



University of Denver
Center for Community
Engagement &
Service Learning



PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT COACH HANDBOOK

Pioneers at the University of Denver have reflected on and written about their experiences working with middle and high school students in Denver schools as Public Achievement coaches. However, these pioneers are coaches working with urban youth towards more civically active students and meaningful public work. Some coaches found ways to guide students leadership skills to more positive outcomes, some struggled with building relationships within their groups and in the community, and still others learned to hone their own leadership skills and foster growth and public skills in those with whom they worked.

Each of these coaches built strong relationships with their students. DU coaches worked with the students to identify important issues in their communities. These issues included gang violence prevention, playground bullying, animal rights and global warming. After identifying these issues, each group decided on a project that could help address the issue. While the final product for each group was some type of tangible object or an event, there is a rich level of learning and sharing that is not as easily measured.

It is these lessons and personal stories that make Public Achievement a unique and powerful program. This collection of stories is meant to help you to reflect on your experiences as a coach and connect to a larger landscape of community organizing that has taken place in the past five years here at the University of Denver and over the past half-century across the nation.

Consider their stories a toolbox for your own Public Achievement experiences. They are sharing their experiences in the hopes that future coaches can learn from them and grow to be even better coaches.

*Special thanks to these coaches for sharing their experiences:
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A Letter to a New Public Achievement Coach

Leanne Bird

At the beginning of the year one question kept pounding in my head, “What makes a good coach?” Over the year I discovered answers to this question, so I am now writing to you so that I may share these answers. I learned the importance of building relationships in coaching and public work as well the role trust plays in building relationships and how this affects what gets done.

As a coach your goal is to guide the students into finding a public voice and provide them with an opportunity to engage in work that matters to them. This is done through creating a space where the students can develop public skills and engage in public work. It is extremely important that the students take the lead in what happens while you are working together. If this is successfully done, they will then own the experience of developing the project themselves. This is what makes PA different from most of their classes. We tell the students that their ideas are important and that they are capable of figuring out how they want to get things done. The coach must actively facilitate and encourage their students to take on the responsibility and direction of the group. It is important to help the students locate their ideas and interests by strategically questioning them and then affirming the students when they do contribute. Your role is to coach these students along while holding them accountable, but the end goal is for the students to develop the confidence and skills to do public work independent of a coach.

This is a central idea to community organizing. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) sums this idea up with their iron rule: “Never, never, do for others what they can do for themselves”. I struggled with this idea throughout the semester, and still need to remind myself of it from time to time. This rule aids people in becoming empowered and self-sufficient. Today, social change generally runs on the model of “experts” telling other people what to do and how to do it. As soon as the experts leave and the next problem arises, the people are back where they once were, without the ability to address the problem themselves. Mary Beth Roger’s *Cold Anger* quotes Cortes as saying, “When people have a charismatic leader who does all their thinking, they become dependent. They become passive. They lack initiative.”¹ If people don’t learn public skills and receive the opportunity to exercise these skills and to think on their own behalf, they remain dependent on others.

It is important to identify each student’s strengths in order to create opportunities for them to exercise these strengths while also addressing their weaknesses. Edward Chambers explains in *Roots for Radicals* that “organizing is about more than winning on issues - it is about developing people’s potential to realize their hopes.”² In both groups I coached it was not nearly as important that the students were successful with their issues as it was that they developed the skills and confidence to realize their hopes.

In the first group that I coached students gained the opportunity to try a leadership role in the meetings they held with their principal, Dr. Pilch. For the first meeting, I created an outline on how to run a meeting with important items for them to remember to do at the beginning, middle, and end. This also included some example questions they could ask her. Before they met with her we assigned roles for the meeting. The assignment of roles is important in all meetings because it allows meetings to run more efficiently. It is also important to rotate the roles because this allows each student to experience a different aspect of the group dynamic while also giving each student the occasion to achieve new skills by being in a new role. These actions provided the students with knowledge on how to make the meeting a success, but in order for it to be the students’ success, I also allowed them

¹ Rogers, Mary Beth. *Cold Anger*. Denton: University of North Texas P, 1990. 15.

² Ibid, 60.

be in control of the meeting once it began. Afterwards we evaluated the meeting, and I gave the students feedback on what they did well and how they could improve. With each subsequent meeting I provided less guidance for them, and consequently they took on more responsibility to control and prepare with the skills and tools they were learning. Although they were doing this to try and succeed at their issue, they were also learning that they had the ability to negotiate for what they wanted with the people who held power.

Forming relationships is crucial to what gets done in the group. Thus the building of relationships with my students became my top priority. I believe that consequently the students took greater value in the work that they were doing because they were being valued. This is extremely significant as Rogers talks about how the IAF stresses the importance of “inciting the first revolution—the internal one that comes with an awareness of self and self-worth...” People who have a strong sense of self can afford to take the risks involved in relationship building” (61). Helping your students to develop a sense of self worth will give them the confidence to put themselves out there and develop a public life.

Building relationships and developing trust requires great attention to what is said and also to what is not said. And it requires patience, lots and lots of patience. Most of all it requires love. If this word seems too emotional or sentimental, think of it as acceptance. Accept your students. Tell them when they do a great job. Tell them what they are good at, and with gentleness and mindfulness, tell them how they can improve. Chambers writes that “one should never treat a human being only as a means to some end... Love means sustaining relationships in which the interdependence of one’s own and others’ interests is recognized and respected.”³ I strongly believe that love plays a huge role in coaching and is vital to the success of the group. However it is essential to balance this love with power and to remember your role as a coach, holding the students accountable when necessary. “Power without love is tyranny, and love without power is sentimentality. In power and love, the interests of both parties matter. To power and love well is to respect the other and the self.”⁴ Love the students and accept them, but also create a space where they are held accountable so they will develop skills and responsibilities that will help them accomplish their project and be successful throughout their lives. And don’t forget to have fun with them, because fun is what keeps people excited and coming back for more.

My coaching partner Rachel and I went into our groups with a very clear intention that forming relationships with our students was our top priority. In our group the second semester, Rachel and I started each meeting with a check-in. We told the students that the purpose of this time was for each of them to be able to talk about whatever they wanted. Rachel and I would both check-in with them as well and tell them about what was going on in our lives. We would also take other opportunities to tell the students about us and our worldviews so that they could feel like they knew us, but we were also very careful not to fill up the space with our opinions so there would be room for the students to confidently form their own opinions. I feel we created strong relationships with these students because we made ourselves appear human and therefore approachable. We showed the students we were human through showing them we were emotional, that we struggled, that we wanted to have fun and have friends as well, and that we were also insecure at times.

An easy way to begin to develop relationships with students is by asking them questions. Ask them about the work your group is doing or about their personal life—just ask them questions so they know that you are interested in them. Remember if they had a game the week before and ask them how it went. It’s key to do this with genuine interest, or it will feel awkward and false to the students.

³ Chambers, Edward T. "The World As It Is and The World As It Should Be." *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for power, action, and justice*. New York: Continuum. 30.

⁴ Ibid, 31.

It is also important that students have an opportunity to form relationships with other people who hold positions of power in regards to the issue on which they are working. One way to identify who has power in regards to your issue is to create a power map with your students. A power map is a where you brainstorm and write down all the people who you could contact for information or to help you on your project. When they created a power map, the person they felt had the most power over this issue was their principal, Dr. Pilch. They realized that in order for them to do anything regarding about this issue they would have to form a relationship with her. Throughout the course of the semester the students held three meetings with Dr. Pilch, as well as wrote her letters and proposals in between these meetings. Through this the students and Dr. Pilch developed a public relationship. The students learned that Dr. Pilch shared their sadness over their issue, saying in one meeting that the challenges faced by undocumented students often wanted to make her cry. Through this comment and the other conversations the students and the principle realized they had the same self-interest: wanting to help undocumented students feel less segregated at the high school. They were then able to work together on this issue. Throughout the semester the students did research, surveyed other students at the high school, and made phone calls to various schools and district officials. They then reported the results to Dr. Pilch in their meetings. At the end of the semester the students wrote a proposal to change the requirements for obtaining parking permit. Dr. Pilch agreed to this and changed the school's policy. I strongly believe that the relationship the students created with her through their meetings significantly affected the level of commitment she gave to this issue.

Leanne's Tips for Being an Effective Coach

- 1. Want to be there.**
- 2. Enter coaching with an open mind.**
- 3. Expect that each student has something to offer you and that that you are there to learn from him or her just as they are there to learn fro you.**
- 4. Help your students develop a sense of self worth, both in the work that they are doing and as individuals.**
- 5. Really want to be with the students because they will be able to tell if you are faking it; this will jeopardize what gets done in addition to their confidence in what they are doing.**
- 6. Step back and let the students do the work.**
- 7. Be flexible.**
- 8. Ask good, pointed questions, questions that will probe and challenge them.**
- 9. Show the students you are interested in them, both in what they are working on in their issue groups and in who they are as individuals.**
- 10. Be open to their suggestions and experiences.**
- 11. Be willing to be wrong, to not know the answer.**
- 12. Know that this experience is not about you or what you want or what's on your agenda. It is about them.**
- 13. Most importantly, build relationships with the students.**

The truth is I adored my students. I thought about them when I wasn't in their school, and I got excited to see them every Wednesday. I waved at them when I saw them in the hallways, and I smiled at them when they spoke in our group. I told my friends about them and what they were working on. I believe that it is so important to love what you are doing and this without a doubt applies to coaching.

