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Community Civic Engagement as an Enabler of Student Flourishing

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“Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire” W. B. Yeats.

Civic Engagement is a process where people join together to conduct public work, it may be for political activism, advocating for social justice, consciousness raising, challenging and changing societal systems. It usually incorporates levels of social connectedness, coherence, shared philosophies, comradeship, social responsibility, compassion, courage and transcendence. Familiar civic engagement terms across Higher Education include, volunteering, service learning, community based learning/research, community engaged research and capacity building. For the purpose of this article, civic engagement as mentioned will include all of the aforementioned elements.

Human flourishing can be described as optimum positive well-being, physically, mentally and socially, in the absence of ill being. Keyes (2005) describes flourishing as a state of positive psychological and social well-being. Positive functioning consists of six dimensions of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy (Keyes and Ryff, 1999). While psychological well-being represents more private and personal criteria for evaluation of one's functioning, social well-being epitomizes the more public and social criteria whereby people evaluate their functioning in life. Keyes' (2002) social dimensions consist of social coherence, actualization, integration, acceptance and contribution. Individuals are functioning well when they see society as meaningful and understandable, when they see society as possessing potential for growth, when they feel they belong to and are accepted by their communities, when they accept most parts of society, and when they see themselves contributing to society.

A comprehensive analysis of incidents of human flourishing led to Gaffney (2011) concluding that the four essential elements of flourishing include: 1) Challenge – a call or demand to engage with a task, overcome an obstacle, to enable something to happen; 2) Connectivity – being personally tuned in to what is happening to oneself and surrounding world; 3) Autonomy – feeling free to pursue the challenge; 4) Using valued competencies – using talents and strengths to the full.

Students with complete mental health are flourishing in life, with high levels of well-being. To be flourishing, then, is to be filled with positive emotion and to be functioning well psychologically and socially. Students with incomplete mental health may be languishing in life with low well-being. Thus, languishing may be conceived of as emptiness and stagnation, constituting a life of quiet despair, academic disengagement, with maladaptive responses

such as social withdrawal and substance misuse. To flourish or to languish that is the question?

Third level student well-being is becoming increasingly problematic, as young people are faced with large cultural forces which compel them to be 'always on' , (tv, internet, phone), there is career pressure given the rise in unemployment and scarcity of secure career pathways, and increased family economic distress abounds following the Celtic tiger fall out.

In *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It*, Kadison and DiGeronimo (2004) claim that for today's US college student:

"The chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function; one in two that he or she will have regular episodes of binge drinking (with the resulting significant risk of dangerous consequences such as sexual assault and car accidents); and one in ten that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student suffering depression has doubled, suicidal ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled. The information on student mental health... is shocking – yet it is the elephant in the room that no one is talking about".

The My World Survey (MWS) of Irish adolescents established that mental health difficulties peaked in the late teens and early 20s. This peak in mental health difficulties, in general, was coupled with a decrease in protective factors such as self-esteem, optimism and positive coping strategies. The three most significant stressors/problems in adolescent life were: COLLEGE, followed by money, work and family (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012).

A high percentage (41%) of the sample (8,221) were categorised into the problem drinking range, 10% into the harmful and hazardous drinking range, while 10% were classified as having a potential alcohol dependence. Approximately 43% reported that they had thought that their life was not worth living at some point. These are all strong indicators to suggest that our colleges are not flourishing environments, where our students may be languishing, and experiencing serious health detriment.

Do Higher Education Institutions carry on regardless? Or are they morally and ethically obliged to consider the development of the whole student in their midst? What is the role of Higher Education Institutions in this? Unfortunately campus culture more and more affirms the values and virtues of a consumer driven marketplace, where students and staff are identified by number; delivery through modularisation and semesterisation often causing modules to be disconnected from the 'whole' professional pathway; sandwiched courses evolving to enable quicker student throughput; and increased emphasis on end outcomes rather than qualitative learning episodes, a growing feature of Higher Education.

What we often forget in necessary conversations about outcomes, retention, and graduation is that learning can fulfil us—providing a sense of purpose, connecting us with others, and helping us gain perspective. Simply put, learning particularly when applied helps us to flourish.

Liberal educationists propose that the purpose of third level education is more than just preparing for a job, it is about acquiring the knowledge, skills, competencies, values and capacities for life's many roles in a world of inevitable change. It is grounded in personal as well as intellectual growth, with individuals developing as social beings, through intellectual inquiry.

