

Engaging the Tea Party Through Pedagogy

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This paper describes the difficulties and rewards found by a cohort of undergraduate researchers as they engaged local Tea Party chapters. While gathering data as part of a research methods course, students found themselves in complicated territory, confronted by research subjects who were wary of higher education, and thus the students' motives and demographics. Our engagement with the Tea Party highlighted a number of challenging issues related to researcher perspectives and roles, and the relationship between higher education and community. Ultimately students benefitted by being placed in a situation in which they had to justify their presence and engage members.

INTRODUCTION

When used as a teaching tool, community engagement can be a productive part of the learning process. It opens options that would be difficult to simulate within a traditional classroom environment, but in certain contexts, it can also pose a challenge for both students and educators. In this paper I explore the dilemmas as well as the potentials involved in community engagement, specifically with local Tea Party movement organizations, part of an emergent social movement of the political right.¹ Such an approach illuminates a number of issues related to student and educator perspectives, and the role of researchers. It also reveals the relationship between higher education and community, and the deficits in students' educational foundations.

One aspect of a broader conversation about higher education and the political right involves the rights' critiques of higher education. While the right often frames higher education as a problem (due to its 'liberal' leanings), and while professors are able to speak to their experience, students have their own perspective, but they can lack the ability to respond as they might wish. This interplay between higher education and right wing communities reveals broader deficits and inequities of K-12 education. Many students do not understand, for instance, what the political right is, much less know how to conceive of what it means to have a political spectrum within which the right is located. Students in the U.S. can have substantial limitations in their ability to perceive complex social relations, undertake analysis of discourse, or even to formulate political positions. One of the issues to consider with regard to higher education is this: how do students make sense of right wing spins of their context, and what do they experience if they attempt to engage the right as an educational process? What does the process of engaging conservative communities reveal about higher education and student roles and socialization?

In 2010, I initiated empirical research focusing on the intra-organizational structures and the ideology of the Tea Party movement. A preliminary effort to recruit student research assistants quickly developed into a collaborative research effort that we formalized in an undergraduate seminar. The participants engaged in participant observation within local Tea Party movement chapters, and developed narratives

through which to examine the Tea Party generally, and to reflect on their own institutional locations as students in New Jersey.

Here, I will contrast some of the representations of higher education I documented during my research on the Tea Party movement in Northern New Jersey with the experiences of my students in investigating the movement. I should qualify that the project did not begin as an intentional effort to consider Tea Party portrayals of higher education, but as we proceeded through the process of developing our research collaboration, it became apparent that our seminar was using pedagogy and collaborative research to engage with a young social movement which—among other things—takes the legitimacy and structure of the current U.S. higher education system as a target. This included, by extension, our activities. Thus, the seminar became a space for students to engage in an exploration of social movement politics that complicated their understanding of their own educational processes; specifically, they came to grips with an agenda that understands the form of their education as an affront to the public good. Within this context I pose two research questions: What analytics are achievable through studying the right, as a pedagogical practice, that might not be so effectively realized only through other forms of learning or classroom activities? What are the obstacles and challenges educators should anticipate in using this type of pedagogical model?

The Tea Party and the Battle over Knowledge and Education

Part of the Tea Party movement agenda involves critiquing educational institutions. For Tea Partiers, including conservative critic Mark Levin, the project of salvaging America is an educational one that begins at home: “Parents and grandparents by the millions can counteract the [liberal] indoctrination of their children and grandchildren in government schools... simply by conferring their knowledge, beliefs, and ideals on them over the dinner table, in the car, or at bedtime” (Schmidt, 2011, p. 217). Similarly, Glenn Beck and other popular Tea Partiers compel parents and grandparents to take over their children’s education (Schmidt, 2011, p. 217).

The suspicion of intellectual elites is strong among Tea Party participants, and they avoid relying on professionals outside of the movement for information. In fact, participants argue it is ordinary people, not the intellectual elite, who should make decisions that impact their lives (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Goldstein, 2011). The Tea Party is especially contemptuous of “experts” who claim to possess pertinent knowledge that isn’t easily accessible to those who do not have specialized education (e.g., Skocpol & Williamson, 2012; Carbone, 2011; Levinson, 2011). Likewise, in their recent and seminal social scientific study of the Tea Party movement, Skocpol and Williamson (2012) heard many expressions of contempt directed at educated people who attempt to develop plans for or advise ordinary citizens. A number of members believe the nation’s crisis can be traced to people being “duped” into supporting foreign ideas by liberal elites, such as those housed in the academy (Goldstein 2011, p. 831). These attitudes were all consistent with the experiences of my students; however, it is worth noting that the budding Tea Party scholarship was published within the two years after the course.

The Tea Party and Generational Tensions

Though of course there is some demographic variation among Tea Party participants, the movement skews older, and this is especially the case in suburban and rural regions (e.g., Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Skocpol and Williamson (2012) found that Tea Party participants did not seem bothered that they are older; this is a noteworthy departure from their older counterparts on the left, who have been known to fixate on the issue of expanding to include younger generations, sometimes even attempting to cultivate youth leadership (with varying degrees of energy and success).

