ON WHAT’S FISHY ABOUT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In a series of essays Stanley Fish has argued that “civic engagement” as a goal of the academy is at least misguided, if not, immoral.1,2,3 This claim is especially provocative given the ubiquitous commitment of educational institutions and educational associations to civic engagement. Civic education is clearly the contemporary currency of liberal education. Muhlenberg College aims to equip students with “ethical and civic values.”4 Rollins College “educates students for responsible citizenship and ethical leadership.”5 Iowa State University, a land-grant university, has the goals of assuring that students acquire “an understanding of humane and ethical values” and preparing them “to be productive and responsible citizens of the world.”6

The civic engagement movement is a mechanism to bring about these aims and goals. The American Association of Colleges and Universities is the leading professional organization promoting the virtues of liberal education. “The AAC&U vision of liberal learning includes a strong focus on developing students’ civic capacities, their sense of social responsibility, and their commitment to public action. AAC&U initiatives help campuses to develop avenues through which students learn about the promise and reality of American democracy and develop a commitment to participating in building more just and equitable communities here in the U.S. and in the global community. AAC&U projects . . . enable students to gain knowledge, but also to learn how to use knowledge ethically in the service of the public good.”7

Certainly, the more students know about writing, history and biology the more likely they are to become good citizens. But setting out to form good citizens, according to Fish, is a very suspect project. In what follows Fish’s suspicions will be examined.
FISH’S THREE ARGUMENTS

Fish’s case against institutions of higher learning attempting to inculcate in their students moral and civic responsibility includes three arguments set against a background distinction between academic values and activities versus ethical and political values and activities. The former includes the values of clarity and truth, and the activities of doing research and grading papers. The latter includes the values of justice and compassion, and the activities of championing workers’ rights and improving the lot of the homeless.

Fish is known for defending the thesis that deep down all areas of discourse including science are, at least in part, political. Nevertheless at a different level of analysis he believes it makes sense to contrast the academic with the political. He is contrasting, we might say, the academic with the crudely political or a disinterested search for truth with overtly partisan activities.

This is all quite surprising and loaded with assumptions. It needs serious defense. But in what follows I grant the sharp distinction Fish uses and look at where he can go with it.

The first argument is that as institutions and faculty pursue the moral and civic education of their students they typically neglect their first duty — the academic development of those students. He illustrates this tendency from his experience with writing programs. “This has spectacularly been the case in the teaching of writing, where the twin emphasis on personal development and the appreciation of other cultures, especially those that have been marginalized and/or oppressed, has been an all-out disaster because very few students have actually been taught to write.”

The university curriculum serves an increasing number of ends. If new ends push out or weaken the traditional ends, especially the end of students learning to write, that would be a great loss and a great mistake. (We can, of course, argue about the best pedagogy for teaching writing.) It also would be a mistake to have faculty stray from their area of expertise. They should do what they were trained to do and do it well.

None of this, to use Fish’s example, shows that the appreciation of other cultures is not a legitimate curricular end. To assume so simply begs the question. Apparently the institutions cited earlier give it and similar ends a very high priority. Perhaps the curriculum needs to be expanded. Perhaps some traditional areas need to be given less space. Making these decisions is the meaningful work of curriculum committees.
The second argument is straightforward. Spending effort on developing moral and civic responsibility is folly for the simple reason that it does not work. Fish describes his own experience at Duke University. “. . . I saw no evidence whatsoever that its graduates emerged with a highly developed sense of civic responsibility as they rushed off to enter top-10 law schools, medical schools, and business schools.”

On the one hand, Fish’s experience hardly constitutes a serious examination of the effectiveness of civic education. On the other hand, he is correct that little evidence exists that these programs are effective. It is not difficult to believe that institutional commitment to moral and civic education is largely puffery with little real interest in curriculum development and assessment. Diversity initiatives are an illustration. After 25 years of “experience,” institutions rarely clearly define what they mean by diversity and their goals with respect to diversity; much less rigorously assess the effectiveness of their efforts. It is not uncommon to offer a smorgasbord of courses and claim the end is met.