“Contemporary research on learning in college calls for a multi-centric cognitive, experiential, developmental and transformative process that occurs throughout and across the educational experience, integrating academic learning with student development” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Involving students in Community Civic Engagement activities gives students the opportunity to step out from behind the desk, bring their knowledge, skills and competencies to the coal face, and learn from real world experiences, through societal engagement.

There is a large body of research evidence, particularly in the US which indicates that student civic engagement leads to an increase in academic success, career direction and self-esteem, it provides a positive connection with others and serves as an important factor in social identity development (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda & Yee 2000; Galura, Pasque, Schoem & Howard 2004; Markus, Howard & King, 1993). Furthermore, attributes that are positively influenced by participation in service learning projects may include academic performance, critical thinking skills, and leadership skills (Astin & Sax, 1998). Many researchers recognize service-learning as a unique opportunity to foster civic responsibility and personal growth (Colby et al, 2008; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Washburn et al, 2004). Students construct their understanding of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society as these skills and other personal benefits accrue.

Volunteers are more likely than non-volunteers to exhibit positive emotions and social skills including openness, agreeableness and extraversion, (Matsuba, Hart and Atkins, 2007), while anxiety and distress are lower among youth engaged in helping and volunteering (Rietschlin 1998; Schwartz et al, 2003).

Looking closer at the mechanisms linking civic engagement to psychosocial well-being, helping others may be rewarding in itself, knowing that one is contributing time, money and effort to the public good of others (Post, 2005). Such rewards may arise from feelings of benevolence, social benefits from attachments and identification derived from connecting with others in the community and networks formed. As part of a longitudinal study at Tufts University it was found that... Students who recently engaged in civic activities, most notably activities perceived to be focused on social change, had significantly better scores on indicators of psychosocial well-being (e.g., connection with others, intrinsic motivation toward learning, strategies for managing stress) (Boyd, et al. 2012).

The long term benefits of college civic engagement are also worth noting. Bowman et al. (2010) in their research conducted during college and 13 years after, found that both college volunteering and service-learning have positive, indirect effects on several forms of well-being during adulthood, including personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and life satisfaction. Such experiences are linked to subsequent adult volunteering, evidence of a more pro-social orientation, which are in turn positively associated with well-being.

Community Civic Engagement is not a panacea or a solution to specific student pathologies, such as alcohol abuse and depression, BUT it does provide real opportunity for

Transformational Learning & Student Flourishing. The following student comments were collated from qualitative reflective journals completed when undertaking the Community Leadership Initiative (CLI) module at the Institute of Technology Tralee.

“I feel that the whole experience involved active learning, looking at the why and how rather than looking at current information or the status quo and accepting it, I got the opportunity to put my ideas forward and was encouraged to be creative in finding solutions to challenges.”

“The feeling of self-worth and value to my community was something very worthwhile to experience during my community engaged learning opportunity.”

“I enjoy learning when my experiences pertain to real life.”

“I discovered quite a lot about myself and my capacities when working with a diverse group of people, in a challenging environment, where I was often well outside my comfort zone. I was glad of the opportunity to practise my leadership and mediation skills.”

“I now feel more of a responsibility to serve my community.”

“This experience was extremely beneficial for my personal growth, my self-esteem and confidence grew a lot, in particular after having to step up to a leadership position and take responsibility.”

The Diploma programme Community Wellness, Empowerment, Leadership and Lifeskills (CWELL), developed by the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences in the University of Limerick, in conjunction with St. Mary’s Community in Limerick, evolved to enable both the community and UL staff and students to work collaboratively and build capacity in well-being and lifestyle education within the local community. The programme is based on a ‘Community of Practice’ model (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and very much appreciates that learning is not just something that takes place in formal educational settings and institutions; it comes from our engagement with the world around us. Learning is situated; it is a social process shaped by the context and the culture in which it takes place (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As such, learning is not simply a process of ‘knowledge transfer’, where lecturers, who know things, transmit information to students, who know nothing (Brown et al., 1989). Learning is understood as an active process; we learn by engaging in activity and from reflecting on this process (Kolb, 1984). What students learn is not stable and fixed, instead, outcomes are difficult to predict and what has been learnt may be difficult to define and to understand (Engestrom, 2001). However by embracing reflective assessment opportunities throughout course delivery, one is able to reap rich, qualitative feedback, which can serve to guide educators and encourage learners to observe and process what is occurring. Community participants undertaking the course have been very positive about their experiences. There have been reports from many students of an increase in self-confidence, self-esteem and the positive impacts the course has had on them as individuals and their families. They have increased their self-worth in relation to their potential to achieve something in relation to education.