Part of the reason Tea Party participants take the lack of younger participants in stride is their belief that as older people, they have special wisdom and knowledge that needs to be cultivated and preserved (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). These ideas are coupled with a deeply rooted skepticism of young people and their concerns; there is a widespread belief among them that younger people have poor priorities, are overly entitled, and irresponsible neophytes.

Tea Party members identified young people as freeloaders: undeserving recipients of government

spending (as young people in general, and students in particular). This was often coupled with personal anecdotes of young relatives whose lack of success, in their perception, incited larger generational reflections. Tea Party participants' critiques of the younger generation ran the gamut from crude language to bad handwriting (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

Negotiating Research with Undergraduates

Involving students in research is a potentially mutually beneficial endeavor; the research of faculty members might be enhanced by student involvement and students get a rare opportunity to play a role in research projects (e.g., Swigert et al., 1993). This type of intensive undergraduate research training can give students an edge in traversing the current knowledge based global economy, and enable faculty to provide a critical component of the charge of universities to prepare them for these conditions (Gonzalez, 2001). Prior research has documented the way in which faculty headed research collaborations benefits students, especial those on the margins. For example, research mentoring programs for undergraduates of color have helped students to clarify professional goals, increase research and technical skills, and to help gain admittance into graduate programs (Crawford et al., 1996).

Despite the fact that research collaboration occurs most frequently in the natural sciences, social science and business students can learn research methods and their discipline more effectively by engaging in real research (Swigert et al., 1993). This is especially the case for fieldwork, in which the best way to learn the methodology is to 'do it' (Bogdan, 1983). By engaging in the community, students can learn more comprehensively about the social and practical experience of doing research, including its complex demands, negotiations, and rewards (Swigert et al., 1993).

Though there are benefits of including students in research that engages communities, the challenges inherent in doing so often provokes instructors to separate the methodological instruction from the actual research process (Schmid, 1992). One stumbling block for this type of research collaboration is the issue of uncertainty that arises. By analogy, we can examine health care instruction. In his article on training in the health professions, Donald Light (1979) argues that although uncertainty abounds in the context of providing health care, professional education centers on training for control. Uncertainty permeates social life, and it is manifest in the context of field work. In the face of new situations, people feel tense and try to reduce uncertainty as much as possible, something that might not be desirable or realistic in research with communities. There are other obstacles to structuring field work activities as part of a classroom experience. Schmid (1992) comments that this process typically amplifies all of the problems confronted by researchers under typical circumstances, since it enmeshes students with minimal training in local communities, which can create potential problems with legal liability, student safety, and breaches of research ethics.

THE SEMINAR: RESEARCH PRACTICUM ON THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT

My interest in the Tea Party movement piqued in 2010, given their increasing popularity and widespread claims of being "leaderless." My research questions coincided with on-going research examining the way in which social movements on the left leverage the Internet to sustain participant involvement. I extended this inquiry via a cross-regional study of New Jersey and Florida Tea Party chapters in order to fill a lacuna in the social movement scholarship related to leadership formation (Aminzade et al., 2001; Morris, 1999; Melucci, 1996). By examining diverse forms of leadership that arise in the context of Internet driven Tea Party movement activity, it becomes more evident that the Internet not only affects participation across movements with vastly different goals and approaches, but also shapes the structure, experience and role of leaders in a contemporary social movement.

The course was upper division and had thirteen students. Twelve of the thirteen students are female. Eight of them are white, while two of them are Puerto Rican, two are of African descent, and one is racially mixed. Eleven students were Sociology majors or minors, while the other two students had Catholic Studies and Anthropology majors.

The structure and content of the course (and the data we collected that term) changed, given the fact

that I had thirteen students to negotiate, each with a different skill level and interest in the project. I ran the course as an applied research methods and Tea Party special topics course hybrid. Students understood at the outset that they would receive a partial survey of the social movement literature, and also get some background information specifically on the Tea Party movement. They engaged in a variety of projects so they could have some first-hand experience with multiple research methodologies. Students documented Tea Party websites, blogs, and Facebook sites, compiled a year's worth of Tea Party related major newspaper stories and radio and TV transcripts, transcribed a five minute excerpt of Tea Party rallies or brief interviews from a rally, and all but one of them attended and wrote field notes for at least one of the three Northern New Jersey Tea Party chapter meetings occurring throughout the term.

The research had Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to the start of the class, and I consulted the head of the board about the addition of Tea Party meeting attendance and the students' involvement. Though researchers attending public events do not need special IRB clearance, she recommended the students be required to complete an approximately two hour Internet-based National Institute of Health certificate tutorial on the protection of human research subjects. They all provided the certificate by the beginning of our second class. Later in that second class period, I supplemented the information provided by the tutorial by discussing aspects of the content that seemed especially appropriate for our research project and activities.

