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Resources for Online Community-Engaged Learning

The university's recent suspension of in-person classes has important implications for community-engaged courses. The elimination of on-site volunteer experiences has made necessary significant changes to many community-engaged projects. Community-university partnerships, however, can operate principally, if not entirely, online. A growing literature has developed a set of theories and best practices related to effective community-engaged learning online. **Equitable, productive community-university partnerships are possible even when students, instructors, and community members are unable to meet in person.** If you are making changes to one or more community partnerships (including community-engaged classes), the Center for Social Concerns encourages you to consider adapting your community-engaged activities so that they may be completed online.

This document introduces some of the theory and practice of effective online community-engaged learning. Please contact Dave Lassen (dlassen@nd.edu) if you have questions or would like to talk in more detail about transitioning a community-engaged learning class online. The Center for Social Concerns is committed to supporting all community-engaged projects, especially during this unexpected transition to online instruction.

Creating an Online Community-Engaged Learning Course

Community-engaged learning experiences center on relationships. These relationships are usually fostered through regular, in-person collaboration. The ongoing Coronavirus outbreak, however, has made these kinds of close interpersonal contacts largely impossible. Because of this, some community-engaged projects scheduled for this semester will need to be postponed or even canceled. It may be possible, however, to modify some projects so that students can still collaborate with and create value for their community partners from a distance. A number of strategies and best practices exist, for example, to make online community-engaged projects equitable and mutually beneficial for everyone involved.

Also known as digital service-learning or e-service-learning, strategies for creating effective online opportunities for students to work with community partners is a growing area of research in community-university partnerships. A general introduction to online community-engaged learning [can be found here](#). This literature has identified ways to effectively design and implement community-engaged work online. These approaches are motivated by the same values and goals, and include many of the same elements inherent in

place-based community engagement. No matter their modality, for example, community-engaged learning courses should include at least:

- close collaboration with community partners
- the promotion of equity and social justice,
- positive community impacts,
- student preparation and background knowledge,
- recurring interactions with community members,
- ongoing critical reflection activities, and
- assessment of community impact before and after course activities.

Creating effective online community-engaged experiences therefore requires a process similar to that used to create traditional, in-person community-engaged assignments. Course projects should be designed in close collaboration with community partners to ensure that all activities are accessible, promote community goals, and further course learning objectives. Instructors should consider the technical skill required to participate in course activities. Will students and community members have access to and an understanding of the hardware (e.g., a computer) and software (e.g., Zoom) required to engage with one another? Helms and coauthors (2015) provide a useful overview of the ways in which instructors must adapt their course designs when moving a community-engaged learning course from an in-person to an online format. A guide for designing online community-engaged courses [can be found here](#). A multi-disciplinary list of example online community-engaged projects [can be found here](#).

Course design decisions for online community-engaged classes are generally presented as occurring before the beginning of a semester, but mid-semester transitions to online partnerships can also be effective. [This recent webinar](#) provides an in-depth view of how one instructor successfully transitioned a face-to-face community-engaged learning course to an online version.

The introduction of online resources and interactions in community-university partnerships can be transformative. Waldner, McGorry, and Widener (2012) have argued that “online learning is a facilitator rather than a barrier to service-learning. E-service-learning holds the potential to transform both service-learning and online learning ... Thus, e-service-learning is not a mere pedagogical curiosity; rather, it is a key to the future of service-learning.” Similarly, Hansen and Clayton (2014) contend that online learning provides “a doorway leading toward alternate views of conceptualizing and implementing service-learning.”

Best Practices for Online Community-Engaged Learning Courses

At the same time, however, online community-engaged learning presents unique challenges. Existing studies have identified a number of best practices for instructors creating an online community-engaged learning course. A number of these recommendations are discussed below, though this is not a comprehensive review.

Ensure Necessary Technical Resources

Students and community members may be unfamiliar with the technologies used to facilitate necessary communication. As part of her larger discussion of community-engaged course design considerations, [Maddrell \(2014\)](#) reminds us that some community partners may not be equipped to participate in online projects. Instructors must therefore be mindful of and respond to the ways in which a shift from face-to-face to online community engagement can destabilize both students and community members. Community-engaged projects should be designed so that all stakeholders have the technical resources and skills necessary to fully participate in and benefit from the project.

