The Development of Citizen Educators at a Remote Graduate Science Education Program

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Abstract: This paper describes and explains findings from an exploratory, interpretative qualitative case study that examined how a residential graduate program in science education, based in a wilderness area, supported the development of citizen educators. Data collection over a three-year period included 16 in-depth interviews with administrators, faculty, and graduate students; observations of class activities and campus community meetings; and document analysis of curriculum materials. Analysis of the data revealed how the culture of the campus community encouraged students to become citizen educators.

Keywords: civic education, higher education, field education, democratic citizenship

Introduction

Fifty years ago, the Valley Science Academy (VSA) was established in Taylor, a small quiet town that borders a large wilderness area in the western United States. (Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality.) When VSA began, it delivered one-week, field-based, science education courses for area high school students. Within just a few years, VSA incorporated as a non-profit educational organization, opened a residential K-12 school, an eco-tourism program, a conference center, and an in-service teacher development institute.

Today, Taylor welcomes visitors from around the world and the area offers a wide range of recreational activities. The region has a long ski season and a summer and fall ideal for hiking and backpacking. Expensive vacation homes pocket the canyons and valleys that branch out from the base of the majestic mountain range just west of Taylor. The VSA Main Campus, located on the outskirts of the town, is organized around new facilities that in design and construction appear similar to the welcome centers at western ski resorts. A second VSA campus, the rustic, smaller Canyon Campus, is located at the end of a box canyon in the adjacent wilderness area. The wilderness and the surrounding ecosystem are beautiful but also potentially dangerous. The region is home to wild megafauna and during the long winter, large parts of the region are routinely closed because road travel is dangerous and sometimes impossible.

In addition to the programs listed above and as a part of its regular Canyon Campus programming, VSA offers the first year of a Master of Science (M.S.) program in science education. Students enrolled in the program live, work, and study at the Canyon Campus. Enrolled as a cohort, graduate students complete nine courses over a calendar year and earn 32 credit hours. They also assist in the delivery of two-day science courses to visiting public school students. The graduate program began in the early 1990s and has a national reputation for producing well-trained, talented, and highly motivated educators. Admission to the program is selective and the tuition is high. Most students who complete the first-year program at the Canyon Campus finish their M.S. degree at partnering universities across the nation. Most of these then teach in public or independent schools. Some enroll in Ph.D. programs, usually in the natural sciences. Other M.S. graduates work as professional staff for non-profits (e.g., land trusts) and public-sector organizations (e.g., state wildlife and conservation agencies).

VSA administrators and faculty were explicit in stating that the graduate program was focused on education and science, not advocacy. Although the curriculum directly addressed the importance of sustainability, it did not advocate for policy solutions. As VSA administrators explained, the organization's stated mission was to connect people with nature and their community. The VSA graduate program was also committed, however, to a specific pedagogy and this was place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Hill & Brown, 2014; Sobel 2004; Theobald, 1997). Sobel (2004) observed that thoughtful place-based educators create learning activities that incorporate educational objectives grounded in places relevant to the lives of their students. Gruenewald (2005) described place-based education as "the process of connecting learners and their teachers through direct experience, reflection and action to the geographically specific cultural and ecological dimensions of community life" (p. 263).

In addition to providing a graduate level, place-based, field science education program, VSA faculty expected graduates to be engaged "citizen educators" prepared to lead in the community when their expertise was relevant to the issues before them. As June, a VSA senior administrator told me, the graduate program was committed to building "citizen action skills and

experience… through knowledge of place, knowledge of self." Oliver, a senior VSA faculty member, added that one of the program's goals was to create "change agents, that is, people who are going to be leaders, educators, active citizens." Joe, another administrator justified this goal by noting that, "We live in a democratic society and living in a democratic society requires engaged active citizens who are willing to understand communities – small and large – and act within those communities." VSA administrators and faculty agreed, therefore, that an important outcome for the graduate program was to prepare highly effective place-based educators and field scientists who would also live and work in their community as engaged citizen educators.

