

Defending the Ivory Tower: Toward Critical Community Engagement

by Matthew H. Bowker

I am often aware of a certain discord between the theme of my first-year seminar in critical thinking and its linked co-curriculum in community-based learning. The antagonism between our objectives becomes apparent early on, when Plato's *Republic* cautions students against their own fellow citizens who, "give a complete training to young and old, men and women, turning them into just the sort of people they want." The more often a young person interacts with his community, Plato fears, the more likely he is to be "swamped by the flood of popular praise and blame, and carried away with the stream till [sic] he finds himself agreeing with the popular idea of what is admirable or disgraceful, behaving like the crowd and becoming one of them." Plato offers the analogy of the great beast, a "large and powerful animal" that represents society. Those who study the beast would not fail to learn its moods and preferences, and would proudly call their new knowledge a (social) science. These scholars of the social beast, then, would have learned to predict and accommodate all of the animal's appetites, but "would not really know which of the creature's tastes and desires was admirable or shameful, good or bad, right or wrong."¹

An important part of critical thinking, as political philosophers understand it, is developing the ability to reason when faced with the powerful forces of community and convention; it is the capacity to question, which needs, habits, and norms of the community are right and which are wrong. Critical thinking, there-

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fore, demands not merely an astute perception of the world, but an ability to disentangle oneself from and develop resistances to that world. In a time when community engagement and the building of “social capital” are very much in vogue, this understanding of critical thought as community extrication and community resistance is not likely to be a popular one. Perhaps its unpopularity is not entirely beside the point, for over the last two decades, influential studies like Robert Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart* and Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* have convinced many social theorists and educators that one of America’s fundamental political problems is our exaggerated individualism, our temptation to retreat to

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private life, our tendency to give up the friendly league and bowl alone.

By contrast, it is curious how often we describe today’s college students as “social,” motivated by forces that include not just social networking and virtual self-broadcasting but membership in community groups and projects. Instruments such as the annual CIRP Freshman Survey from UCLA’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program and the somewhat controversial National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) seem to indicate that college students are deeply invested in politics and in their communities. For instance, in 2011, more than 57 percent of baccalaureate students reported that they had “performed community service as part of a class,” while over 87 percent indicated that they had performed “volunteer work” in the past year. At the same time, these surveys reveal that the most common reasons for attending college are not civic but personal: namely, to obtain a “better job” and to get “training for a specific career.”²

Although the NSSE disclaims its validity as a generalizable or comparable measure of student trends, the effect of such surveys over the past two decades has been broad acceptance of the belief that community engagement is what students, faculty, administrators, community organizations, employers, and even politicians want. The ideal of community engagement suggests that both a student’s career and his college’s mission are (or ought to be) inextricable from the community in which they are embedded. That students, faculty, and academic institutions should serve community purposes, actively engage in community affairs, and network themselves in real and virtual communities relevant to shared goals is taken to be an obvious point.

It remains uncertain to what extent this alignment of objectives between institutions of higher learning, community organizations, employers, and government is directed by pedagogical principle and to what extent it serves the changing

structural and financial needs of increasingly financially stressed colleges and universities. What is certain is that there is a growing resistance to the suggestion that the individual and social functions of education should remain separate. Rather, higher education is now often considered not merely an end in itself, nor primarily an enrichment of the student as an end in herself, but as a process of training and development in which the student is figured as the means of satisfying employers' demands, communities' needs, and the nation's political and economic aspirations.

What I find remarkable is how profoundly this vision of education differs

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from that of the Ivory Tower, an emblem for elite learning environments where privileged students master abstruse topics of little discernible significance to daily life. Only 50 years ago, the Ivory Tower might still have been an apt metaphor for American higher education, with only eight percent of Americans receiving college degrees in 1960. Today, that percentage has nearly quadrupled, and with it, it would seem, our vision of the nature and meaning of higher education.³

