

Through the rest of the semester, nearly every week featured a visit to class by leaders from the organization, who talked both about what they hope the organization will achieve, how it does its work, and the specific issues that the organization is working on: affordable housing, a long-delayed property revaluation in the city, improving the local public schools, and public safety and policing. The leaders, who are from many different religious traditions and represent the racial and ethnic diversity of Jersey City, were just excellent: ordinary people trying to make a difference in their communities. I think this was in many ways the most effective aspect of the fall course: students saw the many different pathways that leaders took to becoming leaders in their organizations, and in coming to the work of

Jersey City Together. And they saw that they could be leaders in their communities, through working with other citizens, in ways that do not necessarily involve running for public office or working through traditional political parties. So one way to see what the course is teaching, aside from the process of community organizing and a great deal of detail about how to make a difference on specific public policy issues in local communities, is that the course teaches leadership. Most especially, the relational aspect of this kind of community organizing helps students to see how they can develop networks with other people and build relationships to make a difference in their communities.

Two key challenges were related to geography. The community organization is based in Jersey City, which is the second largest city in New Jersey (Newark is the largest) and about a twenty to thirty minute drive or a similar length train commute from Newark. Thus, for most leaders coming to speak to the class was not as simple as it would be if the class were located in Jersey City. Similarly, for students, who were required to attend at least one event over the course of the semester, there were logistical and scheduling challenges particularly for those who used public transit. There was one event scheduled in Newark, and about five out of the thirty-five students attended that event. About ten of the students simply did not fulfill this requirement, and this of course affected their grade in the class. On the organization leaders' side of this logistical challenge, the seed grant funds were helpful since I could pay for the costs of parking and/or transit, and also offered a small stipend.

Ideally, of course, the class would involve working with an organization in the same city and eventually this may be possible depending upon how the IAF affiliate organization develops. Part of the goal of the seed grant is to make the course a permanent one in the political science department, rotated among different faculty. And so I will be working with my colleagues this semester and in a summer workshop to help develop additional versions of the course that might take up different material and work with different community organizations, but all in the context of democracy and citizenship. Again, these activities will be aided by funding from the seed grant—a small amount of course development funding, but then, for next year, funding for a graduate assistant to help faculty build contacts with community organizations and run the course for the first time. This may be the most challenging part of the course—there are so many demands on faculty time that this may be difficult to make permanent except as my own course—which will limit the effectiveness of the course.

Another key challenge, and one that I think can be easily remedied, is that only a few students from the fall course are currently taking the spring course. This problem will be remedied by simply making the course a single semester course, with less traditional academic reading and assignments, and more hands on work right from the start. This will be easier now that I have built the course; it also will be easier now that the organization, Jersey City Together, has really solidified its agenda and mode of working. The organization was officially launched in April of 2016, although that event built on more than eighteen months of organizing. During the fall of 2016 most of the working groups of Jersey City Together were still building their issue campaigns, so students conducted research projects related to the issues. Now there is the possibility for more hands on research as the issue campaigns are implemented; for example, we are doing door knocking for the housing campaign, and may do more research with city offices to gather information.

I should note that developing the courses was a joint project with the organizer, and with the leaders who came to speak to the class. The organizer, Frank McMillan, helped me think through how to develop the syllabi, and suggested using the model of IAF leader training to think about how to organize

the syllabus for the fall semester course. I had initially imagined a more academically traditional way of organizing the class, and the method of using the one on ones and the negotiation role play really helped to structure students' understanding of the organization. Further, the projects really developed rather organically as JCT was developing its issue agenda, so students had to adjust their understanding of the group project work. This was more difficult for some students who would have preferred a more traditional class structure. And it required flexibility and also a bit more hands on management of the groups than I had initially envisioned.

This was partly because we had to rethink what our role was as students who were learning about the organization and about leadership and how to exercise political power, but were not setting the agenda of the organization. Students (and I) wanted to design projects that we thought might be useful to the organization. It took multiple iterations and discussions of the group project to get a clear understanding of what our role was—providing research on issues that were identified and fleshed out by JCT, not setting the agenda or determining what issues were relevant or should be addressed. This was difficult to clarify since it was a different role for students, who were more accustomed to choosing their own research topic and agenda. And it was initially difficult for me as instructor although once I understood what the problem was—a misunderstanding about our role—it helped to clarify the work.