When I asked how VSA developed these citizen educators the faculty said they observed this capacity under construction in class exercises. But, they acknowledged, the program's courses were primarily focused on instructional methods and field science. The more important factor contributing to this development, they agreed, was the overall experience students shared while living together for a year in a small wilderness community.

VSA had data to confirm that the Canyon Campus culture encouraged students to become citizen educators. When I reviewed the results from a recent survey of graduate program alumni, I observed that just over 100 respondents commented on their experience at the Canyon Campus. Overall these respondents indicated that they were now significantly engaged in their community. They said their experience at VSA made them more effective in their roles as teachers, civic leaders, community organizers, public officials, land managers, and conservation agents. And, they attributed this capacity to their year-long experience of living, working, and studying at the remote Canyon Campus. But, I wondered, how was this capacity developed? When I spoke with VSA graduate faculty about this, they struggled to provide a detailed account of this phenomenon. They said it just seemed to happen. What I wanted to know, therefore, was *how did the Canyon Campus experience encourage students to become engaged citizen educators in their community?*

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research was constructed from empirical findings and conceptual insights reported in the literatures of citizen engagement, civic education, and place-based education. This framework balanced the need to enter the research with a baseline understanding of why civic education has become a critical priority but also how it might be addressed in nontraditional settings like those found in the VSA graduate program.

Citizen Engagement

Social scientists report that America is suffering from a decline in citizen participation in political and community affairs (e.g., Kanter & Schneider, 2013; National Task Force on Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement, 2012; Putnam, 2015; Skocpol, 2003). For example, among the world's democracies, "the United States ranks 139th in voter participation" (The National Task Force, 2012, p. 1). During 2010, only 10 percent of adults contacted a public official (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This low level of political engagement varies among different groups of Americans. Older and college-educated Americans are more engaged than younger Americans and those with only a high school diploma (Putnam, 2015). Americans growing up in low-income families tend to be less engaged than those growing up in middle or high-income families.

Some researchers have argued that participation in the political life of communities is not easily measured, so generalizations based on age, education, and class should be offered cautiously (e.g., Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Still, it appears Americans are becoming less aware of local political issues and less knowledgeable about how people in other groups live (Putnam, 2015). This can lead to cultural isolation, polarization, and the risk of viewing others or "out-groups" as a threat (Mason, 2018).

Civic Education

Traditionally, in the United States, public schools were where students learned about American democracy and public issues and problems (Putnam, 2015). Yet, as The National Task Force (2012) reported, cuts to public education during the first decade of the 21st century led to elimination of high school civics courses in half of the states. Today, only nine states and the District of Columbia require a full year of civics (or American Government) in a public high school curriculum (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Additionally, because the quality of a public education is closely linked to the social and economic well-being of the community, students from low-income families often do not have many opportunities to experience advocacy, negotiation, and compromise in instructional or extra-curricular settings designed to facilitate growth (Putnam, 2015). American higher education institutions are facing their own challenges in preparing students for an active role in their democracy.

At American colleges and universities, civics education is frequently subordinated to other priorities such as STEM education or the development of vocational skills. Civics courses are often treated as an "afterthought" in curriculum development (Boyte, 2015a). Colleges and universities have some responsibility for these problems. The academic terminology of civic education is confusing and undermines efforts to advocate for funding to support such initiatives (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). In the higher education literature "civic engagement" may refer to instructional strategies or educational programs (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012). Fortunately, some clarity is now emanating from the scholarship. Three broad categories of institutionalized civic education are now commonly acknowledged (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

"Civics coursework" typically takes two forms. First, civics may be taught in traditional credit-bearing courses focusing on government institutions. These courses, usually offered by Political Science faculty, examine the history and development of the federal and state legislatures, executive branches, and judiciaries. Second, coursework across the disciplines may incorporate a service learning component where students serve at a public or nonprofit agency such as school or foodbank (e.g., Ricke, 2018). Students engaged in service learning often have direct experience with people caught at the intersection of structural inequalities and the policies attempting to mitigate them (e.g., Tinkler, McGann, & Tinkler, 2017).

