

Building Civic Capacity for College Students: Flexible Thinking and Communicating as Puppeteers, Community Partners, and Citizen-Leaders

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Abstract

College students face a complex world filled with pervasive social problems that require strong knowledge bases, critical thinking abilities, and sustained engagement in civic life. This article details key pedagogical practices for our innovative health puppetry program, in which undergraduate honors students use puppets to share information about healthy eating, diabetes prevention, and active lifestyles with children and their families in community settings. We articulate a notion of “flexible thinking” as the ability to take on and perform new roles within the public/civic arena by seeing complex social problems from multiple perspectives and responding with creative solutions and engaged action. We look to the written reflections of our student puppeteers to share, in their own words, multiple ways their thinking and communication changed as they grew as puppeteers, community partners, and citizen-leaders. We also offer insights about promoting flexible thinking through in-depth service-learning.

In the spring of 2011, 13 undergraduate honors students from a variety of majors were part of the inaugural “Puppet Shows that Make a Difference!” class, a service-learning honors seminar team-taught by two of us with another of us serving as guest lecturer and project advisor. Our goal was to give our students the experience of using health puppetry to speak with children in our community about ongoing childhood overweight and diabetes issues. We spent the first half of the semester training our students as puppeteers using large colorful puppets and scripts purchased from the longstanding educational puppetry organization The Kids on the Block (n.d.). We also taught our students an interdisciplinary course curriculum focused on interpersonal, intercultural, and small group communication, with guest speakers on topics like healthy eating, childhood obesity and diabetes, child development and family relations, and educational principles for children. In the last month of our class, we visited nine different low-cost (or no-cost) after-school programs that partner with our university’s service-learning center. Our students performed the puppet shows to nearly 300 children. Each show was approximately 30 minutes long, with 20 minutes of scripted performance and 10 minutes of interactive dialogue.

But the puppet shows were more than just a set of community-based experiences. We recognized that students engaged in rich, well-designed, service-learning projects learn not only through hands-on experiences in the community; they also

learn through sustained self-reflection. In-depth written reflections can help teach students to consider their experiences thoughtfully to “generate, deepen and document” their learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Rama & Battistoni, 2001). Throughout our course, we asked our students to write weekly reflections, called *articulated learnings* (ALs) in response to prompts about key course topics. We also required a final essay that took the form of a longer AL that integrated and highlighted learning from across the semester. The ALs were based on a model for critical reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009). This model—known as the DEAL model—provided a clear framework for students to organize and understand their own experiences via (D)escription, (E)xamination, and (A)rticulation of (L)earning in the journals so that they would glean new meaning from their community interactions, rather than just to have an experience outside the classroom. This model not only encourages students to think in-depth and critically about topics being explored, but also easily lends itself to scholarly analysis.

Below we will argue that our health puppetry project led students to develop and engage in flexible thinking and communication with members of their community. In our thematic analysis of student journals kept over the course of the semester, we find flexible thinking in a) perspective-taking shifts experienced by students as they enact the roles of puppeteer, teacher, leader, and citizen and b) increasing awareness of students’ sense of civic

responsibility and agency in “making a difference” as citizen-leaders. We end our analysis with suggestions for scholars and practitioners to promote flexible thinking through in-depth service-learning courses. But first, we provide a brief literature review and a detailed explanation of our class and how it worked.

Literature Review and Background Information

Today’s college students face an increasingly complex world filled with pervasive social problems that require the knowledge, skills, and informed agency to put learning into action in their communities. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) points out that “full civic literacies cannot be garnered only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities also are honed through hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address common problems that affect the wellbeing of the nation and the world” (p. 3). For students to truly care about problems, they need to experience them outside of what they may read as an example or statistic in a textbook. Or, as Battistoni (2013) states, a broad understanding of civic knowledge (and subsequent action) “includes a deeper knowledge of public issues, including their underlying causes as well as of how different community stakeholders understand issues” (p. 115–116). Students studying a health issue might, for instance, learn about the multiple facets of community and family life that could contribute to health issues as well as to become more sensitive to the cultural traditions surrounding food and health.

To be well-prepared to work in communities, then, students must be able to think about different perspectives on a problem, consider varied courses of action, and determine ways to collaborate effectively to create solutions that serve a larger purpose (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2012). Indeed, students must be empowered to embrace an ethical civic identity (Kniefelkamp, 2008). For example, students could learn that there are diverse professionals who could address complex health issues from varied perspectives and areas of expertise. Students could also be given opportunities to actively experience new ethical civic identities by playing unique roles in the community.

