1. Public Advocacy Project

**Course(s) for which this activity is intended**
Course level 100/200. Public Speaking, Argument, Persuasion/Advocacy courses. Can be adapted to not include the action and/or to have all assignments in written form. We utilize this semester-long project in Public Discourse.

**Objectives**
The semester-long Public Advocacy Project introduces students to rhetorical/argument theory, community-based research, and public advocacy. For the project, each student identifies community problem in a community of which they are a part. The project is completed in stages and culminates in each student presenting the best plan for addressing the problem to community agents of change. During the semester, students actively and meaningfully engage with a community and gain knowledge, enhance and hone skills, and thoughtfully consider their responsibilities in their communities.

Through the Public Advocacy Project, students learn to:
- Effectively create and present oral, written, and mediated communication.
  [Effective communication is contextual and contributes to deliberative discourse by identifying issues, adapting to audiences, marshaling arguments and evidence, and employing appropriate presentational standards.]
- Find and utilize relevant and reliable library and community-based research.
- Ethically engage in research, interactions with community members, and in presentations (oral, written, and websites). See Project Guidelines.
- Understand how to effectively engage opportunities for positive social change.

**Rationale for the project**
In developing a new foundational community-based course, our intent was to emphasize symbiotic connections of rhetorical/argument theory and civic life. Engaging in ethical and productive public advocacy requires understanding of theory, community-based research, and collaboration and engagement with the community. We sought a way to accentuate and develop knowledge and skills for community advocacy. To do so ethically requires students work within community of which they are a part and do extensive community-based student research, course work, and reflection. While a rigorous undertaking, the project is transformational in developing knowledge, skill development, and civic aptitude and responsibility.

**Description of the project**
For the Public Discourse Project, each student identifies a problem in the community, thoroughly researches that problem, determines the best plan for addressing the problem, and presents the plan to agents of change in their community. A dedicated Public Discourse text supports learning rhetorical, argument, and public advocacy theory and guides the application of theory in developing a successful project. Chapter readings and targeted sequenced exercises provide the foundational building blocks for major assignments and for the overall project. In a discussion and workshop-based classroom, students pursue the project in stages with the support of interdependent learning community.
**Assignments**

Sequenced assignments, emphasizing thorough research, audience analysis, and preparation, require students to collaborate with others in the community to fully understand the problem prior to engaging in advocacy. [Project Guidelines](#) and the [Problem Checklist](#) underscore ethical, practical, and community considerations and help students choose appropriate problems.

**Problem Proposal**
Students provide evidence that the problem exists and is urgent before embarking on further research.

**Problem Analysis**
Students demonstrate a thorough understanding of the problem—harm, causes, and advantages of addressing the problem.

**Problem Analysis Presentation**
Students narrow, adapt, and organize information from the Problem Analysis to present to an audience of classmates.

**Plan**
Students revise and refine their Problem Analyses and provide a thorough, well-researched plan that best addresses the problem in their community.

**Action Proposal**
Students determine how to most appropriately present their plan to the community. They provide a rationale for their choice of action and a detailed timeline for how they will proceed with their action.

**Action (Requirement for Course Completion)**
Students take action in the community. If it is a speech, they give that speech to their identified audience. If it is an event, the event will be held. Change need not actually happen nor do students necessarily receive an “A” if it does, but they need to have crafted an appropriate means with appropriate content for reaching their intended audience with their message. To successfully complete the course, the action must be documented.

**Action Assessment**
Students assess the effectiveness of their action in reaching the audience with the intended message.

**Public Advocacy Presentation**
In an in-class speech, students advocate their plan to an audience of community agents of change.

**Project Website**
Students create a visual expression of their project aimed at an Internet audience.
**Course Reflection**

Based in project and personal self-reflection exercises and in-class discussions, students reflect upon knowledge and skills gained, identify areas for personal development, and create a plan for additional courses, internships, activities, and/or experiences to support continued growth.

