

APA Grant Report

Grant title: Community Connections: Digitally Enhanced Community-Based Learning in Philosophy

Project Steering Committee:

Dr. Susan Hawthorne, Department of Philosophy, St. Catherine University

Dr. Ramona Ilea, Department of Philosophy, Pacific University Oregon

Dr. Monica Janzen, Department of Philosophy, Hennepin Technical College

Initial Goals

The initial goal of this project was to develop a digital workspace and archive that could facilitate community-based learning in ethics classes and dissemination of results to communities and scholars. The purpose of the digital workspace was twofold: 1) to focus on outreach to philosophers and students and 2) to focus on assessment as a means of convincing skeptics about the value of civic engagement projects.

To facilitate community based learning, we assign civic engagement projects in a variety of philosophy classes such as introduction to ethics, environmental ethics, critical thinking, and a specialized course on socially engaged philosophy. The projects can work for diverse student populations and learning environments, such as those found at two-year technical colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and large universities. These projects have the common themes of encouraging activism, leadership, responsibility, and outreach. A primary goal of these assignments is to empower students to learn ways to work toward social change, and, ultimately, become more skilled citizens. To do this, students identify an issue they feel passionate about and then design and implement a project that addresses this issue. Students' agency in the choice of work and the requirement to engage with the public differentiate these projects from some common forms of service learning and also help facilitate the goal of becoming more engaged citizens in their wider communities.

Each semester, as we assign these projects, we work with students to guide them to create projects. We find ourselves, as faculty, using examples of past student projects as a way to describe the projects to current students. A goal in developing the website was to create a workspace to showcase past projects, post project guidelines for our particular students, and allow students to see the many, varied ways students complete these projects at different institutions and within different communities.

We wanted our website to be a place where students could pick up the ideas or lessons learned from past students and build on those projects. For example, in our grant proposal we discuss the case of a cookbook written by college students doing a civic engagement project in conjunction with middle schoolers. We thought that perhaps, with the platform in place, the middle schoolers involved in the recipe book project could have entered their recipes on the site and worked online in real time with the college students to make the recipes healthier. Another idea was that using our website, next year's students could also expand the recipe book or coordinate a community event based on it. The recipe book project, which originated by Dr. Hawthorne's liberal arts students, could easily be emulated by Dr. Janzen's Somali immigrant students at Hennepin Technical College.

In addition, we wanted to assess the impact of these projects on both student learning and on the communities in which they worked. By archiving civic engagement projects used in our classes, we hoped to gain insight into the value of these projects. Although we have anecdotal evidence that

students appreciate the projects and learn much, we hoped that by collecting information on a central platform we could better assess student learning and the impact of their work in local communities. We hoped to answer these questions: How much did the community benefit? What, exactly, did the students get out of doing these projects? More generally, what type of community-based project tends to have a positive impact on communities and on students?

Finally, we aimed to use this website as a way to encourage faculty at different institutions to learn more about community-based learning in philosophy. We believed that if we could provide assessment evidence that students do gain skills and insights on matters relating to philosophy, but also citizenship skills, other philosophy faculty would be interested in using these projects in their own classes. Our goal was to provide concrete resources (syllabi, assignment instructions, examples of student writing, and examples of successful projects) on our website. We aimed to pilot the website at three different institutions: a liberal arts college, a regional university, and a technical college serving low-income and minority students to show that these projects are feasible with a variety of student populations at different types of institutions.

Accomplishments

We have done much to meet the initial goals of this project. We have created a website, www.EngagedPhilosophy.com. Originally, we planned to call this site “Community Connections,” but we realized that this title was not as indicative of the type of work we were doing as “engaged philosophy.” Furthermore, “engaged philosophy” may be a more useful search term and may appeal more directly to philosophers. This website currently has content useful to both faculty and students. For example it contains: assignment guidelines, sample projects, instructions to create e-portfolios, and testimonials and data supporting civic engagement results. These materials help solve practical problems in implementation and sharing of results by providing concrete resources.

As per our grant goals, the website is being used in three classes (two ethics and one specialized course on socially engaged philosophy) taught at the three different institutions: St. Catherine University (a liberal arts college), Pacific University (a regional university), and Hennepin Technical College (a technical college serving low income and minority students). This fall, we were able to direct our students to our website which helped them develop concrete ideas as they began work on their civic engagement projects.