When contemporary educators use the term, "the Ivory Tower," pejoratively, as we often do, we seem to condemn not only its legacy of exclusivity but the purity of ivory and the isolation of towers. Consciously or unconsciously, we express hostility toward the Ivory Tower's esoteric quality: the fact that it defines an inner circle set apart from the rest. Curiously, the idiom was first invoked in the "Song of Solomon," where the beloved's perfect neck is described as "a tower of ivory." In fact, in addition to the familiar architecture of bright Gothic towers across Europe and the U.S., the term has several notable literary and religious associations, including the sanctity of the Christian Mary. It is perhaps an unfortunate coincidence that, in the U.S., some of the oldest and most selective universities belong to what we call the Ivy League. Here, the centuries-old ivy on the walls of these venerable institutions seems to suggest an additional barrier between the few and the many, making the Ivy League's Ivory Towers doubly impenetrable fortresses of erudition and privilege. Of course, in an age where greater access to higher education is often defined as a national priority and where educational goals are frequently defended with reference not to individuals' intellectual gains but to the vivifying economic effects that advanced training will bring to our communities, it is not surprising that an esoteric and disengaged educational metaphor would be rejected as anti-democratic and reactionary.



This monotype by Clara Lieu, a critic at the Rhode Island School of Design, is part of a series entitled *Submerge XII*. To view more, visit claralieu.com

DEMOCRATIC PARADOXES AND THE “PRESSURE OF REALITY”

Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, the inspiration for both Putnam’s and Bellah’s influential books, is considered one of the greatest works on American politics. Tocqueville is regularly mistaken for a champion of American democracy, although he was actually a thoughtful critic who worried that democratic individualism, combined with the majority’s tyranny over thought, would outstrip intellectual freedom in the U.S. Tocqueville’s assessment was complex, for he argued that American democracy created isolated yet groupish people who felt insignifi-

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cant in comparison to the majority, but who were, therefore, enthralled to the majority’s prejudices and preferences. While Tocqueville noted that Americans’ mental energies were regularly turned back toward their own private concerns, he worried equally that Americans’ patronage to the majority was akin to the climate of a royal court, one where citizens were compelled to sing the praises of “the people” and to value only those deeds that gained popular approval. Such pressures, Tocqueville feared, would condemn most Americans to lives of preoccupied agitation, unwitting conformism, and the endless pursuit of career success and material wealth: busy yet trivial existences in which true reflection could find no place.

It is odd that the social side of Tocqueville’s critique has been ignored while his concerns about excessive individualism have been so often repeated, a process ironically mirrored in the near consensus with which proponents of community engagement hasten to agree that American individuals must be more civically engaged. Certainly, one of the primary goals of community-based learning is to draw students out of their isolation, to help them form the civic “associations” that Tocqueville praised so often, to encourage them to “engage the world beyond the campus walls.”⁴ And empirical research does suggest that community engagement correlates positively with skill-development in communication, critical thinking, and other important areas.⁵ Nevertheless, what is markedly uncritical about the trend toward community engagement is that there is little room for either students or faculty to consider its subtle suggestion that “the world” only really exists “beyond” the campus walls, that the real value of knowledge is found only when it is applied in the service of the community’s needs.

Most community-based learning projects substitute time spent reading, writing, or discussing ideas with hands-on activities. Even the reflective components of community projects can rarely compensate for the full amount of textual

engagement, writing, or reflective discussion found in traditional classroom activities. Of course, those of us who have been involved with community engagement are well aware of such tradeoffs, and we have tallied up their most obvious costs and benefits. But we may be less cognizant of their hidden implications. In my community-based learning courses and projects, I have witnessed students' pragmatic biases grow as our community-based interactions increase in complexity and duration. As Tocqueville feared, a student who approaches a subject within the context of a community problem may be inclined to believe that "there is less risk for him in making use of some false principles than in wasting his time in estab-

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lishing the truth of all his principles," just as a student engaged in a community-leadership project may hastily conclude that "it is not by long and learned demonstrations that the world is led." Indeed, Tocqueville noticed immediately that hierarchical social organizations based on rank and exclusivity tended to favor "the haughty, sterile search for abstract truths," while the American democratic culture suggests that we use knowledge to better our communities, encouraging us to demand of knowledge primarily its "immediate, useful applications."⁶

The American poet Wallace Stevens coined the wonderful phrase, "the pressure of reality," to describe not only our daily tasks of labor, bill paying, and the like, but the pressure exerted on our minds by "events... that stir the emotions to violence, that engage us in what is direct and immediate and real... that involve the concepts and sanctions that are the order of our lives and may involve our very lives... [that occur] with increasing omen, in what may be called our presence."⁷ The realities of our time, the difficult and sometimes ominous realities facing our communities, our nation, and our world are too real to deny. We ought not turn away from them, and higher education seems like a reasonable place to ground our efforts to contend with them. But part of learning to contend with the pressures of reality is finding freedom from reality, developing the imaginative space necessary for creative resistance to reality.

