

Communication and Democracy

Challenge:

There are numerous models of deliberative democracy used in this country. These models are used to create civil environments for discussion of current political or social topics and increase civic engagement. However, most are limited in their ability to explore the notion of “citizen” and the responsibilities associated with this role. According to a civic engagement study conducted by Tufts University, “...civic engagement research is important to higher education today...”¹ It is clear that students need to gain a deeper understanding of how communication shapes the notion of “citizen” in the United States’ democratic system². Students need to explore the historical influence of communication, specifically speechmaking, and comprehend the effects it has had on the concept of citizenry. They need to build a foundation of tools that can be used to participate more actively and effectively in the political process. Learning these skills will help motivate students to seek common ground and explore differences when discussing issues. The skills will teach them to analyze the decision making process more completely, including weighing possible negative ramifications against possible benefits more thoroughly.

Solution:

Dr. Timothy Steffensmeier, Assistant Professor in Communication Studies and research associate with the [Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy](#), was funded by the [Interactivity Foundation](#) to design a course entitled *Communication and Democracy*. This course explores theoretical and conceptual methods of discussing the potential shift from the notion of “citizen” to that of “civic leader.” The course employed a student-led facilitation process to develop the skills necessary to nourish and sustain democracy. Students were placed into groups of five participants and engaged in numerous student-lead facilitations throughout the semester comparing and contrasting the conceptual definitions of “citizen” and “civic leader.” This process was designed to teach students the skills necessary for effective leadership in the areas of facilitation and constructive conflict mediation.

In addition to the facilitation, the students partnered with the K-State Volunteer Center of Manhattan to ascertain the assets and needs of Manhattan and surrounding communities by hosting deliberative forums. The forums were supported by a grant from K-State’s [Center for Engagement and Community Development](#).

Results:

This course taught students the difference between a “citizen” and a “civic leader” by discussing roles and responsibilities involved with both. According to one student, “I walked away from realizing the impact that a local voice can have on a national issue.” It developed student’s facilitation skills through group-based deliberations and taught students perspectives and techniques for effective facilitation. Another student says, “Learning about facilitation skills has helped me to more efficiently and productively solve strategic problems within my workplace, and my social, academic and professional groups.” In addition, these students planned, created and hosted a successful public forum.

The development of these skills helps create greater public awareness and understanding of the issues involved with the role of “citizen” in a participatory democracy. The course helped narrow the gaps between the role of “citizen” and elected officials by deliberating on the responsibilities associated with these

¹ Wilson, N.E., Diaz, A., O’Leary, L.S., Terkla, D.G. (2007). Civic engagement: A study of changes in college. *Academic Exchange*. 11(2). 141-146.

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roles. The facilitation development not only increased students' skills as active participants in democracy, but also increased the cadre of community facilitators. *Communication and Democracy* encouraged a participatory democracy of informed and inclusive decision makers.