"Civic engagement programs" are commonly organized as a part of undergraduate majors and build on student learning in coursework but then go beyond this to study complex community problems transcending specific disciplines (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). These programs usually privilege the institution in community partnerships. They assume "the experts" reside at the university, not in the community. Knowledge is produced by academics and then applied in the field. Engagement may be sustained but it is apolitical. This means academics often adopt a positivist, neutral, technical approach to problem solving, in service to the community.

"Democratic engagement" initiatives offer a new and more balanced collaborative approach to student learning and community problem solving (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Participants acknowledge that experts may be on campus or in the community. Problems are identified collaboratively and knowledge is co-created. Engagement is sustained over an extended period of time, not limited by the academic calendar. And, the outcomes of engagement are ambitious; the shared work is intended to serve as an opportunity for student learning, community improvement, and as a critical step towards building "an inclusive, collaborative, and deliberative democracy" (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011, p. 22).

Each of these forms of civic education assumes that most important learning is a consequence of structured educational activities. Each approach assumes a socialization conception of civic education where students are prepared for insertion into an already existing political order and the primary goal is to teach them how to operate within that order (Biesta, 2011). We have long known that civic participation is a consequence of many different kinds of experiences. But, as Engbers (2016) observed, "little attention has been given to the diversity of institutions and community level policies that might influence civic and political participation" (p. 55).

Place-Based Education

Place-based educators design learning activities grounded in student experiences at specific places relevant to educational objectives (Sobel, 2004). Advocates of place-based education identify several benefits resulting from the effective use of this holistic pedagogy. It provides a concrete context for identifying problems or issues. Students understand how the problem or issue under study is relevant to real places and real people. Place-based education has served as a guiding construct for (a) outdoor education (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), (b) sustainability education (Warr Pedersen, Pharo, Peterson, & Clark, 2017), (c) ecological & environmental education (Orr, 2004; Thomashow, 1996), (d) urban education (Ward & Fryson, 1973), and (e) rural education (Theobald, 1997).

Regrettably, there is only limited dialogue between place-based education researchers and civic education researchers. And yet, as Gruenewald (2003b) observed, place-based pedagogies can help citizens learn how to advocate more effectively for "the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit" (p. 3). Accordingly, it appears likely that place-based education, which foregrounds the experiences of people, might be a valuable pedagogical complement to traditional American civic education which emphasizes the role of institutions in preparing citizens for political democracy (Boyte, 2015a).

Considered collectively, the findings and insights reported in the literature show that traditionally, public schools and higher education have been critical institutional resources in developing the skills, knowledge, and values that Americans rely on to participate in our democracy. However, it is also apparent that the development of this capacity may be supported by a variety of experiences. The research method designed for this study was informed by my theoretical framework but also open to findings grounded in the experiences of my participants and therefore distinct from those noted in the established literatures.

Methods and Data

The research question guiding this inquiry was *how did the Canyon Campus experience encourage students to become engaged citizen educators in their community?* Because the focus of the research was on the experiences students shared while living, working and studying at the Canyon Campus, the method needed to facilitate the collection and analysis of a variety of data in order to ensure the complexity of the experiences and the setting could be captured. Accordingly, I selected the interpretive case study method. This method is recommended to manage "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 40). My inquiry was naturalistic and I observed, studied, and approached participants in their daily settings over an initial two month period and then as needed to follow-up over the next two years (Patton, 2015). I pursued authenticity and trustworthiness through reflexivity, triangulation, peer review, and thick rich description.