For the last course assignment, I had them reflect on their experiences by writing responses to a series of questions related to how they dealt with any lack of "cultural competency," the benefits and disadvantages of being an unfamiliar outsider, what they found most and least satisfying or enjoyable about the research process, and how they dealt with any challenges they confronted while engaging in the research. I discussed with them the possibility that with their approval, I would excerpt their final reflection papers as part of an exploration of this fairly rare pedagogical experience. All thirteen students agreed to let me use their writing in constructing this article, as part of the research field notes and documentation produced by our research team. Some Tea Party meeting field note passages are also peppered throughout.

By engaging Tea Party communities, students revealed members' ideas about public knowledge, education, and educators. Considering this aspect of Tea Party ideology is worthwhile; not only did this depiction relate to the students directly, but it was especially relevant in the context, since they were attending meetings as college students and as young people engaging in the research enterprise as part of their higher education experience.

The Encounters

During the meetings, students and Tea Partiers needed to make sense of one another's roles and behaviors. From the perspective of Tea Party members, the students occupied multiple prospective roles, all of which are fairly objectified (e.g. pawn of some professor, potential recruit, young sidekick or sex object). The moments of engagement students had with the membership was often strained, and students attributed this to a generational gap, and what they perceived as a suspicious or paranoid attempt by the membership to assess what potential role or roles they might play. The attention they received was pronounced and a little surprising, given that the meetings they went to were just before local elections, and were thus very well attended (students approximated between fifty-five and eighty people at all meetings).

Students discussed the way their status as youth was pronounced for Tea Party members. Often this recognition of their age was coupled with nervousness. One student commented on the way their youth was noted: "Walking in we actually overheard people talking about how young we were, which is something they didn't need to highlight considering that the next youngest person...was around 33." Some acknowledgment of their status as youth (and potentially college students) was, in every case, followed up with an aggressive attempt to place the students. Another student elaborates: "As soon as we walked into the meeting we were bombarded with an enormous amount of questions by several different people. A lot of the questions pertained to our age...if we had simply been young people interested in the movement, their aggression would have been enough to scare us away." Another student attending this

meeting elaborated, “A few people approached us and jokingly said they hoped we were not here for a class project, which put us in an awkward situation from the get go. I told them that...we were here...for a research project, and we wanted to understand who they are and what they were fighting for from them rather than the media. They seemed fine with that response, but...the majority of [the] people were suspicious of us being at the meeting regardless.”

Students attending almost every meeting mentioned that their status as students in particular created a pronounced anxiety for Tea Party members. In her field notes one student recorded that a man approached them “immediately and nervously” and commented on their note taking. He wanted to know why, “namely was it for an assignment.” Once she explained that they were attending for an assignment, he further inquired about their political beliefs, and as the student puts it, “he seemed as though he did not trust us and was constantly firing questions at us to find out who we were.” The summer before this seminar, one student happened to purchase a dog from an ardent Tea Party supporter, who tried to recruit her to the movement. She made it clear to the dog seller from the onset that she was going to be taking a class in the fall in which she would be helping with a professor’s on-going research project on the movement. This student attended a meeting the summer before our seminar with her father, and we discussed her experiences during the first class meeting. When she attended her second meeting during the seminar term, she commented that “a woman immediately approached us and asked us if we were here for a class project and hoped that we didn’t have to report back to our ‘wacky teacher’.” Interestingly, the dog seller, who was present at both meetings the student attended, “silenced” this woman, “introducing me as her ‘young Tea Party supporter’.” When the student shared the incident in our classroom debrief, she said that she didn’t respond to the comment, since it was the dog seller’s characterization, and not her own. The student did follow up with the dog seller subsequently, and she made sure to re-articulate her status as a student in the class.

Students were sometimes antagonized by members of the Tea Party movement. One student commented that the membership is very “distrusting of us” and that students were not approached “respectfully.” She states further “they were not open to a Sociology student who was curious to know more, especially one who wasn’t waiving a flag and screaming ‘for liberty and justice for all’ during the pledge.” In response to some of the initial unfriendliness one student confronted, she concluded that she “could not see the older leaders of the movement giving up power for a younger person, or listening to the advice of someone younger. I think the older generation would be threatened that the younger generation would take over, and they are not willing to give up the stake that they hold in this movement.”

Given the negative reactions some Tea Party members had to their presence, students used various strategies to make the encounters as “normal” and “useful” as possible. One student explained that their anonymity “gave us an opportunity to ask some questions without having to commit to the party.” Though another student acknowledged that she “was very nervous that I would not know what to say if the people asked me questions, and thought that it would be very uncomfortable for me” her strategy was to be “as honest and vague as I could.” She was also one of many students that commented on the benefit of having other classmates there as backup: “It also helped that I was with a few other girls...If there was a question I was not sure how to answer, I would look to the other girls to help me out.”

