What Does It Mean to be an Active Citizen?

One of the questions I asked myself the most during this semester was *what is an active citizen and how do I become one?* While I have not developed my own definition for it yet, I was able to gain insightful input for what it might be. Throughout the course of the class, we covered material covering topics of citizenship to what a community is. Much of what we learned in class came from reading texts and reflecting on what we read. By examining the different articles and diagrams, I was able to build my idea of what service truly is and how I can use what I learned to help me become an active citizen.

One of the most important things I learned from the class was the Active Citizen Continuum. This continuum describes the four stages of conscious development within an individual while doing service. The stages go from being a member, to a volunteer, then a conscientious citizen, and lastly an active citizen. Keep in mind that this model applies to dedication to one specific project over a culmination of time. Almost everyone starts from being a member. A member is someone who might just go and service a project for a day or so, not really keeping in mind his or her impact in the overall effort. During this stage, the person is not really aware of what the social issue might be, or care for the issue at all. As a person starts going out to the events more and more however, they might start becoming more aware of their surroundings and start noticing things. For example, if someone was working at a food bank, they might notice that there are regulars who seem to be dependent on the foodbank. That might get them to wonder why, what is the reason behind their lack of food sustainability? That is when a person transitions from being just a member, to a volunteer. Although the person is asking questions, they do not have much information about the social issues behind the cause. When they start developing a concern for wanting to know what the underlying causes and social issues are, however, that is when they become a conscientious citizen. Now the individual might start looking beyond the food bank. They might look at possible food deserts and the primary causes behind them. They might also be looking into income levels for people living in the area and whether people are earning a sustainable income or not. The individual starts becoming more and more informed about the social issue and looks at systemic thinking to understand the different aspects of the social issue. The individual enters the last stage of the continuum when they put the community that they serve as priority. Not only that, but they work with other individuals who also put the social issue as their top priority so that there is a team, a community, of people working towards the same cause. The active citizen continuum cannot be done alone. There is always a group of people who are in the same boat, and more importantly, a community that is willing to help individuals go up the active citizen continuum. It should be noted that the road to being an active citizen is not a one-way street. People can always move up and down the ladder, it all depends on the individual. Throughout my course of the semester, I found myself working my way up and down the ladder. For some of my service events, I was just a mere member, for others, a volunteer, and for one, a conscientious citizen. I became involved with an organization that goes by the name Coalition for Refugee Resettlement (CRR). At first, I just went to the interest meeting because I thought it sounded interesting. I was unaware of the number of refugees living in the area, or how refugees had little to no help trying to integrate themselves into society. Once I became aware of the issue, I began questioning things. I began to question why the government provides such little aid for the refugees and what I could possible do to help. I began to understand why the efforts of the CRR was necessary and how my active service within the CRR was making a difference in the social issue. Although I can only say I am borderline conscientious citizen right now, in the future I hope to become even more involved with the program and become an active citizen.

Another model that we studied in class was The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Astin, Helen S. and Alexander W. Astin). This model is not finite and is constantly undergoing changes with previous leadership development concepts. This model focuses on three key aspects: the individual, the group, and the community/society. The main focus of this model is understanding how the three incorporate with one another and developing the idea that leadership is not a role given to one specific being, it is as stated in the model, “a group process, relational” (Astin, Helen S. and Alexander W. Astin 6). This applies to being an active citizen because although being an active citizen might look like a role of leadership from the eyes of the people around you, it is far from that. Becoming an active citizen, as noted before, can only be done by the help of other people, or *the group¸* such that individuals in a group can strive towards a positive change in the society.

