Teaching about local policy in/action: iPhone images of disability access (barriers)

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Arthur Blaser

Department of Political Science

Chapman University

Orange, CA 92866

Blaser@chapman.edu

Introduction

 As teachers, we need to demystify politics by making issues tangible to our students. I seek to show how this can be done with respect to disability access in the community, demonstrating how they can affect local politics and how they can be affected. Examples of both compliance and non-compliance can be captured in iPhone images. This presentation is based on practices in Orange, California, near Chapman University, but should generate ideas that are applicable for students and teachers everywhere.

This presentation and accompanying PowerPoint presentation is based on four presumptions about the teaching of local politics: 1. Civic engagement is important; 2. Direct student involvement in learning is important; 3. Value-explicit education is important; and 4. Disability access is important. After I briefly discuss the four presumptions I will describe some of the ways I have taught about local policy in/action, and offer related thoughts on how teachers of political science can and should be engaged in teaching and learning.

Teaching about disability issues has too often been relegated to the “nonpolitical” in which “experts” fix passive “patients.” Part of the upcoming (July 26, 2015) commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act stems from a recognition that disability policy is a rights issue that people experience every day. As such it is intimately connected to rights movements based on race, gender, sexual identity, age, ethnicity, and other factors (slides 2-4)

At this stage, my approach is exploratory and anticipatory. Ultimately, based on feedback from community members, students, and colleagues in political science, I hope to develop the approach further, and design means for assessment.

In another context (an extensive Emporia State University project on learning about political economy) Rob Catlett wrote in *PS: Political Science and Politics, “*Students learn incredibly well from each other and from civic engagement, and they value these experiences highly. As one student replied, ‘Now that I am aware of it, it is not something I can ignore or pretend I don’t care,’ when writing about deficits and debt. America’s future depends on the type of critical thinking and action that began to emerge in this endeavor; ignoring our fiscal challenges no longer seems an acceptable course” (2010: 342). America’s future also depends upon communities and the rights of community members to access, the primary concerns detailed here. The concerns detailed here are value-explicit, encouraging assertion of competing values and encouraging the skill to identify competing values. Especially, in the context of the approach described here teaching cannot be “value free.” On the other hand, effective teaching includes the identification of competing values and alternative approaches to weighing them.

Part of the appeal of this panel on “Local Politics and Civic Engagement” stems from the fact that local politics is not one of my usual teaching areas. Since I began full time teaching in 1979, most of my teaching has been in international relations. Since 1996 I’ve taught a course on “People with Disabilities in Politics and Society” (now every year) and then added a senior level course “Disability and the Law.” The approach I describe here has thus far been incorporated in the first course, but is applicable to general courses in local politics and American government. It has also been applicable to presentations in other courses (Education and Sociology) and to community presentations. In January, 2015, I also received papers from students in which some (although not all) incorporated iPhone photos for analysis of disability access.

This is the assignment from the schedule in which this paper concerns “Option B”:

The major course assignment involves examination of media or access practices. If you choose Option A, Media or Text Analysis you’ll be examining three or more television shows, movies, newspapers, or history books. If you choose Option B. Access Analysis you’ll be examining three or more malls, entertainment complexes, sports stadiums, parks, parking lots, residences, or sidewalks. [Full syllabus available on request].

In January, 2015 students reported on images from a shopping mall, sports stadiums, residence halls, campus buildings, Disneyland, and apartment complexes.

This approach encourages application of models of disability—encouraging students to understand why and how environmental factors make a difference. Although one could introduce moral, charity, vocational, administrative, cultural, and postmodern models I focus on two of them: a medical/deficit model focused on the individual with a disability and a social model focused on ways that the society either encourages participation or erects barriers (See e.g. Oliver & Barnes, 2012). [Slide 5].

The models are reflected in common images which students were encouraged to incorporate in their papers. Rather than pity or inspiration, often reflected in images of disabled individuals using a deficit model, students are encouraged to identify barriers or removal of barriers, reflective of a social model. (A classic history of the disability rights movement is Joseph Shapiro’s *No Pity*, which criticizes contrasting images of Tiny Tim and the “super-crip” (1994); Stella Young persuasively castigated “inspiration porn” that focuses on a few individuals overcoming barriers rather than on the removal of barriers (2012)).