Despite the fact that ethical issues in doing research was a developed component of the course prior to their encounters, their preparation still proved inadequate given the tremendous pressures students confronted because of the Tea Party movements’ conception of higher education as a political threat. To members of the Tea Party, their role as student researcher was inherently suspect and students often found themselves unable to negotiate a dynamic that involved multiple older people aggressively confronting them in an unfamiliar public setting. Though we spent time in class on the importance of being honest about our motivations for attending, one student divulged that she lied in response to members’ “overwhelming concern” with their presence at the meeting: “... When asked what we were doing at the meeting, I quickly said that we were with the republican student group at [our campus] and were eager to attend our first tea party meeting...” When she explained this in the following class period, I verified that this was an ethical breach while validating her anxiety about the position she was in. Given that the student attended only the second Tea Party meeting during the term, the scenario helped prepare us for the

likelihood that students would be approached at these big public meetings about why they were there. It also highlighted a tension between the vulnerability of students and their need to assume a role that is accountable as responsible researchers.

The encounters with Tea Party members illustrated the way in which female students were at risk in this setting. At the end of the term a student accompanied me while I interviewed a white sixty-seven year old Tea Party member who spoke at a rally. She arrived twenty minutes into the interview, and the member immediately began to direct all responses to her, though I was the only person conducting the interview. Towards the end, he began to discuss unrelated issues about the difficulties of dating in his situation, and then asked the student if she would be willing to date somebody much older than her. We both hastened her quick departure, and although after debriefing, she was not regretful about having participated, it underscored the troubling complexities of young women entering this unfamiliar space.

Despite the fact that to varying degrees eleven of the twelve students experienced scrutiny and skepticism while attending meetings, interestingly, many of them simultaneously faced forceful attempts to recruit them. One student commented that she had “whiplash” from the meeting she attended, since they approached her with considerable “contempt” and suspicion, which was interjected with moments of “cult-like recruitment.” Likewise, another student wrote that an older man (she estimated his age to be mid-seventies) who “sat next to us and talked to us throughout the entire meeting” wanted to introduce them to the executive board. She explains: “He was persistent to get us to commit to future projects, and wanted all of our information.”

Most of the female students in the class referenced that, to some degree, they received unwanted and unsolicited attention. For some, this meant that they encountered Tea Party members who were interested in socializing with them extensively, or having discussions that felt personal, and heavily inflected with traditional heterosexual gender roles. One student reflected on the incident with the man who tried to recruit her and another student, explaining that he discussed issues with them that were unrelated to the Tea Party movement: “By the end of the meeting, he was even giving us advice that had nothing to do with the Tea Party. He told us that we had to pick our sister in laws before we picked our husband, because the relationship a brother and sister have is very telling to how the guy treats women.”

Though there was some variation in how Tea Party movement knowledgeable or aware students were (based on their level of engagement with the course material, as well as prior knowledge), all of them negotiated an outsider status, and encountered a bevy of unknown group norms. As discussed, the dynamic context of their encounter with the movement meant that they needed to think ‘on the fly,’ and make decisions and choices brought on by the often unpredictable circumstances. One of the bigger challenges students confronted was a relative lack of familiarity with the language or reference points of the Tea Party movement. This sometimes made it difficult for students to gather information, or even to understand what was transpiring on a basic level. The challenge was persistent despite their immersion in existing, albeit nascent, studies of the Tea Party. The “language barrier” reflected movement jargon and customs, many of which had not yet been thoroughly documented in existing scholarship, and were simply inaccessible to outsiders not yet socialized into the Tea Party movement.

The students’ field notes often revealed basic confusion, often coupled with surprise, about the norms of the movement. One student carefully documented the unfamiliar processes at the meeting she attended: “She holds to the agenda but allows people to interrupt occasionally with their opinions, as was the case with a white man in his 50s that stands up in the middle of the meeting. He rambles on about something and makes several animal references and at one point even howls. The people seem to know what he is talking about and nod their approval.” Another student commented on the content of the movie “Battle for America” in her field notes from a meeting: “There was TONS upon TONS of seemingly irrelevant imagery that didn’t [appear to] match the topic in discussion (e.g. talking about an unfair partisan majority yet there’s bizarre imagery of a white, blond woman with pastries, about to eat a cupcake).”

The only male in the class attended a meeting without another classmate. He dutifully explains the “surprising” historical re-enactment that occurred, along with his attempts to proceed as if he was expecting this:

The first speaker is an individual dressed as a Colonist from the 18th century, a historical re-enactor. As he is introduced (by someone else who seems to be a part of whatever act this is) fog rolls out from a fog machine and the lights were also set to dim. Needless to say, I was completely taken aback by the presence of this historical re-enactor as the original speaker...As hard as I tried, I couldn't mask a smile at what I saw to be the sheer absurdity of the situation.

It is worthwhile to note that the student feels compelled to explain why he is thrown by these events, "I believe the sheer absurdity was not so much out of any personal bias, but more out of complete and utter surprise at the presence of the re-enactor."

