FORUM

Power and Conflict in the Public Realm: rethinking progressive visions of collaborative citizenship

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ABSTRACT John Dewey's vision of education and of the school as a model for society was grounded in a commitment to collaboration. This view continues to inform the basic assumptions of progressive educators, especially in the USA. Collaboration in classrooms is offered as the basis and matrix for collaboration beyond them, in the civic realm. But the civic realm is a realm of struggle, and to overemphasize collaboration miseducates students as to its reality. This article explores Saul Alinsky's critique of the Deweyan vision of civic action, with its alternative understanding of the place of collaboration in civic engagement. For the powerless to be heard and heeded by the powerful, collective organization and skills for engaging in conflict in the public realm are key requirements.

Our understanding of 'citizenship' in a democratic society depends on what we think 'civic participation' should look like. In many ways, citizens are what they do; they express themselves in their practices of participation.

In the USA, at least, the dominant vision of democratic practice in the education literature is drawn from the work of John Dewey (e.g. 1922). His was a vision of democracy grounded in collaboration. A truly democratic arena for Dewey was one in which participants engage with each other as equals and work together to solve common problems, supported by the unique contributions and perspectives of everyone in that space.[1] As David Labaree (2005) notes, in schools of education 'a rhetorical commitment to progressivism ... is so wide that ... it is largely beyond challenge' (p. 275). And when progressive scholars think about civic practices, they generally envision practices of Deweyan collaboration.

Scholars and educators have, of course, envisioned a range of approaches to teaching civic engagement. While my interest in this article is in responding

to the basic assumptions of progressive educators and not to formal approaches civic education, the arena of civic education is informative. Conceptions of teaching civics in schools range from learning the rules of government, to participating in debates and role plays, to joining service-learning efforts, to working on projects to make change (Hanson et al, 2018; Shapiro & Brown, 2018).

When progressive educators engage students in actual social change efforts, when they move them to concrete action beyond the classroom, however, they generally look to collaborative projects. The work on 'action civics' by the Action Civics Collaborative (ACC) is representative. The ACC envisions students working on social action efforts in teams, publishing reports, and sometimes even giving testimony to officials. Like other similar models (see Boyte, 2008), it should not be surprising that the ACC vision builds on 'on the project-based, democratic learning philosophies established by John Dewey and Jane Addams' (ACC). The ACC learning framework envisions students working collaboratively together and then essentially seeking to 'collaborate' with other citizens and powerful people beyond the classroom walls who can affect the issues they are interested in. Collaboration in the classrooms thus provides an almost seamless base for further collaboration in the civic realm.

Dewey (1922) wanted a school with practices that were reflective of the world outside, not separated from it. And ACC is reflective of this vision. But this effort to merge the outside with the inside of school works two ways. It can not only lead us to bring social practices in from the outside world; it can lead us to misunderstand practices that work well in a classroom but which have only limited relevance beyond it (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006).

The problem is that collaboration describes only a subset of the practices involved in civic engagement and social action. The civic realm is not only a space of collaboration, it is also a place where titanic battles between the powerful take place. An important critic of progressive visions of civic action, Saul Alinsky (in Brittain & Pearson, 1968), noted with his trademark sarcasm that:

> You've got to get away from all of this reconciliation jazz and all
> this friendship ... business. Reconciliation, in this world, means only
> one thing: when one side gets enough power so the other side gets
> reconciled to it. Then you've got reconciliation. Then you've got
> peace and love. And then you've got a *dialogue* going on.

His point was not that one could never usefully engage with others in the public realm as collaborators. Instead he argued that the powerful, especially, were often uninterested in collaboration, especially around issues that people cared about the most.

If you sit down to collaborate with someone who has no real interest in collaborating with you, you will be taken advantage of. A key characteristic of engagement in arenas of power, unlike classrooms, Alinsky (1946, 1971) argued, was to gain enough power to make sure your voice is heard and that

other powerful people and groups have to take you seriously. Alinsky was all for collaboration, but believed it was only possible with the powerful when the relatively powerless could demand a seat at the table.[2] Even then in his experience what often happened looked more like negotiation between power holders, each seeking to serve their self-interests, than Deweyan collaboration. Alinsky believed about progressives (his term was 'liberals') what Alan Ryan (1997) said of Dewey, that 'it was the role of brute power in political life' that Dewey 'could never quite reconcile' himself to (p. 295). Dewey built a vision of democratic practice that had few tools for engaging with those who had no interest in collaboration (Schutz, 2010).

