

## Anthony Careless

University of Toronto Service-Learning Advocate

**Interview By:**  
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*Dr Anthony Careless is an instructor of Political Science at the University of Toronto. He is currently offering a course called Democracy in Decline – Redeeming Politics through Civic Engagement. This unique course incorporates a Service-Learning component. Service-Learning gives students the opportunity to participate in community service and connect those experiences to their in-class learning. Service-Learning placements are facilitated by the Centre for Community Partnerships (CCP) which was founded in February 2005 in response to emerging safety concerns in a number of Toronto neighbourhoods. Its mandate is to establish academic and co-curricular service opportunities, to enhance student learning of the social, cultural, ethical and political dimensions of civic life.*

### **How about we delve into what led you towards Service-Learning as something that you wanted to teach.**

I'm an early adherent to Service-Learning; when it came to U of T I was approached by CCP while I was teaching a second year course and we concluded that it was not appropriate. When I got a fourth year course I immediately went back to them. The reason I'm attracted by Service-Learning is that my life has been a split personality; for thirty-eight years I've taught here at U of T in our department as an adjunct and for thirty years I was a policy advisor in constitutional reform for the Ontario government. So I headed up the constitutional reform policy unit in the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs. We did 1982; we did Charlottetown; we did Meech Lake; I think I did 1867 as well: I remember talking to John A.. I can't quite remember how old I am.

One of the things that struck me is that in those days I was very keen about the Institute of Intergovernmental Relations at Queen's University. Richard Simeon, of our Department, was the Director when he was a prof at Queen's. The Ontario government helped fund them and they were, and are, just an excellent group. Whenever I had problems with federalism from a practical point of view, I could hardly wait for the colloquiums that they

would hold, much as Mowat does, because I would go down to them and there'd be now forty profs sitting there from all over Canada, experts in Canadian Federalism—all the big names that you've ever read—and I would say, "I'm having a problem in the Ontario government thinking up options for senate reform that will work. I mean, I've read the articles and books that you've written, but how do we do it incrementally, how do we actually do it given the opposition between the Upper House and the Lower House; how do we do it when the party in power has finally gotten a majority in the senate and isn't finding the senate a roadblock as it was for the first three years of their office. How do we bring diversity more into our Constitution; how would we allow Québec to be a nation within a nation; how could we recognize inherent right to self-government but still have a unified Canada?" Really practical questions and for the most part they came up blank on that. They seemed to imply that their mandate was to think up the big picture, think up the big dreams, if I could put it that way; mine was to do merely micropolitics.

Well, I wanted doables rather than dreamables at this point and it became clear to me that really what we needed to make sure happened at university is that you had a breed of teachers and not necessarily professors. I think there's a difference between teaching a course and being a professor who might work a lot with philosophy or research. Some universities, as you know, make a distinction between teachers and professors in their department and it seemed to me that we needed a breed of people in the department, in any department, that could trade on their practical experience, on the day-to-day, and somehow take the best of the bright ideas in the department and bring it into a set of practical micro-steps for students to work their way through. We wouldn't want to take away from those professors who have marvelous visions, but they may not be transferable and therefore I worry at times whether universities can speak 'truth to power', as you've heard that quote many times. Or whether they can take micro-steps out of their macro vision that they have for a better political environment or a better political world.

**Right, so rather than looking at a major political change and trying to get that instituted right away, Service-Learning helps students learn about small steps that are more palatable and easier to complete?**

You've said it perfectly, exactly. And when you look at a lot of the writings that have been performed by academics and we can think of all the names we respect and so on, most

of us who have worked in the political environment, in the public service, would say ‘that’s wonderful, but it won’t fly’, or ‘it needs to be disaggregated; it needs to be broken down into small steps’. So, the main teaching shock for the students in my course is probably that I’m telling them that the purpose of their training is to be able to brief a newly-elected minister of Democratic Renewal. Her riding is Parry Sound; she’s not likely a rocket scientist when it comes to democratic deficit, but she’s got the mandate; she has no money; she can’t change the Charter, yet she has got to bring about democratic renewal—and get re-elected.

