

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Leadership and Democracy

Articles

Maura Casey

Michaela Grenier

Matthew R. Johnson

William V. Muse and Carol Farquhar Nugent

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Interviews

Dennis Donovan and Harry C. Boyte

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Afterword

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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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DEVELOPING LEADERS

The Life and Work of a Citizen-Educator Using Public Achievement (An Interview)

Dennis Donovan and Harry C. Boyte

Dennis Donovan was the principal of St. Bernard's Grade School, which became both a local and international model for Public Achievement, the youth civic education and empowerment initiative. In Public Achievement, young people, coached by older adults, work in teams on issues they have chosen. St. Bernard's demonstrated that, when done well, Public Achievement changed students, teachers, the school culture, and the neighborhood. Since 1997, Donovan has been the leading international trainer for Public Achievement. In this interview, Harry Boyte, a founder of Public Achievement, talks to Donovan about using Public Achievement for leadership education. The full history and impact of Public Achievement is documented in Awakenings Democracy through Public Work: Pedagogies of Empowerment by Harry C. Boyte (Vanderbilt University Press, 2018).

Boyte: Before we get into your own story and experiences, let me ask a question about what the Kettering Foundation calls “leaderful” communities. Rather than communities full of leaders, the foundation sees these as communities with cultures that encourage the development of leaders. They are rare, but they do exist. Does Public Achievement develop leaderful communities?

Donovan: There are many ways people think about leaders. I think of a leader as someone who develops people and who also is “political” in a cocreative way. They understand power and self-interest. They recognize that public culture is filled with complexities, diversity, tensions, and politics. From my own experiences, many people don't understand this.

Public Achievement, ideally speaking, generates environments that develop leaders. But it takes time to coach and teach the practices of organizing and cocreative politics. These practices need to be infused into teacher development, parent education, and work with students. It doesn't happen without intentional work to integrate civic and political practices into the culture of a whole community.

Boyte: What led you into education?

Donovan: My upbringing played a key role in why I went into education and how I thought about it. My mother was from an Italian family and my father was Irish and these cultures impacted my life.

My mother's Italian background was Catholic, with strong values of concern for others. The idea of family came first—the extended family. My father worked at Hamm's beer brewery. He was grateful to have grown up

during the Depression when you couldn't survive without other people. He had a strong work ethic and believed in doing good work in the East Side community, being a responsible person, and being involved in the church.

My father was a public person. He was active in the union and loved local politics. His greatest joy was relating to people. One time near the end of his life, I dropped him off at the grocery store. When I came back, he was talking with some Hmong kids. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm telling them about the history of East Side. They live here and have to know the history."

I was exposed to music from both sides of my family. It became a very important part of my life. But making a living by playing music was tough. I had a great social studies teacher in high school and decided to be an elementary school teacher.

Boyte: How did you get into teaching?

Donovan: I applied for a job in 1973 and became a sixth-grade teacher. I used what I had learned growing up, that you need to get to know people. I got to know the kids, coached three sports, and did home visits. The school was mainly working class and professionals from Irish and German cultures.

After five years, the pastor asked me to become the principal. I wasn't nuts about doing it, but he doubled my salary and paid for my master's degree. I was approached three times about becoming the principal at St. Bernard's, and the third was a good offer.

Boyte: What happened?

Donovan: When I moved to St. Bernard's Grade School, my vision was to create a safe environment and have high-quality teachers who connected with the young people. That's paramount. I believe teachers need to learn how to voice opinions, concerns, and conflicts in a public way. Teachers' lounges can be toxic.

St. Bernard's was very different from the first school I taught in. At St. Bernard's, students were from working class and poor families, with a lot of challenges. But I had a good relationship with the youth, even those who were challenging.

There was a sense in the parish that this was how they had always done things, and they didn't want to try anything new. I felt the teaching staff could use some improvement. Some were doing things that may have worked in the 1960s, but this was the 80s. Some were controllers and strong armed. There was a lot of negative politics, a swirling political whirlpool of craziness. At the first school board meeting, there were 50 parents protesting something and wanting to get rid of the pastor.

When I became principal, part of the job was to get money from the archdiocese for student tuition, so I had to be involved in a group called the Inner Urban Catholic Coalition (IUCC), which included all the urban Catholic schools and churches in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Boyte: What did you learn?

Donovan: IUCC was a church-based community-organizing project. The organizer, Paul Marincel, saw that I was nervous about talking in front of crowds. He got me to become chair of the education committee in the second year and was very forthcoming about honest feedback and the usefulness of constructive tension. He taught me how to run a meeting with an agenda, how to strategize before the meeting, how to have people pay attention, and how to do a collective evaluation of what worked and what didn't. I liked it.