I'll leave you with this: have fun while coaching, build relationships and trust with your students, and love going there to be with them. With these things I am confident that you will be on your way to being a successful coach. Enjoy! PA is an incredible journey.

Public Achievement and Teacher Education

Michael C. Kuhne

Minneapolis Community and Technical College

One form of civic engagement that works well is Public Achievement. This article highlights three different civic engagement activities that work well in the Urban Teacher Program (UTP) at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). According to the Public Achievement web site, Public Achievement is a youth civic engagement initiative focused on the most basic concepts of citizenship, democracy and public work. Public Achievement draws on the talents and desires of ordinary people to build a better world and to create a different kind of politics. The simplest way to understand Public Achievement is as an ongoing, action- and project-oriented team activity designed to allow participants to reflect on and name the democracy skills that they learn. MCTCs Urban Teacher Program incorporates Public Achievement to help the program meet its mission, which professes to instruct students to practice and model advocacy and activism, while instructing students to understand methods of conflict resolution . . . pose and solve problems; promote change . . . [and serve as role model[s] in education and politics. These objectives are met through the students' participation in two Public Achievement-focused seminars. In one seminar, students participate on Public Achievement teams and select critical issues in their communities, identify specific problems within the issues, and create public work projects that respond to those problems in nonviolent ways that contribute to the commonwealth. In the subsequent seminar, the students go through the same process, this time as coaches of teams whose members come from three different Minneapolis K-12 schools.

"...the most important lesson I learned about relationships is that I do not need to have everyone like me. What I need to do is build relationships that are mutually respected by both parties in order to create successful accomplishments in public work."

To describe Public Achievement classroom practices, I have sorted the practices into three stages to match the process that Public Achievement teams experience: issue development, problem clarification, and public project. The first stage is issue development. While there are a number of different classroom practices one could use at this stage, we have found relational meetings to be effective. According to Edward Chambers, the relational meeting is an encounter that is face to face . . . for the purpose of exploring the development of a public relationship? Wherein one searches for talent, energy, insight, and relationships. In our setting, the goals include increasing self-awareness about one's own interests while learning the importance of building public relationships. We ask students to do two relational meetings. One is with a classmate. Once they have conducted a relational meeting with a classmate, we ask that they conduct another relational meeting with someone in their community.

Typically, this relational meeting will grow out of the first meeting (in fact, we ask classmates to make suggestions to one another). These meetings are usually more tension-filled than the classmate relational meeting. Many students struggle with this activity, likening it to a cold call in sales. However, those who are able to deal with their discomfort benefit from the experience. One student, writing anonymously, argues that, "the most important lesson I learned about relationships is that I do not need to have everyone like me. What I need to do is build relationships that are mutually respected by both parties in order to create successful accomplishments in public work." Through these relational meetings, students become clearer about not only their partner's interests but also their

own. Incorporating relational meetings into the curriculum has helped our students learn a method of conflict resolution based on relationships.

Once students have formed issued-based teams, the next step is for the teams to clarify particular problems within the issue. A classroom activity we use is power mapping. Students use large sheets of paper and write the issue in the middle. From there, branches are drawn to indicate specific aspects of the issue. For instance, a team might form around the issue of racism.

The branches from this issue might include the racial profiling of African American males, recent events on campus involving racist remarks directed at Muslim students, tensions between immigrant communities, and so on. Each new branch promotes discussions, helping teams move from general issues to specific problems.

Once the team clarifies a specific problem, a new power map is created. This time, the specific problem is named in the middle, and the branches now lead to organizations and the names of specific people. This activity helps teams identify their particular problem's stakeholders. Once these stakeholders are identified, team members research the problem. This might entail traditional research methods, but it often involves another series of relational meetings with people identified in the exercise. Some teams periodically return to power mapping, refining both the problem and the stakeholder list in the process. This activity helps students understand how to pose and solve problems as they analyze the power dynamics of any issue and problem. Once teams clarify a specific problem, they produce a public project.

Unlike traditional small-group projects, public projects must identify and work with an audience that resides outside of the classroom.

The type of public project depends on the specific problem being addressed. In addition to projects that focus on internal campus matters, other teams have reached into communities for their public projects. One team formed September 12, 2001, less than 24 hours after the Twin Towers collapsed: their project to create a series of forums wherein discussion about discrimination against Muslims could occur. This group presented their forum in eight different Minneapolis schools. They also presented at a public work celebration to over 120 stakeholders. I appreciate the way that this public dimension of their work elides the students' notions of academic learning as separate from "the real world."

Asking our students to make their work public teaches them how to promote positive change. It also gives them a taste for what it might mean to be a role model as a citizen teacher. Public Achievement is the vehicle for UTP to meet its civic engagement goals. At the same time, Public Achievement provides an action-based learning environment for teaching candidates to explore the important public dimensions of their work.

“Unlike traditional small-group projects, public projects must identify and work with an audience that resides outside of the classroom”

From Perry, James L. (Editor). *Quick Hits for Educating Citizens: Successful Strategies by Award Winning Teachers*. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2006. p 34.

Building a Relationship, Creating Empowerment

Emily Washburn

Courtney and I are quiet people. When we meet with our leadership class to discuss our work in Public Achievement, we are more inclined to listen to others' thoughts and to process and analyze them than we are to add to or challenge them. Observing Courtney and I in class, it seems like we would be the least likely leaders of the bunch. Due to our common character traits, it may seem that the two of us working together would lead to the kids in our Public Achievement group running all over us. And, the truth is, for about four or five weeks, that is exactly what happened.



We did not just struggle with stepping outside of our comfort zones. We were dealing with a small faction of middle-school students who understood our predicament and knew how to use it to their advantage. Four young ladies in our group formed their own “upperclassman” clique, refused to pay attention, called Courtney and I out on our mistakes, and engaged in class only to the extent that it meshed with their personal agendas, which was usually little to not at all. The shy, contemplative people we are, Courtney and I had no idea how to handle these girls or how to spark an interest in them for our class. We

constantly asked them to pay attention or join in, but our minuscule voices and timid mannerisms got in the way of us actually creating any sort of impact on the girls' behavior. So, Courtney and I went to talk to Frank, our Public Achievement advisor. Courtney and I were thankful for, though not surprised by, his ability to walk us through solutions and techniques to improve our predicament.

At our initial meeting with him, Frank began by asking Courtney and me what we needed help with, but, we were not sure how to answer; we were overwhelmed. We realized we needed help coming up with set lesson plans each week. Going in to class with a “let's wing it” attitude and some basic guidelines was not working. And, more than anything, we realized that we needed to better relate to them in order to harness the group. The relationship we had with the kids would ultimately be the determinant of how each meeting went, how much buy-in we received from the kids, and how successful the Public Achievement experience would be for all of us. In order to harness this group, we had to create buy-in from them so they contributed to the group, and we wanted to do this by giving them power and showing them that we were confident in their abilities. So, Frank gave us tips about talking to the girls as people rather than “inferior” students, and he helped us create a cohesive lesson plan for our next Public Achievement meeting. We became much more aware of the work required of us and what we needed to do each week before and after we met with the kids. Courtney and I gained more than courage that day in our meeting with Frank. We found support and a toolbox of techniques to use with the kids. We realized that we were capable of shaping the group dynamic and that achieving success meant applying more commitment and self-confidence.

“We had to create buy-in from them so they contributed to the group.”

So, the week after meeting with Frank, I went back to Bruce Randolph Middle School. Courtney could not make it at the last minute, so I was on my own to talk to the girls as well as lead an activity for the rest of the kids to do in the mean time – when we had created a plan with Frank, Courtney and I agreed on splitting the group so one of us could talk to the girls and one of us could guide the rest of the kids in some sort of community-building activity. However, with Courtney gone

that day, it was all up to me. I knew that “confrontation and controversy were essential to organizing”⁵, so in an effort to push myself out of my comfort zone, which had previously helped me to avoid confrontation and controversy, I stuck to our game plan. I did not want to segregate the kids by singling some out, but I knew how crucial it was that this conversation be held, so I asked the rest of the kids to pull out their journals and write about an experience they had had that week dealing with discrimination against youth (the topic the group had chosen to tackle). I then asked the four young ladies to join me for a private conversation.

“The girls had been withdrawing their consent to be part of the public school system for a long time...”

As soon as I began the discussion about how the girls needed to remember that the other kids looked up to them, they knew what I my schpeel was going to be about. They had heard the “responsible leader” speech from their teacher before. However, in my determination to change our group dynamic, I kept in mind that “In a participatory, collaborative class, conflicts and complaints can be expressed openly and negotiated mutually, which increases the possibility of solving them or at least maintaining a working relationship in the group.”⁶ My goal was to create this open, collaborative environment, so instead of giving in to the girls’ complaints that they had heard it all before, I pushed the conversation and said:

Yes, being responsible leaders is exactly what I want to talk to you about. But, it is more than that. I want you guys to know that Courtney and I are here to work with you, not to teach at you. If you have any ideas about what you want to see in class, we want to hear them. If you don’t like something, we want you to tell us, or tell the group. We want you to be role models for the younger kids, but we want you to really participate in this class, and in order to get you to do that, we want to do things that you guys enjoy. Courtney and I are here for whatever you need to talk about, so feel free.