Was our work useful to Jersey City Together? I think there were several ways that it has been useful, and there are ways to adjust the course so it will be more useful while also achieving the pedagogical goals of the course. First, I think it was useful for the organization to build relationships with young people, and in particular that it was useful to some of the leaders to come to the class and see how students responded to their stories and the work that they were doing to improve their community. The students, in turn, found many of the leaders very inspiring. Because the organization is a diverse one, that represents much of the religious, racial, and class diversity of northern New Jersey, the leaders reflected this diversity, and the students found much to relate to with respect to their own identities and stories and struggles. This was mutually beneficial. Second, the research that the students did made some limited contributions to the information that the JCT working groups needed to move their issue campaigns forward. This was true once we really targeted our research to the specifics of the campaigns, and focused on best practices. For example, what are best practices in training police officers for community policing? What are best practices in implementing community schools? In educating tenants on their rights? Third, I think the spring course will provide an even greater contribution to the organization because the students are doing leg work that needs to be done, helping both the leaders and the organizers in implementing the campaigns. Fourth, a number of students from the course are interested in engaging with the work of JCT outside of the class. This includes a student who is doing an independent study this semester, reaching out to and building networks with Muslim Student Associations at universities and colleges in northern New Jersey. I am hopeful about the relationships this project will build and hopeful that this will be helpful to the students and to the organizing efforts.

How successful have the courses been for students? A key lesson for students, whether they are interested in civic engagement or not, is to learn how to be leaders. Part of this is learning how to build relationships; we did some of this in the fall class, and are doing more in the spring class, with students conducting one on one meetings, getting to know each other and understanding each other's reasons for political engagement. Fundamentally students learned about having the power to act, and whatever their field of study this is I think a useful lesson.

## Implications for Political Science and the practice of civic engagement

The purpose of these courses is also connected to the transformation of the university, building toward a goal of community-driven community engagement in the curriculum. And this is connected to the notion of full participation, to the importance of multiple connected initiatives to bring about a more diverse and inclusive university. The idea of full participation comes out of a critique of standard university diversity efforts that bring about little or no actual institutional change. We are all familiar with these efforts: A diversity committee is appointed, mostly in order to make it look like the university is taking some action on diversity when in reality there is no intention on the part of top leadership to bring about any institutional change (Sturm et al 2011). Coupled with deeply entrenched institutional resistance or simply the inertia of large organizations such as universities, and ongoing and deep inequalities of educational opportunity in the U.S., this means that institutional change is very slow. As political scientists noted in a report about the discipline in 2011, progress on diversifying the political science professoriate is “glacial” (APSA 2011). Thus, unless a mission of full participation of everyone is integrated into all of the ongoing institutional practices of the university, little actual change takes place.

What do Sturm et al mean by full participation?

*“Full participation is an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others (Sturm 2006, 2010). This concept offers a holistic set of goals that focus attention on (1) the institutional conditions that enable people in different roles to flourish, and (2) the questions designed to mobilize change at the multiple levels and leverage points where change is needed.”(Sturm et al 2011 p. 4*

The authors discuss the different kinds of initiatives that address the many places in universities where there is inequality of access to education and to research and the process of knowledge production, from the setting of research agendas to access and support for students from historically underrepresented groups to the continuing lack of diversity of most faculties. And they address efforts to teach civic engagement and preparation of students for their role as participants in democratic life, as well as public scholarship. They argue that these initiatives, undertaken separately and in institutional isolation from one another, have limited impact on the overall practices and life of universities.

However, if these efforts are seen as interrelated, and if the work of public engagement and of increasing the diversity of all spaces at the university is seen as the job of everyone who is part of the university, there is a much greater possibility that universities will change to become more democratic, inclusive, public serving, and, indeed, interesting places. Thus, diversifying the curriculum is one of the spaces where full participation must be implemented. Importantly for political science, this includes the civic education curriculum and how we implement students’ experiences of community engagement.

Many political scientists have critiqued service learning that does not teach political engagement, seeing traditional service learning models as more focused on organizations that are not engaged in politics and do not engage with organizations involved in public policy-making (APSA 2011; Boyte 2015). In this view service learning does not really teach about politics or power, and thus does not show students how to engage in public life and political decision making. There are also many ways that traditional service learning also does not serve the interests of students or of community organizations very well. Often

small non-profits are not willing to have students serve as interns, given that the work of supervising an intern is often more taxing than any value that an intern can add to the organization in one semester. The idea of full participation, coupled with the notion of the “outside-in university” (Cantor and Englot 2014), seeks to address these concerns. Cantor and Englot note that traditional models of knowledge in universities that do not see the communities in which universities are situated as a resource for knowledge, for questions about the world, and for student learning, are missing a key element of knowledge acquisition and of the role of universities as sources of knowledge for the democratic public.