Further, as Minnich (2012) points out, “education and democracy both thrive on inquiry, on experimentation that may enable discovery” (p. 25). Effective civic action requires what we are calling “flexible thinking.” Flexible thinking is nec-

essary to take on and perform new roles within the public/civic arena. It requires the ability to see the “big picture” of a complex social problem, along with the ability to look at that problem from multiple perspectives, responding with creative solutions and engaged action. It requires the type of “fluid intelligence” Cattell (1963) described as necessary for “adaptation to new situations” (p. 3). Fluid intelligence is “the ability to be creative, make leaps of insight, and perceive things in a fresh and novel manner” (Potter, 2013, p. 78). Community-based performance helps students to develop this kind of flexible thinking, as the performer must venture into unfamiliar territories of self and other, both as they take on the role of a character in a puppet show and as they take on the role of citizen-leader within their community. Structured reflection about community experiences can also help students develop flexible thinking as they must look back at what worked (or didn’t) in one situation and then be creative in considering new alternatives to use in the future.

Using Service-learning and Performance To Address Complex Social Problems

Recognizing the importance of students’ civic learning as well as building their capacity for flexible thinking and action, we created a service-learning course to take on the problem of childhood overweight and diabetes, both of which are severe problems in our community. In North Carolina two thirds of all adults (67.5%) are overweight or obese. The state also ranks 50th in the United States for rates of childhood obesity (Pitt County, 2008). In our county, it is estimated that 40% of elementary-age children and adolescents are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight (Pitt County, 2008). Given the pressing social issues facing us, these interactive puppet shows were not just “fun” (although they were that); they were a way to share accurate information on healthy eating and active lifestyles with children at-risk of developing obesity and eating-related health problems such as diabetes.

These puppet shows were also a way for our students to learn from the children in their community about what kids face when it comes to eating well, using fluid intelligence to gain new perspectives on these health problems. All of our puppet shows contained both a scripted scene and a time to interact, so children in the audience could speak directly with the puppets. Our puppets, for instance, asked the children questions like “What could you eat for a healthy snack?” And our pup-

Figure 1. Puppeteer Class



peteers were frequently surprised by the children's answers. In this sense, our project created a unique learning partnership between college student learners and elementary school learners, with puppets in the middle. As Bringle and Hatcher (2002) point out, campus-community partnerships are developed through person-to-person interactions that are dynamic. Moreover, partnerships between campus members, such as our university students, and community members, such as the children, are recognized to be both complex and challenging (Jacoby, 2003), since the partners come to the interactions "from different worlds" (Sandy & Holland, 2006, p. 30). So, as a primary learning goal, we hoped our students would "learn to put themselves back into the mix of humanity...working 'with' people (in the community) rather than 'on' them" (Boyte, 2009, p. 15), being able to shift their thinking accordingly. We also hoped that our students would see themselves increasingly as citizen-leaders "making a difference" in the very communities where they were performing.

Block-Schulman and Jovanovic (2010) state that "service-learning programs work because they engage students wholly—involving the intellect, the body, and the emotions in a social arena to assert an ethical posture (as active citizens)" (p. 93). Performance lends itself to this holistic level of engagement, because the student-as-performer engages the flesh, the memory, the senses, the emotions, the voice, and even the human spirit in the act of performing. Pineau (2002) describes performance as "a medium for learning," one that "requires the rigorous, systematic, exploration-through-enactment of real and imagined experience in which learning occurs through sensory awareness and kinesthetic engagement" (p. 50). This type of performative learning through embodiment is closely aligned with Minnick's (2003) notion of deeply democratic thinking as "play" in which students get "caught up in imagi-

native moments, not tied down to or locked within what he or she already knew or what logically followed" (p. 24). We found that this form of "play" as a learning strategy was quite effective, as we discuss below.

Our Course: Puppet Shows That Make A Difference!

