THEORIZING CITIZENSHIP AND EVALUATING PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT

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An Excerpt

Researcher (R): How has doing Public Achievement (PA) changed the way you think about yourself?

Casey (pseudonym for elementary school student): ***I am less lonely now that I have done Public Achievement.***

R: Really, that's interesting, what is it in PA makes you less lonely?

Casey: ***Well, people used to think that I am kinda weird here, and I am different. I like playing in the woods and stuff by myself and doing my own kind of stuff.***

R: And people think of you as less weird when you do PA?

Casey: ***Yeah, they even give awards to kids like me in PA.***

R: Wow! It sounds like you are a leader in PA.

Casey: ***Yeah, I really like doing PA.***

R: Let me see if I am hearing you right, before PA people thought that you were weird, and now that you have done PA, people look at you differently?

Casey: ***Yeah.***

R: How do you think they look at you differently now?

Casey: ***They look at me as a citizen.***

R: As a citizen, what does it mean for them to look at you as a citizen?

Casey: ***Like I am more of an equal, they listen to what I have to say.***

This dialogue, filled with civic promise, is typical of the many conversations I have had with young participants in reflecting upon their experiences in Public Achievement.[1] It points to the power that involvement with Public Achievement has to open possibilities for young people like Casey to understand themselves in a different way, as "citizens." Public Achievement groups have successfully organized public forums on land mines, demonstrated to shut down prostitution houses masking as "saunas," built playgrounds for their schools, and painted and fixed graffiti-covered bathrooms. It has provided young people with opportunities to show that they want to make a difference in their communities and that they possess the insight, courage, and endurance to make positive social and political change. In evaluating their participation, young people have further shown that they are sophisticated interpreters and theorists of their social worlds. All they require is a dedicated time and space, and a basic conceptual framework for thinking about and taking collective action.

In this article, I present an account of and explanation for the ways in which Public Achievement "works" to educate participants of all ages to be effective and reflective political and social actors, or in other words, to be thinking and acting citizens. I begin by offering a basic description of the theoretical framework and practice of Public Achievement. Next, I discuss some of what has been learned from an ongoing evaluation of the program. In the fourth and fifth sections, respectively, I explain how younger students and undergraduates benefit from their participation. In conclusion, I discuss the role theory plays in Public Achievement and service-learning in general.

The Theory and Practice of Public Achievement

Public Achievement, developed by the University of Minnesota's Center for Democracy and Citizenship, is an experiential civic education initiative based on the concept of "public

work."[2] Public work embodies the idea that an important component of democracy is the "work of the people" and an important component of citizenship is being a co-creator of our public world (in contrast to being a consumer, client, or volunteer). Harry Boyte and James Farr define public work as the "expenditure of visible efforts by ordinary citizens whose collective labor produces things or create processes of lasting civic value" (1997, 42). Implicit in the notion of public work is that the everyday world can be made otherwise through the actions of "ordinary" persons acting as citizens.

Public work entails working *in* public, *with* the public, and *for* public ends (Boyte and Kari 1996). It encourages efforts to reconceptualize citizen action as something other than a competition for limited resources among claimants for irreconcilable interests, its aim being more to make positive public impact than to ensure that some "win" or others "lose." Because it requires ordinary citizens to address issues of power, public work is often messy, gritty, and pragmatic.

Through Public Achievement, elementary, middle or high school students work in small groups with "coaches" for an hour or more each week to devise and implement projects or actions that address public issues.[3] The coaches are generally undergraduates taking service learning courses.[4] Public Achievement programs currently operate in four states and in Northern Ireland. To date, over 10,000 youngsters and 1,600 university students have participated.

At the beginning of each program, all Public Achievement participants convene to generate a list of public issues requiring citizen action. Students select the issue they want to work on and are placed in teams with four to ten others who chose the same issue. Because issues are tied to students' interests, they range from school-based (changing lunch menus, changing dress codes, getting extra-curricular activities) to neighborhood (battling prostitution, drugs, gangs, cleaning up the community, increasing public safety) to global (eliminating land mines, de-forestation, child labor).

Rather than following a rigidly prescribed method, in Public Achievement, students are encouraged to develop their own means for solving public problems. As Dewey (1916, 1997) recommends, groups start from "scratch" in the sense that they have to begin where they are, what their interests are, and what they know about the issue. The students work together to discuss and research their issues and their socio-political contexts, and to come up with a project or series of actions that will make an impact within a given time frame (usually the academic year).

Through Public Achievement, students learn how to co-create and function in democratic groups. They also gain a sense of civic competence and power by making "power maps" of their issue, devising action plans, taking action, and evaluating how effective their actions re. All of this learning is grounded in intentional and explicit evaluation of and reflection upon what it means to take action in the world, to be aware of one's actions, to "fail," to "succeed," to try alternative courses, to work with others in a group, and to be responsible for working on issues of concern (see Hildreth 1998; Farr 1997).