Paul and John Norton, who was working for a church-based organizing group in Minneapolis, went to a training at the Gamaliel Foundation [a community organizing group for whom Barack Obama had worked]. In the late 1980s, I also attended their training in Chicago. I hadn't ever flown in an airplane. There was attention to skills like "one-on-one" relational meetings and developing public—as opposed to social—relationships. I became exposed to people of color and learned about racism.

We wanted to build power by creating an ecumenical organization, so we courted 50 churches in St. Paul. We held 4,000 one-to-one meetings. I spoke in front of groups. I was on public stages, and the organizers gave me feedback and helped me understand that it's not about embarrassing someone but giving constructive feedback. I got better at not trying to be liked and focused on being respected. I would say it was about developing a more public persona.

Fourteen churches committed to being involved in the new group, the St. Paul Ecumenical Action Council (SPEAC), in 1991 or 1992. We had the convention at St. Bernard's. A thousand people attended, and each chose education, housing, jobs, or crime in Frogtown [a neighborhood in St. Paul] to work on. I was chosen to be chair of the education committee, so I was also involved in all the work of the organization by being on the executive board. It was exciting. I was learning who I was. I was the same kind of performer in public life as in music. I became more strategic. I liked people. I was able to see in people the talents that Paul Marincel had seen in me.

Boyte: Community organizers talk about "developing people." What does that mean?

Donovan: I see three things.

One is the knowledge and belief that people can do important things. This means that the organizer believes in and communicates the capacity of people to be change agents.

The second is learning a set of skills to do everyday politics. These skills include learning how to map power relationships in a setting, deal with and even create tension in constructive ways, build public relationships, and reflect on experiences, both successful and unsuccessful.

The third is the importance of practice. Like a good musician, developing people takes practice, and for people to become public actors requires practicing the skills involved. They also need a mentor who supports and challenges them.

Boyte: What else did you learn from organizing?

Donovan: I learned how to get to know powerful people like Jim Scheibel, the mayor; labor leaders in Minnesota; Nils Hasselmo, the president of the University of Minnesota; Chief Finney of the St. Paul police; the archbishop; and every local principal. Our education committee in SPEAC worked with every school board member in the city of St. Paul, as well as with business-people, teachers, parents, and congregational members, to improve the school.

I also learned public speaking. Once, when I was preparing for a major speech, I did a practice session. The organizers said, “You suck. You’re not talking about your passion, your desire to empower youth and change education.” They told me to go seek out Reverend Battle [an African American preacher and a leader in SPEAC]. Battle laughed and invited me to his services. I developed more confidence by telling stories. He said, “You can work with anyone if you’re real, even though you will never understand what it’s like to be black.” I also learned about public conflict. People who were opposed called me a communist. Most people were not negative. They were really eating this up. They could see that my words were making sense.

My organizing experiences impacted the school culture. I knew, for example, we didn’t need two- or three-hour meetings. Our teacher meetings were focused and disciplined. They lasted 45 minutes and were productive. Teachers also learned about the value of agendas and how to put concerns and ideas on the agenda. People began to become real with one other.

Boyte: What did you like about Public Achievement?

Donovan: When you first described Public Achievement, I thought, “This could be the ingredient that would have the kids and teachers learn what I was learning.” I wanted to make education better. In my own life, I

hadn't liked education, and I wanted to create an environment where students, teachers, custodians, and everyone would grow.

We tried a Public Achievement approach in IUCC for Martin Luther King Day in 1991. Young people throughout the organization were given the opportunity to plan all of the activities and events. From this experience, I saw tremendous potential to do greater things through Public Achievement. I saw Public Achievement as a different kind of education, with less focus on the teacher and more on the student, and with student participation in decision-making. Students would work on things they cared about and would help direct their own learning. They would learn to perform on a public stage.

When we began Public Achievement, students blossomed. They were developing a different way of seeing themselves.

Boyte: How did you “develop” staff and teachers?

Donovan: Teachers and staff needed to share this vision, so I created opportunities for them to take responsibilities. Susan Francis, hired as a substitute teacher, said she was thinking of becoming an administrator. When I had to be away from the school, I put her in charge. She was worried. If there were a kid problem or a teacher problem, what would she do? I coached her and she did fine. Other teachers wanted to do student-directed thematic education. I encouraged them to present the idea to the faculty. Maintenance workers became involved. No one was more important than anyone else.

Boyte: What makes for an excellent Public Achievement program?

Donovan: It's important to have somebody in the school who understands Public Achievement as a way of doing school differently and a principal who sees Public Achievement as a tool to empower young people to be engaged with things that are meaningful.

The principal also needs to help teachers do the best they can. Public Achievement helps teachers, if they're open, to see students in a new way, to see that they're smart, creative, have potential, and have ideas about how things can be better.