Not having pre-existing fluency with Tea Party group language and customs (despite their preparation) created stress for students, and sometimes this was coupled with a thoughtful consideration of who they were in this new setting. One student reflects on her experiences:

I consider myself very good at speaking up for myself and others, yet in this environment, I was the quietest in the room. A good example occurred when we were reciting the pledge. There was an extreme over-emphasis on the part 'with liberty and justice for all.' I did not put extra emphasis on this part and it felt like the whole room turned and looked at me, wanting to know why I didn't emphasize that phrase.

Students expressed frustration at not understanding basic Tea Party rhetoric, even for coursework that didn't involve the pressure of interacting with Tea Party members. One student describes her experience transcribing: "The transcribing was difficult mainly because they used so much insider terminology that made no sense to me, so I often felt like I was transcribing an interview that was in a different language. Most of it was useless to me in terms of getting a better understanding of the movement, or [for] following a dialogue." Students presented to the class all materials distributed during the meeting(s) they attended, which often included documents that were challenging to decipher. These occasions provided opportunities to explain to the class that not understanding is a typical part of the outsider researcher dynamic, especially true of participant observation. We dedicated part of our class period to a collective experience of translating the movement's rhetoric. Students began to recognize this attempt to decode as a normal research process, and some embraced it. One student enthusiastically created a "glossary of Tea Party terms" that she would add to as we proceeded.

Considering Knowledge and Intelligence

Students were able to unveil messages about how the Tea Party understands intelligence, and what signifies it or the lack thereof. As mentioned, the public is often posed as uninformed, and people who disagree with them as lacking intelligence. Both the intelligence and morality of liberals is attacked, as are educational systems, which are thought to be run by liberals with problematic agendas. It is important to note that students had their own schemas for evaluating whether Tea Party ideology is valid or ethical. The process of engaging in original research in some cases stimulated their desire to understand or learn, and they communicated that this stimulus differed from what they experienced in traditional classroom environments.

Students were surprised by the degree to which Tea Partiers quickly labeled anybody who disagreed with their political perspective as unintelligent. One student commented in her field notes that "the public" was referenced in condescending and fairly derisive terms, highlighting that they are "uninformed and uneducated." The seeming contradiction between attacking people for being uneducated, and also attacking education, was one that we unpacked in class. Students conveyed the sense that outsiders to the movement are regarded as being duped or improperly educated according to Tea Party member perceptions of "truth" and "fact."

Members of the Tea Party movement attack education and educational institutions as unethical and a source of blame for the nation's troubles. This theme was pronounced in students' field notes. The

student's description of the historical reenactment includes a comparison of King George III to Barack Obama on the abuse of federal authority by the "Ghost of America Past." He explains, "after exclaiming how he feels sympathy for us, he then states that this 'damage was caused by highly educated individuals with no moral fiber'." During the brief Q & A after the re-enactment, he describes the first question as "a slight at the left." The question is, "Why are the left portrayed as intellectuals?" which "received quite the laugh from the rest of the audience." The student then relayed that "the response was that the perception was fabricated by the Left to make up for their moral deficiencies."

Students referenced that they had never quite experienced such "anti-school" sentiment in any setting as they did at Tea Party meetings. One student's field notes reference that a major agenda item was "political correctness spread by liberal schools." Another student's field notes reflect a similar sentiment at her meeting: "There is group agreement in the hostility toward academics. The crowd would collectively snicker when academics and public schools were mentioned." One student mentioned that a middle aged Russian immigrant newcomer tried to discuss an educational policy, and admitted to working with Democrats on the issue previously. The membership responded with aggression: "The crowd was clapping with the attempt to have him leave the microphone, and the leader asked him to wrap it up. There was a joke made at his expense and rumbling from the crowd."

Again, universities are posed as the headquarters for spreading liberal ideology. One student referenced the critique of higher education that emerged at her meeting: "Overall, they preached for the hour and 40 minutes I saw about how excellent conservative ideals are, and how hysterically awful liberals/socialists/communists are, as one group, and hiding in places like universities." Another student noted a similar sentiment on the blog site she monitored:

The video of the young African American men learning the 'I am an Obama Scholar' inspirational chant in their school was supposed to be something positive to encourage young black men to stay in school because they have the capability to do great things if they get an education. The Tea Party Patriots, because of their feelings towards Obama, thought that it was the most horrifying thing that children in school systems could be exposed to...they saw it as evidence of a socialist school system brainwashing students.

After attending meetings, students often linked Tea Party movement skepticism of young people to their negative assessments of educational systems in the U.S. One student reflected on this phenomenon: "They want to know our agenda in being 'involved' and showing up at meetings. They do not fully trust the younger generation, as they explained, we are the people seen to be affected by liberal politics in our education and cultural outlets (media, music, etc)."

Perhaps Tea Party skepticism of students is warranted; a few students found themselves calling Tea Party ideology into question, both in class and in their write ups. Students mostly refrained from editorializing in their field notes, however one student included this reaction to a film: "It stated AFL-CIO, NAACP, and a particular Latino organization were not virtuous or for the public good, and its affiliates aren't American people (which makes you question who are the American people in their eyes? Obviously not minorities, or the working class)."

