Title: Democratic Organization and Constructive Work: A Nonviolent Approach to Service Learning

Name, School Affiliation, Location: Andrew Duden, Lake Oswego High School, Lake Oswego, Oregon

Grade Level/Subject Area: 11th and 12th grade Political Action Seminar

Duration of Lesson: 4 days

Relevant Oregon State Standards:
SS.HS.CG.05 Understand the civic responsibilities of U.S. citizens and how they are met.

SS.HS.CG.05.01 Identify the responsibilities of citizens in the United States and understand what an individual can do to meet these responsibilities.

Lesson Abstract:
Students and teachers learn cooperatively how to build and maintain an effective service-learning model in the classroom. First, a background is provided on Lake Oswego High School’s Political Action Seminar’s environmental program. Next, students and teachers learn why Mahatma Gandhi is an exemplar for any effective service-learning project. Finally, students and teachers learn how Cesar Chavez is a helpful guide to a service learning in a democratic classroom.

Guiding Questions:
- What are the civic responsibilities of U.S. citizens and how they are met?
- What can an individual do to meet these responsibilities through constructive work and political organization?
- How does Gandhi and Chavez’s notion of nonviolence connect to our notions of civic responsibility?

Content Essay:
Service learning became an educational mandate for many United States high school students recently. However, service learning is problematic. When mandated, students feel coerced into doing something for the greater good. Their relationship to service becomes another obligation in the litany of academic requirements for graduation rather than something they do altruistically. By using the example of how I can rejuvenate a failed service-learning project at my own high school, I hope to provide a service-learning model for any K-12 teacher who aspires towards a nonviolent, democratic classroom. Through a careful analysis of both the nonviolent programs of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Cesar Chavez, we can move from a mandated, coercive program of service to a more altruistic one.

Background on Political Action Seminar’s Environmental Program:
Political Action Seminar (PAS) is a class in which 11th and 12th grade students work collaboratively to develop political action projects in the community. In 2010, Lake Oswego High School students formed a planning team to build a composter for the
community garden at Lake Oswego High School. The composter was part of a broader program to elevate the environmental awareness and sustainability of our high school. Students planned and coordinated with a variety of stakeholders: local vendors who provided building materials, school administrators, and our Life Skills classroom teachers. The Life Skills students, special needs students at our high school, are primarily responsible for the stewardship of the community garden.

Several problems arose. First, the students took too much time determining how to build the composter. The composter did not get built until April of 2011 when the school year was nearing completion. Second, the students had not considered an effective program for compost collection. Rather, they intended the life skills students to do the hard labor of collecting the compost. Third, as a result of summer construction at the school, the composter was removed from its location, and now sits away from the community garden. Finally, none of the students who built the composter, save one, had any intention of returning to Political Action Seminar for a second year to continue the program.

**Why Gandhi is an exemplar for any effective service-learning project:**

The purpose of the composting program to promote environmental sustainability on Lake Oswego High School’s campus accomplishes several nonviolent objectives. Gandhi himself was an advocate of what he termed “common labor.” He stated, “My experiments in *ahimsa* have taught me that nonviolence in practice means common labor of the body” (245). We often tend to look at Gandhi solely through the lens of his passive resistance to unjust laws like the Salt March. However, when Gandhi began *swadeshi* (a constructive program), he considered it a much more sustainable aspect of *ahimsa*. For example, Gandhi produced his own *khadi* (home spun cloth) daily. Gandhi believed that the building of a civil society requires a constructive work program. Through the creation of a constructive work program, we reduce the need for civil disobedience because each individual will become active daily participants in *ahimsa*.

Gandhi explained the value of constructive work as a critical attribute of nonviolence. He wrote, “The first *satyagrahis* [nonviolent practitioners] of South Africa labored for the common good and the common purse and felt like free birds” (245). Gandhi was critical of modern civilization because individuals pursued labor for their own individual profit. In his view, once an individual no longer needed to profit by his own labor, he immediately took to the practice of exploiting others for his own profit. Gandhi wrote, “Thirty four years of continuous experience and experimenting in truth and nonviolence have convinced me that nonviolence cannot be sustained unless it is linked to body conscious, body-labour and finds expression in our daily contact with our neighbours” (245). Again, Gandhi’s emphasis on body labor and daily contact with the community leads one not only to a deeper understanding of the importance of *swaraj* (self-rule), but also a deeper understanding of the ability of *ahimsa* to create institutional change. With the simple act of collecting food waste for compost, students will be laboring for the common good. There is no way to conceive of an individual student profiting by this labor. They won’t even receive any quantifiable grade credit because their labor is voluntary.

Second, we will learn how the act of composting is wholly consistent with Gandhi’s idea of suffering in the service of others. This is work that we don’t want to do. It’s hard labor, and it takes time away from our busy school day – most importantly, our lunch-time. However, through shared communal suffering, we come closer to the daily constructive work that is essential to *ahimsa* (nonviolence in practice). Also, it will
be a great opportunity to ask questions of our own shortcomings like “why is work like this a hardship or demeaning? What does our negative attitude say about us as individuals?” When we recognize our shortcomings in this program, forgive our shortcomings, and move forward in a cooperative way, we practice Gandhi’s notion of swaraj (self-rule).

