

The Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts: Deep Learning and Reflective Practice

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The Power of Learning In and From Community

As part of a first-year learning community/service-learning program required of all entering first-year students at Wagner College in New York City in their fall semester, I organized a field trip to the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. It is a historic location sitting on the New York harbor, the East River, between the Williamsburg and Brooklyn Bridges, looking directly across to lower Manhattan.

My learning community teaching partners from literature and history joined me in planning this particular field trip as a first orientation for a semester's worth of community-based learning with neighborhood groups in Williamsburg. It was part of "Reading and Writing America," a three-course learning community revolving around ethnicity, politics, and literature. The two dozen, traditional-age, mostly first-generation college students, were enrolled in an introductory multicultural literature course, a political science and history course on American pluralism, and a writing and research intense "Reflective Tutorial" (RFT) with more than thirty hours of community involvement.

The trip to the historic Brooklyn neighborhood provided an introduction to the substantive questions and topics of the learning community, namely, ethnicity, gender, social history, economic development, social justice, and their representation in the literature and poetry in 19th- and 20th-century America. We chose this neighborhood because it provides a mirror for these topics. Williamsburg was originally incorporated separately from Brooklyn, then joined it as a combined city previous to the 1898 incorporation of what are called the five boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island) that now constitute New York City proper.

Williamsburg is currently embedded in critical choices surrounding economic progress, ethnic politics, and social justice. Since incorporation in 1898 and up to World War II, Williamsburg was home to proud Italian American and Jewish communities. The Italians have remained in small but highly significant numbers within a tight social network. Recently, a large Hasidic community has formed in another quarter of Williamsburg, with a strict allegiance to prescribed religious norms. The Italian and Hasidic Americans predominantly own their own homes, varying from brownstones to wooden turn-of-the century structures. In between these two groups, a large Puerto Rican community resides in standard apartments and public housing. They rent. And for most of the last thirty-plus years, their neighborhood was witness to the predictable calamities of high crime, rampant crack cocaine, homicides, and all the indignities of poverty in contemporary urban America.

With renters bordered by homeowners in a declining, historic neighborhood as the city began to prosper in the 1990s, the gentrification of the northside

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In 1997, the Wagner College Faculty adopted The Wagner Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts, a four-year comprehensive undergraduate curriculum. All students are required to complete three learning communities, and two reflective tutorials with community-based learning, liberal arts core requirements, a major, and other competencies. The Wagner Plan is framed by First-Year, Sophomore, and Senior Programs.

The First-Year Program requires all first-year students to enroll in a three-course learning community that includes two disciplinary courses and a reflective tutorial. Two faculty members teach their respective disciplinary courses (LC courses) to a common cohort of twenty-four to twenty-eight students and each teaches one section of the Reflective Tutorial (RFT) with twelve to fourteen (roughly half) of the same students. The RFT instructor serves as the faculty advisor for these students until they declare a major concentration. The RFT is a regular course (three-credit/one-unit) that draws on the literature of the two LC courses and joins it with additional literature integrating them around the LC theme (e.g., "Reading and Writing America"). In addition, the RFT requires more than thirty hours of community involvement linked to the theme of the LC and students are asked to contrast and compare their community experiences with the tapestry of ideas presented by the assigned readings and class discussions. Writing assignments and class presentations are integrated with the field component.

The Senior Program requires all students to complete a learning community in their major, which links a major capstone course with a major RFT, including more than 100 hours of field work and a senior thesis. The Senior Program asks the student, "What does it mean to be a civically responsible reflective practitioner using this major field of study?" In addition to these learning communities, students complete a sophomore-based LC, two intercultural classes, and the other graduation requirements. Faculty members teach in one or more LCs and at present, more than 85 percent of the full-time Wagner College faculty members participate in the Wagner Plan and its learning community offerings. Richard Guarasci is president of Wagner College. He formerly was provost and a teaching participant in the Wagner Plan for the Liberal Arts.

began. Preceded by a movement of artists and writers the previous decade, Williamsburg's destiny was to change for the better. Crime fell dramatically, the areas bordering New York harbor became attractive once again. In this same period, the Hasidic community arrived with intentions to do serious housing renovations and with large capital funds to underwrite major alterations.