There are, in fact, emerging discussions of Alinsky-based forms of civic education in studies of youth-led community organizing groups (see, for example, Connor & Rosen, 2016). However, because actually engaging in social conflict goes beyond what teachers can generally safely promote in the classroom, such efforts are generally restricted to non-school, out-of-school youth spaces. They tend not to inform visions of school-based civic practice.

Alinsky would have shaken his head at the 'action civics' vision of civic engagement. Not because it doesn't accomplish useful goals, but because it miseducates students (and teachers) about the way power often works in the public realm. Making effective arguments and reaching out your hand for collaboration is only part of the practice of citizenship. In fact, when students are praised by powerful people for their speeches or their research, teachers and the powerful mislead students about what is most likely to have an impact on the status quo (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Fehrman & Schutz, 2011).

Alinsky's (1946, 1971) writings on community organizing for power are nearly as important to community organizers as Dewey's are for progressive educators, and Alinsky's vision continues to inform organizing efforts in the USA and increasingly around the world (e.g. Tattersall, 2015; Fisher & Dimberg, 2016). In this article, I present his understanding of civic engagement as a counter to the Deweyan vision. With Alinsky, I argue that when the practice of citizenship, writ large, is largely equated with friendly collaboration, students are miseducated about the realities of public participation and even about the place of collaboration, itself, among the myriad practices involved in public engagement. The world beyond the schoolhouse walls is very different from a classroom managed by a supportive progressive facilitator-teacher. The goal here is not, however, to critique what I will refer to generally as collaboration. Instead, I believe we need to rethink the *place* of collaboration in the public realm, and that this will involve both bringing new understandings of social action to the classroom and reframing the role of collaboration in civic engagement. What is the legitimate role of, the most pragmatic place for, collaboration? As Kathleen Knight Abowitz (2015) argues, in agreement with Dewey, democratic society 'requires a substantive education in citizenship, in which students learn the knowledge, skills, and values that prepare them for life in a democratic, pluralistic society in a globalized world' (p. 14). What roles can collaboration play and not play in this process?

Note that scholars of social action disagree about effective strategies for change. Not everyone agrees with Alinsky's analysis, and there are examples of effective social movements grounded at least in part in collaborative conceptions of engagement (Schutz, 2019). However, the goal here is not to deny that collaboration can be useful in public at times, or that different kinds of strategies work in the public realm in different ways. Instead my point is that frequently collaboration it is not the most productive approach, and citizens must be prepared for this reality.

Organizing for Power[3]

Alinsky was not the first community organizer, of course, but his work represents one of our most comprehensive frameworks for social action. Alinsky's (1946, 1971) work responded directly to progressive conceptions of social action and change popular during his time. In fact, he developed his vision of community organizing by abandoning a progressive-oriented community youth support program he was supposed to be directing. He decided that the youth program was mostly a waste of his time, and instead worked with local labor organizers, developing his first power organization in the desperately poor Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago (Horwitt, 1992).

In Back of the Yards and elsewhere, Alinsky developed a series of concepts in opposition to core progressive assumptions about civic action. For our purposes, Alinsky made two key assumptions about the nature of the public realm that inform an alternative vision of civic practice. He believed (1) that in much of their lives most people are largely driven by self-interest, and (2) that the powerless generally only gain power as a collective, in solidarity. First, Alinsky (1971) argued that people were usually driven not by some general desire to support or work together with others but by *self-interest*. Pure 'altruism', he believed, 'is a myth' (p. 53). He found that powerful people supporting the status quo, for example, rarely responded to calls for empathy. They had little interest in working together with others to change situations that benefited them (and, as Alinsky noted, the status quo generally exists because it benefits someone). Politicians, for example, hold listening sessions where they don't really listen much, already having decided on a course of action. Further, the powerful themselves are pinned in a matrix of influence and tradeoffs with other powerful people and institutions. In fact, if they agree with you, they may actually want you to demonstrate your power and make it possible for them to act with you. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said to an activist, 'I agree with you. I want to do it. Now make me do it' (cited in Goodman, 2009).

