
**BOWLING ALONE AND SINCLAIR LEWIS:
A TEACHING EXPERIMENT
IN A FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM**

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The College of St. Scholastica, where I teach in Duluth, Minnesota, has a first-year program called Dignitas. The goal is to introduce beginning students to college life, to develop their thinking, and to connect them to the college community. The program spans the whole freshman year, occupying two credits each semester. Human dignity is the overarching theme. Individual sections of the course have a sub-theme devised by each instructor.

For school year 2007–08, my first year teaching the course, I hatched a plan that included Sinclair Lewis. My idea was to focus on contrasting visions of community in America, the idealistic view being represented by the widely admired book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, published in 2000 by Harvard social scientist Robert D. Putnam, and the more pessimistic view being represented by literary works such as the novels of Sinclair Lewis. I titled my section “What’s Wrong with Bowling Alone?”

Although Putnam worries that Americans have shown less and less community involvement since about 1960, his vision of the benefits of community life is optimistic. He believes that American society is at its healthiest when citizens have high levels of community engagement—what he likes to call social capital. His statistical evidence shows that states with high social capital have high levels of education, public safety, health, and economic prosperity, and contrariwise, that states with lower levels of social capital have lower success rates in the same areas. As membership in groups such as the Elks Club, the PTA, and neighborhood bowling leagues declines, so does

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our overall quality of life. We would be better off, he thinks, if we could rebuild our community connections.

In contrast to Putnam, Sinclair Lewis found American community life disappointing. In *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, he portrayed people engaged in community activity that led to societal dysfunction. Civic activism among residents of Gopher Prairie is just as likely to destroy a school teacher's career unfairly—witness Fern Mullins—as it is likely to produce a new school building. In *Babbitt*, the vigorous community involvement of the protagonist and his friends, whether in church, business organization, or social club, has for the most part an unhealthy purpose and effect.

The goal in setting Lewis against Putnam was not to demolish Putnam's main idea but to showcase opposite positions of equal weight. Together, the two authors give rise to interesting questions, which are challenging enough to make definitive answers unlikely. Does community activism contribute to human dignity and well-being? Do special conditions need to be met for community activism to have healthy effects? Does the success of American democracy depend on strong community life?

The bias I had at the outset, which I sought to control, was the bias of many literary intellectuals who distrust communities. After all, in literary portrayals of the conflict between the individual and society, the individual often faces the risk of being crushed. Consider, for example, what happens to key individuals in *Madame Bovary*, or *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. And literary satire, almost by definition, raises suspicion about human beings acting in concert. It is certainly hard to be a Sinclair Lewis fan without feeling at least a little skeptical about the way communities function in American society.

On the other side of the issue is a strong feeling, common in the world outside literature, that we should all establish community connections as if our lives depended on them. Students hear this message almost every day. They have been telling each other for decades to "get involved." Teenage athletes believe deeply in the power of teamwork, and they describe team experiences as among the most meaningful of their lives. Educators try to connect students with extracurricular activities as a method for insuring academic success. Religious communities, such as the Benedictines who founded the College of St. Scholastica, testify to the goodness of living and working together. Even the Dignitas program itself has community-building as one of its goals.

So the subject, I thought, should provide abundant material to talk about. More than half the class periods each term were

available for discussions of this nature, thus allowing room for the students to read *Main Street* in the fall and *Babbitt* in the spring. We had guest speakers representing the positive side of community life—including our successful baseball coach whose team is tightly knit, a nun from our Benedictine community who described monastic life, and a member of a local Rotary Club. In addition, the collegewide course plan mandated several experiences having to do with human dignity, some of them even related to the community theme. The common text for all sections in 2007–08 was *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. The common film was *Crash*. There were a couple of all-section assemblies on themes such as racism and abusive relationships. We participated in a service-learning event called Thanksgiving in the Spring, which served a free meal for hungry people in Duluth put on by students and the college food service. And we went on a pilgrimage, most sections to a memorial site in downtown Duluth commemorating three African American men who were lynched there in 1920. The idea was to have a variety of experiences in and out of the classroom.