The economic improvement of the city and the neighborhood drove realty prices up. Empty lots became attractive investments. Landlords began evicting Hispanic renters and began courting young urban professionals. Naturally, gentrification followed and now Williamsburg is an interesting mosaic of the small, resilient Italian American community, the sizeable Hasidic population, the embattled Hispanic groups, and the very likeable and well-heeled white yuppies, flush with money from Manhattan-based professional careers.

On the field trip, two of my students sat next to me in our Wagner College community-service van, as we rode around the various quarters of Williamsburg to gain initial exposure to the rich diversity within the neighborhood. Accompanied by a highly experienced and well-regarded community organizer working with the Catholic Church and its Hispanic parishioners, my colleagues and I began to lay out the connections among the three courses and the community work. The students would be deeply immersed in the similarities and differences in the immigration experiences of the 19th-century Irish, Chinese, African, Mexican, and Jewish Americans. Among the formidable assignments, they would read Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993), a Sherman Alexi novel on Native Americans, and a Russell Banks novel on rural working class lives. They would be asked to compare and contrast the 19th-century immigration with contemporary immigration in New York City. They would learn that in 1998, 50 percent of all children born in New York City were born to mothers not born in the United States.

As we toured the area, my students were struck by the inequities among the ethnic subdivisions of Williamsburg, but when we turned the corner into the café-lined streets adorning the yuppie quarter, their eyes grew wide. As students from modest middle-class homes, their natural desire for an upscale, professional lifestyle momentarily overwhelmed their immersion in the scholarship of inequality required in their learning community courses. I was somewhat taken aback at how quickly consumer culture could command their instincts. Two wonderful young women seemed, for an instant, drawn immediately outside of the academy and into the vortex of consumerist necessity.

I thought a great deal about that moment and its significance as we proceeded through the term and what I was able to clarify as a basic principle for myself, once again. *By itself the undergraduate curriculum is insufficient for the preparation of young learners for the democratic responsibilities of contemporary American citizenship.* While absolutely necessary as a critical foundation of knowledge, the formal curriculum, learning inside the classroom, proves insufficient preparation for our students. It demands that an experiential component be added that allows our students to demystify the numerous images that they have internalized from a popular culture that celebrates individualism, materialism, consumerism, and social stereotypes.

This isn't a particularly novel insight. As early as 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville was warning us that several of these factors would prevent American democracy from realizing its potential and probably result in its collapse (de Tocqueville, 1835). He warned his readers that without a commitment to what he called "the habits of the heart," Americans would fall prey to selfishness and divisions. He focused his work on the dilemmas of joining individual freedom and material pursuit to the desire for democratic community within an ethnically and racially fractioned society. Tocqueville understood that Americans needed to attend to their moral, civic, and ethical development. At the same time he was struck by the high level of civic virtue and volunteerism that he found in the United States and he believed it would ultimately be our possible salvation.

My two learning community students reminded me of this fundamental lesson, but in our case it took the form of the imperative of joining community-based learning to the course curriculum. *Without an experiential service component, the deep learning within the classroom would likely remain too abstract and removed, even for two civic-minded students committed to high standards and academic achievement.* In their case, by adding in ten or more weeks of community-based activity within the Williamsburg, Brooklyn neighborhood, the existential realities of economic development and economic and political inequality became palpable. Their journey through the semester's literature was accompanied by a series of encounters with the biographies of neighborhood residents who were living out the exigencies of the course topics.

Students immersed themselves in childcare centers, public policy groups, and other activities within neighborhood community centers. Some worked as tutors with Latino pre-school children who were fluent in Spanish but struggling with English. Other Wagner students researched an array of environmental and economic challenges, the focal point of neighborhood organizations conceived with public health issues related to elevated rates of asthma. Suddenly, the historic panorama provided by the courses provided perspective to choices circumscribing the lives of the different residents of Williamsburg. Without their community involvement, I doubt that the students would have come to understand that their immediate reactions to the neighborhood were just that—shallow and less informed. Later, they came to realize that their aspirations for a satisfying material life were valid ones, but provided only a piece of a satisfying life. They came to appreciate the need to link one's professional worklife to the larger social dramas playing themselves out in human terms within neighborhoods like Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Recently, I revisited this experience with one of those students. She is now finishing her final year, where she is completing the required Senior Program consisting of a learning community within the major, with 100 hours of community work and a senior integrative paper. Poised now to reflect on her four years and particularly the meaning of that earlier First-Year Program experience in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Michele captured her own interpretation of the power of integrated and experiential learning.