These girls had never had such power enabled to them before, and, likewise, I had never felt such an ability to empower. Right then and there, the dynamic between the girls and I changed. Ed Chambers made an important point when he noted, “We play by the rules when we have the chance to participate in making them. But when we’ve been left out of the rule-making and when authority is used arbitrarily against us to shut us out or deprive us of what we need to live, we can withdraw our consent.”⁷ The girls had been withdrawing their consent to be part of the public school system for a long time, and by my making a point to help them discover the power to control their education, their views on class changed. Katie mentioned a game she wanted to play for a warm-up (and the next week we played it), and Maria, always the tangent-taker, somehow began a discussion about where everyone was from, and though it was not quite on topic, it was apparent to me that the girls had understood what I wanted to stress to them, so I let them run with the discussion for a minute or two, and we began to get to know each other on a new level. They no longer saw me as someone to take advantage of because they realized there was no advantage to take. If they wanted to do something, I’d let them do it (within reason and context of the group). If they wanted to talk about something, I’d let them vent. Courtney and I treated the whole class like this, and soon it became reciprocal. If we wanted to talk about their topic or their project, they would talk about that. If we wanted to do an activity around their issue, they would be open to it, or they would creatively alter my idea after discussing their changes with the group. Eventually, not only would they talk about what we wanted and would we talk about what they wanted, but we also began to talk *together*. The girls had

⁵ Rogers, Mary Beth. *Cold Anger*. Denton: University of North Texas P, 1990.

⁶ Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1992.

⁷ Rogers.

insightful comments and would prompt the other kids. They would ask the younger kids to stop goofing around and pay attention, a habit that only two months earlier they were being told to quit themselves. The process was like that of watching a flower bloom; one does not realize that small, individual changes are occurring, but one realizes the full beauty of the flower once it is fully open. Each week the group grew closer and closer, and eventually Courtney and I were able to look back and notice the change that had occurred.

Challenging the Process: The Success of Failure

Jane McGillem

As Harry Boyte points out, “there is a deficit mentality about young people today that is part of the larger deficit mentality about most people in general.”⁸ I felt the presence of this mentality when I first stepped into Highline Academy as I saw teachers frantically ordering the students around in effort to reduce the chaos that flooded the hallways. As my eyes were opened to the disorganized structure of the school I immediately knew it would be a great challenge to facilitate student leadership. As I watched the students and teachers interact, I could tell there was a lack of respect going both directions. I saw the teachers telling the students what to do, rather than asking them.

I have always been frustrated with the common interactions between kids and adults. As PA coaches, DJ, Vinny, and I made it a goal not to use our power over the students. We felt that the best way to empower the students was to make them see us on an equal ground. We wanted to reestablish the way they saw authority figures in school and gain their respect. With this idea in mind, DJ, Vinny, and I worked with Edward T. Chambers’ idea of relational power as “power with, not over” to create an environment where students could be honest and express their concerns⁹.

“When I accepted my role as a PA coach I never wanted to have a situation where an authority figure needed to come in and take on that “teacher” role.”

We explored the idea of using relational power by engaging in one-to-one conversations. In learning from Myles Horton, DJ, Vinny, and I tried to build off of our relational power to understand each student’s self-interest. I believe self-interest is an individual’s motivation for making certain choices and involving his or herself in certain organizations. I think that sometimes one’s self-interest is often influenced by ulterior motivations. We needed to know each student’s motivation and self-interest in the issue of bullying.

In a one-to-one relational meeting with Hilary, I learned that she was only involved because the school made it a requirement. Therefore, it was in her self-interest to please the school and meet the requirements so that she could get a good grade. She was not motivated as much by the issue of bullying, but she was rather interested in other people thinking that she cared about bullying.

After learning the student’s self-interests by using our relational power, we made a goal to help the students realize their potential without telling them how to get there. In working toward this goal we had to remind each other of the iron role as founded by the IAF, “never, ever, do for people what they can do for themselves.”¹⁰ Since the students were not used to voicing their opinions and being directly involved in changing the community, they did not understand their power. As I struggled to motivate the students I had to keep reminding myself of what Mary Beth Rogers said in *Cold Anger*;

⁸ Boyte, Harry C. “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” *Public Achievement Handbook* (2006)

⁹ Chambers, Edward T.D. 2004. “World as it is/World as it Should Be.” *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for power, action, and justice*. New York: Continuum.

¹⁰ Rogers.

“if I want to organize you, I don’t sell you an idea.”¹¹ It was my job to get the students to voice their own ideas, which was something they were very unaccustomed to.

After establishing relational power and getting a taste for the students’ self-interests, we felt it was appropriate to move forward with a project. DJ, Vinny, and I provided our students with disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures that show their perspective of bullying. At the end of the project we were going to choose five pictures that capture the essence of the issue, and present it to the students’ peers and teachers. After we assigned the project the students were less receptive.

We went back the next week to collect the cameras with the expectation that they fulfilled their responsibility. As soon as the students entered the room that day I immediately felt a different energy. I started to engage with the students as I usually do, by asking how they were doing. When I got no response I started to raise my voice a little so I could bring focus and attention to the room. In a loud voice I asked, “did everyone bring their cameras this week?” The only response I got was an eye roll from Hilary.

Then all of a sudden the chaos erupted as everyone was talking over each other complaining that the photo project was a burden. Everyone seemed to agree that they had no time, and this was all a waste, etc. As I was starting to get overwhelmed I looked to Vinny to gather his response. It was obvious that we were both trying to maintain order, but we were not being successful.

As all of the commotion was starting to build up I looked over to the corner and made eye contact with Andrea. Andrea is the coordinator between Highline Academy and the University of Denver for the Public Achievement program. She was observing that day and as the tension in the room started to escalate, she finally had to interrupt. She raised her voice to the students and said, “You guys are being so disrespectful. There are two adults in here trying to talk to you and you need to show them respect and listen.” At that moment, Andrea stepped into the teacher’s role.

When I accepted my role as a PA coach I never wanted to have a situation where an authority figure needed to come in and take on that “teacher” role. As soon as Andrea raised her voice, I felt like I failed as a coach. Andrea was exerting power over the students because she did not see an alternative in that moment of chaos. It was my job as a coach to intervene before that moment occurred. I could sense the cold anger in the room before Andrea stepped in. Rather than working with the anger, I allowed everyone’s emotions to boil up in a pot so much so that Andrea felt she needed to raise her voice to keep the lid on it. I had worked so hard to establish a more personal relationship with each student so that they would listen to and respect me.



“In a social movement, the demands escalate, because your success encourages and emboldens you to demand more.”

It became clear that although we had a comfortable and trusting environment, we needed to reestablish our role as coaches. Then I remembered what happened to Myles Horton during the process of the Civil Rights Movement. Horton was involved in many of the smaller struggles that were instrumental in the larger movement, which made him realize that “in a social movement, the demands escalate, because your success encourages and emboldens you to demand more.”¹² In learning from Horton, I realized that I needed to look at my role at Highline from an organizing

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Horton, Myles. *The Long Haul*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998, 115.

perspective. I needed to see myself as part of a larger movement. The students were pushing the boundaries and moving toward further action, just as they should be doing in the Public Achievement process.

After Andrea got everyone's attention, I took a deep breath to gather my focus. I asked the students to just stop everything for a moment and take out a sheet of paper. I wanted them to put their concerns in writing so that I could figure out what I needed to do to reestablish our goals and redefine our purposes. I needed to become more grounded in my role as an organizer and identify the students' issues to bring the focus to their leadership development.

Although I felt like the students had walked all over me in that meeting, I came to realize that they were only able to be so candid because they did trust and respect me. They were pushing DJ, Vinny, and me because they did not like what we were trying to get them to do. At first I felt like it was my fault that they did not like the camera project, then I remembered what Mary Beth Rogers said about organizing. These students were obviously angry about something, and they were challenging me and the only way I needed to respond to them is by offering my own challenge. I realized that I cannot sell the camera idea and make the students believe in it, but rather I need to find out their interest and "stir the possibilities," and then help them to realize their visions.¹³

The greatest lesson that I can take away from my experience as a Public Achievement coach is that power in public life is built on relationships. The fact that the students felt confident enough to get angry and share their concerns demonstrates my success in building relational power and ultimately challenged me to rethink about my role as an organizer. I felt powerless the moment students erupted in protest, but in the end I realized that they were just engaging in the Public Achievement process. Being challenged by the students has made me more confident about my ability to act as an organizer and continue to erase the "deficit mentality" at Highline Academy.

Uncovering a Process: From Leader to Community Organizer

Kristen Rouse

I believe everyone's perspectives and goals are constantly changing because of life experiences. Through my PA work and education about community organizing, my ideals and goals have developed into more detailed and thoughtful things. I also believe that one's view of a leader is constantly changing. Before we even know the term, we may view our preschool teacher or soccer coach as a leader. In middle school, leaders may very well become the popular kids. In high school they could be office holders or our team captains. I, like many others, went through all of this leadership morphing. The people I have viewed as leaders in the past may very well be leaders in their own ways.