Data collection was carried out in the following manner. During a sabbatical leave, I lived at the Canyon Campus during the Fall of 2015. After acquiring IRB approval from my university and VSA, a sample of participants was nominated by the administrators and faculty I initially encountered. As I explain below, given the small size of the program (15 students and 13 VSA administrators and faculty), many students and most VSA personnel teaching in the program were participants. Thirteen interviews were conducted over a two-month period at the Canyon Campus and three at the Main Campus in Taylor. Each of these initial interviews was conducted face to face and in a private setting. In each case, I began by explaining the study and inviting the participant to read and sign the consent form. I then followed a semi-structured interview protocol. These initial interviews were transcribed and then sent to the participant for member checking. When I began to note saturation in the interview data, I paused this part of data collection. Follow-up telephone and e-mail inquiries were conducted with seven participants during 2016.

During my residency at the Canyon Campus, and simultaneous with the interview process, I also observed faculty meetings, classroom activities, field trips, community meals, and community meetings. I carried out document analysis of curriculum, class handouts, and syllabi throughout the project. I completed extensive field notes on a daily basis to record my activities and observations along with my reflections. In July 2016 I returned to the Canyon Campus for three days of limited documentary data collection and shared tentative findings with a group of administrators and faculty. In 2017, I collected and analyzed additional documentary data from VSA administrators.

Framed by the research question, my initial analysis of transcripts and field notes was guided by qualitative case study methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2014; Willig, 2014). First cycle analysis (Saldaña, 2014) included descriptive coding (to identity topics), values coding (to capture norms and beliefs), and narrative coding (to note interpersonal experiences). Second cycle analysis (Willig, 2014) was primarily pattern coding and led to the identification and description of three categories and one emergent theme: The Ecology and Paradox of Engagement. This theme provided a foundation for my interpretation. My discussion of the ecology of engagement is presented in the Interpretation section of the paper. Discussion of the paradox of engagement appears in the Conclusion. Although not generalizable, the findings offer clues about how citizen engagement might be encouraged at programs similar to one offered at the Canyon Campus (Reichertz, 2014).

Findings

The findings reported were guided initially by my theoretical framework and developed through the use of the interpretative case study method. These findings are presented in a manner and sequence that honors the perspectives of my participants.

During my residency at the Canyon Campus, 15 students were enrolled in the graduate program. They ranged in age from 22 years to 30. Ten of the fifteen students were women. Only one of the fifteen identified as a racial or ethnic minority. I interviewed six students, three women and three men. Also, 13 VSA administrators and faculty were working full or part time in delivering the graduate program. All were White. They ranged in age from 27 to 56. I interviewed 10 of these administrators and faculty, four women and six men. Interviews with 16 participants comprised most of the data collected and analyzed.

Three substantive categories were formed from an analysis of the data. The categories were (a) how the formation of citizen educators was encouraged, philosophically, (b) how the formation of citizen educators was encouraged in community activities, and (c) the graduate student perspective or how selected graduate students accounted for their engagement with past, present, and future communities.

How the Formation of Citizen Educators was Encouraged, Philosophically

Several participants indicated that the development of citizen educators was comprehensive and systematic. June, a senior administrator who had taught in the graduate program for more than 20 years, began by observing that the process of developing citizen educators was embedded "…in our systems, in our education, and in our culture." June noted that given the wilderness setting of the Canyon Campus, everyone is expected to take responsibility for the welfare of the community. This encompassed cleaning up the dining area, doing laundry, and securing trash and recycling. It also included being alert to potential animal and weather adversities. June added that when she reflected on the community philosophy that transcends the entire organization, "I think about the really tangible 'hands to work' [philosophy] – you know, that we all have shared responsibility around caring for one another in the community." One of the other VSA administrators, Joe, explained that the "hands to work" philosophy, adopted from the Shakers in New England, is based on the recognition that people become more committed to each other, the community, and their ideals if they work hard together to accomplish a shared objective. I observed this on a daily basis while living at the Canyon Campus. When work needed to be done, the expectation was that everyone would contribute time and effort to the project.