Fish’s third argument is a critique of a specific method for developing moral and civic responsibility, viz., civic engagement. The outline of the argument is straightforward:

1. Faculty, qua faculty, should not take a stand on any political issue.
2. Civic engagement projects involve faculty, qua faculty, taking a stand on political issues.
3. Therefore, faculty, qua faculty, should not conduct civic engagement projects.

Premise (1) is clearly held by Fish. “. . . in my view no university, and therefore no university official, should ever take a stand on any social, political or moral issue.” Alternatively, “. . . it is immoral for academics of academic institutions to proclaim moral views.”

At times the support for (1) appears to be pragmatic. He makes similar points to the earlier discussed first argument. Faculty have plenty of trouble doing their academic job well. They should not add these political activities. More persuasive, but still reasoning pragmatically, he fears that if faculty engage in political activity they will be seen as another special-interest lobby and consequently the support for higher education will decline.

The pragmatic arguments do not get us very far. Surely, it is not okay, on Fish’s grounds, for the dutiful professor — the one who does
his academic charge well — to then engage, *qua* faculty member, in political activity.

Whether public support for higher education is helped or hindered by universities taking political stands is an empirical question. But even if it does hurt universities’ coffers, that is not a sufficient reason to avoid political activity, if it is central to a university’s mission. Fish, of course, believes it is not central, not a legitimate part of the university’s mission. But we need a reason.

Fish does hint at a more powerful theoretical argument. Thought about political and moral issues is essentially arbitrary. There is no truth to these matters. Hence there is nothing to be reasoned about. These issues have no place in the academic sphere where reason and evidence are to help us get closer to the truth, if not arrive there.

This is an odd argument for Fish to be making given his own academic work in literary criticism. But setting that aside, the argument is really a conversation stopper unless one has lots and lots of time. We are not going to resolve the issues concerning moral nihilism here. If Fish’s argument rests on such controversial notions, much of the sting of his position resolves.

There is a more modest and compelling rationale for (1). Political positions by their nature are often controversial. Reasonable people can take different sides on an issue. At least at some point in the history of the discussion of an issue, the evidence underdetermines which side is correct. Underdetermination is typical of current, actively discussed and pressing issues. Fish finds no fault with teaching about abortion, workers’ rights or diversity. In fact, he would probably argue that such issues are a central part of a good liberal education. His problem is taking a stand or proclaiming a position on these topics. To do so necessarily goes beyond the evidence to non-rational methods, i.e., various non-rational techniques of persuasion such as appeals to sympathy and self-interest. For Fish taking a stand is not simply saying I believe so and so given the preponderance of the evidence. It is trying to persuade others by means beyond marshalling the preponderance of evidence.\(^\text{13}\)

On this reading premise (1) is quite plausible. The project in a university course that deals with social, political or ethical issues is to help students form beliefs on the issues based on reason and evidence, i.e., the promotion of rational autonomy. Faculty taking a stand or, for that matter, even asserting their position may hinder this process. The mere authority of the teacher may add non-rational elements where they distort the basic project. To actively use non-rational methods to persuade
students is contrary to the academic project. The goal in such courses
should not be to get students to believe or hold the “correct” position,
though it would be fine if they did so, but to get them to form their
beliefs on the basis of the available evidence and rigorous reasoning.
Sometimes it is easiest to convince students of the “correct” position by
shoddy reasoning, avoiding certain evidence and appealing to extra evi-
dential matters. If this is what Fish is condemning, surely he is right.

The third argument then rises or falls on the strength of premise (2)
— civic engagement projects involve faculty taking a stand on political
issues. We need to recognize at the outset that universities are not very
precise or clear in saying what they mean by civic engagement. A great
variety of activities both in and outside the classroom fall under the ban-
er of civic engagement. What Fish needs to show us is that a significant
number of these activities by necessity involve faculty taking a stand on
political issues.