Going off of the idea of leadership, we also looked at the article *From Leadership to Citizenship* by Peter Block. This article, like the Social Change Model, focuses on changing idea of a single person having leadership to expanding the idea into something more relational. In the case of this article, Block brings up the point that often times, people are drawn to people with leadership roles, or better said, “What is stunning about this industry [leadership] is not the suppliers, it is the willingness of customers to pay for the solutions.” (Block 2) He argues that we have created within ourselves a paradox such that we are so drawn and dependent on the idea of leadership that we have formed a learned dependency. (Block 3) This means that individuals who are fully capable of bringing about change themselves invest more time into thinking that someone else might be able to bring about change for them. As Block states, “The longing for change does not create it”. (Block 3) People must be willing to bring about change themselves, and put more efforts in themselves in order to bring about the change that they so desire. This is where the idea of citizenship comes into play. Block argues that moving from an idea of leadership to citizenship will bring about positive social change. As defined by Block, “Citizenship is our ability to create for ourselves what we had sought from our leaders.” (Block 3) The reason that citizenship is not valued over leadership is due to the fact that people are scared chaos will arise from the individualism and self-interest. In a way, we emphasize leadership in order to push away responsibilities from ourselves, leaving the decision making and justice serving to one individual. Block gives us another, more legitimate, definition of citizenship, “citizenship is our agreement to receive rights and privileges from the community and, in so doing, to pay for them through our willingness to live within certain boundaries and act in the interest of the whole.” ( Block 3) This is moving more towards what citizenship really is and the elements of citizenship. He emphasizes that in order to achieve citizenship, we need to overcome our isolation and focus on coming together as a community. In a community, everyone has their own role that they play, their “niche”, and with their role comes accountability. One of the main concepts with citizenship is accountability, people sticking to what they need to do and actively playing their part in facilitating positive social changes. If people can be accountable for their part, then a community can be build and relationships fostered. Overall, this article focuses on how humans have become overall dependent on leaders and failed to notice that change can only be brought up from actions taken by a community. In order to increase social awareness towards a problem or something else of the sort, people need to become accountable in their community, such that larger institutions can arise from these small communities, all of which are based off of accountability of one another.

To put it all together, Mary Pipher’s narrative, *Reluctant Activists* explains a real life example of when leadership turned to citizenship, the Social Change Model, and the Active Citizen Continuum in one story. The story goes like this, Mary realized the environmental dangers that began to approach. She then heard about the Keystone XL pipeline that was to be installed in her state. She goes on about how her efforts seemed futile at first and the frustration that first occurred. Later however, her and team efforts seem to finally pay off when there becomes support for the issue and finally, the pipeline expansion stops. Throughout this narrative, Mary becomes more and more aware of the social issue of the pipeline that would have potentially changed the life of the people of Nebraska. There is a development in the story as she starts asking more questions and lastly, prioritizes the issue, in such a way that all her life choices are reflected off of the issue. In the story, she also claims that her initial preconceptions of the government were completely wronged as thought the government would help her in the effort, however she was met with their corruption. This showed the transition from leadership to citizenship, as she and her team realized if anything was to be done, it would have to start from them. This narrative cleared showed all the previously mentioned concepts and how they can play out in an individual, and how people change when they become an active citizen.

Moving on to the idea of an “active citizen”, or my understanding of it at least. An Active citizen is someone who is conscious and aware of their impact on their community, and in doing so, brings about a positive social change. An active citizen strives to do what he or she can to give back to the society that has done so much for us. I think the best way to explain an active citizen is someone who lives by John F. Kennedy’s quote, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” I think this quote is a direct representation of what an active citizen is because it wants us to take the initiative in asking what we can do. The “active” part of active citizen is completely different from being just a responsible citizen. An active citizen seeks problems and addresses new ones. Being active means going out of our way to focus on social issues and matters that need to be addressed. By being an active citizen, one puts other’s needs before their own and their work becomes purely selfless, which is what all work should be. In Virginia Tech, I think being an active citizen is a lot easier than it would be elsewhere. This is mainly due to Ut Prosim, the school motto. I believe that Ut Prosim shapes the way that Virginia Tech students live their day to day lives because the school is very service oriented. Ut Prosim is especially prominent in the little things that people do at Tech. Perhaps it is just me, but I think Virginia Tech students are more considerate and kind towards one another, be it the way people are always holding doors for the people behind them, or the way people pick up trash if someone missed the trashcan. There is always room for improvement however, in regards to creating new social realities centered around Ut Prosim. First of all, it cannot be done by a single individual’s efforts; as mentioned before, change can only be done with the accountability of people within a community. I think new social realities centered around Ut Prosim can be made by emphasizing it more than it already it. It can start small; the SERVE LLC is a great example of how Ut Prosim can be integrated into society. Ut Prosim is centered around our willingness to serve, or our kindness. Kindness is one of those things that increase in magnitude as more people get involved. Therefore, I think in order to create new social realties centered around Ut Prosim, it must be done as a rippling effect; something can start small and build enough momentum to effect the whole lake.