Engagement was also encouraged, philosophically because administrators and faculty believed that when individuals engage with others and places this establishes connections that make individuals wiser about their environment and the people they are working with but, also about themselves. One of the faculty, Oliver, explained that,

> We're connecting people to nature, as part of what we're doing. But, we're doing that with the intention that those people can learn from those connections. We do that through science, we do it through stewardship, we do it through education. And, we send people out into the world who will be capable of connecting others to nature through science, through education, through stewardship. And, I think that people who do that are going to be engaged citizens.

Ronald, another instructor echoed this perspective when he stated,

> And, so, explicitly, we talk about connection to place and this leads to engagement in place... And, this, I would say, leads to decisions and informed engagement on a lot of the bigger challenges. And, so,... it directly involves civic engagement as citizens.

Arnold concurred with his faculty colleagues when he explained,

> So, not only do we want them [students] to learn about the dynamics of the place but, we want them to become immersed in the place and have meaningful experiences in the place. And, I think that through that lens, it's somewhat natural for people to become engaged in their place or their community or something that they care about.

These data show that outside of any specific instructional activities, the development of citizen educators was promoted philosophically.

How the Formation of Citizen Educators was Encouraged in Community Activities

My observations of VSA graduate program activities; analysis of curriculum documents; and interviews with administrators, faculty, and students revealed how the formation of citizen educators was also encouraged by community activities. For instance, this was facilitated through continuing active solicitation of feedback from the graduate students. In face to face Canyon Campus community meetings, administrators and faculty demonstrated that the graduate students were full members of the community and they were encouraged to speak up and discuss issues and concerns important to them. June described this aspect of the Canyon Campus culture when we met in her office for her interview. She explained,

> So, throughout the year, we have community meetings where grad students bring up issues… it's about constructive criticism, feedback, and responsiveness to that feedback. So, throughout the year we get that feedback. At the end of the year we do an exit interview with every student. Then we sit down and compile all that – we spend two days in retreat – thinking about, "how do we respond to that?"… And, I can tell you that we modify the [graduate program] as a result [of these exit interviews]. We're incredibly responsive and people are really jazzed at innovation and taking on new ideas – they're not closed to it and I think that's a direct success of who we are, … how we listen to one another, and how we listen to our adult participants… I have heard graduate students come back and say that… through that process, their ability to be heard and influence change… their ability to build common vision. This is more than what they got at any other place – they just don't experience that kind of deep community growth and depth.

June's comments underscored an aspect of the graduate program that other instructors and students affirmed.

The data presented above illustrate how student experiences were a consequence of an overall VSA mission and philosophy. But, these experiences were also shaped by unstructured activities that were a part of living and working at the Canyon Campus. And, the data provided yet another perspective of how the formation of citizen educators happened.

The Graduate Student Perspective

My review of the VSA graduate student biographies showed that each of the 15 students had completed a bachelor's degree and each had come to VSA with significant professional experience. Some had taught at public schools or independent schools. Others had worked for state conservation corps, wildlife sanctuaries, wildlife refuges, or outdoor expedition and guide companies. Most had significant national and international travel experience. And, each had a unique passion for learning about ecological systems and environmental issues.

When I asked one of the graduate students, Murray, to explain how his graduate experience at VSA was influencing him, he offered the following,

> I see [my future] engagement, very directly related to [my VSA experience] in two areas, specifically. One is the fact that we are living in a community setting as graduate students. Not only are we all taking classes based here but, the majority of us are living together. So, that really requires us to be doing our best as members of this community – which has been challenging quite frankly – and I would say we are doing pretty awesome all things considered… And, we have definitely worked through conflict and also taken efforts to know and appreciate one another in a way that wasn't done in [my previous] experience. And, I would say that both as teachers coming out of this program and also going back into whatever communities we do, having experienced things in this way, if we apply the principles and some of the actions we've done while we've been here, we should have a high level of engagement. So, that community aspect is one part. The second part is the leadership aspect of the program, which ties back into that community part. But, it also goes beyond it in the sense that, ideally, we are going to be shaping things around us once we leave the program and again we will take lessons learned here and applying them elsewhere.

