

The Importance of Play Past Childhood: Engaging in Civic Spaces

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Introduction

As I stepped into my leadership studies class for the first time, I was immediately presented with two large circles of chairs. I chose a seat, and we all settled into the two groups. Our instructor began by posing a question: “When was a time you observed or participated in an experience that helped to make progress on an issue or problem facing the community?” We each took turns sharing our experiences. After every student had a chance to speak, we analyzed what patterns or themes surfaced in the stories we shared, which included those of encouragement, helping others, safety, and establishing a sense of belonging. Then we were asked: “If you had to *physically* represent what we have talked about today, how would you do that?” Blank stares ensued. It was the last thing any of us had expected to hear. Initially, I could not comprehend what I was being asked to do, though it was a clear request. Our professor repeated the prompt as eleven college students tried to figure out how to enact what we discussed.

Unbeknownst to us at the time, we had been modeling a *Community Conversation* activity that we would be engaging in with our community partners in the weeks and months to come. The leadership class in which we were practicing this is part of the Staley School of Leadership Studies at Kansas State University. It introduces a pedagogy that revolves around civic leadership and challenges students to engage with community members in an effective and innovative way. Reflecting back on the first day of class, I made an observation that held true in the three community conversations I attended subsequently: there tends to be a great level of hesitation when you ask participants to physically represent what they are verbalizing. However, based on my own work experience in an early childhood education and development center during high school and college, I kept coming back to one thought: having extensively observed children’s behavior, I am confident that if I challenged the group of children I had worked with, or any group of children for that matter, to enact their thoughts physically, they would have no hesitation at all. This thought prompted my interest to research play, the importance of its continuance into the adult years of life, and its adaptability to aid in leadership education. In this essay, I will address two key questions: how can incorporating play into leadership development improve community development strategies? And, what is the value of “play” in the process of civic leadership? I will then use the Community Conversations activities we participated in with our community partners to illustrate how such integration can be done effectively and successfully.

Civic Leadership

Chrislip and O’Malley (2013) acknowledge that a majority of people assume civic leadership is simply the interaction between citizens and government, focusing on “oversight[s] and operation[s].” However, the authors wish to “embrace an emerging understanding that broadens this description beyond government to include the role of ordinary citizens and others in the organization and workings of society to address common concerns” (Chrislip and

O'Malley 2013, 3). Kahl states in his work that “community leadership development programs supporting civic leadership are designed to create ‘leader-full’ communities wherein citizens have an increased role in active project involvement and decision making” (2012, 4). Andrews et al. (2010) studied what factors made certain civic engagements and associations more successful than others. They found: “Members who participate in group deliberations are also more likely to commit to the outcome of that deliberation” and “participation in organizational activities can also generate social capital within the group and in the broader community” (2010, 1197).

The Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) embodies this broader approach, providing four competencies of civic leadership that act as an open framework for conducting effective civic engagement. The four competencies promoted by the KLC are: (a) diagnosing the situation for which you are intervening, (b) managing self, (c) intervening skillfully, and (d) energizing others (O'Malley 2012). While civic leadership can have a vague definition and broad execution, it is all aimed towards creating healthier communities. These competencies guided our interactions throughout the leadership course, to convene group deliberations and create meaningful activities to build “capital” within the communities we visited. We used community conversations as a means to convene public dialogues in order to assess the needs of a six-county area in central Kansas. We partnered with the Konza United Way and Harvesters Community Food Network; our purpose was to learn from members of the community, so that our community partner organizations could adapt their abilities to better service these regions.

Importance of Incorporating Play

Play is defined as “an activity or behavior that: (a) is carried out with the goal of amusement or fun, (b) involves an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude or approach, and (c) is highly interactive among play partners or with the activity itself” (Van Vleet and Feeney 2015, 640). Typically, the word “play” has a strong connotation to children and their development. However, there is a significant amount of research across multiple disciplines, ranging from psychology to evolutionary biology, that demonstrates the benefits of play far outreach the younger, developmental years of life. In fact, many agree that play is just as necessary for adults as it is for children. One advocate for this idea is Dr. Stuart Brown, the founder of the National Institute for Play, who states that for children, play teaches them “empathy, how to communicate with others, and how to roll with the punches (Yenigun 2014).” He goes on to say that although the “learning processes [are] different than what occur in adult play...the ‘harmonics’ of this occur in adulthood as well” (Yenigun 2014).

Another proponent for this idea is Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, a design and innovation firm. In a Ted Talk, he asked the audience to help him recreate an experiment that emerged when Robert McKim, an engineering professor at Stanford University, researched creativity. In the experiment, everyone took out a sheet of paper and had 30 seconds to draw the person next to them. After the 30 seconds had passed, McKim noticed that many laughed at their drawings, some were embarrassed, and others went so far as to apologize to their neighbor for their poor recreations. McKim found that every time the experiment was done with adults, the outcome was the same: laughter, embarrassment, and apologies. However, McKim observed that when you perform the same experiment with children, they proudly show their neighbor their “masterpiece,” no apologies necessary. McKim believes and demonstrates with his experiment that as we get older, we pay more attention to the opinions of the people around us, especially those that we consider our peers. This fear of judgement from peers can lead to people being

more conservative in their thinking (2008). To continue to foster our own and others' imagination, creativity, empathy, and communication, it is important for us to continue to play.