"...going into projects with a self-rewarding goal can hinder a project's success."

Since coming to college, however, I have expanded my terms of leadership even further. The more historical view that I held in the past would leave out many of the incredible people I now see as excellent leaders. In addition to my overall view of leaders and the qualities they possess, my personal goals as far as leadership is concerned have changed drastically. I used to limit leadership to those who have power. Though this is often true, my idea of what power is has changed to include much more. I have come from thinking those who control have power to also realizing that those who give others control are also powerful and influential. Because I now see different kinds of people as leaders, I have been able to assess myself as a leader and the roles I would like to play.

¹³ Rogers, 17.

Though community organizing was something new for me this year, it is not a new thought in the world. People have been organizing since before there was even an awareness that it could be done. To me, this has become my new goal for myself as a leader. I cannot honestly say if I have ever wanted to be a powerful person. I did not want to be the powerful, charismatic leader I had learned about in leadership classes or the person whom people report to. I now know for certain that empowering others is what I find important for my personal aspirations. Helping others realize their abilities and watching them begin to use these talents is a desire that fuels my work in my public achievement project and my future involvement. Working with PA and other similar projects, I believe I can do just this.

After all of the work I have done this year with PA, I know that I desire to make a difference. I want to help other people, like Ashley, Ella, and Brittany, realize that they are very capable of doing more for themselves than any other person can. Steps such as this will not necessarily be world changing. However, I also know that changing the world will not be the first step in accomplishing my goals anyway. I now realize that making a difference can be much smaller than this, like what I am helping the girls in my group to realize, and going into projects with a self-rewarding goal can hinder a project's success. Being an organizer is not about yourself; it is about other people. Realizing their abilities, having hope in them, watching them succeed during a process. As Horton said, "It's very important that you understand the difference between your perception of what people's problems are and their perception of them."¹⁴ Other people and their perceptions and desires are what motivate and affect the decisions and steps one takes as a community organizer. Self-interest is not something that can or should be considered.

In addition to my thoughts on leadership changing, my view of success has also developed throughout my year as a PA coach. My experiences coupled with the work and thoughts of others have helped me do this. Saul Alinsky and Myles Horton have been two community organizers I have been able to learn from this year. Through all of their work and dedication, one can see that Alinsky and Horton have been two of the most effective organizers throughout history. Their thoughts on measures of success did diverge, however. "Saul and I differed because my position was that if I had to make a choice between achieving an objective and utilizing the struggle to develop and radicalize people, my choice would be to let the goal go and develop the people. He believed that organizing success was the way to radicalize people."¹⁵ I agree with Horton in this sense. To me, it is much more important to help people develop than it is to have a successful project. Even if a project is successful, how can it be sustainable without well-developed people to support it? After all "Social movements aren't subject to accurate record keeping. You can't reduce them to statistics."¹⁶ Ends do not justify the means in this case because the ends do not necessarily matter if they do not help the people to further succeed. With community organizing, the means are the most important aspect of the process; they are the process. During the struggle to achieve success, people learn more about themselves and what they are capable of. This has been true for me as well. Bureaucracies with the Denver Public School System were just one example of this for me. For Highline administration, having a PA program was enough. Making sure that program was effective was not necessarily a priority. Discovering this through the year made me learn ways to communicate my frustrations to administrations as well as why things frustrated me in the first place.

"It is much more important to help people develop than it is to have a successful project."

My Public Achievement project and the accompanying struggles have helped me to realize things about myself and the difference I can make. Being a leader with the ability to order others and

¹⁴ Horton, 70.

¹⁵ Ibid. 80.

¹⁶ Ibid 115.

assess my own level of success has become an insignificant position for me. I still like to hold these kinds of leadership positions and be a source of answers for people, but I realize that leadership through teaching others how to take charge is much more rewarding. After all, “Once you understand that, you don’t have to have answers, and you can open up new ways of doing things.”¹⁷ I now realize how important this is, and also how important it is to realize that sometimes you will find answers when and where you least expect them. This is true not only in how I handle myself as a leader, but also in a grander way of what other kinds of roles I can play.

Emotional Threads

Kali Smith

The experiences of being a Public Achievement Coach have taught me many valuable lessons within the realm of community organizing. These lessons began as struggles and trials that overwhelmed Natasha, my fellow PA Coach, and myself with frustration. We often faced days of unproductive meetings with our students because of their behavior. We also struggled with communication issues with Highline Academy when trying to coordinate more meeting times. I don’t mean to say that Public Achievement was an overall negative experience; I want to convey the importance of having expectations but realizing that the chance of those expectations being fulfilled can be drastically altered within the work of PA. My expectations did not include many of the events that occurred during the year. I learned immediately that it is impossible to have expectations, and your goals or objectives for the time frame can be altered many times along the way.

“We were not there to teach or lead the students, but rather coach them into discovering new ideas and thoughts...”

Thinking back to the first day we met the students, I recognize the significant changes that occurred over our time together; changes in the students and myself. I recognize the changes that occurred and how they will benefit myself as a community organizer in the future. I am also able to see the improvements that can be made within my work as a leader. However, all that we as PA coaches struggled with through the year has contributed to the leaders and community organizers we will be in the future. As coaches, we were taught the threads of Public Achievement and its purpose in the community, but there can only be so much discussion before you are placed into the situation and learn first-hand the struggles and frustrations that come along with community organizing.

Our classes at DU structured PA with agendas and roles. We weren’t aware of our students’ exuberant personalities at this point and had hoped we would implement a structured lesson plan with every Friday class. I must say that the four students we worked beside were, on occasion, intelligent, well-spoken, somewhat mature leaders in their school. In fact, we were very impressed with their presentation on gang violence prevention in their community because they displayed both strong leadership in front of the group and passion for their issue. Needless to say, we soon discovered our four students, who were in eighth grade and best friends, thoroughly enjoyed goofing off and not paying attention. This didn’t negatively affect the group until a few weeks into PA when they felt comfortable enough to act themselves in front of Natasha and me. They needed to “test the waters” and figure out who Natasha and I really were, but they eventually felt Natasha and I were trustworthy and “cool” enough to act themselves during our weekly classes. Natasha and I struggled to find the balance of allowing them to express their unique personalities but maintain stability and consciousness in what they were doing with Public Achievement. We were not there to teach or lead

¹⁷ Ibid 68.

the students, but rather coach them into discovering new ideas and thoughts about their issue. But their dynamic personalities made coaching almost impossible at times and left us wanting to pull our hair out.

One instance, in particular, left us even more exhausted. Since our weekly meetings were so unproductive, Natasha and I needed to schedule a time to meet with the students to make up for all we were behind on. It was at eight in the morning during a snowstorm, and we were hopeful the students would not be as energized this early in the morning. They started off with their rowdy behavior but Natasha and I soon established that we were not in the mood to waste this time. We sternly told them how far behind we were because of their behavior and that it is disrespectful to waste Natasha and my time that day. They then apologized and we got our work done. By treating them as adults and holding them responsible for their actions, we established a different type of relationship than they thought, one different from the typical “student/teacher” relationship they only knew. With time and a lot of energy, I saw changes in their behavior and changes in my ability to coach and manage these students. They felt more compelled to have a tangible result for their project and they started focusing more during out meetings. This allowed for more production and fun, which led to feeling more accomplished when leaving Highline.

“The most productive thing to do was focus all my energy into the students and their project.”

To me, it was never a struggle of Public Achievement’s expectations; it was a struggle of inconsistency. Learning that what we thought was happening in their classes was not happening, changing classrooms every week, being interrupted by passerby students were outside factors leading to the overall breakdown of our PA structure. These elements negatively contributed to our work every meeting, leaving it difficult to maintain a constant variable of productivity. And because of these issues, I began overwhelmed with annoyance and anger and I was afraid it would show when I was with the students. According to Mary Beth Rodgers in *Cold Anger*, “Anger...has to be controlled and connected to a concern for someone else...there has to be a restraint to the action connected with anger.”¹⁸ It was a constant struggle for me to teach the students how to constructively manage their anger or frustration. Eventually, I found most of these overriding issues were out of my control and the most productive thing to do was focus all my energy into the students and their project.

Since working with the students was my primary concern and truly listening to their ideas, I’ve learned the importance of analyzing almost everything they say. Their life experiences have been quite difficult and they often dismissed the importance in their struggles. It is now that that I have “learned to listen and turn people’s ideas around in my mind. They were experts on their own lives and their own experiences. And those experiences could have something to teach me even if I didn’t see it at the moment.”¹⁹ Their experiences have taught Natasha and I that even if we never personally face the affects of gang violence, we will not be ignorant towards it.

Overall, my experience with PA has been a constant growth in community organization and personal leadership growth. Now I’m able to evaluate my emotions or actions in accordance to the situation involving the students. The events that occurred delayed our goals and expectations for the quarter, but I feel we never stepped back to look at the broader picture. “When you learn something emotionally, I guarantee you, you never forget it.”²⁰ Personally, I have grown as a leader and emotionally invested in these students.

¹⁸ Rodgers, 191.

¹⁹ Horton, 20.

²⁰ Rogers, 113.