Our "troupe" included 13 undergraduate honors students who were majoring in disciplines as diverse as chemistry, criminal justice, communication, biology, accounting and nursing, among others (see Figure 1). They were primarily sophomores and juniors, and they were fairly evenly split by gender. Almost half of the class planned to go into a health profession, and most of these intended to attend medical school after college. Only 3 of our 13 claimed to have any performance experience; only one had ever worked with puppets. We were also lucky to have three teaching assistants, graduate students in our department's master's program in health communication. We had trained these students as puppeteers during the previous semester, both for our own process of learning to work with our new puppets and so that they would, in turn, be able to help our undergraduate students with the difficult skills of puppeteering such as eye focus, puppet gesture, and lip sync.

We had two faculty members team teaching this course. One of us has extensive performance experience, and the other has extensive service-learning experience. Both of us are also graduates of our university's Engagement and Outreach Scholar's Academy, an intensive program to learn about community-engaged scholarship with institutional and financial support to develop new projects. Because both of us study and teach communication, we invited a number of colleagues from areas such as nutrition, pediatrics, and childhood development to present on these topics to give our students interdisciplinary knowledge.

These areas of understanding were key to our project, not just because we wanted our students to see the “big picture” of childhood overweight and diabetes, but also because they would need to be able to answer children’s questions on these topics in their puppet shows.

To provide a strong sense of the challenge our students faced in learning to be puppeteers, we must first describe these puppets. These were not hand puppets. They were huge, kid-sized puppets with arm rods, requiring both physical strength and substantial performance skills by puppeteers (see Figure 2). This style of puppetry is based on the ancient Japanese Bunraku style in which the performer stands behind the puppet dressed in black, as a kind of shadow to the puppet. The performer also wears a black mesh hood in order to see the audience, allowing for better interaction. Although the shows were fully scripted (and copyright demanded no deviation from these scripts), each performed puppet script was followed by an interactive question and answer session between the kids in the audience and the puppets. Thus the need for interdisciplinary learning by the students and another need for them to quickly flex their thinking from being a puppet using a script to being a puppet that could accurately and responsively answer each child’s questions.

We were able to purchase the puppets and scripts with grant funding from our university. As part of this, we were also able to bring in two trainers from the head office of The Kids on the Block, who conducted a one-day puppeteering workshop with our students. Consequently, the students were very well prepared as puppeteers and had many chances to practice and develop their puppet skills both in and out of class before actually doing the community puppet shows.

Throughout our course, we asked our students to write weekly reflections in response to prompts about key course topics. Both the prompts and the students’ writing followed the DEAL model for critical reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Ash, Clayton, & Moses, 2009; Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). The DEAL model encourages students to describe and then explain their learning using the following sentence stems: “I learned that...; I learned this when...; This learning matters because...; In light of this learning....” Our discussion prompts covered topics within three categories: personal growth, civic learning, and academic enhancement. Topics included community partnerships, leadership, performing with children, teamwork, exploring cultures, and making

Figure 2. Puppeteers



a difference, among others. The ALs also traced students’ experiences as they learned about the academic foundations of their practices and as they learned from their interactions with community members as engaged citizen-performers. The final AL essay called for an integration of the multiple dimensions of their experiences.

Research Questions and Method

Our investigation of service-learning and flexible thinking considers the intersections among role playing/perspective taking, civic engagement, and flexible thinking in students’ writings. That is, we looked carefully at the essays to see whether our primary learning goals for students were being met. To this end, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: How did playing new roles (puppeteer, teacher, etc.) contribute to students’ abilities to take the perspective(s) of others (and enact flexible thinking)?

RQ2: What did the service-learning experiences mean to students, relative to their citizenry and perceived ability to facilitate change?

Students were asked to participate in the study, but had the option not to include their responses in the research. They were told that their reflections would be used to analyze the content and critical thinking. So, while we recognized that the prompts would influence the content of their responses, we also expected that the structure would give our students some grounding in what to write about (as opposed to open-ended journaling where students may choose to simply recall experiences without delving deeper). The DEAL model encourages students to think deeply about the content of their learning, as well as their related thoughts, feelings, and developing skills. As researchers, our hope

was to gain some understanding of the meanings and significance our students would make of their service-learning and related classroom experiences. Consequently, our primary method of analysis is focused on generating understanding as it emerges from students' own voices (i.e., grounded theory).

We chose the "constant comparative method" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 222) so students' voices could be heard without imposing a rigid theoretical frame. This approach enables researchers to develop common and overarching themes, frames, and principles through a systematic but flexible form of inquiry. Two important aspects of this method are that "it specifies the means by which theory grounded in the relationships among data emerges through the management of coding (hence, grounded theory), and it shows explicitly how to code and conceptualize as field data keep flowing in" (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 222–223). In this study, thematic elements were identified in the student reflections and compared across authors. Below we share the themes that emerged from our analysis and the connections among them.