Regarding the undergraduate coaches, Public Achievement is different from many service learning approaches in political science. Instead, of just working for nonprofits, Public Achievement coaches take part in an intentional effort to educate young citizens through deliberating, thinking, taking action in, and reflecting upon the "real world." As civic educators, also learn about themselves as citizens as they undergo training, coach youth, participate in debriefing sessions with fellow coaches, keep journals, complete readings, and take part in class discussions (see Farr 1997).

Being a coach– a title the younger participants conferred– is a complex balancing act of facilitating the project (getting the work done, thinking strategically, holding themselves and others accountable) and the process (building a small democratic group, learning about their focal issue, evaluating their work, and reflecting upon their learning). Coaches must co-create with team members a group and space where all participate in making decisions, all contribute according to their abilities, and all work together on common goals. By helping their teams learn and use a vocabulary of public work (especially, "democracy," "citizenship," "power," "interests," "diversity," "public," and "freedom") to name what they are learning, coaches provide conceptual tools and frames team members can use to define concerns as public issues and to think about the world in new ways.

Like the school children, undergraduate coaches also work as a team. After each meeting with their Public Achievement teams, all the coaches gather to discursively reflect upon and discuss the connections between their practical work and the college course they are taking.[5]

A Different Kind of Evaluation

For the past year, I have been involved in an evaluation of Public Achievement that differs from many strategies of program evaluation. It is not quantitative and its aim is not to "measure impact." Sponsoring foundations have performed these sorts of quantitative evaluations and found that participation in Public Achievement produces aggregate positive outcomes for youth in areas such as understanding of focal issue, self-perception of civic power and competence, mastery of teamwork, public speaking, expressing opinions and respecting others' opinions. Undergraduate participants have gained better understandings of the connections between theory and practice, better understandings of local communities, a greater appreciation of the capacities of young people, and improved abilities in working with youth (Jianas, Helmer, and Jones, 1999; Moore et. al 1998).

These quantitative evaluations document what youth and college students learn. As a theorist of democratic practice, I am more interested in understanding how Public Achievement achieves positive outcomes and, more importantly, how youth participants, like Casey, come to see themselves and the world differently after doing Public Achievement. This participatory research evaluation (utilization-focused method), systematically asks various participants to describe and reflect upon the meanings of their Public Achievement experiences (Patton 1986, 1990).[6]

How Public Achievement "Works" for Young Participants

As a participant and evaluator of Public Achievement, I have listened to and talked with countless youth participants about their experiences. What is striking is that youth participants from vastly different school settings, working on different issues, with different types of coaches, consistently see themselves and the world differently after Public Achievement. By putting the accounts of participants in conversation with democratic and educational theory, I have developed five preliminary explanations for why Public Achievement "works" to educate youngsters to be effective and reflective citizens.

First, Public Achievement embodies an invitation and opportunity for young people to publicly express their passions and interests and make a difference in the world. Unfortunately, young people have few such opportunities (see Eliasoph 1998). In my evaluation interviews, I repeatedly have been impressed by young peoples' perceptive interpretations of their social worlds. Yet, they regularly tell me that "no one asks me questions like this, and if I give my

opinion, adults don't take me seriously." Public Achievement, then, represents a "free space" where young people can talk about and act on things that matter to them and where their opinions and actions are taken seriously.[7] Further, the program is open to all, voluntary, and grounded on the idea that all people can be competent and effective citizens. Students often tell me that having a choice is what makes Public Achievement fun, different, and meaningful (e.g. "Public Achievement is fun because adults aren't telling us what to do"). It represents for them notions of freedom (to make choices) and power (over the choices one makes).

Second, the process is centered on the continuous co-creation of a small group that is inclusive and works democratically. The group is a space and place where young people can "craft" themselves in new ways. The coach and group members typically do not know each other; Public Achievement groups are often cross-grade. I have found that the young people experience this newness as a "clean slate" and an opportunity to "disclose," "show," or "craft" themselves in a new way (outside their identities or roles as a particular type of student or member of a peer group). Again and again young people comment, "Public Achievement is a chance to be different;" "I can be myself in Public Achievement;" "I can take my masks off in Public Achievement;" and "Others see this and treat me differently." The Public Achievement team can thus be thought of as a Arendtian "public sphere," in which people, through word and deed, can reveal their "whoness" (Arendt 1958). This disclosure is "witnessed" by the rest of the group, the coach, and possibly the wider world. The team members' lives are highly constricted by the categories, expectations, and roles of school grade, gender, clique-grouping, age, social class, race, family, and views of teachers. Public Achievement, however, is experienced as an alternative socio-psychological and political space where group members do not have to take on the social roles grounded in their reputations. Students often view Public Achievement as a place of "freedom." This may explain why some students who have been labeled by teachers as "behavior problems" or "low academic achievers," or by their peers as "weird" or "outcasts" flourish in Public Achievement.

