

1: California State University, Chico

Public Sphere Pedagogy

Connecting Student Work to Public Arenas

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Institutional Context

As a public, regional, comprehensive university, CSU, Chico graduates the kind of students that make up the lion's share of baccalaureate students in this country. CSU, Chico is a residential campus, with the majority of students of traditional college-going age and a balanced mix of first-time freshmen and transfer students. Our university has faced its share of challenges in an effort to improve academic engagement and address student wellness issues.

Inspired and fostered by the strong emphasis that president Paul Zingg placed on the civic mission of the university, we considered how best to improve academic and civic engagement in our students. In his inaugural address, Zingg asked if we "dared" as a campus community to "define community values . . . and reward behaviors . . . predicated on service above self, civic responsibility, and high ethical standards." While CSU, Chico has become known for its emphasis on sustainability education and action, Zingg sought the improvement and creation of multiple well-defined outreach efforts that would intentionally tie students' classroom experiences to the creation of civic character.

In collaboration with faculty in several departments over the past five years, the Office of Undergraduate Education, which houses our First-Year Experience (FYE) program, has responded to the president's challenge by creating a new kind of structure in several first-year courses, a structure that assists students in building bridges to the community and in changing their self-view from high school student to emerging adult and successful college student.

We have come to call the method we developed Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP). PSP has particular characteristics and specific learning outcomes. Courses employing PSP (1) focus on students' reading, class discussion, research efforts, and writing on contemporary—and usually pressing—public issues; (2) connect students' class work to public arenas in order to demonstrate to them through direct experience the relevance of civic studies and scholarly activity to the larger world; (3) place students in dialogue with diverse campus and community members around issues of public importance, providing them with opportunities to behave as adult participants in processes of dialogue and debate vital to the health of a democracy; and (4) encourage students' ongoing civic participation through "next step" activities—such as action plans, further civic course work, and/or commitments to civic activities and organizations. Together, these activities have been shown to increase students' commitments to scholarship and lifelong learning, improve their sense of civic efficacy and personal responsibility, and prepare them for long-term participation in civic life.

One Example of PSP: The CSU, Chico Town Hall

The Town Hall began as a strategy for improving students' engagement in first-year writing courses. In 2006, three composition faculty members teaching the entry-level required writing course responded to the president's focus on increased civic development for students by creating pilot Town Hall sections with a civic dimension. In order to place students in an environment where their research into public issues mattered to a wider audience than their teacher and classmates, the faculty proposed a Town Hall as the culminating work of the course. In this Town Hall, students would present their individual issues-based research projects and lead discussions about the issues they had dedicated their time to understanding. Campus administrators, faculty and staff, and students were invited, as were members of the Chico community.

The first Town Hall consisted of 180 participants, 120 of them students in the sections of the required English course. Students presented key information from their research, then led discussions by starting with a set of their own questions and gradually working in audience questions and concerns.

When students returned to the main hall after two hours of breakout discussions, they spoke ebulliently of their experience, making comments such as "I can't believe this was so interesting"; "Who knew I could enjoy talking about the things my parents discuss?"; "What else can I do that's like this?"; "Now I feel like a college student." Comments of this kind have

since been frequently documented in follow-up written reflections, which are now a standard embedded assessment in PSP courses.

Following its initial small-scale success in fall 2006, the CSU, Chico Town Hall grew rapidly. By spring 2007, the event included more than 300 participants, and it now consistently draws over 700 participants. At least 80 "consultants" drawn from the campus faculty and staff and from community organizations participate in a final hour of discussion with small groups of students around public issues. Growth of the Town Hall has occurred organically, first due to growing participation of faculty members and/or to the inclusion of large lecture-style classes.

Public Sphere Pedagogy beyond the Town Hall

Because of the success of the Town Hall, faculty teaching other kinds of courses have worked with the FYE program to revise classes and embed a public event that increases students' engagement. To date, these include courses in American government, public speaking, small-group communication, principles of macro analysis in economics, and university life. For example, in the course Introduction to University Life, students' research and civic work during the semester results in a student-built Civic Dialogue Museum focused on contemporary themes that students have studied (e.g., AIDS and public health issues, global citizenship, and cultural belief systems).

Additionally, the communication studies department has embedded PSP in both their public speaking and small-group communication classes, where students have the opportunity of participating in the Chico Great Debate. The Chico Great Debate consists of a full day of speeches, presentations, debates, and an interactive civic expo, designed and delivered by students in our City Council Chambers. The event is webcast live; students speak to reporters and sometimes appear on the local news. This work represents a full partnership between the university and the city: An evening "main event" debate series is opened by words of welcome from both the mayor and the campus provost.

Finally, an entry-level course in economics, Principles of Macro Analysis, has moved what used to be a set of in-class presentations into a public arena where interested others from all walks of life come to learn from students, to interact with them, and to seek creative local solutions to difficult economic circumstances. As in other PSP offerings, students engage enthusiastically and afterward report a heightened interest in civic activities, including voting, informing themselves on public issues, and participating in community efforts focused on positive change.

What We've Learned

Assessment conducted via surveys, focus groups, narrative analysis of student writing, and classroom ethnographies on the impact of the Town Hall indicates that participation in a PSP course improves students' academic and civic engagement and some features of their wellness. A four-year survey we conducted of students who had been in the first cohort of Town Hall participants indicated significant changes in their positive self-views, their interest in politics, their civic participation, and their belief that "I can make a difference in the world."

Additionally, many faculty members who have been involved in PSP work say, "I could never go back to teaching the old way again," meaning that working in isolation in traditional classroom structures no longer seems as productive or interesting as assisting students to enter the public domain by using their course work to enrich the community. These teachers enjoy the collaborative work of planning the major event together, a kind of planning that reaches back into their classrooms and causes them to compare teaching approaches, research assignments, and learning outcomes. They also enjoy the noticeable impact on their students, who are more able to recognize how their course work matters beyond the boundaries of school.

Public Sphere Pedagogy effectively creates a sense of civic efficacy while bringing home to students the importance of their scholarly endeavors. By inviting students to take part in serious conversations about issues that matter, faculty provide a clear purpose for reading, writing, research, and class discussion that heighten students' sense of agency, involvement, and empowerment. Assessment data have demonstrated both immediate and enduring effects on student attitudes.

One of our most persistent challenges moving forward is to find the institutional structures and resources necessary to sustain PSP. PSP has costs—in terms of organizing the public events critical to the practice's success and in terms of cost on faculty time. In an era of shrinking resources for higher education, any program that does not increase institutional capacity or effectiveness comes under intense scrutiny. We argue that, far from being a "luxury" or an "add-on," PSP has been a proven means of reaching often detached and alienated students and bringing them firmly into the academic enterprise and university community. PSP can also play a key role in reviving the civic mission of the American university. This is an argument that, in the CSU, Chico context, resonates with faculty and administration alike. Whether this support in principle is followed by the modest financial resources needed to sustain PSP—only time will tell.