The website also serves as a way to showcase past projects to record methods and display end products. We have selected a range of projects to display on the website in order to better represent the wide array of projects which students pursue. For example, currently on our website, there is information about a project from a Critical Thinking course in which a student sought to help his hometown in Liberia escape from annual floods. There is also information about the Animal Ethics Club at Pacific University that was created six years ago as a result of a civic engagement project and continues to be part of student projects even now. This particular project is a good example of how current students have built on a past project. Now that this project is on our website, it is possible for students at Hennepin Technical College or St. Catherine University to further develop this project idea in new and innovative ways on their own campuses. Students are able to search the website for projects related to a specific topic (community, sports, writing, etc). This allows them to find projects related to their specific interests at either their own institution or at other institutions on those topics. This is a useful feature of our website that will expedite its search capacities.

We worked beyond the scope of our grant to develop and implement concrete assessments of civic engagement projects. We believed that if we could gather both quantitative and qualitative information about student work and the role of civic engagement projects in relation to philosophical learning we could better convince skeptics that this work has value. Our assessment evaluates the results of three courses at three different institutions. We are gauging students' confidence in their own philosophical and practical skills, along with their evaluations of the success and impact of their projects. To do this, we secured IRB approval at all three institutions. We designed both a pre-course survey and post-course survey to quantitatively measure the skills students gain through working on this project. In addition, we created uniform writing guidelines for the three classes to qualitatively measure the skills students gain. To date, students in the three courses have completed pre-course surveys to assess their initial attitudes about the projects. We are excited to collect and compile the rest of the assessment results at the end of the Fall 2013 semester. We plan to study these results over January and into the Spring term of 2014. While we have not yet completed the research, we hypothesize, based on several years of using our civic engagement model and gathering student feedback, that while there may be differences across campuses, students will improve in three areas: (1) Philosophical skills, such as ability to reflect critically on their own and others' actions and ideas, argumentation skills, and ability to engage in civil dialogue; (2) Capacities for agency and positive attitude, such as motivation to create change, ability to see themselves as capable of creating change, and empathy with "different" others; and (3) Practical skills, such as problem solving and time management.

We are currently working with a graphic artist to develop the design, look, and feel of our website. In our budget, we anticipated the need for technological help, but we did not anticipate needing help with design. We wanted to create a site that had recognizable elements and had a specific word mark. Because we want our website to look professional and appeal to both students and faculty, we felt that this was an important need to address. We hope to complete the design process by November, 2013. This is slightly longer than our initial timeline in which we believed we would have design completed by July 2013. This is due in part to our later realization that we needed to seek a professional graphic designer to help us.

We should point out that in our initial grant proposal, we believed that we would host focus groups to get feedback about our website. As we developed the assessment surveys, we realized that the surveys were a superior method to gain the feedback we needed. In fact, surveys were superior for a number of reasons: they provide concrete feedback that is quantifiable, they are a better use of time, and questions can be tailored to gather specific information. We are on schedule to contact colleagues, and we plan to offer these philosophers a small honorarium (between \$25-\$50, depending on our budget after the design costs) to compensate them for their time and feedback on our surveys.

Conferences and Publications

An important aim of our work was to disseminate the results with others. We have already presented our work at the Public Philosophy Network Conference (March 2013) held in Atlanta, Georgia. The mission of this organization is to encourage and support publicly engaged philosophical research and practices. We continue to build our relationship with this organization and as a result, we also have been accepted to present a panel at the Pacific APA in conjunction with the Public Philosophy Network (April, 2014). Our panel will be titled, "Cultivating Citizenship: Student-Initiated Civic Engagement Projects". We presented a second panel at St. Catherine University (April, 2014). And Dr. Ilea has also

presented at three additional conferences in which she shared her work on civic engagement projects. Our work has also been provisionally accepted to be part of an anthology titled, *Experiential Learning in the Philosophy Classroom* (edited by Julinna Oxley, tentative publication date: Spring 2015). We continue to seek new avenues to share our work with others.

Publicity

We are on schedule to launch a full publicity campaign in Spring 2014 to advertise the website. We have compiled a list of known philosophy websites that could be linked to our site and that could link to our site. This will not only increase use of our site, but also be beneficial for them. We will also invite other faculty to not only use our website as a resource, but showcase civic engagement projects by their own students. Our website will link to our personal websites as well. Once we accomplish this, we will have met the main goals expressed in our grant application.

Recommendations

An unanticipated result of our work was the development of a clearer vision about the project as a whole. We benefited from the time we spent discussing the purpose of assigning civic engagement projects, how we might assess student work and the skills students gained, and how to improve writing assignments to better reflect both philosophical and practical learning. It was only through many discussions that we realized both differences and commonalities in our perceptions of our work. Our collaboration was integral to the success of this project. We also believe that we have become more reflective and responsible teachers as we assign civic engagement projects to our students. Philosophical research is oftentimes individually completed, yet we found our dialog with one another yielded rich results. We recommend that the APA continue to fund other grants in which philosophers engage in collaborative work.