

### 3. Description of “What Is Politics?” Assignment

Because they recognize how difficult the projects are, Shenk and Takacs organize course readings and activities to help students construct them one step at a time. The first important milestone in doing a HIPP is defining politics. Students write a one-page thought piece on the following questions: “What is politics?” “What counts as politics for you?” “Do you ever act politically?” This seemingly simple task initially proves more a stumbling block than a cornerstone in constructing a HIPP, because most of the students begin the course uninterested in or disgusted by politics. With few exceptions, students in the course describe politics in negative terms: for example, “a corrupt system driven by people pursuing their own self-interest.” Few students have any desire to become politically active. As one student put it: “I don’t do anything political because I see anyone who makes a living at doing politics, usually one in government or in a position of power, as a little kid who is just squabbling over getting more money or more power. I do not want to be any way a part of that mess...so I don’t do anything.”

In an effort to broaden and reframe the meaning of politics by connecting it with things the students do care about, Shenk and Takacs ask students to consider the 1960s slogan: “The personal is political.” They suggest to students that “virtually everything you do has some kind of impact on others” - from the way you get to class to the toilet paper you buy. The idea that politics can be defined more broadly than students initially thought and that many seemingly apolitical matters have political implications intrigues most students, and they come to enjoy discussing their conceptions of what counts as politics. In fact these discussions are among the most dynamic of the semester as students grapple with defining politics in ways that reflect their personal values and ask

each other provocative questions: What forms of political participation are valid for you, and what aren't? What do you approve of others doing, and what don't you approve of? Is protesting or boycotting a valid form of political participation? Is breaking the law?