When I asked another graduate student, Dominic, the same question he said,

> Well, there's a huge emphasis on community involvement and commitment in the graduate program. And, it's strengthened my understanding, it's improved my understanding, it's strengthened my commitment to my community. And, it's actually making me more hopeful because I feel that I am acquiring tools to effect change and to impart that sense of urgency on students that come through as well. And, that extends to the higher levels, the global level. So, students learn that they have no choice but to be a part of it. Because at this point, everybody on earth is dependent on each other, on a global scale.

When I asked Jennifer about her experience as a member of the Canyon Campus community she noted its relevancy to the rest of her life. Jennifer stated that,

> …engagement [with the community] means a lot of things to me. One, I think personally,… is that you [should be] involved in your community whether that's voting or volunteering in different organizations and taking the time to really connect with people and places. And, that can be a small community, just like your college campus or your state or your city or, like, when I travel to different communities in different countries, and get involved in their communities and learning about what they do that makes them successful.
> *Interviewer*: OK, and will engagement in the community be a part of your life when you leave VSA?

Jennifer: Yes. So,… I'll be graduating here in July and my first goal is to get more involved in the local community. Because I feel that since I've been a graduate student, I really haven't had as much time to volunteer and do as much service as I'd want to or as much as I have done in the past…

Interviewer: So, where did you acquire your commitment to service and engagement?

Jennifer: From my parents, probably. Yeah, growing up, we traveled a lot. And, the schools that I went to. So, I went to private schools K through 12. And, we would always have a community service day. But, we also had clubs that met during the day. And, then those clubs partnered with different organizations. So, from like a young age I was getting involved with different organizations. And, in high school [a student club] was just one that I felt the most connected to and relevant. But, my parents also – whenever we traveled – we would also do some service in a different country. So, that's where I got the international service commitment.

The significance of the three categories developed above is that the VSA graduate program was encouraging students to become not just effective field scientists and place-based educators but citizens who would seek a role in their communities. This engagement was not for purposes of personal gain or to achieve status but to live and work for the well-being of the community and its members.

Interpretation

My data collection and analysis affirmed that living, working and studying at the Canyon Campus directly contributed to a desire among the graduate students to become more engaged in their community. Life, work, and study at the Canyon Campus was experienced within a network of shared experiences, that is, an ecology of experience. I identified four aspects of this ecology.

First, VSA administrators and faculty intentionally established and reinforced cultural norms regarding responsibility, awareness, participation, self-reliance, hard work, caring for others, and respect. There was no room for slackers. The conditions were physically, emotionally, and cognitively challenging and I repeatedly observed community members helping others or waiting for others to ensure the group tackled class assignments and work tasks as one. Second, adherence to the "Hands to Work" ethic was a visible and concrete example of the shared commitment to the community. The Hands to Work philosophy also resulted in a mindset of shared responsibility that helped secure adherence to other core principles such as the value of place-based inquiry and the importance of science as the best method to understand environmental issues. Third, the VSA commitment to support the formation of citizen educators was strengthened by a commonality of interests that extended across the community. VSA administrators, faculty, and students worked and played together. Even when away from campus, they participated in similar activities (e.g., hiking, snowboarding, skiing, bicycling, etc.). And, most if not all of the graduate students were pursuing similar career paths that offered the promise of living and working in settings where they might regularly access and enjoy the wilderness. Finally, community life for graduate students at the Canyon Campus was regarded as demanding but, fair and good because the expectations were transparent and clearly related to their growth. VSA administrators and faculty exercised oversight of the learning environment

but, they were explicit in welcoming student perspectives as campus responsibilities were discussed and assigned. VSA had high expectations for the graduate students. But the administrators and faculty understood that they were expected to provide the kind of world-class graduate experience that mirrored the exceptional natural environment students enjoyed on a daily basis throughout the year.

