

Online Civic Engagement Project Ideas

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Introduction:

This document describes civic and community engagement projects that I incorporated as part of a course titled "Representation, Identity, and Dissent" that I taught fully online in summer 2020. Both individual civic engagement activities and collaborative civic engagement projects were included. In what follows, I describe each civic engagement assignment so that instructors interested in these kinds of assignments can get a sense about how they might be implemented.

Course Background:

This course was a 300 level seminar in comparative politics that also featured applications to American public policy. The course was originally designed to be taught in-person, but was redesigned for an online format due to the coronavirus crisis. The course met daily for five weeks, and twelve students enrolled. Three class sessions per week met synchronously via video conference software, while the other two classes were asynchronous.

Student grades were mostly determined (58%) by completing different components of an individual research article writing assignment, and much of the course was structured around this assignment. Civic engagement activities counted for 20% of the grade, with 15% devoted to the Policy Day legislative policy simulation and 5% devoted to other civic engagement activities, including a collaborative civic engagement project. There were three kinds of civic engagement activities and projects: three short community experiences, a small group data report, and a collaborative class project.

Three Short Community Experiences:

I included three individual assignments related to civic engagement, all of which occurred during the first half of the course. The learning goals for these experiences were to get students thinking about identity in their community. The assignment instructions and grading rubric are below.

- Community identity profile: "Think about the identities present in your community (however you define "community"). Look up and write down statistics about ethnic, religious, gender, and national identity, and describe what you would consider your communities' common identity in a paragraph. Finally, make a contact list of all your political representatives. Do a little research on what issues your representatives might care about, and pick one issue you might contact each representative about. Write down your list and the issue you would contact each representative about and a sentence explanation why. Submit to Canvas."
- Field observation: "Attend a group event (club meeting/event, study group, team, public meeting, meeting with coworkers) for at least one hour and write notes about how group members express their identity (or why they do not). You should choose an event for a group to which you already belong or an event where spectators are common (debate,

lecture, dance performance). There are many such events going on online right now; if you cannot think of a group to observe, discuss with your classmates or myself. Please do not deceive anyone throughout the observation (i.e., do not pose as a new club member). Instead, only observe groups open to the public or which you are already a member. Turn in your typed notes and a one paragraph reflection to Canvas.”

- Midterm synthesis: “As an alternative to a midterm exam, identify four public policy issues that synthesize what you have learned thus far in the course. Do some online research and identify a community organization working on each public policy issue. Write four paragraphs, one for each issue, that each describe how the issue relates to the course and what work the community organization does to address the issue. Submit to Canvas.”
- Community experiences grading rubric:
 - Five percent of total grade.
 - 95, 85, 75, 65 scale, where 95 indicated “Completes the assignment in full. Uses clear, simple, and direct writing style. Demonstrates a well thought out reflection on the assignment. Shows pride to fulfill the intent of the assignment and demonstrates the strength of the author. Is mechanically flawless.”

Group Data Report:

The group data report was part of the assignments for Policy Day. Policy Day is a legislative policy simulation, where students work to adopt policy proposals. The learning goals for Policy Day were to related theories from the course to local issues and to better understand the public policy implications of political science. To prepare for the actual simulation, students complete two written assignments: an individual briefing paper and a group data report. The individual briefing paper is a 1,000 word memo discussing policy implications of students’ individual research articles. For the group data report, students divide into groups based on the similarity of the research questions they are asking in their research articles. The assignment instructions and grading rubric are below.

- Data report: “Choose a real world case that illustrates some part of your research findings (assuming you are able to support your hypothesis). Try to accommodate the interests of everyone in your group as best as possible. For example, if everyone is studying aspects women’s’ movements, you might choose a recent women’s’ march. Based on your case selection, you will collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Your group will conduct a minimum of two interviews based on interview protocols we discuss in class. The goal of these interviews is to learn about the public policy implications of the case. What are its lasting impacts? Second, you will search for relevant quantitative data related to your case and describe these data.

Your group will turn in one data report that includes a minimum one double spaced page summary and one double spaced page analysis covering the two interviews. The analysis should focus on the public policy and lasting impacts of the case. In addition, your data report will include a minimum one double spaced page description and analysis of the data you found and why it is relevant to your case and to the public policy problem.

Finally, you should include a paragraph or two synthesizing both sources of data. The data report is due on Policy Day.”

- Data report grading rubric:
 - Thirty point assignment was one third of total points for the 15% of the grade allocated to the Policy Day simulation. The remaining two thirds of total points came from the individual briefing paper.
 - Interviews are summarized and contextualized effectively (10 points).
 - Relevant empirical data is discussed (10 points).
 - A section draws broad conclusions from the data analysis (5 points).
 - APSA style citations (5 points).

Collaborative Civic Engagement Project:

The collaborative civic engagement project took place during the latter half of this course and consisted of three synchronous class sessions. The learning goals for this project were to help students apply theories from the course to a local problem, to better understand public policy solutions, and to understand and appreciate the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds. We collaborated with a local youth employment program for this project. The program works to provide underserved youth with a first job opportunity and to teach them about careers in conservation and sustainability while completing local environmental service projects. I have volunteered with this organization for several years, and the program director and I identified a need to develop a workshop on understanding environmental racism and how youth could get involved in local government and community development to address issues related to environmental racism.

The original plan was for my students to develop this workshop and for the youth to develop a workshop on their experiences with environmental racism. We would then travel to the youth’s worksite and work with them for one day, followed by the youth coming to the university and participating in class on a different day. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the actual project was implemented differently, as I describe below.

- Toward the beginning of the course, we spent one synchronous class session discussing the value of community engagement and how it related to the course content.
- Prior to the synchronous class sessions working on the project itself, students completed an online module on Canvas with the following features:
 - Environmental racism survey: An ungraded quiz that provided some information about the environmental racism problem in St. Louis.
 - Environmental racism reports: Several reports on the problem of environmental racism in St. Louis for students to read.
 - Youth introduction: Since we could not interact directly with the youth in the online course format, I asked students to watch several video interviews with the youth as well as to read their blog.
 - Area introduction: Students were asked to use Google Earth to look around the worksite that they would have visited in person.
 - Government introduction: I provided students with some resources to describe the local St. Louis City government structure.

- On the first synchronous class session devoted to the collaborative project, students were asked to take the goal of developing a workshop and to break this goal into steps that they could then work on. Students split up into four groups to work on different parts of the workshop. We concluded this class by outlining a timeline for the entire project and getting a status update from each group. When students had questions about the needs of the community partner, I fielded these questions, as the community partner was not able to be directly involved with the project due to the pandemic.
- The second synchronous class session was entirely devoted to working in groups. Groups checked in with one another at the beginning, middle, and end of the class session. Groups frequently wanted to be moved into combined breakout rooms with other groups to discuss various issues related to the project.
- Most of the final synchronous class session related to the collaborative project was devoted to finishing up group work. Toward the end of the class, each group presented what they had accomplished, and we created a to do list for the items that were still not finished. In the end, the four groups produced the following components:
 - An introductory activity on defining environmental racism and how environmental racism impacts the lives of the youth in the program.
 - An activity to help youth identify an issue related to environmental racism that they were particularly passionate about.
 - A flowchart that the training facilitator can use to take youth's issues and to figure out which representatives are most appropriate to contact in order to address or resolve the issue.
 - A telephone script for the youth to adapt in order to contact their representatives, along with an activity to help youth become more comfortable talking on the phone.
- Students' performance on the project was not directly graded, though their participation and engagement did factor into overall course participation grades.