At a good Public Achievement site, there is a core group of people besides the principal who want to take what's going on in the program into the school more broadly. Public Achievement is a way of doing classroom management differently. In most classrooms, the teacher sets everything up—the rules, the norms. The more students can be cocreators of the environment of a classroom, the more they are going to want to come to school. They feel invested.

Boyte: How do school environments change?

Donovan: There need to be trainings with school personnel so they can talk about their challenges, their highlights, their thoughts on ways to improve the school. The ideal is teachers and principals cocreating the environment.

Children are dealing with life situations that overpower what traditional schools provide. Students come with all kinds of baggage, not just in urban schools but in rural and suburban schools. Mental health is an issue with students of all ages. I see it at Maxfield Elementary School and among my university students.

They are also dealing with stress caused by family issues, societal issues, worry about the future, whether climate

Schools can't be isolated from issues that face parents and the community at large.

change is destroying their planet, and their future work. They worry, "How am I going to share my thoughts with other people?" A lot of things they keep inside. When they can't express them, they act out. Part of the challenge is having people around they can trust, who support them, to whom they can relate. It's important for students to have public conversations about things that matter to them. They need hope.

For the last four years, I have been working every month with lifetime offenders in Stillwater Prison in Minnesota. I've learned a lot about the relationships among poverty, education, and incarceration. Schools can't be isolated from issues like these that face parents and the community at large.

Public Achievement, at its best, works with issues that participants really care about. It takes skill and courage from teachers to invite students to work in a legal and nonviolent way on any issue that touches their lives. Oftentimes, teachers encourage only safe issues because of their own demons.

Public Achievement must also have coaches who are serious about their preparation and learning. The coaches must be comfortable with making mistakes and not having all the answers, able to relate to participants, and not afraid to work in a process that is messy and organic. It takes an individual who goes with the flow and who puts the time and effort into being proactive in bringing ideas and information to the group. Coaches need time for evaluation and reflection as a team in order to grow in their ability as coaches. We call the people who develop the coaches "coach coordinators," and they have the kinds of skills I saw in the community organizers I began work with in IUCC.

Boyte: Is this difficult?

Donovan: Yes. The coaches are usually college students, and, by nature, they are very busy. If they're volunteers, it's hard to hold them accountable. If they're in a class and the instructor doesn't make coaching a priority and just jams it in, the coaches will see it as another requirement rather than a way to grow democracy.

The best ways to get student coaches to take it seriously are by having paid coaches or by having Public Achievement as part of a major core requirement for a course. There needs to be ample time for coaches to think about what

Leaders also develop other people. They do not seek to be always at the center.

they're doing and why they're doing it. Debriefing is important. Our first coach coordinator, Jim Farr, a political science professor at the University

of Minnesota, was a great coordinator because he would talk with his students in debriefings about the implications of Public Achievement for doing democracy. The coach coordinator needs to see Public Achievement as a tool for making student coaches better professionals in their own fields.

Boyte: Dennis, talk more about your views of leadership.

Donovan: Leaders are usually seen as individuals who act by themselves to get things done, command the attention, and guide the behavior of others. I believe a good leader is different from this conventional view. A leader respectfully manages relationships. He or she needs to be open to growing, a listener, clear with his or her own self-interest and story, and open to making mistakes. Taking risks is crucial.

Most humans want to be liked, but this type of leader wants to be respected. He or she learns to make decisions without everyone being happy, but everyone can respect the decisions.

Leaders also develop other people. They see potential in others and understand that their power grows to the degree that they develop the next person. A good leader allows others to get attention and visibility. They do not seek to be always at the center. That takes time, energy, and talent to do. A leader gets clarity around the difference between the public world and private life, which creates more success in both arenas. A good leader does not make a decision without waiting for 24 hours of reflection.

Leaders have a group of people they can bounce ideas off of and a variety of people in different arenas they listen to. They don't live in a bubble. Such

a leader is a communicator and transparent for the most part, though not all the time.

Finally, good leaders have a public love of people. They care for humanity.

Boyte: Let me conclude with the dangers from the dominance of technology. More and more teachers say that robots and information technologies are taking over what was once the role of educators. Can the lessons and approaches of Public Achievement help create a response?

Donovan: Today, what is done in education, including how to use technology, is decided by a small number of people. And what they dictate regarding what students should learn is not always what students *need* to learn. Many decision-makers are moving toward the technology approach. It looks good for everyone in a school to have a tablet. But this doesn't mean that there is an improvement in what the students learn about how to interact with other people. In my opinion, technology used at home, in games, and in school can take away from that core need.

There is increasing demand for results-oriented learning. This is often only in the head and not in the heart or soul. This way of evaluating success eliminates many students. There is an increasing need for students to have not only basic knowledge but skills of how to engage despite differences and how to navigate the ever more complex world we live in.



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