Learning New Roles: Puppeteer, Community Partner, Citizen-Leader

Minnick (1985) lists "play" as a characteristic of the kind of thinking that we should be teaching in the college classroom, noting that "Such play is not always fun: It can take us to scary places. But it also unclenches, releases" (p. 24). Many of our students began the semester feeling "clenched" about what lay ahead. As honors students, they were accustomed to performing well on tests and receiving high marks on essays. But, for most, performing was an entirely new venture, one squarely outside of the proverbial "comfort zone."

Interestingly, in their first week of journaling about the class, these 13 students collectively used the word "comfort" 21 times, all basically describing how uncomfortable they were about performing. Representative of this was Mike, a pre-med student, who described the discomfort he experienced when students were asked to sing their names as part of a warm-up activity. Mike wrote that the activity "forced students like me out of their zones of comfort." He elaborated:

I was slightly taken aback on the first day of this class when asked to sing in front of my classmates for several short periods as a part of warm-up exercises. I do not often sing in front of people, and much less often in front of those I barely know.

Ron, too, described the anxiety he felt upon reading scripts aloud for the first time, writing, "I sink into my chair, excessively, unnecessarily fearful of being selected to assume the vocal identity of a character about whom I know slightly more than nothing at all." This process of taking on a character would eventually prove liberating for our students, freeing them up for other possibilities of self. But this "liberation" was only after hours of practice and increasing self-confidence as performers and educators.

Moving Between Self and Other

Richard Schechner (1985) theorizes the restored behavior of taking on a theatrical role as "me behaving as if I am someone else" (p. 37). Schechner describes the performer's stance as she inhabits the character as a dance between the "not me" and the "not not me," explaining:

While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others. While performing, he no longer has a "me" but has a "not not me," and this double negative relationship also shows how restored behavior is simultaneously private and social. A person performing recovers his own self only by going out of himself and meeting the others—by entering a social field (p. 112).

For our students, this interplay between self and other was not an easy process. The challenges of performance went beyond learning the physical mechanics of puppetry such as lip sync, eye focus, and gesture. It was entering Schechner's "social field" in which the self would be doubly displaced, first as our students took on a puppet character and then a second time as they came into dialogue with their young audiences, who offered them a child's eye view of the world.

Interestingly, it was the mental image of this future performance partner, the imagined children, which brought Jada some comfort as she navigated the anxieties of performing before her peers in these early days of our class:

During my reading I focused so much on the part that everyone else in the room seemed to disappear. While I continued to talk as Christine I began to imagine myself in a room full of young children. ... I believe that I was able to get into the reading as I began to imagine children because I love working with children. I know that they are not judgmental and that they love it when adults act crazy.

Ron also navigated performance anxieties with an eagerness for learning this new role when he wrote in his first reflection: "I am eager to start practicing with the puppets, and molding my own personality to theirs." Ron likely intended to communicate that he would start the process of shaping his character's personality (rather than his own). But the mistake is revealing of what would happen for many of these students, as the process of taking on a character freed them up for other roles and for seeing the world from other points of view, to think more flexibly.

Teaching and Leading

In Hersey and Blanchard's (1977) situational leadership model, leaders can delegate to their followers (in other words, let their followers lead), when the follower's readiness level is high. In our case, this happened when the students were ready to go off script in the interactive portion of their shows. Having embodied the knowledge about healthy eating and diabetes through rehearsal and performance, they were ready to teach, and they were ready to lead others. After eight weeks, our students stepped out into their community to perform. As they did this, they took on a new role, that of teacher. Arnold, another pre-med student, spoke to this challenge and the learning opportunities it presented when he wrote:

Questions like "Can diabetes kill you?" were hard to answer when dealing with children, but showed that they were relating to the topic and trying to understand as much about it as possible. Dr. Collier came and instructed us on the medical aspects of diabetes in order to improve our knowledge so we could answer questions with factual information. This was knowledge that we could apply immediately to the performances that were in our immediate future, something that is a rarity in college courses.

Arnold imagined this learning continuing into his future role as physician, stating "I will also continue to learn as much as possible about diabetes, and continue to educate my community about the disease in some way."