Consequently, the data revealed that the VSA Graduate Program and the Canyon Campus had its own ecology or interlocking relationships and expectations that secured its culture and its core principles, including a commitment to the development of citizen educators. This was regarded by all participants, including the graduate students, as an exceptional and perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The strength of the Canyon Campus culture and community operated as a critical support for students as they managed the demands imposed by their experience. The culture and community worked well for students who were on a path leading to a career in field-based science education. But, not every graduate student had spent years on this path.

This was illustrated in my interview with another graduate student, Pedro. Pedro identified as Hispanic and his parents came to the U.S. from Mexico. The family struggled initially as they made their home in a western state. After finishing high school, Pedro enrolled at a good state university, graduated, and then worked as a naturalist and guide before coming to the Canyon Campus. When I interviewed Pedro, I asked about his youth and education and when he became interested in nature and science. After sharing his history, Pedro reflected on his first backpacking trip with a group of teenagers in a program that introduced them to the wilderness. And, this is what he told me.

> *Pedro*: I recall a specific moment, however, where,… we got to sleep outside one night,… and we were just looking up at the stars. And, it just blew my mind. It was unreal. Being from [a large metropolitan area], well,… you could see the light pollution. [At night, in the city] maybe you could see 10, 15, maybe 20 stars. But, when we were at Yosemite and we were sleeping outside, well, it was incredible…
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> *Interviewer*: So, your first backpacking trip was in Yosemite?
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> *Pedro*: Yeah and for the first time in my life – or for the first time in a really long time – I felt at ease, where I was. And, I guess just growing up where I was – like in school – it just wasn't the best fit for me. And, it felt like something was just missing. And, I was not a bad student. I was a good student. It's just,… I didn't see how that was relevant to what I was doing with my life. But, going out there, all of a sudden it just made sense. And, I was able to make a connection with this place – a connection that I really hadn't felt with any other place and just the lack of distractions – like cellphones – and the people that I was with, well, there was a lot of positive energy and people wanted to be there. And, so I guess, being in a place, with people who want to be there, and just being in a beautiful place, as well, I just felt at home. It felt really natural.
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> *Interviewer*: Do you remember the place in Yosemite?
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> *Pedro*: Yes, I do. I don't remember the name of it. But, I do remember the exact spot. It's near this huge granite dome and you walk to the edge of the dome and all you see is the entire Yosemite Valley, and I remember, there's this huge rock over to the right side and its small at the bottom but widens at the top. And, I remember climbing on top of that rock and looking out and thinking, why did it take so long for me to get here?

Pedro's experience highlights an important aspect of the Ecology and Paradox of Engagement. At the Canyon Campus, graduate students came to live and study in a graduate program that was

mission driven, with a fixed identity. Indeed, all of the VSA programs were driven by the organization's mission. And, almost all of the students were coming from social, economic, and cultural circumstances where a year of graduate student at a backcountry campus was consistent with the life they had lived. Thirteen had completed their undergraduate work at a small private liberal arts college or a flagship state university.

Students were drawn to the graduate program by VSA's national reputation, the quality of its faculty, and an institutional identity that fit with the rest of their lives. The graduate program was administered and taught by a staff of well-educated, experienced scientists and naturalists. But, all of them were White. VSA administrators and faculty unambiguously affirmed their commitment to enroll a diverse group of graduate students. The organization conducted place-based education outreach programs in economically disadvantaged communities around the country and, in some cases, overseas. However, the demographics of the people teaching and the VSA mission and philosophy (emphasizing science and education but declining advocacy) implicitly signaled a deference to an institutionalized distribution of knowledge and power that reinforced the values and priorities of the dominant culture. A graduate program developed in this context would still offer a world-class experience to students like Pedro but it would lack the kinds of knowledge and social capital found in a more inclusive setting (Yosso, 2005)

Conclusion

Several observations help situate the importance and relevancy of these findings. First, for at least a century, educators have noted that often the most important learning occurs outside the classroom and in the community (e.g., Dewey, 2008). Nevertheless, the institutionalization of civic learning courses, civic engagement programs, and democratic engagement initiatives (Boyte, 2015b) reflects how civic education has become incorporated into the culture of traditional, state-managed higher education. What remains largely unexplored is how learning in nontraditional higher education programs, like that offered at the VSA Canyon Campus, may support the development of the activist citizenry called for by Boyte (2015b). This exploratory study suggests that small residential graduate programs, attending to place, are quite capable of preparing citizen educators.