I encourage representation not only of where and how disability access is handled poorly, but also of where it is handled well. Both kinds of representation are easily obtained in iPhone images. Two recurrent questions are: 1. What are the applicable standards? and 2. What can be done about it?

Despite defendants’ claims that the rules are unclear and unavailable, the federal rules are at the websites in the references, the White House disability portal, the Americans with Disabilities Act’s site for the Department of Justice, and the site of the Access Board (an independent federal agency straddling the executive and legislative branches that drafts rules to implement the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Architectural Barriers Act, and other legislation). In most cases, no additional state rules govern access. California in a rare exception with stronger rules that are linked to the site of the San Francisco Mayor’s Office on Disability and elsewhere.

The government websites, combined with readily obtainable iPhone images, enable discussion of distinctions among laws (here primarily the Americans with Disabilities Act), regulations (the Access Board Guidelines), and practices (mixture of compliance and noncompliance).

The “what can be done” question is more complex, partly because the answer changes from person to person and time to time. For instance, access complaints have been more likely to receive a response during the Clinton and Obama administrations than during the George W. Bush administration. In slides 6 and 7 I suggest courses of action that have sometimes made a difference and at other times not. For instance, I include voting as “good, but often insufficient,” a topic that is more thoroughly discussed by others (e.g. Mitchell, 1971). I encourage “study *and* advocacy” part of my intent through this assignment.

Images of Local Policy In/Action

The bulk of this presentation is in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation. None of the images is intended to be a rare exception; indeed the hope is that students can amass similar images (this was the case in my January, 2015 course). This is some accompanying description for the images:

Slide 8: East Palmyra Ave. and South Grand St. (missing curb ramp) [unless otherwise indicated all images are from Orange, California, about 25 miles south of Los Angeles]. This intersection is about three blocks from the Chapman campus in a residential neighborhood. [Subject of a “Street Service Request” (City online form)]. This is one of the federal standards:

Access Board: “R207 Curb Ramps and Blended Transitions

Curb ramps, blended transitions, or a combination of curb ramps and blended transitions must connect the pedestrian access routes at each pedestrian street crossing. Curb ramps and blended transitions must be wholly contained within the pedestrian street crossings served. Typically, two curb ramps must be provided at each street corner. In alterations where existing physical constraints prevent two curb ramps from being installed at a street corner, a single diagonal curb ramp is permitted at the corner.” <http://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/streets-sidewalks/public-rights-of-way/proposed-rights-of-way-guidelines/section-by-section-analysis?highlight=WyJjdXJiIHJhbXBzIl0>=

Slide 9: Curb ramp, Walnut Ave. and Maplewood St. This is a residential neighborhood. The “lip” is in excess of the ¼ inch tolerance.

Slide 10: Signage, Santiago Canyon College, March 24, 2015. The red background indicates fire zones, although blue background customarily distinguishes accessible parking areas. The phrase “accessible facilities” is ambiguous; the College’s facilities are currently a subject of litigation.

Slide 11: Santiago Canyon College, Entrance to classroom building from parking lot. The lot contains no accessible places; a separate lot down the hill from the building has spaces. There is no directional signage.

Slide 12: El Dorado Plaza, shopping center in Orange, California. No access to shopping center for wheelchair users [remodeled following prospect of legal action, 2014].

Slide 13: “No animals allowed except seeing eye dogs.” One of many signs outside *Ostioneria Bahia* [restaurant in Orange, California]. Service animals must be permitted in “public accommodations” such as the restaurant, and will commonly not be seeing eye dogs.

Rule: “The ADA defines a service animal as any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability. If they meet this definition, animals are considered service animals under the ADA regardless of whether they have been licensed or certified by a state or local government.” Department of Justice, <http://www.ada.gov/qasrvc.htm>

Slide 14: *Honeybaked Hams*, outlet about one mile from Chapman University, Counter access is at a lower level than formerly, allowing wheelchair-using customers access. This photo depicts a “best practice” in contrast to the former arrangement where counters were all above wheelchair height.