As our students became more comfortable with their roles as puppeteers, they shifted into new roles as teachers and leaders. This was clearly demonstrated during the one show when students had to think on their feet because they received

no questions from the audience. We had become accustomed to a room full of little hands popping up when the puppets took questions. But in this location the children had been highly disciplined to sit still and say nothing, and this discipline continued into the interactive portion of our show. After a prolonged silence ended the show, our students came out and took their bows. They put their puppets down, took their black hoods and gloves off, and began to interact with the children as themselves. Maggie started off by saying to the group, "You really don't have any questions about healthy eating or diabetes?" Then a question came, and then another, turning into our longest audience dialogue and the only one that took place between performer and audience with no puppet in between.

Perspective Taking

These sorts of dialogic experiences with children in our community challenged our students to see the beyond their own frames of reference. Melanie writes about this learning when she first had to answer the question "What is diabetes?" posed by a young person in her audience. Melanie stated that her "first instinct [...] was to begin by explaining the function of glucose in the cells and its conversion to energy in order to be used for carrying out daily activities." She quickly realized that a highly technical explanation would likely not be met with wide understanding from the K-2 crowd. Melanie continues:

As I gained performance competence, I started to think more about who my audience was, and what kind of answers they would understand. This learning matters because it made me realize who I was answering, and take into account what their level of understanding about biology would be as an elementary school student. In light of this learning, I began to think like a kid when the question and answer portion of the show began so that I would be able to answer questions in a way the child asking the question would comprehend.

Melanie not only had to think like her character to answer the question, she had to think like her audience, displaying the kind of entry into Schechner's (1985) "social field" that enables a performer to escape the perspective of the self, however briefly. Maggie also spoke about this when she was sur-

prised by the willingness of the children in her audience to share their own stories, writing:

Once we began talking about diabetes, I realized through the children's numerous comments that many of them had first-hand experience with diabetes through family members, but also that they did not know much about the condition.

Our students were now not just learning about the problem of diabetes in our area from the perspective of a physician or a professor; they were learning from the personal stories of children with a diabetic grandmother who had died from the disease or a diabetic uncle who took shots of insulin every day.

Making a Difference

We had titled our course "Puppet Shows that Make a Difference!" hoping that our planned puppet shows would do just that in our community as our students shared information about healthy eating and diabetes with youth at risk of diet-related health problems. Although we did not assess the impact that these puppet shows had on our audiences, what we found was that the perception of making an impact was deeply meaningful to our students. Caitlin's final essay exemplified this:

I felt at the beginning of this class that it would not be possible for me to change the world, the nation, or even a city on my own. I seemed to block out the "...That Make a Difference" part of the class. I did not see how it was possible for a freshman in college to do anything that would have enough impact to be considered "making a difference". I realized that if I could help one child, this class, and ultimately I, would be a success. Yet, the complete breakthrough did not occur during [the lectures]. [...] Finally, on the day in which we performed for the children, a complete breakthrough occurred. I saw the children and how receptive they were. I saw their excitement, and the excitement of the adults around me. It finally seemed real. I had made a difference.

Of course, we should be skeptical that these puppet shows could affect the kind of dramatic societal changes that Caitlin articulates. But we can see in her optimism and investment in community that spark of what it feels like to be an agent of change.

Astin and Astin's (1996) *Social Change Model of Leadership Development* posits that there are three levels of change for engaged citizenship: individual, group, and community. At the first level, individuals gain a consciousness of self and a commitment to the value of civic engagement. Next, at the group level, individuals come together for collaboration and common purpose. This sets the stage for the final level: community engagement. Christine Cress (2011) also writes about how service-learning can engage students in these three stages, noting that "students are able to extend their intellectual capacities to include empathy and problem solving that will have a real community impact" (p. 78). She continues: "in this spirit, service-learning offers students the opportunity to become critically conscious citizens with the knowledge and skills for creating more equitable democratic communities" (p. 78). Our student Caitlin echoes this notion as she ties the work of performance to the work of democracy and citizenship, writing:

A belief in the ability to make a difference is even more important to the citizens of this and any other democratic nation. Democracy thrives on the belief of its citizens that they can make a difference. This is what drives people to the voting booths, to rallies, and to signing or forming petitions. If the belief in a single person's ability to change the world was lost, I believe that democracy itself would be lost as well.

Caitlin's conception of perceived civic agency as fundamental to a thriving democracy offers an insight into the kind of flexible thinking that our service-learning puppeteers experienced as they went out to perform "making a difference."