“I feel more confident and more assured of myself and I feel happier in myself ... I will use my new skills to benefit my family and the community to "help them to help themselves" on a personal level it has given me huge confidence”.

There has been a reduction in isolation for some students as the course has provided an opportunity for socializing.

“CWELL. It’s a course that people should take on. It’s for the wellbeing of themselves as much as it is for the community. Everyone will benefit. Anyone that will do this course will benefit and they will benefit their community by contributing back into their community so that...it’s a win-win situation....This course has given me a purpose and changed my life”.

In relation to module content, students have admitted becoming more confident in discussing the topic of mental health and the issues relating to it, admitting that their awareness regarding the stigma attached to mental health and the importance of mental health across the life span has increased.

“I think more, positive thinking about life and health and the knowledge is a good and positive thing. It has made me more aware of my mental health and that of my children and my family. It has also boosted my confidence in a lot of ways”.

Through coursework, they have also improved public speaking, PowerPoint presentation, academic essay writing, computer, reflection, time management and communication skills.

“I have grown personally and academically since I started the CWELL programme ... it has had a positive effect on me and my family. I have learned to work as part of a team and to respect other people’s opinion if they are different to mine”.

The Community Leadership Initiative (CLI) module delivered in the Institute of Technology Tralee aims to develop student community leadership skills and competencies, which are practised and enhanced through meaningful engagement with community based groups. The CWELL programme in contrast aims to build leadership capacity within the community, taking the classroom to the participants, (following a needs assessment); whilst UL students who mentor these community based learners both enhance their understanding of community and develop their own personal skills and competencies also. Both courses serve to foster resilience and leadership development, at an individual and community level, with the ultimate aim being to lead towards improved quality of life (flourishing), and healthier and sustainable communities.

In many academic settings, there is increasing pressure on administrators to standardise, rather than expand, the role of curriculum design (Heard, 2014), however, curriculum planners should also consider incorporating an emphasis on student characteristics that affect student learning and development. According to King (2014), in addition to mastering disciplinary knowledge and developing competence, a problem-oriented approach, utilising authentic contexts (active and often collaborative), knowledge construction opportunities are key elements of higher education. The emphasis of this approach is on the value of the experience itself in developing personal characteristics and civic responsibility, focusing on using individual level attributes to shape and guide educational practice (King, 2014). In this model, neither knowledge acquisition, student experiences nor personal characteristics alone are the key factors; instead, the combination of all of these interrelated components (personal characteristics, experiences, lessons learned from experiences, and meaning making) provide a more holistic approach to prepare students for a work force and to engage as civically responsible citizens . High-quality learning experiences can be adapted in ways that take students’ characteristics into account (King, 2014). Wiggins and McTighe (2005) highlight

that engaging designs require students to function well with knowledge and skill, in a context of real world issues, needs, constraints, and opportunities. This requires a shift away from methods that simply flood students with information or rehearse familiar skills. Learning experiences need to take cognisance of students' perceptions of their relevant personal characteristics and skills and how these affect their learning needs greater consideration.

Traditional didactic classroom or clinical settings have been criticized for failing to prepare graduates for 21st century practice (Hoppes & Hellman 2007; Cole & Carlin 2009). The challenge for educators is to create learning experiences within the curriculum for students to actively reconfigure what they are learning in ways that facilitate further inquiry and questioning (Heard, 2014). Students should not be viewed as passive consumers of third level education, but instead, should be considered by educators as co-creators of knowledge and drivers of social change. Self-authorship is central to a twenty-first-century education (Baxter Magolda, 2004). We live more than a vocational life, thus we need more than a vocational education, we live a larger civic life and need to be educated for it (Mathews, 1995).

Whilst student intellectual, personal and social development are crucial in Higher Education today, but of equal importance are the approaches that seek to measure student success, learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness. These should not only be in terms of knowledge acquisition, skill demonstration and critical thinking, but should also embrace the development of a resilient sense of self, emotional competence and the capacity for rendering meaning and purposeful engagement with others in the wider social environment. Learning needs to embrace the 'whole' student, enhancing wellbeing, and instilling a sense of civic, moral and social purpose, in essence it should be transformational.

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