The challenge to my students is: how are you going to talk to her; how are you going to be pragmatic; how is she going to get re-elected; what happens when you don’t have any money to finance all the things that you’re thinking about given that you can’t change the Charter and institute a whole new set of ‘thou musts, thou shalt’s’ and stuff like that? That’s fairly atypical thinking for most of the students I run into and if there’s a steep learning curve it’s probably this: that they need to disaggregate those big images that they’ve had in many other courses and think about the small steps that politicians work with, can only work with. That’s the value of where you are at SPPG. My guess is, knowing the people there, that you’re being taught that as well. It’s all very well to know about Hegel, Marx and Hobbes and so on, but no one’s going to listen to you when you’re at Queen’s Park. I think.

**Now, just to be clear, my understanding of the Service-Learning program, as it’s being taught, is to get students who are typically focused primarily on academics to also move into a more practical and applied setting where they have to take not only their learning to bear, but they also need to interact with others. So it’s creating an atmosphere where they no longer develop only an, I guess, essay-writing attitude towards the world, where they take a position and argue for it, but look at the positions of others and start really feeding in and moving their position as well.**

The literature says, and I’m just quoting here, ‘Service Learning aims to achieve three objectives: information into your course from outside the classroom’, as you’ve just said, ‘not the textbook, not the teacher’; second, ‘support for a community partner who needs your support’, so there’s a true sense of service as much as learning; and the third thing is ‘to expose a student to civic learning and civic leadership’. You know, they’re engaged in problem solving; they’re engaged in watching public servants or advocacy groups deal

with multiple stakeholders who disagree; and politics is about how you get to “yes”, over divisive issues and who you’re going to invite to do that.

The issue could be an economic one; it could be a social one; it could be a biological one; it could be a cultural one. All we study in our discipline, in my humble opinion, is what is the business of getting to yes, and who do you invite to that. One of the features of getting to yes is, because there’s so much disagreement, you need to figure out who’s going to be invited around that table, who you’re going to exclude intentionally or otherwise, and how do you work the sociology of that environment to incline people to want to listen to one another. Who are your stakeholders?

I think one of the biggest challenges in a world that is overcome with an excessive individualism, as [Francis] Fukuyama talks about, is that we’re not by training or by sociology anymore socializing into a position where we listen to a lot of people different from ourselves on a face-to-face basis. Yes we watch TV; yes we go on the internet; yes we connect with our friends; but less and less do we go out to the dance club or do we go out to the pub or do we go out to the Rotary or wherever there may be a common interest in entertainment or leisure or drinking, or even doing good—as Rotary or Lions might do—but where personalities and viewpoints will differ. We, today, can filter out so much in the media or internet of what we don’t like. And the lack of that social engagement and the couching or the cocooning of people, means that there isn’t that traditional engagement with other people and learning to listen to them and that’s a very big part about what Service-Learning is about. People are being sent into an environment where stakeholder differences are very strongly held and they need to watch the skills of those who are professional political advocates or political advisors to see how that’s mediated. I think that adds a real edge, a reality to the political theory that we study in the isolated environment of the university.

**If I’m not mistaken, another important aspect seemed to be the role of Service-Learning in changing students’ attitudes towards politics and community life?**

Well that’s a very interesting part about Service-Learning. When Service-Learning started in the States it had a very strong leftist bias to it and the idea was that Service-Learning

was instituted by a left-leaning academic fellowship or fraternity in the university in order to teach the rich boys and girls who were going to Harvard and going to Vassar and going to Smith and going to Yale that the reality that the majority of Americans were living was nothing like what they were living and that if they were going to be useful and sensitive and adaptive, they really needed to see the “underside” of American life where there was greater diversity, less wealth, a wider range of life potential, a wider range of educational skills, a wider range, really, of social and intellectual skills. And that was the purpose behind the Service-Learning, as I understand it, in the States.

**So, another component is the idea of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes?**

Exactly and learning from that and the presumption was that rich boys and girls needed that. That’s changed a lot perhaps in the States, but certainly when Service-Learning came to Canada there hasn’t been that same bias. I don’t know whether it’s because we are a more diverse nation; we certainly constitutionalize our diversity in a way the Americans don’t. We have two official languages; we are three nations: Aboriginal, French Canadian, or Canada. We legislate multiculturalism. So we’ve taken our diversity a lot further in terms of recognizing it and calling it what it is. We don’t mind hyphenated Canadian identities, you know ‘I’m a French-Canadian’ or whatever it may be, so it may be that the urgency to correct social blindness, either isn’t as much a Canadian urgency, or maybe it’s because Service-Learning is now 25 years old and maybe it’s lost that element of urgency.