Living With Chaos

Natasha Kiemnec

The focus of our class was on gang violence. The first activity we were instructed to do with them was the Theater of the Possible.²¹ Kali and I had laid out a schedule, to the minute plan, to help focus and drive the first day's discussion. Kali wrote the plan on the board. I said, "Ok, Kali is going to write down our lesson plan for today and...." I was interrupted. "Daniel, did you see that kid?" asked Andrew. "Nah, Nah man I didn't see him." claimed Daniel. "Hey, boys I am trying to tell you what we are going to do today and we have this outlined plan that we need to tell you about," I forcefully said. They were quiet again. Kali and I explained to the best of our knowledge the Theater of the Possible. At the time, we hadn't completely bought into the idea of the Theater of the Possible. Actually, to be honest, we thought it was going to just be a disaster. As coaches, we had done some pre-reading on the Theater of the Possible. I think that we didn't fully understand how it was going to work and secondly, we thought that we should be engaging our group in a more productive activity. Originally we took the idea of community organizing to mean that we should be going out into the community and trying to solve problems, and to us, this did not include Theater of the Possible. Despite all these doubts we had we tried to sell it to them. Later on, I realized it was this moment that taught me my first lesson in community organizing, the importance of believing in the process. Kali eagerly prodding, "How does that sound? Doesn't that sound like something you all can really make your own?" Daniel attempting to please us responded, "Ya that's sounds doable." Lindsey, "Ya, whatever. It's fine." "What do you guys think you want to do your skit about?" I hesitated to ask.

"We thought it was going to just be a disaster."

Silence.

"What about gangs interest you?" I pushed a bit more. Daniel says, "I don't know, like prevention." Kali, "Okay, so that's good. How can you show that in a skit?"

The week before their performance we told them to practice their skit, memorize it if they could, and bring costumes. We knew these requests were big, especially for a group that had not been able to focus or get excited about what we were doing. However, if they were capable of taking this skit and making it their own, then Kali and I would know that we had reached them. We could be sure that they had been listening and were engaging in what we were trying to teach. The chaos, the problems, and the confusion would be quelled if they succeeded in these tasks. The anticipation was high.

The following week, Kali and I wandered into Highline down the chaotic halls that seemed a bit less confusing than before, looking through the crowds for our group. Would they be dressed? Would they have their lines memorized? Did they invite people to the presentation? As we were searching, they came up behind us. "Look, look at our costumes!" shrieked Lindsey. "We wore them all day." "Isn't this sweet?" questioned Andrew. "We have been practicing all day!" Lindsey told us. "Oh my goodness!! You guys look awesome" Kali and I said in unison. They each had their own costume with fake mustaches and all. When they got up to perform the excitement about their costumes had worn off and we were a bit nervous again. We were afraid of failure. We thought that if we failed that would mean that the lessons that we had struggled with were not being reached. It would mean that we were not making progress. For me, I thought it would have meant that all the baby steps I was taking to becoming a better leader were unsuccessful. But in reality, whether the skit was successful or not, we would not have failed because struggling through all of these steps was a

²¹ This type of performance is a skit written by a group who wants to convey an issue to an audience. After the skit is performed once, the audience and the actors have the opportunity to interact and discuss the events that occurred. If the audience feels that the skit could have ended differently they can express that desire to see a different ending

success in itself. The skit began and all the giggling and chattering that we had seen in practice was gone. They all knew their lines and they were fully in character. Not only did they know their lines, but they also embellished the skit and made it their own. They explained the conflicts that arise for kids when trying to decide whether or not to be in a gang. After they performed, they asked the audience if they would change what they saw. They facilitated their own discussion and performed the skit with a revised ending. We ran backstage. We could hear laughing and screaming.

Their elation was unbreakable. We had reached our goal. In that we had taught ourselves to believe in the process and to work within the given conditions. By doing so we saw results. Personally, I forced myself to have confidence in myself and learn how to separate institutional problems from the kids' problems. By doing this I was able to create a space where the kids could go from being rambunctious to channeling all that energy into a skit. We had been spending too much time in discussions rather than moving forward with action. The first couple of weeks that we had with the kids were mainly dictated by us. This made it seem like another regular class where they had to sit and be told what to do, even if they were being given more input than usual. Eventually, once we reached success with Theater of the Possible, this opened my eyes to the importance of taking action through turning the power over to the kids. The kids weren't engaging and we weren't making progress because we were confining their abilities to discussion. As soon as we turned the power over to them and let them construct their own skit, they grew exponentially, "I wanted action to be the main thrust, instead of just talking about future action that you don't practice."²² Myles Horton explains what we were first struggling with. We talked about Theater of the Possible too much, which eventually became boring to the students and dried up possible feedback from our group.

Our group had developed because we had become better leaders. We believed in what we were teaching and we had confidence in our abilities to teach them. This allowed them to put their trust into us because we had trust in ourselves. As this development occurred it led to the final shift which was giving the responsibility over to them. This ultimately showed them that we could be trusted and that we had confidence in them even though they are only middle schoolers. After overcoming the continuous setbacks, I appreciated the reward of success much more. I could see a give and take relationship that had been created. Both the kids and us as coaches were learning and relying on one another. By educating others I have been able to focus more on the big picture.

**"The kids weren't
engaging and we weren't
making progress
because we were
confining their abilities."**

Put me in Coach!

D.J. Close

Being a Public Achievement (P.A.) coach is like playing and coaching at once. Time is spent both as a motivator from the sideline and also the player being challenged on the field. In order to fully understand the specific model of Public Achievement, one must recognize the clear line between volunteering and service learning. A PA group requires positive energy and constant reinforcement from the coach. Through the slow teaching and acquiring of personal development skills, the true purpose of being a PA coach is discovered. As a public achievement coach, I learned that the goals of PA and community service are entirely different. Community service is great to be involved in however, PA teaches others to help themselves and requires tremendous accountability and interaction by the coach. Teaching someone how to solve problems while working with others is the over-arching

²² Horton, 16.

goal of PA Programs like Public Achievement help to empower students, teaching them to be more resourceful in handling issues in their communities. Instead of making an individual impact within a community, I now realize the greater mission of teaching others how to make change within their communities. An old saying best describes our goal, “Give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and feed him for a life time”. Through this paper, I will share some of the reasons I have chosen to become a PA coach, some of the struggles that I faced along the way, and positive ways I was able to create a service-learning group.

Highline Academy is a Denver charter middle school and is where my newly acquired PA skills were put to the test. I worked with a group of seven 7th and 8th grade students. Through discussion and personal experience, my group picked bullying as their issue in this model of Public Achievement. I decided to take the time to go to the school for a full day and observe the students in class. I talked to them about what their school was like. First, I passively observed my students, sitting in on various classes and seeing how they interacted with their teachers and friends. After a while I began to assert myself, (important step) when the opportunity came I started talking to my students, asking them what they were working on, if they liked the class they were in, and why or why not. This seemed to ease some tension between the students in my group as well as between students I did not plan on meeting because they were not part of my PA team. I began to have conversations with the students to find out what grade they were in, how they liked their school, etc. I was becoming a part of their community, someone who had invested time into finding out what their names were and what their daily school lives were like. This was important because it established that I cared about the students and I was there to help and support them. Trust was developed in our relationship. I believe that this was a great investment of my time because the students were able to see that I cared about them and that I was there to stay.

“We had created an environment where our students believed that they could share how they felt and truly open up to us.”

My trip to the middle school surprised me in how much I was able to read how the students liked or disliked something, and also how much they opened up. I was able to observe the students in how they talked about the PA program to their friends. The PA coaches and I had begun to wonder if our students even liked us or the program. This sounds petty, but we really wanted to know if the students liked working with us, or if they thought PA coaches were just older college kids who didn’t know what they were doing. During lunch, I had taken a seat at a table with one of the students in my group. I was tired of observing and felt that it was a great time to start asking questions, but before I had the chance, I was surrounded by middle schoolers on all sides. The students within my group wanted to introduce their friends to me and tell them what we had been working on. The students acted completely different around their friends talking enthusiastically about the issue we were working on, rather than being difficult and skeptical like they were when they talked about it with us. Because I had gone to the school and had been around them all day, I was able to see that they had a



true passion for the project we were working on, and that they were excited to tell their friends what they had been doing. When the students were in our group they didn’t always show this strong energy towards the issue and therefore as PA coaches, we couldn’t tell if we were helping them at all. The fact of the matter was that they were super involved, but they were testing their boundaries with us to see how we responded to their challenging attitudes towards the project. If the student’s participated and helped out, we were ecstatic. If they were unproductive and not wanting to do something, we stopped and listened. We

had created an environment where our students believed that they could share how they felt and truly open up to us.

Several months into our Public Achievement program our students confronted us. They did not think they were doing anything about the issue, and had become uninterested and non-cooperative. The two other PA coaches and I thought that we had outlined the issue we would work with, focusing on special projects to increase their understanding and resolution abilities. Halfway through our project, however, we discovered that bullying might not have been what their true passion was. The students were not following any of the ground rules that the group as a whole had outlined, such as, one person talks at a time and respecting each others' ideas. Their level of enthusiasm about the issue, as well as PA, had disappeared at one point. A liaison between the University of Denver and Highline Academy who was in charge of coordinating the PA programs had to intervene and tell the students how disrespectful they were being. The students reverted back to sitting in their desks, mouths shut, and minds turned off. The room was silent, and as a PA coach, I felt all of my power had been stripped away. Power should not be looked at in a negative light, nor should the PA coach abuse it. It is the coach's responsibility to have a presence within the group and derive his or her power from the respect and knowledge that is built by the group.