When the Dignitas program started here in 2006–07, it met with resistance from students. Recently there has been more acceptance. My section responded well to community-building activities, less well to intellectual ones. The majority of American college-bound eighteen-year-olds are not intellectuals, and intellectual activity does not have the community-building force for them that professors might like it to have.

Nevertheless, my students had enough mind power to be able to formulate interesting responses to the juxtaposition of Putnam and Lewis. In the first semester, these responses showed up best in in-class essays about the extent to which Putnam's recommendations might help to solve the problems of small-town life in *Main Street*, and the extent to which the problems revealed in *Main Street* might expose flaws in Putnam's recommendations.

For background here, you need to know that at the end of his book Putnam offers a substantial list of things to work for, including more local civic engagement, more participation in local cultural activities, a religious awakening accompanied by tolerance, less television watching, and less urban sprawl so as to reduce excessive commutes that rob people of community time.

The expected position for students to take was that these recommendations would not help Gopher Prairie. Several essays took this position and found good reasons to support

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it. Gopher Prairie is not likely to benefit from more civic engagement because the residents are already very involved. Note the Thanatopsis, the Jolly Seventeen, the Ancient and Affiliated Order of Spartans, the Commercial Club, the library board, the school board, and the evening social events of the merchant class. Gopher Prairie does not have television or urban sprawl, and although there is a shortage of tolerance, there is no shortage of religion. Civic activist Carol Kennicott tries to inspire more cultural activity, and her efforts meet with resistance. So this line of reasoning concludes that dysfunctions in Gopher Prairie would not be solved by Putnam's recommendations, which, when put to the *Main Street* test, seem idealistic and not well grounded.

Several students took a middle-of-the-road approach, arguing that some of Putnam's recommendations would help Gopher Prairie and some would not. Among those that would not are the obvious ones about less television and less urban sprawl, features that Gopher Prairie did not have. Among the recommendations that would help are more civic engagement across class boundaries, more cultural activity, and a religious awakening involving tolerance. The students had a defensible position here, for Putnam's idea of healthy community life involves tolerance and connections among diverse people. The social connections he encourages are supposed to inspire reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligation. He believes that societies with deep social networks having these features function more smoothly and efficiently than societies that lack them. Therefore one may well argue that Gopher Prairie, which lacks deep connections across class boundaries, could benefit from Putnam's suggestions.

Perhaps the most interesting approach in the student essays was the idea that when Putnam's recommendations are put

to the *Main Street* test, they hold up well. Gopher Prairie may be seriously flawed, but it does not isolate people in private cocoons as does modern urban and suburban life. Despite the gossip, the intolerance, and the stagnation, people in Gopher Prairie are warmer and friendlier and better connected with each other than Americans in general are today. Community spirit, such as it was, had not yet died. Just as Carol Kennicott in the end preferred Gopher Prairie to Washington, DC, so Putnam rightly prefers well-knit communities to urban or suburban isolation, and the rest of us, according to this line of thinking, should follow his lead.

It was heartening to see this much variety in the student responses. A comparable variety of views continued throughout the course, as well as a persistent majority optimism about community life. In *Babbitt*, the bleaker picture of civic engagement may have weakened students' enthusiasm for community a little more than *Main Street* did, but my sense of their feeling at the end was that most sided with Putnam more than Lewis. Most students still wanted connections, still wanted to belong to something, and still believed it possible to live meaningful lives in warm, coherent communities. Of course Lewis and his fans have usually yearned for these things too. We just doubt the promise will be fulfilled.

Was the course a success? I think the idea was good, but students were not as happy as I wanted them to be. They were not avid talkers, and they tired of reading so much Lewis—a disappointment to a fan like me. Still, substitutions can be made. In 2008–09 I am doing the course again, with *Main Street* as the only Lewis text. The concept of juxtaposing Putnam with literary realizations of community life has proven to inspire at least some good critical thinking. The experiment seems worth trying again. ✍