In the course that I have, one of the wonderful things about that course, which we’ve taught for about five years, maybe even longer, is that—and maybe it’s self-selection—is that every single student sitting around the table, every single student is active socially in something beyond themselves, in addition to playing hockey and soccer or whatever it may be. In other words everyone has come into that course with an orientation to something different than just who they are in the community. So, it’s a wonderful course to be a part of. They teach me as much as I teach them. I have to emphasize that.

Service-Learning is run by the Centre for Community Partnerships here at U of T; they have about a staff of five. It’s certainly not at all confined just to the academic course

work; there's inter-session work that people can do. If you belong to one of the big U of T clubs you can do Service-Learning or things equivalent to it. Reading Week is totally devoted to Service-Learning as a member of the university campus club although you don't get a credit for that. So CCP is really, in a holistic sense, oriented towards bringing people out of their pure university experience and giving them experience out in the community.

**Do you think that service learning could play a more transformative role at the secondary level where schooling is still mandatory and could it serve to inspire students who otherwise would not be interested in taking such a course to be more civic-minded?**

I certainly agree with the point about Service-Learning transforming people; generally speaking, it's very transformative. I think we've benefitted tremendously from the 40 hour requirement in secondary schools. There's some research now done on that by the Centre for Voluntary Sector Studies at Ryerson about what it's done for people's sense of civic engagement, also for their sense of social engagement. If you think that there are three levels of engagement [social, civic and political], you and I are political scientists and we're probably most interested in political engagement and why do people no longer belong to parties, why do they no longer vote, why do they no longer gather together in some fashion to advocate this or that? That tends to be done more by professionals rather than big grassroots organizations and why even in the big grassroots organizations participation is primarily via the cheque-book, where you sign away \$40 to Greenpeace but don't ever turn up to any of their meetings, if they even have them.

That kind of arms-length or greatly diminished involvement in political engagement is, as most of the literature says, a product of a prior low-level of civic engagement and indeed social engagement. So when you look at the literature of [Robert] Putnam, or [Neil] Nevitte, or Fukuyama, oh gosh, [Daniel] Yankelovich, they're all talking about that triad or rank-order of engagement. And the nice thing about looking at voluntarism, at any age—whether it be in the secondary school or post-secondary environment—is that it does really start to get people engaged in civic activity. That will cascade downwards into social activity but it can also move progressively, they're hoping, up to more political activity so that when teens turn 18 they will indeed go to vote rather than seeing it as something that's not cool or that they're not interested in.

So I completely agree with you that the idea of encouraging greater civics in the high-school setting would be tremendously important. At the same time, as I say that the evidence of the 40 hours is really pretty impressive, I think the detriment, or the deficit in the literature that Ryerson's been producing is not a deficit in their literature but a deficit in the program. Evidently the staff in the schools don't care very much about the content of the hours, so a kid can have an experience but it doesn't add up to anything because it's not discussed. The teacher's about as interested in you doing your 40 hours at Pizza Pizza as you doing your 40 hours over cruelty to cats or dogs or something like that. So the evidence seems to suggest that if we are going to continue to do it at the secondary environment, the ethos around voluntarism and mandatory service hours, is going to have to change. Service-Learning is much more developed in the United States, whereas a) U of T is one of the last big universities in Canada to adopt it and b) Canada is quite far behind the American development of Service-Learning. So we hope eventually to see it in the Canadian secondary school environment as richly as in the American setting.

**At the fourth year university level you have graduate students and students who are about to graduate. They've had a number of experiences; their writing skills have developed; they've been engaged in lots of different social interactions. So as compared to someone in secondary school who doesn't have those, how would the experience differ and could it be made beneficial for the younger student in such a way that they would be able to take that and carry it on?**

No matter what level of schooling you're at, Service-Learning above and beyond everything else is about experience—and experience that you've not had before. So that is the universal that can start in grade ten and go right through to fourth year. What differs between the high school setting and the university setting is the diagnostic that you bring to that experience and my course is very, very heavy on diagnostic, but I say practical diagnostic. One of the things I find most challenging is that my course, because it's about democracy in Canada, every single student coming into the course is an expert on both, I have no monopoly on knowledge there. I wish we were teaching Hobbes or Marx or Hegel, where I know they know nothing and, for at least four months, I know I have the monopoly on knowledge, but that's not the case here.