I do not suggest that experiences like those offered at VSA can replace some or all of the institutionalized learning that occurs in civic learning courses, civic engagement programs, and democratic engagement initiatives (The National Task Force, 2012). But, today, at many colleges and universities institutionalized learning occurs within a culture encouraging "hypercompetitive individual achievement" (Boyte, 2015b, p. 257) fueled by a "ubiquitous neoliberal ideology" (Barber, 2015, p. 200) and this has overtaken the broader civic purposes once embraced by higher education institutions.

In view of these circumstances, there is good reason to encourage the kind of living and learning I observed at the Canyon Campus. What goes along with this, however, is the reality that small highly specialized programs serve a population that is often self-selected without much racial and ethnic diversity. Environmental education programs remain undersubscribed by racial and ethnic minorities (Taylor, 2007). Ironically the paradox of programs like that delivered at the Canyon Campus is that although they may be effective in supporting the development of engaged citizen educators, they may also be limited by the mission and identity that make them

attractive to many others. And, yet if these programs become more widely recognized as fruitful sites for developing citizen educators, they might succeed in ways that more traditional institutions cannot. As Sandel (1996) observed, healthy democracies require "multiple sites" where all citizens have an opportunity to learn, engage with the community, and develop an ability to fully participate in democratic culture.

In an era when western democracies are plagued by an increase in political polarization and open hostility towards out groups (e.g., Mason, 2018; Mounk, 2018), it would be worthwhile to study the wide range of experiences relevant to developing a commitment to the community. Simultaneously, it is important to note that philosophers like Allen (2016) and Biesta (2011) are calling for a new understanding of citizenship that entails much more than a technical knowledge of how democratic institutions work.

Biesta and Allen accept that in any complex modern society, some formal instruction in civics is necessary, especially for young students. But, Biesta (2011) added, the focus of citizenship education should not be on replacing ignorance with technical knowledge. Instead, educational institutions should place more emphasis on providing young people with the open and undetermined opportunities needed to support development of a genuine desire to live and work in democratic communities. As Biesta (2011) noted, "learning here is not about the acquisition of knowledge, skills, competencies or dispositions but has to do with an 'exposure' to and engagement with the experiment of democracy" (p. 152).

Allen (2016) observed that even though the public has increasing doubts about the effectiveness of public education, people still see it as the solution to limiting the growth in inequality. Yet, education's more important contribution, Allen added, was developing students' participatory readiness or civic agency. The citizen, for Allen, is someone who chooses to live in a community with norms that guide and yet expose us to the uncertainties of a future where a more just way of life is sought but can never be fully perceived or understood.

What links the arguments developed by Biesta (2011) and Allen (2016), and the Canyon Campus experience is the recognition that civic agency (and the work of citizen educators) is a result of something more than learning the skills and knowledge needed to select political leaders or access government bureaucracies. The citizen is also a person who accepts the uncertainty of pursuing a better life for all and yet persists "driven by a desire for democracy or, to be more precise, a desire for engagement with the ongoing experiment of democratic existence" (Biesta, 2011, p. 151). The experiences of Canyon Campus participants highlighted the benefits but also the limitations of one high quality, fixed identity, mission driven field-based program. But, more importantly, these participants revealed how a desire for a more meaningful civic life might be constructed in a wilderness setting, far from the noise and drama of traditional institutionalized higher education.

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