A quote from the book, *The Long Haul*, by Myles Horton, helps to describe what and why I am a Public Achievement coach at Highline Academy, "The work we do is about power, and about building power and teaching people how to organize around their own interest, how to be effective."²³ Before I had worked inside Highline Academy I was not familiar with the Public Achievement model of leadership. Instead, I only knew the elementary school student government model where my personal aspirations were to become known as a great leader who could manage and lead people in any situation. Through PA I have learned that the "Iron Rule" of, "never, ever, do for somebody what they can do for themselves" is more powerful than just trying to lead someone.²⁴ Each person struggles with their own problems, the problems I might have could be no sweat for someone else to figure out. The thing to realize is that they are my problems, and they will always be my problems until I learn how to solve them. When working with a group of people to find a solution, even if you think you know the solution, you must allow them to find their own answers so that they will be able to solve the problem today, tomorrow, and in the future.

Towards the end of working with our groups, we had to work hard to really bring the team together. By expanding off of the work and relationships that we have created, the time to focus in on our issues and make a difference is at hand. Pushing our students further out of their comfort zones and improving on their newly acquired communication and problem solving skills, insures their success with future community issues no matter their source. The experiences of being a PA coach are different from any other community engagement I have ever been involved in. No matter the outcome of our particular issue, the importance of teaching students that they have power to make change spreads the effective relational and investigative solution finding goals of Public Achievement. The process of becoming an effective community organizer and a PA coach cannot be read about or taught second hand. The only way to truly sharpen one's development of the communicational, relational, and problem solving skills behind PA and community organizing, is to be personally involved. The rewards of becoming a PA coach have changed leadership style and the positive results that are a result of the process of PA are amazing. Success does not come without defeat, nor rewards without disappointments. By persevering and learning how to interact as a leader, teacher, follower, and student will allow you to make the impact you have been hoping for. Now you have created players within the community who no longer ask to be 'put in the game,' but who know how to become involved personally and work towards finding solutions to win the game.

²³ Horton, 24.

²⁴ Rodgers, 15.

Just Talking about It

Vinny English

Public Achievement (PA) is a form of community organizing that incorporates leadership on an academic level. It involves frustrations, rewards, and most important the chance at making an impact in at least one young individual's life. I can advise you of this because it is what I have found during my time as a PA coach at Highline Academy, a Denver Public School. PA is an evolving process, founded in the roots of empowering the youth of America. It is an idea that defies the norm and goes against societies' stereotype that the young people we are working with care only about themselves, and are incapable of being concerned with others. As Harry Boyte says, it "blows apart the fiction that young people are "apathetic," passive about social problems, or concerned only with their own narrow goals." As coaches we are giving students an avenue, or outlet to effect change on an issue they feel important, to defy the norm. Keep in mind this is community based leadership.

Take for example my experience and work with the situation the bullying group experienced during the camera project²⁵. On the day the cameras were supposed to be brought back, and turned in for development only one person of the *entire* group had theirs nearly finished. Many of them didn't have the camera with them, and all of them had taken an attitude of apathy, disinterest, and plain disrespect towards the project, us as coaches, and PA overall. There were only two (of three) coaches present that day, and from the coaching standpoint we were slighted from the start. The conversation - what little there was since it is easier to stay quiet, not talk, and let the time pass - quickly escalated from the simple fun-intended discussion of the camera project, to a conversation of students questioning the purpose of PA, and coaches wondering if/why this issue was important to them, at all. Finally the tension in the room came to a head when Andrea, an advisor to the program and liaison between Highline and The University of Denver, addressed the group and reminded them of the situation as well as the parameters by saying, "You all (students)



need to understand that there are two adults here that are trying to help you and that they deserve your respect." This aide from the outside gave us as coaches a moment to step back from the situation and collect our thoughts and emotions. I was slightly startled at the piercing outside assistance, and while it was welcomed and needed I felt like a turtle on its back. Quick action was necessary to ensure that any progress was made. The day was about to end without chaos and disinterest in the air - something had to be done and fast. Each student was directed to get out a piece of paper and write something – *ANYTHING* – down about how they felt towards the issue, the project, PA, all of it, and any of it. It was a desperate tactic to gain feedback from the students as to what could be done or how they were thinking, and even this was done with reluctance; It was the biggest "push-back" I had ever felt during the entire PA process. It is here however as Chambers says, "the excitement comes in working out the tension,"²⁶ and I can assure you that tension was present in many people in many forms.

²⁵ **Camera Project:** Each student was to receive his or her own disposable camera to capture images (staged or real) of the issue. The group would then synthesize the mass of photos into three to five pictures that best represent their issue, and then write a description of the scenario as well as potential hazards involved.

²⁶ Chambers, 153.

While the journaling may have been a frantic attempt at the time, the results were gloriously exciting. We as coaches learned that the students were tired of, “just talking every Friday about bullying,” says one student typically with an “attitude” toward the group. They wanted to take *action*, and take a stab at making a difference, and so while it was one of the most discouraging days of PA I ever had, it yielded the most information as to what they wanted to do. It gave us as coaches, with the help of our coach Eric, the avenue to enable the students to make PA their own and not just more “projects” that they didn’t see the purpose in.

Therefore, the next week focused on the students, we continued the conversation with them focusing it around their feelings from the week before. The location of our meeting changed (to outside), and the students were excited to change locations, but initially starting to resist our requests – pushing back – when we were simply just asking them all to sit down at a table with us, and the tension was visible within the students. Then during our conversation, which was again headed towards a lecture due to disengagement, two golden thoughts were flushed out in their responses. The students, the team, wanted to do a video tape displaying and explaining bullying, and then secondly they wanted to be on the playground for interaction, these were the desired avenues of action coming from the students. We discussed further their ideas of a video project, its potential problems and pitfalls, as well as the benefits of being able to see bullying acted out, and the long lasting effect of being able to replay the video. While enthusiastic and encouraging of the idea we challenged *the students* to develop a plan for their movie, which would encourage buy-in and cooperation throughout – it never surfaced.

The team then moved to the playground, and while it may have been a gamble to take our team onto an active playground to try and accomplish anything, enormous amount of progress was made. The team divided its efforts and worked with different groups of children across the entire playground. In the short time that they had, two team members were able to set up an organized game with playground equipment, creating lines for each student’s turn at the game. Other team members simply held conversations with students, or worked to stop a pair of younger boys who were fighting over a toy and then encouraged sharing. It was a dawning of a realization for us as coaches – an enactment of what the team really wanted. The team was concerned with bullying on a social level within their school, and the effects that it can have, etc. However, they were more invested in the creation of a program to prevent bullying. A sort of mentor program that would involve older students being on the playground engaging the younger students, through organized games that teach the inherent values of sharing and fair play. The team wants the program to show other students how to play in a different manner that won’t lead to fighting, and part of the program they were enacting was the simple and friendly gesture of just talking with other students who are off by his or her own self and may be lonely, or are potential targets for bullying. This idea of involvement and action that the students were seeking is how they wanted to affect change. The team wanted to star first on a personal level, and then allow themselves to become concerned with the larger issues of bullying and general interaction within the school. I supported this direction, because by affecting change on the small personal level it creates potential to spread, domino style, through the people affected and then continue through the entire school simply by word of mouth, or observed examples. This desire to effect change coming from the team is the zenith of PA, because it shows commitment and willingness to work for the community.

Public Achievement is community organizing that incorporates leadership in an academic setting with elementary and middle school students. Public achievement can be frustrating, rewarding, exciting, and most importantly potentially life changing for the young individuals you interact with.

“They wanted to take *action*, and take a stab at making a difference...”

Core Concept: Power

Eric Fretz

Naropa University

Power trip, power hungry, power move, power politics, even power lunches and power ties! Chances are you use the term “power” in a variety of phrases every day. Few of those phrases have positive connotations--power is generally seen as an oppressive force associated with compulsion and authoritarianism. When used in English, power generally connotes an individual or a group exerting a will over another, less fortunate, person or group. In this way, Max Weber’s definition of power resonates with many people: “By power is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one’s own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests”.²⁷

Most people in this country see power as a by-product of wealth, privilege, gender or race. In other words, power is seen as something that comes from innate characteristics, or things that you are born with. In many ways, this perception of power in the United States is correct.

Economic class, race and gender do indeed play a role in how we are perceived by others and the strategies we can employ to work and be in the world. However, that doesn’t mean ordinary people can’t change their lives and their communities. In *Public Achievement*, where we see power as an ability to act, learning to identify, access and work with power is one of the most important skills for developing a public life.