Of course, imaginations conceived in remote relation to reality would be effete and hollow. But just as too little reality can deplete the imagination, so can too much. A student who has not practiced resisting the pressure of reality, who has not been encouraged to work with impractical, abstract ideas in an Ivory Tower, is likely to be incapable of responding with genuine creativity and spontaneity to the problems and concerns of people around her. Such a person may be committed to serving the community, but she is likely to have difficulty generating truly innova-

tive ideas, for the pressures of reality, convention, and popular bias will have come to weigh too heavily on her mind.

RELATIVISM AND THE WORSHIP OF POWER

One domain where “the pressure of reality” has made its effects visible is in the ever-increasing ardency of student relativism. Many students begin my courses in ethics and politics assuming that everything they (and others) think is determined by the culture or community in which they live. A phenomenon wrongly attributed to dissociated or abstract thought, unreflective relativism among students

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derives largely from a profound immersion in community. Some students argue that it is impossible to imagine a person extricating himself from the norms of his community. Certainly, they maintain, he could never establish enough distance to entertain a truly unprejudiced thought. And if such an intellectually free person were ever to be found, students are sure that his “moral opinions” would “come down from on high,” as twisted and unrealistic beliefs unfairly imposed upon people of different communities or cultures.

One student recently summarized the consequence of such relativism in the following way: “It is unethical to believe in ethics.” By this paradoxical phrase she meant that anyone who is foolish enough to believe in right and wrong is also likely to inflict his will upon others who disagree. Therefore, the only way to respect others is to disbelieve in ethics, or to keep one’s “moral opinions” to oneself, without acting upon them, for even if a student believes that an act is morally wrong, he is equally assured that his convictions are wholly determined by the community, which has “always already” shaped his thoughts. The paradox of such relativism is that it is not, itself, subjected to a relativistic critique. That is, many students are incapable of imagining a morality that is absolute and not relative, of thinking about morality in a way that is fundamentally opposed to their own.

Contrary to the intended civic outcomes of community engagement, in which students are empowered to act upon their moral convictions in local, national, or international settings, our focus on serving community interests may actually solidify students’ belief that community is the sine qua non of moral value. I have worried that this perspective may be reinforced by our design of community-based projects, which we are careful to present as ethically non-problematic and politically neutral. We rarely ask students to shield women seeking abortions from angry protestors. More often, students tutor children or clean up parks. I have wondered

what we would say to a student who has an ethical or political objection to child tutoring or environmental preservation, but, as might be expected, I have never encountered any such objections.

What I am suggesting is that students today pose radical, critical challenges to their communities only with great difficulty; indeed, some even insist that such challenges are theoretically impossible, because the values upon which such challenges would be based would have to be derived from the community itself. When our community-based efforts, then, ask students to leave the classroom and to direct their learning toward (ostensibly unobjectionable) forms of service to their

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communities, and when we imply that doing so is always valuable because service to the community is inherently “good,” we may be re-entrenching students’ enthrallment to social power, to the belief that the goals and values of the community are always “right.”

In my courses, I have been surprised for several years by students’ views concerning notorious heads of state like Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, views which reflect a related danger of excessive community immersion. A surprising number of students, from diverse backgrounds and from three different universities, have informed me that while they do not “agree” with the decisions made by such leaders, they feel it is important to recognize such leaders’ “skill” and political “effectiveness.” I have had a hard time figuring out why students want to defend people like Stalin and Hitler, especially in the way they defend them, which obscures the horrific content of their actions and focuses instead on the technocratic elements of their statecraft, rhetoric, and authority.

What I hear these students saying is that they want to recognize political accomplishments outside of any moral framework, in part because they are quite attracted to the idea of achieving power, and in part because they are hopeless about the possibility of discovering definitions of right and wrong that transcend the ever-changing “moral opinions” of the community. Having been persuaded that the community determines all values, these students have sought out that aspect of even the most atrocious actions that might survive the muddle of relativistic ethical debate. And the sole value that seems to supersede moral and cultural differences is: power. Sadly, like community-based service, community-based power is wrongly conceived here to be intrinsically morally valuable, as that which creates social change, and as that which ultimately decides moral and political disagreements.

