

SOC398/PS300 Syllabus¹
Community Organizing: Theory and Practice
Class times: Monday and Wednesday 4:00 pm - 5:15 pm Humanities 518
Fall 2009

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General Course Description:

In recent years, community organizing has gained a great deal of attention due to several factors: the success of community organizing efforts to advance educational reform, low-income housing, healthcare reform, and environmental justice; the rise of Barack Obama after his early career in community organizing; the career opportunities the field offers for disciplined young people interested in working for social change without giving up a reasonable standard of living; and the fact that many community organizing efforts occur in the kinds of "communities of color" that constitute the demographic future of American society. This course will introduce students to the history and political experience of community organizing in America, the current practices and strategies that it uses, and the social theory that guides practitioners (and can help critique their work). Course will include field experience with local organizations.

This course introduces you to the practice and scholarly understanding of community organizing. Community organizing entails engagement on the terrain of politics, understood in the positive Aristotelian sense of the way human groups make decisions regarding their future. The course does *not* assume that you either reject or embrace any political ideology, party, or leader – but only that you are interested in learning more about community organizing as one tool for democratic life. Discussions and lectures in the class will respect the positions of people holding a variety of political views.

After surveying the background of community organizing in the U.S. (and discussing parallels on college campuses), we will look first at the role of stories or “narratives” in this form of democratic political engagement. This may seem obvious, but in fact represents a key political dimension of this work – and for some a personally and even spiritually transformative practice. The class then addresses three questions over the course of the semester: why do people organize; how does organizing work; and what does it take to become a good organizer. The context within which the learning of this class takes place is one of strengthening democratic traditions and practices, particularly as it relates to civil society.

Course limitations:

Given the limited amount of reading possible in a semester and the variety of forms of community organizing “out there”, we will by no means discuss all the readings available nor all the varieties of this kind of political engagement. Rather, the focus will be on giving you intellectual and practical tools that you can use to think about those forms of politics and democratic (small “d”) organizing in which *you* are interested. During class, I will draw examples from a variety of forms of organizing chosen according to their relevance to the topic, class members’ interests, and my own expertise – mostly those based on ethical commitment to the monotheistic religious traditions (Judaism; historic Protestant, Catholic, evangelical, and Pentecostal Christianity) and those related to the labor

¹ As is often the case in course design, this syllabus draws on ideas and models from many colleagues. But I particularly want to acknowledge my indebtedness to a similar course taught by Marshall Ganz at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

union movement. But class discussion by *no* means should be limited to areas of my expertise. I strongly encourage students to think about and bring to class discussion questions and comments from your own political and personal interests.

Educational Philosophy and Methods:

"I was concerned to take advantage of that climate [of transition and intellectual openness] to attempt to rid our education of its wordiness, its lack of faith in the student and his [or her] power to discuss, to work, to create. Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in [humanity], on the belief that people not only can but should discuss the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion."

Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*
New York: Continuum, 1987 [1969] [bracketed revisions mine]

This quote from the Latin American educator Paulo Freire captures the spirit with which I aspire to teach this course. Among the "problems of democracy" we face are: 1) The fact that better-paid, better-educated, and more elite citizens tend to be more active in politics than are middle class and working class citizens; and 2) that wealthy individuals and organizations contribute more to political campaigns and issue advertising than do the less wealthy. As a result, societal decisions tend to benefit the wealthy more than others, leading to the inequalities we see around us – as well as related inequities, such as environmental degradation. Community organizing strives to address these two problems head-on. But how well that works, and how it can best do so, requires the kind of "creative discussion" for which Freire calls. The course seeks to foster that kind of discussion.

In a course this size, discussing the challenges confronting democracy and how to address them will not be easy and will require your active collaboration. This course will thus combine participative teaching methods with rigorous intellectual expectations: *you will be expected to do all the readings, take notes regarding the content of those readings and your reactions to them, and come to class prepared to discuss them.* Instead of just attending a lecture and taking exams, in the context of class discussions you will be asked to offer your opinions about the readings and course topics, *and* about your experience in the wider world.

There is no single "textbook" for the course. In order to encourage critical thinking about the texts, diverse readings have been selected to force you to think material through yourself. Some readings are quite descriptive and engaging, others more analytical. I will suggest study questions to keep in mind as you read, but you should also ask your own questions as you go – and bring to class those questions, partial answers, or comments that seem most important. You should do all readings prior to coming to class, so we can discuss them. But not all readings must be read with equal care: use this class as a chance to learn (or to strengthen) a disciplined approach to reading: "skim" readings quickly initially to get the overall picture, then go back to read some sections more carefully and re-skim others.

Important: A crucial source of learning for the course will not be written, but rather experiential: beginning by the fifth week of the semester (September 23), each student will work a few hours each week in a community organizing project of your choosing. You can seek out an existing organizing project within an organization whose values you support; or develop your own organizing project to take action on your values; or choose a project that reflects your values from a list of options I will offer. I will impose no constraints on the kinds of organizing project students can work with, beyond that they must be non-violent and legal. That is, choose a project that reflects *your* values, not my values.