Power: It’s More than You Think

Try this experiment: ask your friends, family members or strangers on the street what they think about power. We bet you’ll find that many folks have a negative view of power. Very few people you talk to will exclaim, “Yes, I love power, and I want more!” - even the ones who have the traditional markings of power such as wealth and prestige. Why do people tend to shrink from power? In *Powers of the Weak*, Elizabeth Janeway argues that we are put off by power because of fear. “Power is dangerous: or so we believe,” Janeway argues, and we stay away from it because we think we don’t have the capabilities to work with the responsibility that comes with power.²⁸ Janeway alludes to Lord Acton’s famous phrase, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” arguing that this phrase has so much currency in our language because it lets us off the hook. If you think of power as corrupt, pushing it away, or deciding not to take it becomes a moral choice or, as Janeway says, “It supplies a convenient explanation for inaction and passivity.”²⁹ When we shrink from power we make a conscious choice to remain isolated and, we implicitly allow things to stay as they are. What we are shrinking from, then, is the responsibility that comes with power and we allow others to make decisions for us rather than engaging ourselves with the real problems of the world.

Here is another interesting phrase that has a good deal of currency in English: “Power to the people!” You’ve all heard it—the phrase is generally accompanied by an upraised fist--and you have probably used the phrase and the gesture yourself on occasion. In the context of *Public Achievement*, though, this phrase makes little sense. You might, however, find a *Public Achievement Coach* thrusting her fist in the air and exclaiming, “Power from the people!” Prepositions matter, and, in *Public Achievement*, we realize that power is not a commodity that can be given to the people from the powerful. Power lies dormant in all of us until we choose to take action, and the more people you

²⁷ Weber, Max. *Basic Concepts in Sociology: Concepts of Power and Domination*. 1964. 117.

²⁸ Janeway, Elizabeth. *Powers of the Weak*. New York: Knopf. 1980. 93.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 91.

can mobilize to join your cause, the more change you will affect in your communities.

Despite its negative associations, power is actually a neutral term; it is neither good nor bad until it is applied to specific human acts. Philosophers and theologians spend a good deal of time trying to understand power as a concept and explaining it as an element of human experience and behavior. For instance, the German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche wrote about a “will to power” which he explained as an innate, creative force of human nature. Picking up on Nietzsche's ideas, the German theologian, Paul Tillich, argued that power is an effort to overcome non-being, or death, and in this way, power becomes associated with a life-affirming force. For Tillich, “[p]ower actualizes itself through force and compulsion. But power is neither the one nor the other. It is being actualizing itself over against the threat of non-being” (47). Another German philosopher, Hannah Arendt, discussed the concept of power in her famous work of political philosophy, *The Human Condition*. For Arendt, power is a possibility, and it only “. . . springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (179). In other words, power cannot happen when people are isolated—it is the direct result of human connection and human relationships. Michel Foucault, a postmodern French philosopher and historian has done a great deal to shape the postmodern definition of power, and while it is impossible to distill Foucault’s voluminous writings on power into a few sentences, it is worth noting that for Foucault, power is a process and a force that allows humans to understand, define and, in many ways, control the phenomenal world. For Foucault, power is like a low, but very powerful radio frequency. It works through human beings and institutions and it determines how we see and evaluate the world around us, but it is very difficult to identify. Although he made many statements that power is not an oppressive force, it is difficult to read Foucault and come away with a sense of power as something ordinary people can access to change their lives and worlds.

It is also interesting to look at power from a linguistic perspective. As a concept, power is an idea that has different signifiers in different language and cultures. According to Ed Chambers, English speakers consistently misunderstand power because they typically use it as a noun or an adjective. Spanish speakers, however, have the verb, *poder*, which means “to be able” and “to have the capacity to make an influence.”³⁰ For Spanish speakers, then, power is related to action. A quick study of the way power is defined in English reveals some deep linguistic tensions. In the Oxford English Dictionary, power is defined in three ways: First, the OED sees power as an “ability to do something,” next it notes that power is related to governing and to force and finally, the OED deals with the mathematical and physical definitions of power. What we are left with, then, is a tension between power as the ability act and power as a force that acts upon us. The fact that English and Spanish speakers have a variety of ways of describing and using the word “power,” suggests that individuals and the culture they create decide how they wish to use language and the concepts that are attached to certain words and ideas. Language, in other words, is fluid, always being transformed by new events, technology and agreed ways of explaining ourselves and the world around us. If you accept the idea that language is the pragmatic product of the human imagination, then it is worth considering ways we might begin to re-define “power” in the United States.

Power and Protest Politics: An Applied Example

Let’s consider an example. Imagine you are a university student who is concerned about the use of sweatshop labor to manufacture athletic clothing for your university. If you only see power as something that is in the hands of other people—people with more money, prestige and knowledge than yourself, it would be difficult for you to imagine a way to address the problem at hand. It is hard

³⁰ Tillich, Paul. *Love, Power and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1954. 28.

to imagine going up against a heavyweight when you yourself are just a welterweight and with those odds, it would benefit you to give up on your interest in holding the University accountable for supporting sweatshop labor and just go to the game on Saturday and have a good time. That is partly the problem with defining power as something that is held by other people—it is that much easier to give up on the challenges that we care about and that pejoratively affect the livelihood of others.

However, if you see power as an ability to act, you free yourself to actually do something about companies that use sweatshop labor to manufacture athletic clothing for your university. That is why, in *Public Achievement*, we define power as the ability to act—it is a re-definition of a received cultural concept that gets us out in the world and cures our helplessness. In this way, every human being possesses the capacity to exert his or her power. You might even argue that as human beings we have a responsibility to exert our power and to change the parts of our everyday lives that trouble us or cause trouble for other people.

But there are still more things to consider. Let's say you manage to find like-minded individuals on your campus who also care about the problem of sweatshop labor. And let's say that you all meet one evening at the local coffee shop and decide that the best way for your group to exert its power and to work toward holding this company accountable for its manufacturing procedures in the developing world is to organize a sit in at the President's office of your university. A sit in would, of course, be a dramatic event—you could probably get a good deal of press coverage and, maybe if you are lucky, you could even get arrested by the university police force. Still, what would that kind of protest politics do to counteract the problem? How would your sit in affect the way the university decides to stock its shelves with sweatshirts, shorts and baseball caps? How would your sit in affect the lives of the people in the developing world who manufacture your University's athletic wear? You would need to consider this as well: is there a chance that the press coverage you receive could actually work against your cause and influence others to see your protest as a histrionic bit of political theatre?

Part of the reason we default toward protest politics when we are upset with a current political situation is because American history tends to favor the protester over the community organizer. We know a good deal more about Rosa Parks' and Cesar Chavez' acts of protest against racial segregation than we do about their abilities to organize people around salient social issues and to accomplish the hard work of inspiring people and mobilizing them to action. The same is true for our understanding of the student protests against the Vietnam War, the Million Man March and the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. The problem, though, is that these forms of massive protest often fail to address the problems at hand and mostly serve to inspire people and make them feel good about being a part of a big group. Massive protest movements, in other words, often leave out the hard work of everyday politics that is, arguably, more mundane, yet more effective in transforming lives and communities. In *Going Public*, IAF organizer, Michael Gecan, offers a searing critique of "activists" who take to the streets to protest governmental and multinational activities. Walking to his Manhattan office one afternoon, Gecan stumbles on a street protest: 5 people stand on a Manhattan street corner. Black paint is splashed on their faces and clothing. One man beats a drum, another speaks inaudibly through a megaphone, two protesters writhe on the sidewalk and another confronts passersby. NYC police surround the scene, more bored than anxious. The entire drama is conducted underneath a homemade sign that reads, "Save the U'Wa Tribe." For Gecan, this sort of scene represents the most cynical kind of political engagement. He calls this sort of protest a "reenactment" and the protesters, "political idolaters" who draw more attention to themselves than to the plight of the indigenous people for whom they purport to advocate. Gecan draws a bright line between the street activism he witnessed in Manhattan that day and the kind of community organizing that involves ordinary people working to make their lives and their communities better. From Gecan's community organizing perspective, acting in public is not about wearing a "Peace" shirt, protesting on street corners, joining the Sierra Club or writing a check to your favorite charity. Rather, public engagement is about training ourselves to mobilize people around salient social issues, dialoguing with legislators, business leaders and

school board members, as well as understanding and practicing social change strategies.³¹ In other words, through your work in Public Achievement, you are learning and applying strategies to affect real change in your communities.

On the Ordinariness of Power

United States history reveals hosts of examples of ordinary people who identified problems in their communities and acted on their abilities to resolve those problems. Typical examples include William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and all the courageous people who organized the Abolitionist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. Other examples include Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the brave women (and men!) who spearheaded the Suffragist movement. You are probably thinking of other examples such as the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s and, if you know anything about community organizing, perhaps the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation comes to mind.³²

The problem with focusing on sainted figures such as Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez is that it is daunting to imagine ourselves changing our worlds and affecting power with the same aplomb and effectiveness as those great leaders. So, again, we run into the danger of comparing ourselves to historical figures, thinking there is no way ordinary folks like ourselves could ever do what they did and, once again, giving it all up and enjoying the game the next Saturday. If you find yourself currently thinking these thoughts read the following story about a Public Achievement group in Lafayette, Colorado:

A team consisting of a coach from Naropa University and four students from Centaurus High School in Lafayette, Colorado started with a dream. As undocumented Latino students, they felt that they had a right to attend college and further their education. However, without status as citizens, they were not eligible for in-state tuition, or even federal scholarship money to help them afford the high cost of tuition, making attending college impossible.

