

Small-Scale Civic Engagement with Big Impacts

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Students' civic values, academic performance, social attitudes, and cognitive development significantly improve as a result taking courses with civic engagement components (e.g, Yorio and Ye 2012). However, designing and guiding students through civic engagement experiences often requires substantial instructor time, financial resources, and university institutional support. This problem is particularly pronounced in comparative politics and international relations courses (Risley 2019), where much of the discussion centers on international travel-based learning opportunities or semester-long programs (e.g., McCartney 2006).

I describe a series of small-scale civic engagement activities applicable across subfields, versions of which can be relatively easily integrated into existing course designs without requiring extensive additional time or resources. These activities focus on local community engagement as a way to help students to more effectively relate political science topics to community issues, to develop tools to solve common public policy problems, and to increase their understanding of individuals with different backgrounds and life experiences. This article is intended to provide a jumping off point for instructors beginning to teach civic engagement, while simultaneously helping them avoid common pitfalls associated with short-term civic engagement projects (Tryon, et al. 2008).

Awareness

Civic engagement awareness activities are designed to expose students to their local community and to provide avenues for students to become more involved, if they so choose. Awareness activities are typically completed outside of class either individually or in groups, take no more than two hours to finish, and can be graded as either complete or incomplete. In my experience, adding just one or two awareness activities to a course can dramatically transform how students approach course content and the connections that they draw between political science and what it means to be an engaged citizen.

Introductory Activity

An especially straightforward and effective introductory activity is to ask students to research the identities present in both their home community and the university community, to list their elected representatives, and to learn a bit about their representatives' platforms so that they can describe an issue that each representative is passionate about. Students can then spend time in class discussing this activity through a lens that makes sense for your course. For example, in my comparative politics course on representation, I ask students to consider whether elected representatives share the demographic make-up of the local community and how demographic characteristics of representatives and constituents differ in other country contexts (O'Brochta 2020). This activity helps students to begin thinking about the connection between political science and civic engagement and lays the groundwork for other activities throughout the course.

Getting into the Field

After this initial activity, instructors can develop other short assignments that ask students to investigate specific issues or organizations in their community further, again tailored to the content of the course. Field observations --- attending a local government or community meeting, making careful observations, and reflecting --- help students more deeply connect major themes in political science to specific course concepts. Conducting research on community organizations working to address public policy issues related to course themes connects students to volunteer and advocacy opportunities.

Conversation

Civic engagement means moving beyond a surface-level awareness of local issues and organizations toward deeply understanding community needs and avenues to contribute. Building deep understanding takes time, but conversations with community members constitute a powerful first step. Students learn the most from these conversations if they develop a basic familiarity with qualitative interviewing and if they identify and contact local community leaders as part of a broader class activity. I facilitate local policy-making simulations in many of my courses, so adding a requirement to conduct several interviews with members of the community provides student groups with first-hand evidence to use in a class debate or a mock city council meeting.

The value of conversation is that students can select and speak to community members who provide their personal experiences with public policy problems and solutions on the topic of interest. As with awareness activities, conversations can fit any course topic. For example, students in an American politics course on immigration were asked to interview leaders of local immigrant services organizations in order to better understand how legislation impacts everyday service provision. Students can reflect on their conversations in short blogs or in discussion posts that are graded as either complete or incomplete.

Some suggested kinds of interview questions:

1. I have read a bit about your background. Could you talk about your motivations for working in this field?
2. Could you walk me through your typical day at work? What do you do, who do you work with, and what issues do you work on?
3. We have been learning about [explain specific theory or concept from the course]. How would you say that this topic impacts you?
4. What would you say are the biggest issues in your field? Are there new questions or problems where scholarly research may help to suggest solutions?
5. What would you like students to know about your field? How can students support your work?

Partnership

Awareness activities and conversations are pre-requisites to students contributing to and working in partnership with community leaders and organizations. An effective partnership moves beyond asking students to choose a non-profit organization to volunteer with for a certain number of hours and involves both students and the community organization learning from and

benefitting one another. This means that students use skills that they are learning in a particular course to help address a community problem, while at the same time respecting and working to understand the organization's philosophy and needs.

Though many partnerships last a full term and constitute the bulk of course activities, instructors can develop short, high-impact partnerships lasting just three or four class periods (around 4 to 8 hours). This is particularly achievable if students engage in awareness activities and conversations prior to beginning the partnership.

Effective Short Partnerships

Instructors facilitate partnerships by selecting an appropriate partner organization, working with the organization's staff to determine their needs, and matching those needs with student capacity. Appropriate partner organizations are those that instructors know well and have preferably volunteered for or interacted with for some time. Instructors who know their partner organization can work to convey essential information about the organization during the course. Doing so limits the amount of oversight required by partner organizations who may lack the capacity to onboard students, especially if they are involved only in short term projects.

Effective short partnership projects are related to course content and have tangible, flexible outputs. Flexible outputs are key because students do not have time to re-do project work during short partnerships. Developing educational training, assisting with event planning, designing surveys, and creating how-to guides are examples of potential partnership projects. Krain and Nurse (2004) describe a short partnership in a course on human rights where students worked with residents at a juvenile detention facility to decorate theatre masks and to build community. This project was effective in part because the mask-making activity had clear goals, but flexible outputs.

As with any group project, it is best to provide students with opportunities to complete both group work and individual reflection assignments. Individual reflections are an excellent place to ask students to connect what they learned during the project to course themes and to assess specific learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Instructors interested in integrating civic engagement into their courses can choose to implement a wide range of short activities applicable across subfields. I recommend starting by assessing students' civic engagement involvement and knowledge at the beginning of the course and then asking students to complete one or more awareness activities, collecting student reflections on these activities to ensure that they meet their stated goals. Instructors can then choose to include additional civic engagement components as they feel comfortable doing so, starting with awareness activities and adding conversations and partnerships.

In my experience, students say that civic engagement activities are high impact course practices that are particularly good teaching tools and end up being fun and meaningful. As political science curricula evolve to emphasize career and skill development, civic engagement is an excellent way to help students apply political science to address local community problems.

References

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