Embracing Community

Part of perceived civic agency, for our students, was embracing the idea that they were part of multiple communities, including the sometimes overlooked ones surrounding their university, and that they needed to be an active participant, a citizen, in those communities. Justin, in his final paper, thought about this as he discussed the importance of "teamwork," writing:

Last, but definitely not least, the most important teamwork was with our class and our partners in the community, both the adults and the children. This was the most delicate and important version of

teamwork we learned about this semester. I learned that we, as East Carolina University students, as current Pitt County residents, as citizens of the United States of America, have a civic responsibility to improve and take part in each and every community we are involved in. Every community from my immediate family to the enormous student body we have at East Carolina flourishes only when we work together to try to improve it.

Justin here identifies several “communities” that he is a part of—from his family, to his university, to his current county of residence. Justin’s sentiments speak to the power of service-learning to help invest students with what Justin aptly terms the “civic responsibility to improve and take part in” the communities of which we are a part. Another way to think about this is that Justin was moving from the “not me” to the “not not me” on his return from his journey through the “social field.” The larger community of Pitt County was now not-not him. His statements also demonstrate that he was able to think about community from multiple perspectives.

By the end of the semester, many of our students were reconceptualizing themselves as community leaders. Arnold wrote about this new citizen-leader role when he stated:

We are becoming leaders by consciously choosing to symbolically communicate the importance of eating healthily to children through puppetry. ... Leaders are not perfect people. They can be anyone. A leader is simply someone with the right skills who, when the opportunity arises, has the courage to step forward and say, “I can make a difference, starting today.”

Melanie had this same realization, noting the importance of each individual’s contributions as part of the larger collective effort that is community leadership. She wrote:

I had a few epiphanies about making differences in the world around us. I realized that you already have what it takes to make the world a better place. Making a difference to the world may seem like an enormous task, but it is in fact the collective effort of everyone to make small contributions with a lot of heart. The size of the contribution is not what matters

most. The key here is to have the heart to do it.

In both Arnold’s and Melanie’s sentiments, we see students who are conceiving of themselves as leaders as they rethink what citizen-leadership is, something that does not necessarily come only from “perfect people,” in Arnold’s conception, or from “enormous tasks,” in Melanie’s. It can come from those who choose to step forward, even in small acts.

Building Capacity for Civic Engagement

Our inaugural puppetry course demonstrates what can happen when students are given the opportunity to focus in-depth on a community-based issue/problem. That is, our students were asked to consider multiple human perspectives, to draw on insights from multiple disciplines as well as across specialties within a single discipline (i.e. small group communication, leadership communication, and interpersonal communication) and to do this in a single semester. This type of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary learning is, unfortunately, a rarity in most college classes that are instead structured to focus on subject matter rather than giving students a “breadth of understanding” about an issue. Admittedly, there are many structural and functional obstacles in the way. As Fitzgerald, Burack, and Seifer (2010) note:

Pressures to build strong university-community collaborations pose difficult problems for the academy because they demand interdisciplinary cooperation, rejection of provincial disciplinary turfism, changes in the faculty reward system, a re-focusing of unit and institution missions and the breaking down of firmly established and isolated silos (p. x).

Still, we must overcome such challenges, because providing students with a greater breadth of understanding is essential to enabling them to think deeply about the complex issues we face in today’s world. Being a contemporary problem-solver frequently requires more than just disciplinary knowledge; civic action necessitates higher ordered flexible thinking that applies, evaluates, and integrates knowledge. Indeed, focusing on a single community-based issue rather than on a subject specialty area is one way to help students capture the complexity of a contemporary problem (in our case, eating-related health problems for chil-

dren). This offers a new possibility for what others have identified as the important process of “doing democracy” and “fostering civic action” (The National Task Force, 2012).

Our course, heard through the student voices in their reflections, reiterated to us how important “big” (pressing, social) issues are in our classes and how students can be empowered to address some aspect of those “big” issues. Just as there may be many partners necessary to solve complex problems, there could be possibilities for students representing many disciplines to work together. Working with different partners and being able to think about an issue from different perspectives is important far beyond any single issue. In a diverse global society, everyone must interact regularly with people representing different experiences and assumptions. So, the abilities to look at a problem from multiple perspectives will be essential to college graduates functioning as active citizens in very dynamic and ever-changing democracies.