Though I did not prompt students to do so, some of them included in their final reaction paper explicit disagreement with the Tea Party ideology to which they were exposed. In her discussion of the "I Am an Obama Scholar" clip, the student identified what she perceived to be a core contradiction, "To me, it was a positive clip, and I didn't understand their criticisms until I read the commentary members wrote below it." She argued against their assessment, "I felt that they were letting their disapproval of Obama cloud their judgment on how a simple saying like that could really encourage the hearts and minds of the children they claim they're doing this movement for, and how while they say they are fighting for a better government for their children, they're still not really doing much to help their children succeed."

Some students revealed that they felt personally attacked or offended by Tea Party ideology. Indeed, this was far more likely to be the case for students with defined political beliefs in opposition to the Tea Party movement (though it should be noted that this would not characterize most of the students in the class). One student responded to the meeting:

...I was a little offended by some of the comments they made about President Obama, democrats, higher education and young voters. They didn't hesitate to refer to our president as 'the socialist in the white house,' and the general consent was that he wasn't doing his job right...they also talked about how 'misinformed young people' were making bad political choices that were hurting everyone. They made reference to the 'brainwashing' of young people, who were some of Obama's biggest supporters. I don't think we were 'misinformed,' I think we were excited about new ideas from someone who in the political world was indeed relatively young.

Another student echoed these sentiments as part of a discussion about her "bias": "Their genuine belief that our current presidential administration is responsible for all of our national problems, dismissing or ignoring any conservative wrongs, came across too delusional, skewed, and misleading for my tastes, even more than I reckoned it would." This student was very self-reflexive about her anti-Tea Party movement bias, and she mentioned that it might have limited her effectiveness as a researcher, writing "I'll need to keep it in mind for future reference, to be aware of my personal convictions with subjects researched."

Many students perceived their lack of familiarity with the movement as an asset in the abstract because from their perspective it meant that they did not have any prejudices and they could be impartial. One student argued that the students' lack of cultural competency was an advantage "because we started the research with a 'tabula rasa,' or a completely blank slate. We did not have any opinions or bias dealing with the group and its platforms. This allowed us to be influenced by the meeting alone and what they had to say..." Another student communicated this viewpoint:

When I first started this class I was unaware of most of the belief systems of the movement. I think this allowed me to study the movement and the members as well as attend the meetings with an open mind and without bias. It protected me from any preconceived notions and allowed me to make judgments on the direct arguments of the movement by myself rather than through the explanation of others.

The Process of Becoming Researchers

Students struggled to think of themselves as researchers, and this brought a number of challenges to the fore. In some cases, the experiences they endured made them decide they wanted to learn more, so that the initial challenges and frustrations yielded productive interests. As they became researchers they recognized that they were able to understand the Tea Party movement in ways that they might not have through an exclusively classroom based experience.

In light of their status as researchers, some students had to endure unpleasant situations in order to collect data. One student revealed that "there were points I flat-out wanted to leave, yet I stayed for the sake of acquiring data, and not coming off rudely..." Similarly, another student explained the hard work she needed to undergo in order to engage in the research process: "... I was in a position of needing to close an age gap in order to...proceed with the research. I did a lot of work to connect with these people because I was committed to the research process. Had I fewer or different motivations, I would have been exhausted and headed for the door immediately." One student explained that doing this research "taught her the art of patience" in order to compile potentially relevant and important information: "I learned I will not always find something immediately interesting and eye catching, and that the research process might seem boring, but patience is more than half the battle."

Students' orientations to the Tea Party movement shifted along with their deepened understanding of the role of researcher. One student explained that in order to get a handle on the Tea Party movement, she first made sure she probed beneath the surface of their perspective:

I found I had to develop a certain level of cultural competency when studying...the Tea Party, which is a reaction to specific ideas and actions in society. It makes it easier to

understand their actions and their grievances if you understand where their anger and uneasiness lies...They are angry because they believe that the government has overstepped its bounds in society. Many people do not see current politics in this light, and so it is important to try to understand where they see that government has failed.

Likewise, engaging in the research made another student “look at my world differently”: “When my sister and I persuaded our parents to get us a dog, little did I realize that this would lead me to creating a connection with someone that would help our Tea Party research...She was a great contact...All of a sudden, all roads led to the Tea Party.”

For some, the course ignited an interest in the Tea Party movement and in the research process. A student explained that the course “proved” to her that “research is not only dry and boring. Research can be informative and exciting.” She continues that the class also piqued her interest in the movement: “Even though I had very little interest in the tea party before this research experience, I ended up developing a passion for it, even though they don’t exactly have my political beliefs. I enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) reading up on the tea party and watching related stories on the news.” For another student, the course sparked an interest in politics, “Honestly, I’ve never really been interested in politics at all before this course. Therefore, I did not previously know anything about the Tea Party. This may be an asset to me now so that I can know what is going on in the world. I feel like this opened my eyes to the whole political thing.” Yet another student described what she found intriguing while taking the class:

It was interesting to watch the momentum that the movement gained while we were studying it, both in the media and on the local level. Watching the efforts of the movement and their overall success during the elections in November was interesting. Obviously, the movement has something to offer the people of America, who are taking them seriously and getting involved on a local level.