Our Diversity and Democracy class covered a unique and successful blend of history and political science. By bringing the members of our

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learning community to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, we were able to bring to life the history of the different ethnic groups that we learned about in our texts and watch the effects of this history occurring now as these groups interface in day-to-day life. As we walked from block to block, crossing imaginary and yet distinctly defined culture divides that were as simple as a sidewalk or a road, we were able to apply the ideas about diversity and democracy that we learned and analyzed in our classroom.

The Tom's River Project: Integrated Learning and Action Research

Approximately 90 minutes south of Wagner's campus in Staten Island, Tom's River, New Jersey, is a sublime bedroom community in Ocean City. Like so many suburban towns, Tom's River is made up of a diverse mix of families with young children and two heads of household, each earning a respectable enough salary to land them in the center of the American middle class. In addition, a good number of retirees live in Tom's River. The attractiveness of the Jersey shore and the ease of living beyond the metropolitan periphery cojoin into a magnet for those families who are seeking the security of a lower-risk lifestyle. In Tom's River, catastrophes aren't supposed to happen.

Yet, Tom's River residents are now discovering that their safe town is experiencing significantly elevated rates of childhood and adolescent cancers. Much to everyone's surprise, environmental immunity is not guaranteed. It appears that Tom's River is vulnerable to environmental toxins that may be infiltrating its ground water and significantly compromising the health of its youngest residents.

Bewildered by the cancer outbreak, some Tom's River residents began asking questions and organizing. Environmental groups formed and began collecting information. When aggregated, the painful realities of the individual families became the data that supported the larger argument that higher childhood cancer rates suggested some external forces were at work.

As part of the process of community inquiry, one of the learning communities within the Wagner College First-Year Program focused on the Tom's River crisis. Using community action research and the intellectual breadth of integrated learning afforded by a learning community/community-based learning combination, twenty-six first-year students and two faculty members focused on the cancer issues in Tom's River as the central core of their semester's work.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declared Tom's River a "Superfund" site in 1984. This entitled Tom's River to immediate cleanup of several dangerous chemical dumpings related to the local chemical factories. These dumpings had been carried out in the 1960s, prior to the creation of the EPA. It is widely suspected that the chemicals compromised the ground water purity and are partly, if not fully, responsible for the elevated cancer rates among children and adolescents. In spite of the Superfund designation, the EPA has not yet initiated any significant cleanup of Tom's River.

Discovering causation in public health cases is quite difficult. Correlation, circumstance, intervening variables, all conspire to obscure responsibility for the

elevated cancer rates. The Wagner College First-Year students—very few of them intending to study science beyond the limited general education requirements of two science courses (one with a lab)—were to engage in issues of scientific literacy and democratic citizenship. They would have to master the concepts of scientific method, scientific evidence, biostatistics, environmental ethics, and the core economic concepts of the market calculus of production, profitability, and maximization. The Wagner College freshmen were able to deepen their learning of biology and economics by understanding their respective relationships in engaging environmental issues, particularly those in Tom’s River. They interviewed cancer victims and their families, local environmental groups, chemical company corporate officials, and elected and EPA governmental representatives. They attended numerous town meetings and, of course, they conducted community-based research on the environmental and economic issues in Tom’s River. They worked with and among that local community, applying what they were learning in the classroom and contrasting to the real-world manifestations of environmental problems found in Tom’s River.

The two faculty members in the learning community, a biologist teaching Introduction to Environmental Biology and an economist teaching Introduction to Microeconomics, tightly planned their two courses around the theme of “Spaceship Earth: The Balancing Act Between Biological and Economic Systems.” The syllabi were prepared together and the textbooks mutually agreed upon. In each of these disciplinary courses, students were asked to build connections among consumers, producers, political actions, and their environmental impacts (Peters and Stearns, 2001). The biology laboratory exercises stressed authentic issues in environmental health such as “contaminated drinking water, acid rain, smog, and smoking.” In addition, the classes took tours of cogeneration and water treatment plants.