This vision of self-interest, however, was not simply about selfishness. Instead, organizers in the Alinsky tradition seek people for their organizations, for example, who have deeply rooted motivations for their engagement – people you can depend on over the long haul. As Michael Jacoby Brown (2006)

notes, organizers understand 'self-interest' to include 'our whole selves, our stories and memories and the relationships we have with close friends and family. It involves all that makes us tick and why' (p. 154). Even Mother Teresa, on this reading, had a 'self-interest' (Chambers, 2000). There were particular issues she cared about, and issues she did not care so much about. She had a vision of how the world should operate and of the best approaches to move in the direction of a better world, facts that those who engaged with her could attest to. Organizers understand that the powerful also can have complex motivations – learning about the individual self-interests of the powerful can be key tools for influencing them and possible bases for negotiation or collaboration.

Second, Alinsky (1946, 1971) argued that the relatively powerless can usually only gain power if they come together in solidarity. The 'people' cannot come to the powerful as a group of individuals, all willing to share their own unique perspectives. This is simply an invitation to be ignored or for them to use strategies designed to split your group into factions, where you squabble among yourselves instead of acting together.[4]

Because the powerless don't hold the levers that control institutions or have large amounts of money, their only resource is in their own bodies. Power only comes from acting in unity when confronted with oppression. Unions have always understood this principle. Workers can only stand up to management when they are able, as a collective, to shut the enterprise down. If too many people walk across the lines between 'us' and 'them', the battle is lost (Rose, 2000). The same is true for community-based organizations which, when they act collectively, can conduct actions that threaten the self-interests of the powerful through picket lines, marches, sit-ins, boycotts, and the like. Alinsky's was a vision of social action rooted in centralized public leaders who can present the demands of the collective in the realm of the powerful.

Certainly, people should start by attempting to collaborate with those who control the forces that affect their neighborhoods, for example. But when this fails, as it generally does on issues that touch the core self-interests of the powerful, one way to respond is collective confrontation. Even if a community group is able to bring the powerful to the table to negotiate (or perhaps collaborate), an organization must maintain its base of solidarity, negotiating not as a collection of individuals but as a single unit with a collective set of demands. They must always be ready to demonstrate their power again in order to maintain the dialogue. A common motto of organizers is 'no permanent enemies, no permanent friends'. You are our friend as long as you treat fairly with us; the moment you do not, you become the opposition again. To dissolve into individuals is to give up the power that forced the negotiations in the first place: such a dissolution is in the interests of the powerful.

To reiterate: Alinsky argued that collaboration won't work in the realm of power because the powerful act out of their self-interests while caught in a grid of power and influence that restricts efforts to change the status quo. Further, the powerful generally only take others who also hold power seriously enough

to actually negotiate with them. Attempting to collaborate as individuals with the powerful disperses what little power the relatively powerless can generate through solidarity.

What Is the Place for 'Public' Collaboration?

Progressive democrats understand, of course, that the world is not always or everywhere a happy collaborative place. Progressives like Dewey (1922) built their conceptions of democracy amidst the brutal battles between capital and labor at the turn of the twentieth century. Dewey was a pragmatist and the argument for teaching collaborative forms of civic engagement as the pinnacle of democratic practice is at least apparently a pragmatic one. Fundamentally, he and other progressives who developed the model of democracy so popular among today's progressives in classrooms believed that conflict was a dead end. To survive and flourish, humanity needs to acknowledge that we are not in a 'zero sum' world, that everyone will benefit if we find common cause. As a result, the Deweyan argument goes, we should educate children for this collaborative world – anything else simply leads us all in the wrong direction. There is an 'intrinsic continuity of ends and means' (p. 377) and, as a result, we cannot use means that would take us in the wrong direction – away from collaborative practice. In schools, Dewey argued, educators are involved in 'purifying and idealizing the existing social customs' (p. 27), eliminating the negative aspects, and developing 'habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder' (p. 115). If we can educate enough children in this way, while trying to sway the wider public in our direction through the media, etc., perhaps we can develop the shared practices we need to move forward into more authentic democracy in the civic realm (see Westbrook, 1991).