Empower Students in an Unfamiliar Setting

[Carver et al. \(2007\)](#) argue that online service-learning can be hampered by issues of agency, belongingness, and competence. Both community-engaged learning and online learning environments require students to abandon familiar ways of enacting knowledge, engaging with others, and achieving success. Without these resources, students may question themselves and fail to fully engage with course partners or activities. The authors recommend that instructors directly engage with students to assess and support their sense of agency, belongingness, and competence.

Consider each Continuum of Online Community-Engaged Learning

[Eaton and Leek \(2019\)](#) note that online community-engaged learning courses require instructors, community partners, and students to be aware of and respond to a number of often unique project dimensions—which they present as continuums. These continuums help stakeholders identify the specific dimensions of potential collaborative projects and identify what is possible. These continuums include:

- Geographies – How geographically distant are students and community members?
- Community Size – What is the size of the community involved?
- Immediacy of Service – Is the service conducted asynchronously or synchronously?
- Immediacy of Service Experienced – Is the community live and present or does it extend beyond the present time of the course?
- Direct/Indirect Communities – Does the service involve direct communities or are there other communities and individuals that benefit by proxy?
- Electracy – What level of digital skills, knowledge, and competencies are needed by students, instructors, staff, and community partners?
- Leveraged Technology – How central is the use of digital technology to the execution of the community-engaged learning?

Cultivate a Sense of Community

[Lee, Kane, and Gregg \(2016\)](#) note that while “online educators consistently try to find ways to build and sustain feelings of community and reduce transactional distance in the absence of face-to-face interactions,” consistent effort in this area is especially important in online community-engaged courses. Because of the multiple dimensions along which online community-engaged courses may challenge students, the authors recommend that instructors create frequent, interactive communication spaces for themselves and student groups. These spaces are also valuable for instructional oversight and to facilitate group reflection.

Cultivate a Sense of Place

A sense of community is integral to traditional conceptions of community-engaged learning. It can be difficult, however, to create such a dynamic in online settings. [Sandy and Franco \(2014\)](#) therefore recommend “introducing a virtual sense of geographic place (i.e., an abstract representation of the real, physical world in the online learning environment) as a way to infuse place-based approaches to digital or computer-assisted service-learning.” The authors argue that such a sense can be cultivated through the use of realistic online mapping tools such as Google maps. Detailed photos of the physical spaces in which community members live and interact may also be helpful. These resources are likely most effective when they provide significant, detailed representations of relevant communities.

Maintain Effective Communication

[Shah et al. \(2018\)](#) point out that shifting to an online collaboration space may affect the nature of discourse between students and community members. The authors note that “online disinhibition can prompt harsh critique or insensitive language that would not have occurred during face-to-face relationships.” The authors encourage instructors partnering with community organizations from a distance to “encourage initial digital communication [between students and partners] focused solely on relationship-building and ongoing (not just task-oriented) interactions integrated with regular partnership activities.” Similarly, the authors recommend hosting “a class discussion on how to build rapport in online spaces.” Courses shifting to online activities in the middle of a semester may not need to spend as much time building relationships online and may instead focus on how to effectively communicate within and sustain community relationships online.

Maintain Visibility

[Waldner, McGorry, and Widener \(2012\)](#) argue that online community-engaged learning is most effective when instructors maintain a significant, visible presence in spaces used by students and community members. The authors note that while traditional community-engaged learning courses also require significant instructor feedback, “students need even more feedback for online components of a course since they lack the immediate response of a classroom environment. Establishing clear channels of communication between professor and students is critical to prevent disengagement and confusion.”

Support Students' Adaptive Behavior

[Butchey \(2014\)](#) argues that students may feel unprepared to engage with community partners online. This unease may come from an unfamiliarity with either the people, organizations, or technology needed for online partnerships. She argues that instructors should offer students strategies and resources “geared toward understanding how people mobilize adaptive behavior in response to learning experiences.” She recommends a six-step process in which students, instructors, and community partners can interact to support student confidence, knowledge, and skill. Student actions in Butchey’s strategy includes helping students *access* their existing knowledge and skills, *try* new concepts in community contexts, *explore* potential strategies in community contexts, *apply* course concepts to community challenges, *seek* for personal meaning and skills necessary to positively impact local communities, and *embed* their community-engaged experiences in future academic, professional, and personal pursuits.