Third, Public Achievement team members get to "try on"– and watch others "try on"– different roles within the group (recorder, evaluator, time-keeper, etc.) and for the group (making speeches, presentations, teaching others, etc.). This constant changing of roles and perspectives has the effect of revealing to the participants and others the different ways of going about the work of Public Achievement and of being themselves.[8] The Public Achievement group provides a relatively safe space to try out and define effectiveness in these new roles and ways of being-in-the-world.

Fourth, the group's work takes place in the "real world" and has weighty consequences. By taking action in Public Achievement, young people learn that they can be competent civic actors, that what they do matters in the world, and that they can do something to alter the mundane conditions of their existence. The projects are viewed by youth as important ways to be noticed and heard. The students note that the adults "don't listen to us" or "listen to us but don't hear us" cannot help but notice the public projects. Working on projects discloses to the team members the truth that the mundane world is open to action and change. With each step, participants enter into into and receive feedback from the world. The public confidence students gain by doing something as seemingly simple as "making a phone call" or "arranging a meeting" should not be overlooked or underestimated. These "small" learnings are often equally important as completing the final project. As students continue working, they must continually assess the effectiveness of their actions and the "impact" they are having on the world. Team members say that one of the most valuable things they learned is the importance of defining

success in their work and, by extension, in their school and everyday lives. Defining success requires reflection, the final and most important way that Public Achievement produces its effects.

It is through encouraging reflection that Public Achievement transcends activity-for-activity's-sake and becomes a personally and pedagogically meaningful learning experience (Dewey 1997; Mintz and Hesser 1996; Waterman, 1997). Each Public Achievement session includes time for coaches and team members to review their work and to name what they have learned. These exercises allow them to continuously make and remake sense of themselves, their actions, the world in which they are acting, and key concepts like democracy, power, and interests. Through reflection and application of the theoretical framework of public work, the group can start to build and test grounded personal and collective theories of the how the world works around their issue as well as their individual places in this world.

How Public Achievement Works for Undergraduate Coaches

Undergraduates often describe Public Achievement as one of the most frustrating and most rewarding experiences they have had. It is frustrating because they are put in the difficult and ambiguous role of working with kids in a new (democratic) way. This runs counter to most adult/student group relationships in educational settings. Coaches are confronted with multiple and contradictory tasks such as dealing with kids who "act up," helping the children learn, facilitating project work, including everybody, using a language of politics, and not acting a teacher. Despite these difficulties, coaches find Public Achievement rewarding because the group and coach usually figure out how to work and learn together and to complete a meaningful project. One of the great ironies and delights of Public Achievement is that the undergraduates often come to see the youngsters they coach as role models. The students' passion, dedication, thoughtfulness, and practical efficacy often inspire undergraduates to reconsider their own political convictions, sense of involvement, and even career choices.

Coaching Public Achievement teams helps undergraduates learn about politics and civic engagement in two ways. First, the ambiguity of the coaching role often compels undergraduates to think reflexively about who they are, how they see themselves, how they act with their group, and what they assume about youths, education, and democracy. Second, the practical experience offers a new and grounded dimension to the academic texts they read in class.

At the beginning of a Public Achievement year, coaches are confronted by (the terror of) how to work democratically with a group of students. This discomfiting experience involving difference (being with kids) and ambiguity (how shall I act?), requires coaches to reflect on who they are and how they work youth. The challenge of being thrown into such an ambiguous and uncomfortable situation with young people is sometimes experienced as an existential crisis. Some coaches clearly turn these crises into positive transformative experiences as they tell us how "Public Achievement has changed my life."

Course readings and class discussions provide an additional frame for making sense of coaching experiences. These encourage second-order reflections about who coaches are as citizens in the world, as students, employees, parents, room-mates, and friends. Undergraduates often comment that Public Achievement makes academic texts come "alive" as ideas that once seemed abstract are grounded in reality. They state that "Dewey now makes sense" or "Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* summed up what I had been experiencing all through the course."

The Indispensability of Theory for Service-Learning and Citizen Education

Alasdair MacIntyre famously claimed that political theory is not only indispensable for historians and social scientists but for "ordinary agents [who] are able to act politically and socially only in virtue of abilities to characterize their own actions and those of others in ways that presuppose, usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly, bodies of theory" (1983, 32). Everybody has "implicit theories" of the world and theorizing can be conceived of bringing greater degrees of explicitness to these different ways of making sense of the world. According to MacIntyre, theories can be metaphorically thought of as maps that make it possible for people to "place themselves in the world and move about in it with some hope of implementing one's intentions" (32).

