

Educating and Mobilizing

By Katie Li

Student activists often have hard time mobilizing their peers. The pressures of class work, fear to get involved, and time constraints often deter people from wanting to take political action. In fact, being “political” today is seen in a negative light. Many a time have I been called militant (even though people mean it in a bad way, I actually take the term as a compliment). People do not want to be associated with extremists, and therefore end up not getting involved at all.

On the other hand, once a student becomes heavily involved with political movements, such as the Assi worker campaign, he or she wants to educate others and seek their support. However, it becomes increasingly difficult for students to mobilize their peers when their peers are so reluctant to get involved. In addition, student leaders’ attitudes toward people who are not involved may actually hinder the educating and mobilizing process. Student leaders often “preach from their soapbox” about issues that they feel so passionately about, seeing themselves as the educated elite and thus seeing their peers as ignorant people that need to be persuaded to follow. Having this “superiority complex” often distances the student activist from his or her peer. I suppose having a superiority complex is similar to being militant, both images viewed as unappealing.

Instead, in order to convey their messages to the general public, student activists need to talk to others like peers. Since most people are afraid of flyers being shoved into their

faces (i.e., avoidance of Bruin Walk), student activists need to take a more personal approach when educating others. In fact, personal contact, which builds trust between people and makes it less intimidating to listen to an issue, is important to establish before educating someone about an issue. Personal stories (a.k.a. “putting a face on the issue”) can also be an effective form of education. Students can then associate the issue with actual lives that are being affected.

The readings in our Course Reader demonstrate the idea of personal contact first, then education and finally mobilization. In the garment worker’s story, she eventually becomes involved in a campaign because one of her friends encourages her to do so. Furthermore, since she knows someone working on the issue personally, she feels less afraid to step out of her comfort zone to educate others and feels more inclined to think that she can make a difference with her peers’ support.

The reading also encourages grassroots organizing. For instance, in the health care worker education situation, teachers encourage the health workers to brainstorm their own ideas and act upon them, rather than instructing them what to do. In addition, their own developed critical awareness inspires their children, which then inspires more people, creating a cycle of education that almost mobilizes itself. This style of education allows the people whose lives are affected to determine their own destinies. They are given the tools to determine what they think is best for their community. Furthermore, in order to educate others, students must explain how the issue at hand relates to their daily lives. If they say they are involved with the campaign for the sake of justice they

probably will not get as many supporters as if they explained how fighting for the issue has an impact on people's daily lives.

If in fact people want more information, student leaders need to give concrete examples of how to help in the campaign. Therefore, people who have recently joined can feel as though they belong to the group and have contributed to making a difference. Student activists cannot just educate others about important issues. They must then take the next step and mobilize. Yet once people's interest have been captured and are educated about the issue (which I consider the most difficult part of the process), mobilization becomes the next logical step.

Reflecting on my own leadership, I know that I often "preach from a soap box." In fact, as I said earlier, perhaps my overtly passionate, sometimes almost forceful "militant" attitude tends to steer people away from me, which then separates me more from my goal of educating people. While being militant is not bad (I used militant here as meaning passionate for one's issues), being overly forceful is not a good thing either. As the readings suggest, I need to "start where people are, and work from there." Rather than telling them what they need to know, I should allow them to discover the issue and solution themselves through questioning and discussion.