The student cohort experienced the conjunction of economic theory and environmental biology rather profoundly when it was placed within the immediacy of the children’s fate in Tom’s River, New Jersey. Wagner College first semester, first-year students were learning in a deeper, more reflective, and more uncertain format than they could possibly experience with two distinct and separated courses in Biology and Economics, even if through some high coincidence, both focused on Tom’s River’s cancer crisis as examples of particular course topics. Within their learning community, “Living on Spaceship Earth” and the community component within the Reflective Tutorial, the third course within one learning community, students encountered the experiential impact of linking integrated and experiential learning.

Students selected one of ten research focus groups from the following options in researching the courses, impacts, and context:

- history of Tom’s River environmental crisis
- ecological/environmental aspects
- community changes
- effects on housing costs
- company responses
- personal/family issues

- legal dimensions
- human health issues
- political aspects
- economic impacts

By the end of their first semester in college, these students had spent more than thirty hours engaged in the community, and endless hours in and out of their classes, focused on the Tom's River Project. These professors joined the students in all of their community work and together they connected their action research to the needs of the Tom's River community.

Within these research groups, students identified an individual research project. Library work provided a further context and then each student proceeded to engage community groups, corporations, government offices (e.g., New Jersey Environmental Protection Agency, USEPA), political officials, community residents, and environmental organizations. The student research papers were the culmination of classroom study, library research, and much fieldwork.

Students attended a number of Tom's River community meetings. They prepared and researched questions for governmental and corporate officials. On several occasions, their participation was noted in articles written in *The Asbury Park Press*, the local regional newspaper.

Initially, these students found fault with the corporate decisions that resulted in an unregulated saturation of chemical storage and dumping in the area. But as they investigated further, they encountered the economic trade-off of jobs related to the local chemical factories. Later, they looked at the impact of the environmental pollution on local real estate values and homeowners' fear of further pollution revelations. In fact, the further they explored the issues, the more they immersed themselves into the community, the greater their appreciation for complexity of environmental issues as they uncovered sociological, economic, political, biological, and ethical layers to the problem. Finally, they came to deeply appreciate the need for substantive knowledge, community involvement, and justice seeking.

By the end of their first semester in college, these students had spent more than thirty hours engaged in the community, and endless hours in and out of their classes, focused on the Tom's River Project. These professors joined the students in all of their community work and together they connected their action research to the needs of the Tom's River community. Specifically, Tom's River residents wanted to know that in fact the cancer rates were elevated and the extent of the chemical dumpings. The students and faculty ended the term with a campus conference on their work, with many Tom's River community and corporate representatives in attendance, and with extensive coverage in local newspapers. The conference addressed the full range of legal, regulatory, and environmental disclosures about the extent of the environmental jeopardy and the limits of regulatory protection.

Each semester they teach in these programs, these professors complete the learning objectives for each of the disciplinary courses, for the First-Year Learning Community and for the Experiential/Community component. They rely on a variety of qualitative and quantitative tools including student interviews, student surveys on learning progress around the program's goals, and portfolio assessment of written work analyzed by an elected faculty committee. In addition, faculty members analyze a comparative review of assessment data from different sections of the disciplinary courses, contrasting learning community students with those registered in course sections excluded from LCs. The professors of this learning community are convinced the students exceeded past classes in the depth of learning in each of the respective disciplines.

Deep Learning and Democratic Engagement

As a beginning of their undergraduate careers, these freshman programs were a full start. In linking both disciplines and academic and community work, the students learned to express themselves, differentiate opinions from arguments, uncover the depth and complexity of issues, encounter the social nature of knowledge making, and connect learning to the needs of the communities around them. Finally, they learned that democracy requires commitment and that it is not an abstract concept, but a way to live one's life. Their democratic education is just beginning.

The assessment data generated at Wagner College support clearly the students' perceptions that they are learning to connect the disciplines and to connect with each other in academic/social ways. They are significantly improving their reading, writing, and analytic skills. Indeed, the faculty's perceptions of their students' learning directly supports student perceptions.

As these forms of democratic education are aggregated within the undergraduate experience, in effect students are engaged in a comprehensive program of the democratic arts. Students are developing the democratic sensibility — active voice, collaborative skills, intercultural engagement, and reflective practice. In a time better known for cynicism and narcissism, students involved in this type of learning are likely to develop democratic aspirations and community involvement. Gradually these students, their faculty, and student affairs mentors are affirming the possibility of an American pluralist democracy.

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