He provides not a single case study that makes his point. He does
discuss agitating for workers’ rights and taking positions on welfare
reform and campaign finance as though the very mention of these causes
would bring examples to mind where faculty take a stand on these issues
and involve their students in acting on that stand. We could leave Fish
with the unmet burden of persuading us of (2). But it is worth looking at
a widespread pedagogical practice that has the ring of what Fish finds
suspect.

**SERVICE LEARNING**

Service learning sometimes involves using one’s labor to help meet a
community need, volunteerism, e.g., working in a soup kitchen. Obvi-
ously one learns many things from this experience and hopefully devel-
ops a desire to continue to support one’s community.\(^{14}\)

There are other service learning experiences which are overtly aca-
demic and fit purposefully into one’s major or general education pro-
gram. The University of Colorado and Cornell University have concise
and clear definitions of service learning.

**Service Learning**: A method under which students learn
and develop through active participation in thoughtfully orga-
nized service experiences that meet actual community needs,
and which are coordinated with a formal educational institution
to address and support an academic curriculum.\(^{15}\)
Service Learning: Service learning is an instructional method that combines community service with a structured school-based opportunity for reflection about that service, emphasizing the connections between service experiences and academic learning.16

Consider an example, an education course on theories of teaching reading may involve the students in using and evaluating the theories in inner city after-school tutoring programs. In this case students are actively learning and addressing a fundamental community need.

If we treat the example as a model of an academically intense service learning experience, several general features emerge: (i) the selection of a community need or problem, (ii) the selection of an action or intervention to address the need, and (iii) an analysis or discussion of the success of the action or intervention. (i) does involve value and political commitments — in the example, that reading is a good thing and that improving the reading ability of inner-city children makes for a stronger and healthier community. More abstractly, the selection of a problem of concern always involves value judgments. In this case those judgments are quite innocent and non-controversial.

It is difficult to generalize about the origin of the actions or interventions. In the case under discussion, the theories being examined dictated the appropriate actions. On other occasions common sense, social service agency protocols, or any number of considerations including our political commitments may suggest actions.

The key element required to make this a service learning project is that there be an analysis of the appropriateness and fecundity of the actions. There is no reason why the guiding faculty member must take a stand relative to the analysis. In fact, as suggested earlier it would be mistaken pedagogically to do so. Hence there is a sense in which service learning involves value judgments or taking a stand. But the academic or learning element of the project is not necessarily infected by those commitments.

Perhaps Fish would regard the selection of “innocent or non-controversial” projects as more problematic than the gloss it has been given. There is a tradition in the liberal arts, especially the humanities, where the point is not to strengthen society in the conventional manner embodied in service learning or to be an apologist for any ideology including democracy. The humanities produces gadflies, not status quo worker
bees. The goal of the humanities is, in part, to uncover and examine the assumptions of our society. The more innocent, non-controversial, and habitually held, the more ripe they are for examination. The political or value commitments required for civic engagement projects ask too much of the humanist. They corrupt her true contribution in the service of the going received views.

CONCLUSION

Fish’s arguments fall far short of the generality he advertised. He has not shown that faculty, qua faculty, participation in civic engagement projects is immoral. The professor of engineering, nursing or education does not fail morally when she engages civically as a faculty member. Perhaps the position is interestingly different for the humanist. I suspect that we are all better off that some humanists, including Fish, think so.

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NOTES


8 For Fish’s “mature” views see Stanley Fish, Doing What Comes Naturally (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989). Fish espouses an anti-foundationalism where all discourse is rhetorical. “All modes of discourse are rhetorical, where “rhetorical” means proceeding on the basis of assumptions and distinctions that are open to challenge, even though there may be times when no one is challenging them” (p. 297-298). The going “foundations” of an area of discourse are established by persuasion — arguments and counter-arguments that are culturally and historically conditioned (p. 29).


10 Fish, “Aim Low,” p. 4.


12 Fish, “Save the World on Your Own Time,” p. 2.