Speaking more about Ut Prosim, or *That I may serve,* it is not just a motto, it is an integrated part of people’s lives and the center for decision making. I think that Ut Prosim is a way of life in that people who fully understand Ut Prosim live very differently from people who merely acknowledge it. For me, Ut Prosim is my way of life. Before I can to Virginia Tech, I lived my live centered around service, however I never had a name for it, and now I do. When Ut Prosim becomes one’s way of life, I believe people become kinder. From my personal experience, I found my life changed greatly when I started living my life around Ut Prosim. I started putting people before me, and I also started noticing how other people live out Ut Prosim on their daily basis. I think Ut Prosim plays a big role in how the university and how I can become an active citizen while on campus or even within my community. One of the ways that either I or the university can encourage students to become active citizens is by letting people know what an active citizen is. For instance, I told my friend I was writing a paper on what it means to be an active citizen, and he responded by saying it was just holding our civil duties, such as voting, and things of the like. I found that people do not really know what it means to be an active citizen in terms of Ut Prosim or service, therefore, I think if the university held conferences to anyone who wanted to know more about what being an active citizen really entails, people would start finding out about active citizenship, be it by going to the conferences or even word of mouth from their friends. That is only one suggestion, but there are plenty of other things that even individuals such as I could do. For example, since I am a part of SERVE, I often find myself telling people about the LLC and my experience and the mission statement of SERVE. Individually, I think word of mouth is the best way to encourage people to become active citizens. Also, sharing events with friends and connecting people to potential service events that might peak their interest. I find that I can easily connect events to people due to one of my strengths being Connectedness; I am easily able to see connections between someone’s interest and how it can be incorporated in an event.

Overall, I personally think I am on the right track to becoming an active citizen. As mentioned previously, I have become involved with CRR and I have come to the point where I am genuinely interested in the social issue of refugee resettlement. When I first got to Virginia Tech, I was completely unaware of the Social Change Model, or the Active Citizen Continuum. I remember going to the retreat in late August and providing a couple hours of my time to Plenty Farms. Even back then, although I did not know of the diagrams and models, I found that I was already feeling the same things I do now, except I finally have a word for it. It was my first time learning about food deserts and I was completely shocked that it was a real issue that effected people. With what we learned in class about volunteering and the downfalls, I remember that there was one issue where people are often uninformed of the social issue that they are tackling. I reflected on my past service events and found that I really did not know the social issues that certain events were centered around. When I went to a local park to help remove invasive species, I had no idea why they had to be removed, I was simply just doing service. I learned a lot about service this year. Not just about what service is, but the downfalls of service and the criticisms of service. The most enlightening moment of this semester was learning about voluntourism. It got me thinking about how corrupt the world could be, monetizing human trafficking and how it was all so that westerners could experience “thankfulness” or other selfish reasons. Until now, I thought that volunteering was solely pure and didn’t know that it could it tainted from the shadows, but apparently I was a bit too naïve. With my awareness, I am now able to be more conscious about what projects I choose to be a part of. The last thing I want to do is help big businesses make a profit off of ignorant volunteers. I want to take what I have learned to further improve my community and build new ones in the years to come. I hope to be able to apply what I have learned in class to make CRR a stronger program so that more people can become aware of the issue and learn how they can help; in other words, I want to become an active citizen.