Against these trends, the aloofness, abstraction, and distance from reality that characterize the Ivory Tower serve as important correctives in teaching students to think beyond the demands of their own time and place. An encounter with Plato's moral absolutism is not likely to convince today's college student to become a moral absolutist, but it does provide a potential vantage point from which to observe, evaluate, and critique the student's own community along with its most fundamental values and priorities (including power, democracy, progress, and even community service). If that vantage point is lofty and isolated from the student's daily life, as it must be, then we should not be so quick to dismiss the Ivory Tower

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as a useless place, for the Ivory Tower provides a useful critical perspective on the communities we inhabit, learn from, and both intentionally and unwittingly serve.

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT


There is a crucial difference between educating a student to make critical, creative, and independent determinations about the values and dynamics at work in the community, on one hand, and marshaling a student's intellect and energy in the service of what a college or university, academic department, faculty member, or community organization has decided to be a valuable community project. As much as we fear individualism today, it is clear that the first pedagogical objective is an individual one, for it involves the development of a student's identity as a subject, as a person, as a critical thinker and actor. It is reflected in the pedagogical aim of self-actualization: The goal of a student's learning, in this respect, is that the student may become more fully herself. If precautions are not taken, the second objective risks using the student in the service of social aims and community values determined not by herself but by others, even if those values are civic minded, socially just, environmentally responsible, and the like.

A central anxiety expressed in Putnam's and Bellah's works is that the gradual destruction of social capital will lead to a future in which society is purchased, if you will, by powerful interests we no longer have the collective resources to resist. What these writers recognized, but what we too often forget, is that the shifting of personal and political "investments" that describes contemporary individualism is, itself, a collective phenomenon. Individualism, emotivism, privatism, pragmatism, relativism: these are widespread social trends accompanied not merely by individual withdrawals from civic life but by shared experiences of confrontation

with technological power, a cut-throat economic and social climate, and a culture of consumption that seems to leave citizens little choice but to buy in to the rules of the game. These “pressures of reality” persuade individuals to worship social power, to fear that which does not serve popular interests, and to assume, in Herbert Marcuse’s words, that “the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods.”⁸ Community-engagement projects are able to address such dangers by involving students in projects that build social capital, yet unless they simultaneously strengthen students’ capacities to generate radical questions, critiques, and alternatives to community projects, they risk merely reinforcing devotion to the power of community, the rationality of the given, and the supremacy of pragmatic considerations.

What I have tried to argue is simply that community-engaged learning should complement, not supplant, Ivory Tower-learning, for just as community-based learning projects can create significant changes in students’ knowledge and attitudes, isolated meditation on philosophical texts can teach students that even community service is not morally neutral, that relativism has important limitations, and that focusing only on the “effectiveness” of political leaders obfuscates the moral content of their actions.

For students to inhabit both a community and an Ivory Tower, faculty, administrators, and students have to be aware of the value of serving the community and the value of not serving it, the good of training for practical ends and the good of exercising the mind on impractical tasks, the need to develop real-world applications for knowledge and the need to think in an environment where the demands of reality are lightened, lessened, to allow for maximal experimentation, imagination, and creativity. Perhaps we might imagine a form of community engagement in which students’ imaginative critiques of fundamental community processes were valued as highly as the integration of already-established community needs with student contributions and pedagogical objectives.

Most importantly, to ensure the survival of Ivory Tower-learning on our community-engaged campuses, we must not reduce learning objectives to “transferable skills” or “civically responsible attitudes” that “add value” to students who then “add value” to corporations and communities. Rather, affording all students the once-rare privilege of inhabiting an Ivory Tower, for a time, means ensuring that they retain some space that is free from the pressures, prejudices, and demands of our social and economic organizations. This space and this freedom are necessary if they are to create authentic ways of living for themselves. 

ENDNOTES

1. Plato, Book VI of *The Republic*.
2. Pryor et al., *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2011*.
3. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
4. Quoted in Dallimore, Rochefort, and Simonelli, “Community-Based Learning and Research,” 15-22.

5. For example, see Cress, Kerrigan, and Reitenauer, "Making Community-Based Learning Meaningful," 87-100.
6. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.
7. Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*.
8. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.

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