### **Diversifying civic engagement in the diverse university**

Implementing full participation at Rutgers University-Newark is an exciting proposition. We have a diverse student body, and as a public research university with relatively small class sizes, students have the opportunity to work with and conduct research with faculty. Yet, we still have a faculty that is much less diverse than our student body. Encouraging publicly engaged scholarship, working more directly with community groups in particular in ways that are led by those groups, diversifying the curriculum and making it more interdisciplinary, and diversifying the faculty are all connected goals in this project.

The public work that students are doing through Jersey City Together is, I think, helping students to see how organized people can exercise power to hold public officials accountable. The current issue campaigns that students are working with JCT are a project on affordable and safe housing and a project on public safety and public education in Ward F. I will describe each in turn and discuss how I believe these projects are teaching public work and engagement.

Jersey City has a serious problem with affordable housing that is being exacerbated by New York City’s problem with affordable housing. Families who are being priced out of Brooklyn and to some extent the South Bronx are moving to Jersey City. The commute to lower Manhattan is similar to commutes from Brooklyn, and comparatively speaking prices and rents are lower in Jersey City. During the fall semester, JCT was doing research on a particular landlord who owns at least 65 apartment buildings in Jersey City, mostly bought in the last five years or so. The landlord is clearly trying to force older tenants out so he can raise the rent, by not repairing units with serious problems such as exterior and interior water leaks, filing eviction proceedings without merit, and generally being unresponsive to tenant concerns about security. Once tenants move out, units are renovated and the rent is raised higher than permitted under Jersey City’s fairly strong rent control law. Among the findings of door knocking campaigns conducted last summer and fall, along with research with the city rent control office, JCT found that the city is basically not enforcing the law by not collecting information from landlords that they are required to file, and not fining the landlords for failing to comply.

For the past several weeks, students from my community organizing class have conducted door knocking with the organizer and some other leaders. We have found similar conditions as those found in the fall. But one building in particular has already gotten the attention of the HUD enforcement office, after we visited the building on February 1. We talked to several tenants who did not have heat, and the heating system had been off for more than a month. After calling the landlord many times, the landlord supplied tenants with space heaters—but tenants pay the electric bills in this building, so this was a way of passing the cost along to the tenants, most of whom were on Section 8. There were multiple other problems in the building. We learned on February 8 while door knocking in another building that our efforts had led to the HUD office red flagging the building, inspecting it, and requiring the landlord both to repair the furnace and to reimburse the tenants for their electric bills. In addition,

an inspector from the HUD office joined us on February 8 in a different building (also owned by the same landlord) and immediately talked with each of the tenants who had complaints about repairs.

I am looking forward to our conversation in class on Monday, as I will be interested to see what students think about this actual result from their legwork. One topic of discussion will be how it is that there was actual action—and how it came out of the relationships built among the organizations that are part of JCT, and the relationships that JCT has built with the city. Clearly, tenants had complained, but these complaints had not led to any enforcement action until our door knocking. And we will continue to develop new tasks on this project—we will likely try to visit the city rent control office and perhaps make an appointment to speak with the staff there, to try to understand why the city is not enforcing the law. And we may do some legwork related to filing requests for information on more of the buildings owned by this same landlord.

The other project, the public safety and public schools project has grown out of a spike in violence in Ward F in 2017 including many shootings and a triple homicide. At the moment this is an emerging project, but it will likely present more opportunities for students to engage in different kinds of locally-focused actions, especially in relation to a community school in the neighborhood that came to be a community school through the work of Jersey City Together. There will be upcoming planning meetings with the public education and public safety teams to ensure that the city puts resources into after school programs, provision of more social workers to work with community members on crisis intervention, and public safety improvements in the neighborhood. Hopefully as students engage in this project they will see how JCT seeks to put pressure on the city to invest more resources into anchor institutions in a neighborhood that has received less than its fair share of the city's resources.

### **Conclusion**

This is a work in progress, but it presents a way to push forward the interlocking goals of teaching democratic values and helping students see ways to build power through building relationships with other community organization and leaders. It supports the work of a community organization and teaches students how local government actually works (or doesn't) in the context of a growing but deeply unequal, diverse city. It seems to be one way to seek full participation in achieving the educational mission of a public university.

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