**How Cesar Chavez is a helpful guide to the development of any effective service-learning project in a democratic classroom:**

In the absence of any returning students from last year to carry on the program, I’ll have to mandate to students that we are going to do this whether or not they consent to it. Admittedly, this mandate by the teacher is not democratic, and may be the least desirable method for introducing a constructive work program. However, this will be a form of nonviolent coercion. According to Cesar Chavez, “Nonviolence forces one to be creative: it forces any leader to go to the people and get them involved so that they can come forth with new ideas” (Stavens, 64). According to Jose Antonio Orosco in his book *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*, during the Delano strike, Chavez asked farmworkers to “give even more of their time in order to develop the discipline, skills, and imagination to continue in the future” (103). Just like Chavez, who went to farm workers to ask if they would join him in *La Causa*, I will ask PAS students to get involved on a voluntary basis, and look to them for ideas about how to make this a fun project. We will develop new ideas to build momentum for the program collaboratively using the collective imagination, creativity, and skills of all the students and the teacher.

Orosco explains, “For Chavez, time, not money, is the resource that allows the poor to realize opportunities to act in concert with one another” (103). It’s o.k. when a project takes more than just a single year. Service learning projects can use Chavez’s conception of time as a resource. Things take time to coordinate and implement. The grape growers strike in Delano took farm workers years to fully implement; it involved strikes, a march to Sacramento, Chavez’s 25-day fast, and a nation-wide boycott of grapes. According to Chavez, “Nonviolence forces you to abandon the shortcut, in trying to make a change in the social order” (Stavens, 64). The shortcut for students at our school is to throw their waste away. Also, it may have been a shortcut for PAS students to assume that merely building a composter will suddenly create compost, or that once the composter is built, other students will collect and make the compost, and use it in the community garden.

**Why service learning, when modeled by Gandhi and Chavez, is an exercise in true democracy:**

Chavez asserts the act of democratic organization for social justice is liberation itself. Real organization creates a transformative experience for those involved in the movement. In Chavez’s *Good Friday Letter* he stated, “Participation and self-determination remain the best experience of freedom and free men instinctively prefer democratic change and even protect the right guaranteed to seek it” (62). According Orosco, during *La Causa*, Chavez “advised [farmworkers] to become involved in the activities of planning, deliberating, and getting things done together, even on the small scale of arranging a meeting, handing out flyers, or walking a picket line. In this way, they became ‘self-determining agents’” (103). Our students can perform the small task of compost collection and meet the same goal. High school students need to have experiences where they are involved in a
meaningful campaign. Involvement means active participation in nonviolent resistance, not passive learning in a classroom. In theory, students will change their school as an institution, and adopt as common practice a more environmentally sustainable way of life. As well, students will create a more cohesive community where the school community works cooperatively together to support the growth of a community garden. As demonstrated above, Chavez would say this is true democracy. It is not a coercive policy of the state. The Oregon State Department of Education didn’t create a benchmark in composting and community gardening. The school board did not mandate that student must collect compost as a requirement of graduation, nor did any building administrator demand the collection of compost as a punitive measure or a means to receive credit for mandated service learning. So, what at first will seem to students a coercive act, and an act that is not part of the student’s daily routine, becomes a united and institutionalized school program. Orosco adds, “The result of this habitual practice in organizing and planning…is lasting power, in the form of an institutional union and a pool of politically talented organizers, who know how to work together because they have developed a kind of practical wisdom about what actions need to be taken” (104).

My hope is that they will experience what Gandhi claimed. Through daily composting, students actually will experience freedom. They will understand that this selfless act of suffering instills a sense of justice and morality which will transform them as individuals and make them more free to think and act on their own. They will hopefully gain a deeper understanding of what it means to act freely, rather than to be coerced into doing something for a grade or other material benefit. Chavez echoes Gandhi when he stated, “I think that once people understand the strength of nonviolence – the force it generates, the love it creates, the response it brings from the total community – they will not be willing to abandon it easily” (Stavens, 64). The community will appreciate their service. They will show them admiration, respect, and cooperation. It will make PAS students feel compassion, and they will have a hard time letting the experience go. We are left with one final thought from Cesar Chavez, “The end of all education should surely be service to others” (United Farm Workers).

In conclusion, when teachers plan service-learning projects with students, several different considerations should occur. Service learning should be collaborative in its planning and in its implementation. Teachers and students combine their imagination and shared skills to build the program’s momentum. Service learning must involve common labor – what Gandhi referred to as a constructive work program. This common labor should be a voluntary act of suffering where the individuals involved do not profit, but the community benefits as a whole. When students and teacher model this behavior it compels others to join the program, and it also engenders compassion among the school community. Finally, service-learning projects take time in order to be effective. Teachers need to make sure the program is sustainable. This involves coordinated planning and dedication of teachers, and school administrators, to be consistent stakeholders in the stewardship of the school community. When students, teachers, and administrators work in this way, ahimsa (nonviolence) is achieved, and the best form of democracy comes to fruition.
Bibliography:

Activities:
Day One:
- Walking field trip to the composter, and a reflective discussion on effective organization v. ineffective organization in political action.
- Return to the classroom, read and discuss “Ahimsa in Practice” by Gandhi and “Creative Nonviolence” by Cesar Chavez.
- Watch “La Causa” w/ journal writing on effective organization and non-violence.
- HW: Jose-Antonio Orosco’s chapter “The Common Sense of Nonviolence: Time and Crises in King and Chavez” from his book *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence* in preparation for the visit by Orosco.

Day Two:
- Visit by Professor Jose-Antonio Orosco: lecture and discussion on the three modalities of nonviolence (coercion, persuasion, and conversion)
- Discuss in small groups imaginative ways to reinvigorate the compost program.

Day Three:
  - Human to human?
  - Human to things?
  - Human to nature?
- Organizational meeting of the compost program:
  - Creating a schedule for composting.
  - Gathering materials for composting.
  - Developing a flier with art and memorable slogan for compost campaign.
  - Brainstorm goals and celebration upon completion of those goals.

Day Four:
- Begin the compost program

Materials:
Readings for students:

**Films:**
- “Viva La Causa,” the film

**Guest Speakers:**
- Jose-Antonio Orosco