For some students, engaging in this research was deeply personal or they considered in-depth the ramifications of Tea Party policies for them as individuals. One student referred to this aspect of doing the research as “one of the biggest challenges to overcome”:

...I felt that their misrepresentations and doomsday scenarios were extremely troubling. I thought a lot about what would happen if what they ask for does get passed...Therein lay the main issue, as the research somewhat became a conflict of interest, in the sense that with each increasing exposure to the legislation and petitions which they were championing, I faced a gloomier and gloomier personal future.”

This student also wrote about how he “overcame this challenge” by “rationalizing” that he couldn’t know for certain what the impact would be if the Tea Party movement gained power, and he also thoughtfully considered why the Tea Party members have these viewpoints. He employed an approach that enabled him to go back and forth between Tea Party ideology and his own personal reactions and opinions. In the end, the student ponders that approaching the research in this way “is unlike any process I’ve had to undergo in all of my other courses—everything we did was so anchored in a direct day-to-day reality that the significance to my life was always something I contemplated.”

For another student, the research was also personal, since her parents had Tea Party involvement. She discussed the way the course shifted her relationship with her family:

Researching the Tea Party Movement has not always been easy, but it has proven to be a rewarding experience. My parents, especially my mother’s involvement in the movement, has often annoyed and even irked me as I have always sloughed it off as a band of overly-zealous rioters who would get nowhere in their efforts. Obviously I was wrong in gauging the movement’s impact, and I have come to almost enjoy (at times and in small

doses) my parents' political banter at the dinner table. Discussions with my parents and other people in the movement, as well as reading a vast array of articles from both sides has widened my viewpoint even further.

Experiences with the course also provided a prompt to learn more. One student in particular conveyed this sentiment: "To be asked about my political views and my stance on certain topics was difficult because I don't have a high interest or even understanding of politics. I guess a challenge for me was overcoming a situation that I couldn't really talk my way out of. It has made me want to learn more about politics so I can at least pretend to know what I'm talking about." Students that don't have developed political perspectives or commitments aren't often challenged to develop them as part of their traditional educational curriculum. The experiences provided by the class, especially attending the Tea Party meetings, played a critical role in inspiring them to understand the political world. Some students expressed appreciation for the increase in awareness of and familiarity with U.S. politics that the course sparked.

Students' experiences enabled them to recognize the value of going into the community to collect data. One student wrote: "I think that the atmosphere of the meetings and the issues discussed are something that other research simply cannot provide...[The fieldwork] allowed me to see that there are other ways to do research rather than just through the internet and books." Another student discussed the particular value of attending the meetings to gain vital insights about the movement: "...Meetings seem to be where the movement gains its power and sway among local voters who are dissatisfied in some way with the government. This movement claims to be about the local people and so I think it is at this level that those involved feel most connected and powerful, which is why it's so important we attended."

Partly because students attended different meetings, their impressions and assessments of the movement varied. One area in which they had diverging observations was with respect to the level of grassroots democracy practiced at the meetings. One student thought that the meetings reflected an inclusive, non-hierarchical structure: "People genuinely respected and cared for one another, and quite honestly, small, town hall, meetings such as this felt a lot more like Democracy than pulling on a lever based upon 5 second sound bites..." However, another student had a very different sense of the level of democracy present at the meeting she attended:

Although they call themselves a 'grass roots' movement, from the meeting I attended, this is clearly not true. There was a leader of the meeting and...they assigned an executive council that would lead the organization...While they allowed people to talk at the end of the meeting, there was no real power given to these people, as it seemed that they were more venting and everyone was waiting for them to stop talking.

Not only did this student recognize the benefit of attending meetings to get a first-hand sense of the dynamic, but she also discussed the importance of being an "outsider" who is explicitly attending an event to pay attention to group processes: "For someone inside the movement, they may be oblivious to this point, but being an outsider, especially somebody attending to pay attention to these things, this seemed incredibly obvious."

By attending meetings, students could identify more subtle aspects of the movement and its members that surprised them. A student discussed the way in which she was "shocked" that people were expressing particular beliefs in a public setting, "...I wasn't surprised that there were people that had these views, but I am surprised that they displayed them so blatantly...I feel that a lot of their beliefs are very radical, and that many people who hold them would rather not have their neighbors know that this is what they believe, but apparently I was wrong...People were very outspoken in this setting." Another student commented on the disjuncture between sources of information. In particular, he noted a different characterization of the movement found in the media and at meetings: "The Lexis Nexis assignment gave me a sense of the way they were portrayed in the media, and it didn't really line up with what I witnessed in the meetings. In that sense, skimming newspaper articles called up on the database ended up telling me