**Outcomes**

Over 2000 students have completed the Public Advocacy Project. Assessment over the past decade demonstrates that the project provides exceptional training in rhetorical/argument theory, community-based research, civic engagement, and public advocacy. Students experience significant learning and growth (leadership, communication apprehension, civic inclinations). Students emerge with essential civic and liberal arts skills—research, perspective taking, critical thinking, problem solving, and oral and written communication—and are empowered and transformed by the experience. Most students complete the project in their first year and report that they utilize the skills gained in their academic, professional, and civic lives. A 2015 alumni study found that alumni continued to rate the course among the most important in skill building and learning and credited it for their civic involvement. Student stories and a list of projects can be found on our website.

**Considerations**

The project requires intentional tracking of student progress to ensure that they are keeping pace and that they are effectively collaborating with community members. In addition to the sequenced assignments, class time is dedicated to frequent check-ins, oral reports, and daily exercise workshops to keep students on track and prepare them for future assignments. During workshops, instructors generally check in with each student individually. Daily, the class engages questions and roadblocks, and, as the class talks through the best way to move forward, students apply communication theory to resolve real life concerns. In these ways, projects and interactions are monitored and, when needed, guidance and correction is given, often from peers. Students work closely with each other and become very involved in each other’s projects. Working with others to craft arguments, work through roadblocks, and think about how best to approach situations expands student civic learning from an issue in a specific community to understanding other issues within different community contexts. The hands-on nature of class time enhances learning and provides intentional oversight of each individual’s work.

**Resources**

- Public Advocacy Project Assignments
- Project List
- Student Stories
- Public Discourse Text
- Syllabus
- Course Calendar
- Research and Assessment
2. **Media Education in Action**

**Courses for which this activity is intended**
Introductory level or mid-level media studies classes (e.g. Introduction to Media Studies, Media & Society)

**Objectives of the project**
- Students synthesize and apply knowledge, skills, and ways of knowing in varied contexts related to media and culture.
- Students thoughtfully analyze enduring and contemporary questions about media and culture from multiple perspectives to independently develop original and creative ways to address complex problems related to media and culture.

**Rationale**
The goal of media education is to develop media literate informed citizens who participate in democracy (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.). The project requires students to use the knowledge they have gained in the course to inform community members about media systems, media institutions, and ideologies in media texts. Rationale for conducting this activity is twofold: 1) students exercise agency in critiquing media systems that often feel impervious to change, and 2) students use knowledge about media to inform community members who may not have access to media education.

Students in media courses often express that studying media and society, especially the U.S. media system, makes them depressed because few media conglomerates control most of what we see/listen to/read/watch. Additionally, they learn that corporate interests of these conglomerates and the complicated nuances of a privatized media system often override using media to inform citizen participation in a democracy. Students express that they do not feel equipped to change/overhaul the system (and we talk about what this might mean, what alternatives would be, and the benefits and drawbacks of other types of systems around the world) but know that media literacy education is one way to challenge media messages that affect consumers in negative ways (e.g. messages about beauty as detrimental to adolescent girls’ self-esteem). Creating a media education presentation for a group of individuals in their communities helps students put theory covered in the course into action.

Second, the action shows students that they can use their education to help others access tools to better consume media. Media is one of the most influential institutions in cultures across the world. Media shape what many consumers believe and are often the gateway to gathering information that citizens need to make important decisions that affect all of our lives. The “Media Education in Action” project is ultimately about providing media education to individuals who may not otherwise have access to this information.

**Project Description**
The “Media Education in Action” project takes place throughout the entire semester in five stages. First, students choose a group that has a need for media education (e.g., a Girl Scout troop, the local Senior Center, a class of middle school/high school students).

Second, students analyze the audience with an “initial research paper” where they delve into scholarly research on how their audience consumes a particular type of media (e.g., national research on how girls ages 10-12 use social media). Topics include how this demographic consumes media (they often draw upon the social learning theory or cultivation theory), the stage of brain development in terms of
reasoning/critical thinking, hours/day and what kind of media the demographic consumes, and the most popular shows, films, music, websites, etc. Sources include academic journals and institutes like the Pew Research Center.

Third, students analyze the specific audience in an “initial meeting paper” where they report on information gained from meeting with individuals in their groups or, alternatively, representatives who work with individuals in the group, such as a preschooler teacher. Students provide an overview of how the individuals responded to each of the interview questions, an explanation of how their answers differ/align with the research they did on this demographic, the most important pieces of information they will use for creating the project prospectus, and anything else they learned/found interesting/surprising.