Our project had several challenges and limitations. One was simply the labor-intensive nature of this type of performance work. Many hours were spent outside of the classroom conducting rehearsals and scheduling performances. There was a very steep learning curve here! For example, one of the lessons we learned was that our child audience members were more attentive audience members when they had their teachers sitting nearby. This was a lesson we learned the hard way at an after-school program where the teachers left and we had to monitor behavior while trying to do our jobs as performers.

Another limitation had to do with the depth of partnering that took place in our project. While individual college courses can be subject to the limitations of a semester-long commitment to a community program (See Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), classes that are issue-focused like ours can be part of a longer-term programmatic effort or what Heath and Frey (2004) call “community collaboration.” These authors rightly note that “in most communities today, it is a necessity for groups, organizations, and institutions to work together collaboratively to confront complex issues” (p. 189). In subsequent puppetry projects, we have worked to partner more deeply with one agency, and to write our own scripts based on interviews and focus groups with members of our community on the topic of healthy eating. Similarly, scholars from other disciplines could partner with community members to develop interactive puppet shows to address other commu-

nity issues. We see nutrition students developing interactive puppet shows to teach children about healthy eating and to learn about children’s eating habits. We see dentistry students doing the same with dental health or sport science students doing the same with exercise (two topics our continuing puppetry students have been working on).

Although we chose not to conduct pre- and post-tests to attempt to quantify our student’s growth, their reflections showed us what they learned while interacting with the children. These opportunities to learn-while-doing were invaluable and went far beyond the cognitive content emphasized in many, even most, college courses. They offered positive emotion, excitement, and “in the moment” kinds of thoughtful responding. We saw that allowing our students the opportunities to “play” both in and out of the classroom helped them to get more excited about not just the “thinking” part of their work, but also about the community-based “doing.” We hope that future scholars and practitioners will develop new ways to capture the element of this rich “play” that can invigorate and motivate both learning and doing. Staying motivated and having fun is not just nice, it is fundamental to opening up new possibilities and to keeping us enthusiastic enough to overcome problems and dilemmas we face along the way.

This service-learning course has also shown us the value of in-depth written reflections. We agree with Ash and Clayton (2009) that critical thinking through reflection requires careful consideration and planning to specify detailed learning outcomes and to design reflections that help students achieve those specific outcomes. We also recognize the importance of aligning our student outcomes with assessing the overall community impact—something that we admittedly did not address in the single semester allotted for this course. We did not gather formal feedback from the children we performed for, but we did learn from the places where children laughed or were especially engaged and from questions and comments they gave. In the future, seeking more formal feedback can help us to improve the quality of our performances and to understand what our audiences are getting out of them. Still, we realize that teaching toward community impact and designing related assessments will also require broad, interdisciplinary efforts over time. Researchers need to work with practitioners to determine what will work to demonstrate impact and to show the long-term sustainable commitment to making positive changes. Students can have a part to play in identifying what really

matters. Working as co-educators (Zlotkoski, Long, & Williams, 2006) and solo educators for others (like the children in our audiences), service-learning students offer real potential for looking at long-standing situations with fresh eyes... and that may be just where innovative responses to “what’s never been done” can begin to take root.

While our study demonstrated a single semester’s course projects, we are well aware that the community partnerships started through these classes require our long-term commitment and efforts, even as we train new puppeteers and work with other community-based programs focused on our chosen issue. As Enos and Morton (2003) aptly note, ideal service-learning is not just about the single transactions between partners, but rather about “the continuing possibility (that partners) will be transformed in large and small ways” (p. 20). We wholeheartedly agree. Teaching for flexible thinking has real possibilities to change students, faculty, universities, and communities as we, together, address the issues that demand our attention. Our students, working collaboratively with others on and off campus, began to see how their own efforts are part of the larger whole, a part of a complex problem’s long-term solution. They saw how they “can make a difference” as players in community collaboration. This is the exciting civic challenge we face; it is also what is most needed for a bright future for our communities, for us all.

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This research project was approved by the University and Medical Center’s Institutional Review Board as research project #11-0147. Following our IRB protocol, we sought written informed consent to access the student journals at the start of the semester. A graduate student collected the consent forms, and they were kept by one of our administrative staff members until after grades were posted at the end of the semester, so as not to create pressure on students to consent. We have changed the names of our students to preserve anonymity.

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