

Teaching Collective Action: Strategies for Fostering Racial and Social Justice

Aaron Schutz

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universities teach students about social problems but provide few concrete tools for acting to promote social change. Teaching about challenges but not about possible solutions can be potentially disempowering and may reduce civic agency. This chapter discusses the development of a required class on community organizing and civil resistance that provides students with specific strategies for engaging in collective action. The author explores a range of tensions involved in teaching this class: making it experiential without forcing students to work on issues or take steps they might not agree with, providing multiple traditions of social action so they do not get the sense that there is one “right” way, working with students whose perspectives might differ from ones he sees as legitimate, and teaching a class that some outside the institution might see as beyond the purview of a university. Ultimately, he argues that it is incumbent upon universities to provide concrete skills for social action, because failing to do so restricts their capacity to become effective civic actors in our democracy.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses a required course in social action approaches that the author has taught in different forms for the last two decades. While most universities have courses that provide analyses of social action or histories of how social action has taken place in different contexts, they rarely teach strategies to help students actually engage in such action themselves. To some extent, this can be unintentionally disempowering. Talking about how terrible everything is without providing many approaches for doing something about it may increase powerlessness. Teaching students about the enormous inequities in incarcerations of African Americans, for example, is horrifying, but unlikely to lead to student engagement (especially by white students) if no concrete approaches for taking action to change this situation

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8463-7.ch004

are provided. At best, university courses may teach about what better policy might look like (but even here, rarely about strategies to get new policies into effect) or strategies for getting people to change their minds, or collaborative strategies with the powerful, or even sometimes approaches to advocacy. What is almost never talked about are ways for engaging in the often conflictual forms of collective people power that can allow otherwise low-income and oppressed communities to push back against those resisting changes in the status quo (see Foster 2021).

It is incumbent upon universities to teach what I think of as concrete approaches to democratic action like the ones discussed, here, ways to build power among those who do not generally hold power in our society (like people with disabilities, the working-class, undocumented immigrants, African Americans) to act concretely to alter oppressive aspects of their society. The point is not that communities lack their own traditions of action, but that there is much we can all learn from the lessons learned by activists and organizers in the past. As I note below, teaching approaches to social action is a tension-filled activity, with potential pitfalls. But these are not tensions we can afford to avoid if we truly wish to develop effective civic leaders for the great challenges facing our students in the years to come.

There is no science of collective action. At best, we have rules of thumb and guidelines that have been developed over many years through actual efforts and studies of these efforts. Since the world and society is always changing, every new effort to foster social change will need to respond to the unique circumstances faced by a particular group. Nonetheless, the lessons and guidelines that activists and organizers and academics have developed allow actors not to recreate the wheel while avoiding some basic mistakes that have been made by those who came before them.

This chapter provides a rich example of how social action might be taught at a public university. It lays out the core learning goals, the logic behind the structure of the class and the central topics focused on, as well as tensions and challenges encountered by the instructor and students. The argument is not that this is the best way to teach a class of this kind. In fact, the syllabus is currently in a transitional state as I explore how to integrate new material and new issues coming up in the field and generally question my overall approach. Further, every instructor will come to a course like this with their own set of experiences and knowledge which will inform what their class might cover. A colleague, for example, teaches the same course with some significant differences. As a result, I do not try in this chapter to provide a “course in a box.” The aim is to help readers understand what they may encounter in designing a course of this kind themselves, along with suggestions about and examples of ways to respond.

In fact, this course is taught in a wide range of ways, including some which actually engage students in social action projects from the beginning. In part because this is a required class, I am limited in what I can ask students to do. As a result, the course really provides a base for helping students understand approaches to social action, while helping them learn to interpret the world and make decisions about strategy and action in the way organizers and leaders often do within the traditions I discuss. At the least, this helps the majority of students in the class who are not planning to be organizers or activists¹ to work with such groups more effectively. Learning how to “do” social action in the ways the traditions I discuss imagine it would require actual on-the-ground work on campaigns with experienced organizers and leaders. Some of my students have gone on to get this kind of experience, sometimes as part of fieldwork through the department.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the context where the course is taught. Then, after introducing a key distinction between “community organizing” and “civil resistance,” I turn to a discussion of the three core components of the course. The first section teaches students about how community organizing groups conceptualize the world around them and make decisions on issues, tactics and targets, seeking

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