Fourth, based on the audience analysis, students develop a project prospectus and rationale for the lecture/exercises in their presentation. In this paper, students explain the topic of the presentation, cite objectives for what they hope the group will learn/be able to do after seeing/participating in the presentation, outline lecture material and exercises in step-by-step instructions (with handouts if appropriate), and explain why they chose the topic and exercises that they did for the presentation (why these are most appropriate for this audience).

Finally, the group presents their 30-minute media literacy lesson to the group they chose. Afterward, students reflect on their experiences in a short paper, outlining why they made choices for the presentation based on the group, how the group responded to their presentation, and what they would do differently if they completed the project again.

**Debriefing of the project**

The media literacy project has worked exceptionally well. Students report feeling empowered by being able to support others in their communities, especially around a topic that seems so insurmountable. One student in fall 2014 offered his/her thoughts: “I thought doing the media literacy projects was a really great project. It was also nice to apply what we have been learning and teach others. I recommend to continue to do this in other M&S classes.” Another student in spring 2015 echoed these sentiments and goes beyond application to future uses: “This class is unique in that what I learn I can directly use to serve my community. I did that with my media literacy project, and will continue doing so by not being a passive consumer of media.” Students are sometimes nervous about the risk involved in the beginning of the project but usually become excited to engage with their communities by the end of the semester.

Although I don’t regularly interact with the groups students present to, their re-caps of the presentations and the few community partners with whom I have talked with express thanks for students fulfilling a need for which they often do not have time (e.g., in school curriculum) or had not thought about before (e.g., the influence of news on senior citizens).

**Considerations**

From an instructor standpoint, this project requires little preparation compared to other community-based learning because students find their own groups. Many connect with groups in their hometowns or with student groups of which they are a part. Although instructor feedback at each step in the process is essential, The project should transfer to online courses well because students work independently. The biggest limitation to the project is that the presentation is only 30 minutes and is
only one time. Hopefully this drawback is mitigated by group members learning skills they can take beyond the presentation.

References and/or Suggested Readings

Media in Action assignment


3. Community-Based Collaborative Video Production

200-level undergraduate

Students studying video production theory and techniques collaborate with nonprofit/government organizations in the local community to produce one or more short videos for use by the partner organization. A suitable nonprofit/government community partner is identified by the instructor before the course begins. Ideal partners have an identifiable need for video production services and are able to commit the resources, mainly time for access and coordination, necessary to support a collaborative project. The intent of the video is identified prior to the project start date, but students collaborate closely with the community partner to undertake the bulk of project development, determining specifics about audience, content, form, style, and other key aspects of production. Working either in small teams or as a cohesive whole (according to the demands of the project), students manage all aspects of production including ideation, scripting, production planning, filming, editing, and postproduction. Production teams seek and integrate partner collaboration and feedback at various stages to ensure the videos develop in useful ways. Once final versions are reviewed and approved by the instructor and community partner, students deliver the videos to the partner organization to be deployed according to the organization’s needs.

Resources:
Course page
Sample video

4. Crisis Plan Assignment—Semester-long Civic Learning Assignment

Level 300 Undergraduate Seminar. 16 students

Readings, discussion, and workshops with groups and community partners.

Students utilize course learning of rhetorical and organizational theory to create a Crisis Management Plan for a local non-profit organization. For the project, students will work in teams of 4 or 5 to create an effective plan that meets the needs and desires of their partner organization. Students complete a series of interviews and mini-presentations with their partner clients, including a needs assessment, a training session on media relations and a fact-finding consultation. The plan is written in a series of section drafts that are revised based on feedback from the professor and clients. In class presentations include a walk-
through of the client presentation with classmates, the formal presentation, and an in-class debriefing of the client presentation. The assignment culminates in the delivery of a hard copy of the plan and a presentation of the plan to the community partner at the end of the semester.

Based on a full draft, students receive feedback on the final plan prior to the client presentation. The client presentation is a formal presentation of the information. For this part of the management plan, students schedule, set up conference space, and obtain or provide additional technology resources to present to their client. This presentation is no longer than 30 minutes with 10 minutes of Q & A to follow. Students also complete an evaluation of their plan presentation orally to the rest of the class recapping what they did (description), how well it went (evaluation), and what they would do differently in the future (learning).

Resources:
Course page