The team found a way to act on their dream when they learned about the DREAM Act, a piece of legislation on the table in Colorado that would allow undocumented students conditional in-state tuition so they can attend college, work on their GED, or register for military service. As their Public Achievement project, this team decided to raise awareness of the existence of the DREAM Act in hopes to help get it passed. Their team decided on the appropriate name of *Encontrando Nuevas Oportunidades*, or “finding new opportunities.”

The team made signs and posters to put up around the school and the community to raise public awareness about the DREAM Act. They also surveyed students at the school to rally students’ support, but they knew that wasn’t enough. They knew there were a large number of people in support of their issue, and had to find a way to show this to stakeholders. They used technology to help them act of their issue. The team couldn’t physically leave the school, but they did have Internet access and knew they could use it to reach a large audience. The team set up an online petition that people could sign in support of the DREAM act. Within a month, the petition had over 1000 signatures, which the students displayed publicly in their school and sent hard copies to members of the Senate and House of Representatives. They also presented their project to a representative of Senator Ken Salazar of Colorado and followed up with her to make sure their work was noticed and received.

³¹ Gecan, Michael. *Going Public: An Inside Story of Disrupting Politics as Usual*. Beacon Press. 2002. 49-53.

³² For a history of social change movements in the United States, see Harry Boyte and Sara Evans, *Free Spaces: the Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Encontrando Nuevas Oportunidades was not willing to accept a short-sighted, cynical definition of power, and made a commitment to act on their ideas to create real change. At first glance it would appear this team had very little power. They were ninth and tenth grade high school students who were undocumented immigrants, so they could neither drive nor vote and their future in this country is bleak. They wanted to make their issue public beyond the school walls, but school regulations did not allow them to leave the school during their Public Achievement time, how could they possibly influence anyone? Rather than feeling paralyzed by their deficits, they took on a new definition of power. They began imagining power as the ability to act and they knew that with some creative thinking they could exert their influence on their school and community.

Power as Relational

While you are working on your Public Achievement project, you should begin to realize that power is relational and that those folks (despite their race, wealth and privilege) who can create trusting, public relationships with the right people are the ones who have the abilities to act and to change their worlds. What does it mean, though, to say that power is relational? One way to look at this question is to begin with the oft-quoted phrase, “You can’t do it alone.” Even ultra-powerful people like Bill Gates and George Soros don’t sit in their offices, high above the rest of us and give orders to underlings who mindlessly re-arrange the world according to the whims of Gates and Soros. Indeed, powerful people like Gates and Soros have become, and remain, powerful primarily because of their abilities to seek out likeminded people with similar interests and strengths that complement their individuals weaknesses.

That is why power mapping is such a critical element of any Public Achievement project. When you power map, you simply create a visual map of the individuals and organizations who also care about the issue or problem you are working on in your Public Achievement Issue Group. Here is an example of a power map constructed by a group working on the problem of Immigrants receiving driver’s licenses³³:

After you draw the power map, the next step is to create relationships with the people you have identified on your map. How do you create these relationships so that you can begin acting on a public stage and affecting change in your community? Well, in some instances you do it the old fashioned way: you simply pick up the phone, dial the number of the person you want to contact on your power map and ask for a meeting. If you are under 30 years old, you might be more comfortable sending an email, but stay away from instant text messaging strangers! Sending letters, faxes or just knocking on office doors are also good ways of beginning the kind off public relationships with people on your power map.

Creating relationships with stakeholders who have an interest in your Public Achievement project is one of the most effective ways to act, or to exert power in the public sphere. You might hear Public Achievement practitioners saying something like this: “Two is better than one, three is better than two and four is better than three.” That is just another way of saying that the power we possess in our lives and our ability to act is directly related to the number of public relationships that we have developed. Creating relationships and setting up relational meetings is nothing to trifle with, though. As Ed Chambers says, creating relationships is an art form—it is hard work that involves a good deal of savvy. To find out about one on one relational meetings, see chapter two of Chambers’ *Roots for Radicals*.

Conclusion: The Melian Dialogue

³³ For more information on Power Maps, see www.publicachievement.org

Human beings have struggled with the reality of power for a very long time. As the following story from the Peloponnesian War illustrates, power is not always about the strong exerting force over the weak. Sometimes it is about our ability (or inability) to negotiate, cut deals and work with people who are different than ourselves.

Athens and Sparta were two of the strongest states in the Ancient Greek world. And in the early 4th century BC the two states were engaged in what came to be known as the Peloponnesian War. In 410, Athens set out to conquer Melos, a little island in the Sea of Crete. Melos had originally been colonized by Sparta so it had cultural and economic ties with the Spartans. But, when the war began the Melians claimed neutrality, choosing sides with neither Sparta nor Athens. For awhile, their island status kept them removed from the war, but one day in 410, the Athenians showed up on the island and gave the Melians a choice: Melos could surrender to Athens and the Athenians would in turn spare Melos. All it asked for was for Melos to become a tributary state of Athens—the Melians would retain their property and their rights. Or, Melos could resist and go to war with Athens—a war they would surely lose.

In the dialogue that ensues between the two diplomatic corps, the Melians make the following arguments:

- We are neutral in the war: don't bother us, and we won't bother you.
- If you attack us, other neutral countries will be threatened and then become the enemies of Athens
- If you attack us, Sparta will come to our aid.
- We will fight against you because it is the honorable thing to do—we have hope and faith that we will win.
- It is about standing up for what we think is right.

The Athenians, in turn, make the following counterarguments:

- Surrendering to us is about self-preservation. Because we are stronger, we have a right to rule you. If you resist we will destroy Melos.
- It is in both of our self-interests for you to surrender—we don't want to kill anyone.
- Melos' neutrality is a sign of Athenian weakness—we must conquer you to show strength and because we need your cities.
- Historically, Sparta hasn't come to the aid of its colonies—do you want to take that chance?
- The honorable thing is to surrender and become a part of Athens—no one will die, we won't alter your culture, plunder your resources or hurt you in any way.

Don't be confused by this story: the purpose of discussing the Melian debate in the context of Public Achievement is not to suggest that the weak should automatically cave in to the wishes of the powerful, and it is not to encourage you to be meek and submissive in the face of challenges you will undoubtedly face during your Public Achievement project. The Melian Debate is an extreme example of power relations at work. Few of you will ever find yourselves in the positions of the Athenians or, happily, the Melians. Nevertheless, this story tells us a good deal about power and how it can be exercised in the world. Because the truth is that most of us are Melians. Individually, we don't have a lot of resources and until we connect with other people our power to affect change in the world is diminished. The Melians had no time to create a power map and develop relationships that would allow them to realistically resist the Athenians. In many ways, the Melian story is the Old Testament story of David and Goliath with a very unhappy ending (at least for David). In both scenarios a physically dominant force threatens the weak. But David is an historical anomaly—the weak are generally crushed by the strong and the Melian story is a just a tragedy—with a proper understanding

of power, they could have saved a lot of bloodshed and heartache. Unlike the Melians, though, you have the ability to develop relationships and take action against the Athenians of your community and your world. As Public Achievement participants, you have the ability to marshal power, to negotiate with others and to mobilize people around important community and social issues. The Melians found out the hard way that isolation and neutrality are unrealistic and that hope without strength is a delusion. In the globalized world of the twenty-first century, where, as Thomas Friedman has recently argued, technology has flattened global communications and relationships, we can't afford to be like the Melians. Through Public Achievement, you have the opportunity to transform neutrality to commitment and isolation to engagement.

Invitation to Contribute

Sarah McCauley

AmeriCorps VISTA – CCESL at DU

As a PA coach, you are already contributing to a much greater movement of community organizing and citizenship in your community. For decades, people have worked together to improve their lives through public work. Their work began the historical framework of Public Achievement, creating stories of success and community. Your work with Public Achievement is the next chapter in the history of Public Work.

This document is a living and breathing collection of the stories from coaches just like you. It is essential that every year we compile more of these stories and lessons from coaches and share them with future coaches who will have similar struggles in different times and places.

Everyone has a story, a lesson, or a tool to share with other coaches. I encourage you to write your own story and submit it for consideration in another volume of our Coaches' Handbook. Here are some tips to get you started:

- Consider the moment when there was the most tension within your group. Write about that moment and how it changed your perspective.
- Keep a journal of your experiences with your group of students. Look back and reflect on how you or your group changed throughout the year.
- Write about the most frustrating part of Public Achievement for you. Why did it bother you? How did you deal with it?
- Focus on the power relationships that you witness during your time as a coach. How did power affect your groups' actions and successes?
- Assess your 'success' as a PA group or coach. Did you get out of the experience what you expected? How was the end of your year different than your expectations in the beginning?

More than anything, I encourage you to write about your experiences, whether you share all of your writing or not. Part of public work is making it public and one of the best ways to do that is to share your writing.

Reflect on your time with your PA group, the relationships that you build, the struggles and frustrations, the lessons learned, and the changes that you see or experience. Write as much as you can and when something feels important to you, it probably is to other coaches as well. When you find that, share it!

When you've found your lessons learned and would like to contribute them to the Coaches' Handbook, email engage@du.edu for further instruction.