Slide 15: Parking lot at Canyon High School, Anaheim, CA. No direct access from designated accessible parking. The access to the school is about 250 feet away, a problem since chair users must travel behind parked automobiles and may not be visible to a driver who is backing out.

Slide 16: South Coast Plaza, west extension (“Crystal Court,” Costa Mesa, CA) No direct access from designated accessible parking. This is an “upscale” mall about fifteen miles from Chapman University. Chair users must travel in traffic away from the entrance in order to access it.

Rule 4.6.2: “In parking facilities that do not serve a particular building, accessible parking shall be located on the shortest accessible route of travel to an accessible pedestrian entrance of the parking facility.” <http://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/background/adaag#4.6>

Slide 17: Entrance to Argyros Student Center, Chapman University. Example of clear, helpful signage. Signage uses contrasting colors with the blue background and international access symbol.

Slide 18-19: Entrance to Hashinger Science Center, Chapman University. Signage directing visitors to the accessible street entrance not apparent. [Perpendicular to the stairs; not in contrasting colors].

Slide 20: South entrance to Argyros Forum, Chapman University. No clear accessible path.

Slide 21: Contact information

Implications and What Next?

 All of the depicted barriers fall under the “readily achievable” standard for barrier removal for construction prior to 1992 (the Americans with Disabilities Act included an 18 month “phase in” period after its adoption in 1990). (In fact, many of the facilities were built after 1992 or renovations triggered a heightened standard). The images are intended to stimulate related thoughts on how we can and should assess teaching and learning. As suggested earlier, this approach at this stage is exploratory and anticipatory. Similar assignments are worth trying and repeating. Adaptations might address rights barriers to gender equity, race and ethnic equity, equity for sexual minorities, and so on. However, for disability access particularly, although some barriers are attitudinal, many are physical and thus easily photographed.

 A somewhat similar suggestion was in a paper co-authored with colleague Frederic Smoller in 2013, from which I will quote at length. We wrote:

“As is standard practice in the field, a research methods course is required. This course introduces them to quantitative and qualitative data collection strategies including participant-observation, focus groups, survey construction, and depth interviewing. Here we can borrow from the work of the Fund for the City of New York which developed its Comnet2Go software—“a new survey tool that can capture and track commonly observed street-level neighborhood problems.” The software runs on any mobile device, such as a laptop, smart phone, or tablet computer that has internet connectivity (Fund for the City of New York). Here’s how it works: A group of, say, 5 wheelchair users are paired up with 5 non-wheelchair using volunteers. The pairs roll around designated parts of the community or college campus or a designated building. The volunteers select each type of barrier such as curb cuts or ramps that are poorly constructed, cars parked over driveways or curb cuts or in parking reserved for persons with disabilities, unleashed dogs, branches that can hit a blind person, mud-lined streets, inaccessible buildings-- from a drop down list.

When ‘send’ button is pressed the software transmits the case to the database. Later it is retrieved to produce statistics, such as an ‘accessibility barrier score,’ and other reports. The results are tabulated and a report containing tables, maps, and photographs is compiled. This is then presented to administrators. The goal is to get the problem fixed. After an agreed upon period of time, the area is canvassed again. Comparisons are made with the original observations to see if improvements have been made and what additional work needs to be done. The goal here is to raise awareness that leads to meaningful institutional change (Johnson, 36).”

The awareness and institutional change can be compatible with enjoyable experiences for teachers and students. My purpose in this presentation is to generate ideas on how this might be done.

References

Books, Articles

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Websites

[www.Ada.gov](http://www.Ada.gov) Department of Justice’s Americans with Disabilities Act Site

[www.Disability.gov](http://www.Disability.gov) White House disability portal

[www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov) U.S. Access Board

<http://www.sfgov2.org/index.aspx?page=4451>

ADA and Disabled Access Code Resources: San Francisco

Mayor’s Office on Disability