The thing that I notice in the course is that I really have to spend almost the first term teaching a diagnostic perspective, so you know how to judge the health of a democracy.

We encourage students to ask questions like: ‘Where is there social capital?’ ‘Where is there social cohesion?’ ‘Where is there social political readiness?’ ‘Where is there reciprocity?’ ‘Where is there co-governance?’ ‘Where can the citizen engage or demonstrate civic engagement or political engagement?’ So you’re teaching students to have a diagnostic. I don’t think you would expect that very much in the high school setting, but to me that’s the real value-added of Service Learning.

If you’re really doing your job as a political scientist those students should be able to go in like first-year med students saying “I couldn’t do open heart surgery at this point, but I can look at something that looks unhealthy, like someone lying on the road with a flushed face and I can begin to go through those steps they taught me in first-year med school about how to analyze high blood pressure, eyes that don’t focus, you know, shaking bodies and so on.” Same with an unhealthy body politic. That’s the aim, what I think I’m trying to do in my political science course with Service-Learning is to say, before stepping out into Service-Learning in the second term, “get a diagnostic” so even though you could be doing data work or doing very mundane things—very often in your Service-Learning it’s not high-falutin’ stuff, what can you expect in twenty hours when training someone might take much of that time—you can say that “I was part of that scene, I watched that scene and here’s my diagnostic” and that really is why the service learning is valuable. We get some pretty stunning “thank-you’s” about the in-depth work some of our students get up to, though!

So what is transferable from your first encounter in high-school to Service-Learning to a senior level in university would be the interest and willingness to go out, to expose yourself to situations that may be quite different, outside your comfort zone, and also that you become civically engaged. In most cases my guess is that people who have done even 40 hours in high school, will become more civically engaged than people who haven’t done any. Then, when they step into university that civic engagement will continue over in one fashion or another if not simply as civic awareness, which means that when they do post-secondary Service-Learning they would be so much further ahead than students for whom Service-Learning was only begun in university.

I think the challenge is to try to find the year where Service-Learning can be both a diag-



nostically educational experience, not just an experience, but a diagnostic education—that's why we use the word 'Service-Learning' and not just 'service'—but also not burden the student unduly. Fourth year is, for me, the dream year, as it would be for any prof, because the students are so mature. In fourth year, I hope you found this too, we are a community of scholars. It is not 'I know and you don't'. That's what you do in first year. So there's a lot of, hopefully, lateral exchange. The dilemma in fourth year is that there is just so much on people's plates that unless they resolve to realize that there's no such thing as Christmas holidays and there's no such thing as reading week in your fourth year, since you're working right through them, I can see a lot of backup, and I am seeing this now with these students. It's not just this year's students; it's all the years I've done Service-Learning. I guess we've been doing this for five years now and what goes by the board—while they're doing Service-Learning—is that none of their readings get done for weeks!

The point of Service-Learning is that it's not intended to be a pure academic addition to your theory of, say, politics. Most courses in our department teach a theoretical perspective and that's about it. You're not asking professors to say 'Look I've been there; I've walked the talk; I've been on the front lines' and so on. The point of service learning really is to provide the student with really practical experience, and in my opinion 80% of the students I will be teaching will never end up in a university doing post-graduate work, or doing a PhD or even getting a university position. They're going to end up in the community, working for politicians, working for the public service, working for advocates, working for corporations, giving them policy advice. Their stock and trade is: "I can read the political machinery; I can read multiple stakeholders; and I can give you policy advice on how to appropriate that". So it's smart advice that's full of small steps; it's advice that's full of a long-term view. It's advice that never uses the term "must" as in "Minister, you must do this" and so on. I would have lost my job on that. For me that's the big advantage of Service-Learning because people can watch incremental change happening on the ground rather than sit with an academic inside a comparatively isolated environment. Currently in our Faculty, with two thousand courses, only twelve have a Service-Learning component. We need more CCPs and Service-Learning.