more about the media than the Tea Party movement.” In class we discussed the limitations of the media in accurately or sufficiently informing people about the Tea Party movement. One of the main observations students had in relation to media coverage was that the same handful of spins and information appeared time and again, so that even though they were downloading hundreds of thousands of related articles, very little information was present. On the one hand, this emphasizes the point that not enough was known about the Tea Party movement to really prepare students for this experience. On the other hand, it also underscored for some students a sense that the data they collected was foundational to any outsiders’ understanding of the movement, and this made them feel their research was a particularly important contribution.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Bringing students who have often been short changed by their K-12 education into direct intellectual and interactive engagement with a social movement community is not unlike trying to fly a plane while still in the process of building it. Although the seminar, as indicated, included some intensive immersion in Tea Party literature, Tea Party media coverage, and in social theories of the political right, the classroom curriculum that was attainable within a focused time period could never have been fully adequate to prepare students analytically and emotionally for the encounters. In hindsight, I would have extended both the length and breadth of students’ preparatory period before introducing them to fieldwork in this particular setting. Educators attempting to replicate the seminar model relative to other populations that might be skeptical of students and young people would need to plan carefully for the psychological strain of the encounters and their differential demographic effects. This imperative, as noted, is inextricable from the necessity of training students for the ethical considerations involved in being simultaneously demographically and circumstantially vulnerable, while still having responsibilities and at least some power corresponding to the role of researcher—a challenge I only partially anticipated at the seminar onset.

There are a few additional features of the seminar construction and content that are useful to consider for those attempting to or interested in advancing similar pedagogical plans, especially for agendas that involve challenging communities. Despite the fact that their hands on research experience was the foundation of the course, what transpired in the classroom was the cornerstone of any pedagogical or research success. The collective process in the classroom helped us all navigate and negotiate the seminar. From the students’ perspective, having the opportunity to process their experiences that week, or hearing about other students’ encounters in the field made them feel connected to the project and part of a research team. It also served to help combat the isolation they felt from being outsiders to the Tea Party movement. It was in this space that students could take a step back and process and analyze what was transpiring, as well as get some clarification on Tea Party communication. It was also the place in which we could strategize to address any challenges that emerged. For instance, we discovered that we needed to use class time to develop individualized “raps” that were genuine and anticipated Tea Party member anxiety at meetings.

Initially, I underestimated the degree to which the students felt compelled to perform for adults. They grasped, intellectually, the benefits of admitting ignorance in a research context, but getting them to feel comfortable enough to follow through and admit it was a struggle. This is something likely to emerge by having students engage communities in the role of ‘researcher.’

As I addressed above, student experiences were demographically variable. There are ethical issues for educators to consider in sending female students into such sites—related to possible emotional safety and differences in readiness. Luckily, the student educational outcomes in this case were positive. For instance, we discussed claims of racism within the Tea Party movement prior to their community engagements. But, if replicating the seminar, I would generate more formative dialogue related to how this might translate for them at a meeting. For students grappling with vulnerable identities, this was also eventually an empowering experience, as learning to successfully navigate knowledge, communication, and critical investigation in spaces that are predicated on racial and gender hierarchy can build critical

social and intellectual skills, and generate a sense of capability.

With these qualifiers and concerns attended to, engaging in a similar course plan is worthwhile. The fact that the seminar often revealed to the students that their educational processes to date had poorly prepared them to navigate social movement politics, political rhetoric, and active citizenship was its greatest success. It would be difficult to imagine much more effective pedagogical tools that might demonstrate to students that knowledge—and the capacity to deploy and articulate it—is a valuable resource, without which one will remain under-equipped in important collective contexts and political moments. Several of my students were expressive on this point, coming out of their encounters with Tea Party communities with the sentiment that they needed to know, needed to understand, and needed to prepare to engage the political right in ways that spoke to their varying and compelling (and in some instances newly discovered) political priorities.

Despite prospective challenges, the value of taking the leap of heading students directly into fieldwork should not be discounted; as many anthropologists and sociologists will attest, much of the best methodological training requires the holistic experience of the research process. Social psychologists, particularly those who examine social learning theory, also certainly have established that some aspects of learning occur best enactively, rather than through acquisition and performance. The seminar research process ultimately realized several of the valuable elements of university-community engagement, in bringing an educational process into a fascinating community setting, and allowing students to fuse the processes of sociological analysis with preliminary development of political affinity and identities outside of the classroom. However, I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge that any academic attempting to guide students through this type of encounter must necessarily be prepared for a complex array of challenges not limited to variations in student skill sets or intellectual orientation. For my students, engaging the right pushed them to think deeply about power, political participation, and ideological authority in ways that implicated their relationships to work, family, education, race, gender, and their status as students and youth. In addition, students were challenged to develop a conception of their own and alternate moral and political schemas. That is, confronting Tea Party rhetoric and being challenged to adhere to and embrace it disrupted several of my students' senses of their ability to be either apolitical or politically ignorant thereby stimulating their sense of the responsibilities of citizenship and personhood.

NOTE

1. Given the malleability and subjectivity of political designations, I do not present a singular or wholesale definition of conservative, right wing, right, liberal, left wing, or left in this article.

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