Expectations and Grading:

Four components will determine your grade for this course:

1. Reading précis (100 points): For each week's reading(s), you must write a **typewritten, one page, single-spaced** reaction paper comprised of two parts: First (about 2/3 of a page), a short summary of that week's readings: the key concepts, main themes, and conclusions. Second (about 1/3 page), a short paragraph recording your reaction to the reading: what did you find intriguing or provocative? what was powerful or unconvincing? what did you think about it overall, and *why*?

You should do a précis for every week's readings. Six times during the semester, I will ask you to hand these in for grading, each worth twenty points. Only the first one will be announced: it is Monday of the second week of class (**August 31**). The others will be unannounced, collected on five other Mondays or Wednesdays during the semester. If you do not have them when collected, you can hand them in no later than the next class session for a **maximum** of half credit. Your lowest score on the six reading preps will be discarded, thus producing a maximum of 100 points, and no penalty if you miss class or fail to do a reading prep *one time*; miss more than that and you pay a stiff penalty. Writing these short précis pieces is not an easy skill; I will work with the class to hone this skill.

2. Reflection papers (100 points): Beginning the fourth week of classes, every other week each student will submit a one-page "reflection paper" in which they reflect on their own learning, leadership and analytic skills, and (later in the semester) their experience in their individual organizing project. After the first two reflection papers - which are required - **one** may be missed with no excuse, but the rest must be turned in. Reflection papers are due both electronically and in hard copy by the beginning of class on the day assigned.
3. Class participation: (100 points). Assigned by instructor at end of semester. These points will be given on a very rough scale of 0/25/50/75/90/100 points: Have you attended class regularly? Participated in class discussions? (Here, quality matters much more than quantity: if you only speak occasionally, but do so thoughtfully and insightfully, in a way that moves the discussion forward, that's better than speaking all the time without really engaging the material). Do you listen to others carefully? When you disagree with the instructor or other students, do you articulate that disagreement openly, seeking to push toward *both* better understanding of their position *and* to insist on a better group analysis of the question? Are you willing to disagree, and yet respect others' viewpoints?
4. One analytic essay (200 points) due Wednesday, December 2: The paper can be a **maximum** of 15 pages; it **must** be typed and double spaced, with a font of either 11 or 12 characters per inch. The paper must analyze the organizing process you chose to focus on and engage in during the semester, and address the following dimensions:
 - briefly describe the organization and its key values and issues (use no true names of individuals, only pseudonyms)
 - what are the crucial dynamics inside the organization and organizing effort?
 - Is the organizing effort succeeding or failing, and *why*?
 - What changes in organizing practice might most improve the effort?

The "why?" question is crucial – not only "why do you think so" (i.e. evidence of success or failure) but also "why is it succeeding/failing?". The latter requires real analytic work on your part, drawing on the course readings, concepts, and teachings about "best practices" to assess for

yourself why things are going the way they are. Whether the organizing effort succeeds or fails will *not* affect your grade. Rather, you must diagnose what's going well or poorly, and how to improve it – this is one of the key analytic skills of organizing, and of life.

All of the following “count”: Your understanding of course materials; how insightfully you apply that material to analyzing your organizing experience and the organizing process within the group you work with; and spelling, grammar, and writing style. Note the warning regarding plagiarism below; if you do not understand it, ask me about it. More guidelines for the papers will be provided later.

The "curve" of final grades will flex according to my assessment of the overall performance of the class, so helping others study or write better papers will not risk lowering your own grade. Indeed, I strongly encourage this kind of help: understanding of any social phenomenon can be enhanced by drawing on others' perspectives. So help one another study, ask others for feedback on your papers, etc. – just be sure to write your own paper and do your own exam! See note below:

Note to all students:

I have a zero tolerance policy with regard to cheating and plagiarism. That is, if you plagiarize someone else's work (by downloading a paper or part of a paper from the internet, using another student's paper or part of a paper, quoting another writer without properly citing them, or in any other way), the consequences will be immediate: You will flunk this course and I will report that to the College and University authorities. This is only fair to those students with the integrity to do their own work. If you know you'll be tempted to cheat or plagiarize, do not take this course; if you are not sure what counts as cheating or plagiarizing, ask me.

Students with disabilities:

In accordance with University Policy 2310 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, any student who, due to a disability, may require special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact the instructor as soon as possible to make necessary accommodations. YFor further information, contact the Accessibility Resource Center at 277-3506.

Required readings:

Please DO NOT BUY the Andrew Perrin book *Citizen Speak* that is listed at the UNM Bookstore for this course – it is not required reading (though recommended, and worth having)

Francesca Polletta. 2002. *Freedom Is An Endless Meeting* ISBN #9780226674490, University of Chicago Press (paperback).

Richard L Wood. 2002. *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* ISBN #9780226905952, University of Chicago Press (paperback). **Please note:** I dislike assigning my own book, generally avoid the practice; but for this course I think it's necessary.

Marshall Ganz. 2009. *Why David Sometimes Wins*, New York, Oxford University Press.

Lots of individual readings available via Zimmerman Library's eReserves page ereserves.unm.edu – you can find it via my name or via Soc398, and use password “organize”

Course Schedule: to be distributed soon; for Wednesday, August 26 read the readings posted for that date on eReserves.