It is important to understand, however, that this is not a binary decision. The issue is not whether to teach practices of collaboration but, instead, what *place* such practices will play in the public realm and what we will teach students about this relationship. In fact, Alinsky-based organizers are strong defenders of collaboration. However, they believe it belongs *within* organizations, not generally in the realm of power in engagements with the powerful. And they don't believe we will ever reach the kind of collaborative democratic world Dewey envisioned – we can't escape from self-interest.

Internally, as community organizing groups work on common issues, they can be a hub of wide-ranging dialogue and experimentation. The process of coming together on a shared set of demands and tactics requires deep engagement among participants. What appears in public, then, is, in a sense, an illusion. A group acts as if it were a single actor with members walking apparently in lockstep behind leaders. But if you looked through a window onto the groups that worked to prepare this public presentation you might see a vibrant democratic dialogue. Solidarity is a strategic decision often maintained

through numerous and sometimes fractious engagements behind the scenes (see Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001).

The problem with dominant Deweyan visions of civic engagement is not that they involve collaboration. Instead, those in the Alinsky tradition believe that they misrepresent the *place* of collaborative practice in the public realm. Dewey presented his democratic vision as an end goal for public action. He wanted educators to act as if the public were a place that could be collaborative so that the society could make it actually collaborative sometime in the future. The school was supposed to be an 'embryonic society' (Dewey, 1991, p. 18) sowing seeds for the social practices of the entire society. From an Alinskyan point of view, however, even if we believed such a collaborative world was possible, it is difficult to understand how citizens trained to be collaborative get there through the numerous barriers of those (especially the powerful) who will not participate in collaboration.

An Alinskyan approach to civic education would approach collaboration differently. While not opposed to the idea that collaboration is sometimes possible in public, it would generally treat realms of collaborative practice as *preparatory* to emergence into public dialogue with other powerful groups and not as a model of the civic realm writ large. With apologies to Dewey, I believe that this is a more 'pragmatic' vision of the place of collaboration. Collaboration becomes one tool out of many that can contribute in different ways to public engagement. This is how actual community organizing groups often operate, with a multitude of spaces and practices: Robert's Rules of Order in more formal spaces (often among formally elected leaders), relatively open discourse in fluid issue committees and work groups, role plays to prepare leaders to engage with the powerful, and more (Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001).

Again, it must be acknowledged that classrooms are generally not places where teachers can prepare students for engagement in conflict in public. Often the 'oppressive' institution students are most concerned about is the school itself, and supporting social action against the school is a good way for an employee to get fired. Nor are teachers necessarily trained to be community organizers. Nonetheless, there are ways to help students more generally understand the place of collaboration in the civic realm. For example, discussions of case studies, like the example of the civil rights movement in the USA, can explore the concrete strategies people used to build power in myriad spaces, and the difference between the public understanding that Martin Luther King was in charge with the fractious reality of constant dialogue and strategizing internal to the movement (see, for example, Morris 1986).

Ultimately, I agree with Alinsky's argument that the commitment to collaboration as the ruling practice of the public realm is not fully coherent. As Alinsky (1971) argued in his last book, speaking back to the progressive student organizers of the 1960s: 'Standards of judgment must be rooted in the whys and wherefores of life as it is lived, *the world as it is,* not our wished-for fantasy of the world as it should be' (p. 26, emphasis added).

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Notes

[1] The best place to see this practice is actually not in Dewey's own writings but in a book written by two teachers from the laboratory school, Anna Camp Mayhew and Katherine Camp Edwards (1936), which lays out how they actually introduced students to collaborative practice in the Laboratory School where he developed much of his vision of democratic education.

[2] Democratic theorists in the Deweyan vein have agreed with Alinsky. For example, James Mansbridge et al (2010) have argued that authentic deliberation can only happen when both sides hold power. They note that if 'one party has greater power ... the less powerful party may appropriately increase its power to equal the first, thus producing ... an approximation to the ideal of no power in the deliberation' (p. 82).

[3] For my description of how organizing groups operate, I draw from my own experience working with different groups. Informative case studies that describe key characteristics of the operation of Alinsky-based organizing groups include Shirley (1997) and Warren (2010).

[4] See Rose (2000) on the tension that emerges between labor unions and progressive environmental groups, for example, when the environmental groups fail to grasp this reality and try to engage with the powerful as individuals in ways that may seem to betray organizational commitments to common demands.

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