Our Case: Integration of Play and Civic Leadership

The idea of learning through play can be adapted to fit a wide array of situations. Our course explored altering play to benefit civic leadership, in how community members and organizations engage and learn with one another. The community conversations, which followed the protocol inspired by the Roadside Theatre (Imagining America 2015), as well as influences from the work of public narrative from Michael Ganz (2010), consisted of three rounds of discussion. In the first round of discussion, we prompt the participants to share about a time that they observed or participated in an experience that helped to make progress on an issue or problem facing their community. After everyone has an opportunity to share his or her experiences, the group collectively analyzes the stories that were heard by identifying common themes, issues, values, and processes. In the second round of discussion, we ask community members to participate in an activity we referred to as *story statues*. The story statues were a physical embodiment of an issue or theme that surfaced through the stories they shared. Lastly, we gathered back together as a large group to discuss how to use all the information in the future to benefit the community.

Specifically, the story statues practiced throughout the semester provided an interesting platform in which to further analyze the communities we assessed. In my own observations, I identified three ways in which I felt the story statues aided our civic engagements. First, giving the community members the chance to decide which keyword, issue, or process to enact provided the opportunity for priorities within the community to emerge from community members' points of view. For example, during a conversation in the first community, we asked them to engage in this activity. When given the choice to act out some of the themes and issues they proposed, they chose an issue, *isolation*, that had not dominated the conversation. In fact, it had only briefly been mentioned in the discussion. As they began their enactments, they spread themselves out across the room to demonstrate the isolation felt by the community, and how this hinders their ability to efficiently and effectively provide services to everyone living there. We were not aware, until the moment we saw them on opposite ends of the room, just how largely the feeling of isolation affects their community.

Secondly, I believe that cooperating in the statues contributes to a deeper understanding of the concerns in their community. At a conversation in community two, we observed another inspiring product of this exercise. The facilitator explained the activity to them, and for a while they all stayed sitting, talking about what they might do if they were to act something out. After displaying the familiar initial hesitation, the group approached the activity with enthusiasm and a lighthearted attitude. Throughout the conversation, the women (all participants that night were women) constantly brought up the fact that their roles in the community overlap and intertwine. In their rendition of the activity, they started out in a large circle that had an opening. They would use that opening to bring new people into the circle, or help current residents that needed it. They displayed the action of helping by having a person in need stand up; another community member that helps with a particular service, such as locating housing, then reached out to her. After they have fulfilled the need of housing, the two people would walk together and go to the food pantry. After the food pantry, all three walked over to the woman that helps people find jobs in the community. This went on until the participant had everything she needed and was

able to join the circle as a self-sufficient part of the community to help provide for the next person in need, at which point the story can continue to repeat itself. Later on, we asked the women to reflect on the exercise and the initial hesitation the group exhibited. One participant responded: “It did not feel weird. I was worried about how it would look, but this is what we do on a daily basis.” They said that the circle they created represented the connectedness of their community and the services provided. In addition, through their play they were able to demonstrate the power of networking that they use on a daily basis to refer those in need of help. It was through this exercise that they realized just how much they depend on each other.

Finally, I believe this exercise helps to create connections and build relationships not only between community members, but amongst classmates, as well as between classmates and community members. I had originally thought that our interactions with community members would end after the community conversations came to a close. This assumption was wrong. Many of my peers created strong connections with community members at the conversations, they exchanged information and decided amongst themselves to keep in touch. After each conversation ended, we gave the participants the option to leave their contact information for us to follow up with them a few weeks after the conversation to check on their progress. I believe that the amount of participants that were willing to stay in contact can be attributed partly to how well the story statue aspect of the conversation went. It was apparent, just through the atmosphere of the room, that there was a distinct change in attitudes, openness, and comfort between the groups before the statues, and after. As the conversation began, participants seemed quiet or reserved. However, after participating in the statues, more participants were willing to share and open up to one another. It appeared that going through the activity together gave the group a sense of shared accomplishment, creating social capital throughout the process of the exercise.

Conclusion and Recommendations

I feel that through our exploration during the semester, we successfully incorporated play into civic leadership, and that ultimately the community members as well as the students benefited from this. Facilitating these conversations allowed both the students and the community partner organizations to understand these communities better, including the specific challenges each one faces. The community members exhibited a deeper understanding of one another by having an open dialogue about their roles in the community and how they can support one another. Lastly, the conversations set the foundation for building meaningful and lasting relationships between students and their surrounding communities.

These experiences throughout the semester impacted me directly in further developing my own style of leadership. I was able to practice facilitating conversations about difficult subjects, a skill that will continue to benefit me throughout my life and career. It opened my eyes to see how many people truly cared about their communities, and how people will come together for a cause they support. Civic engagements can be strengthened when members feel included in the processes and when activities that can create social capital within the group are utilized. These exercises also challenged me to think outside of the box and come up with new, unconventional, and effective ways to engage with others. I hope that our findings throughout the semester encourage and challenge others, such as educators, leaders, administrators, and community partners, to explore how play can be adapted to reach their goals.

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