In the context of service learning in political science, theory is important in its most fundamental sense because it helps students make sense of and give meaning to the lived experiences of acting, working, and learning in and about politics in the real world. Often undergraduates' real-world experiences are encounters with "difference"– different types of people, organizations, or social worlds. To make sense of these experiences of difference, students put their service learning experiences into conversation with their own assumptions about the world, and possibly, the academic theories and concepts they learned in classes. According to the literature on experiential education and service learning, students' struggles to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences constitute critical pedagogical moments (see Waterman 1997; Mintz and Hesser 1996). Effective service learning programs make explicit the assumptions, experiences, and academic content in play.

I contend that substituting "citizen" for MacIntyre's "ordinary agent" makes citizenship conceivable as a process of figuring out what one's "world" is like (be it school, neighborhood, community, nation, or world), what one's place is in it, and how one, with others, can effectively act within it. However, this figuring must be intentionally, explicitly, and continually done. In Public Achievement, participants use the conceptual tools of public work to build their own theories for acting in the world on their issue and for living their public life in general. Consequently, they do not learn theory, but instead use theory to continuously test and re-think their experiences of Public Achievement. Our evaluation has shown this to be the case, among both undergraduates and youth participants.

Theorizing, as such, can be a liberating process that allows individuals to gain a sense of power over meaning-making and language, and which, in my view, can open spaces for thought, action, and being within disciplinary discourses.[9] Therefore, it is absolutely crucial that theorizing is democratic, open, and possible for all people in the group (and for citizens in a democracy). Seeing theorizing as an integral part of citizenship has important consequences for democratic theory and the conceptualization of citizenship. Instead of being a considered a category within a political regime or a set of attributes, citizenship can be seen as a process and part of every day lived reality, embodied as a variety of modes of being-in-the-world and a variety of ways of response to the world.

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About the Author
R.W. Hildreth, a former public school teacher and civic educator, is currently a graduate student in Political Science at the University of Minnesota. He has worked with Public Achievement over the last four years in the United States and over the last year as a Human Rights Fellow in Northern Ireland.

Notes

[1.] In the past year, I have been involved in an evaluation project of Public Achievement with Professor Michael Baizerman, professor of youth studies, University of Minnesota.

[2.] The Center for Democracy and Citizenship treats public work as a contested concept. The idea of public work draws on and resonates with traditions of civic action, political struggles for emancipation, and foundational theories of citizenship and democracy in American history (Boyte and Kari 1996; Evans and Boyte 1986). For a working definition of pubic work see "Public Work at the CDC" (www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/cdc/publicwork.html).

[3.] Public Achievement programs have also been carried out by university classes, community groups, and even residents of senior citizen homes.

[4.] Parents, community volunteers, business people, youth workers, Ameri-corps members, senior citizens, and high school students have also served as coaches.

[5.] While Public Achievement is a natural fit for political science courses, it has also been incorporated into education, philosophy, public affairs, rhetoric, social work, and women's studies classes.

[6.] We engage in four levels of questioning/listening to examine "changes" that result from Public Achievement: the description of experiences of participating in Public Achievement; the naming of skills, capacities, and lessons learned in Public Achievement, the naming of how these skills,

capacities, and lessons are lived in other, different domains of everyday life; the naming of changes in their selves, selves as beings-in-the-world, and how they see the world, as a result of doing Public Achievement. We ask students to describe a "non-Public Achievement" event or situation with the words and concepts of Public Achievement, and vice-versa. Or we ask them to describe a situation in school, with their family, or at work where they used something they learned in Public Achievement. Attention is given to whether the concepts, principles, values, and decision-points basic to Public Achievement can be named and, if so, how and in which everyday youth language (subgroup or subculture). By paying careful attention to language frames, we can hear "change" and test face validity. We also use different language frames when repeating answers and asking interviewees if we "got it" or "heard it right." This allows for a deepening of conversation and yields data about young persons.

[7.] Sara Evans and Harry Boyte (1986) used the term "free spaces" to capture those places where African-Americans involved in the Civil Rights Movement could gather, discuss, and organize without fear of white oppression. More recently, the idea of free spaces resonates as places where people can think about, discuss and engage public issues in the increasingly compressed and information saturated world (See Eliasoph 1998).

8. See Arendt (1958) for a slightly different account of the role that perspective plays in the public sphere.

9. See Foucault (1982) for a discussion of how disciplinary power, in the form of historic discourses and practices, constitute individual subjects. In my view, Public Achievement can be seen as a site of resistance to certain disciplinary discourses and practices (particularly those of age, clique, school grade, and gender). This does not imply that theory itself is outside of discourse or that it does not produce disciplinary effects. What is important is that Public Achievement makes theorizing and public action possible for more citizens.