

Turning the Instruction Over: How to Invite Engagement through Community Connection and Civic Action

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Abstract

The Critical Issues Investigation combines experiential education philosophy with service-learning methods to situate a section of a course in both personal and professional development utilizing active and engaged citizenship for college age students. Through the use of the National Issues Forum materials, critical issues facing a variety of communities become a platform for investigation and innovative problem solving through recreation and leisure services delivery systems. During the investigation, learning objectives are set by the faculty, but the specific tasks and the focused direction for the learning are turned over to students to define, investigate, implement, and evaluate. Instructors become “moderators” of student groups, providing structural direction while withholding traditional forms of explicit didactic instruction. As the students and moderators examine the issues, their collective knowledge around the issues expands. As a result, culminating projects highlight critical national community needs in which students unravel the complex nature of the issues and promote action-oriented dialogue focused on addressing them locally.

KEYWORDS: *Civic engagement, critical issues, service-learning*

Introduction

Parker Palmer (1998) posits that we only come to know reality by being in community with it. A reality of moving students from consumers to producers of knowledge can include exposure to critical issues affecting their profession, community, and world. Experiential learning and educational initiatives provide a

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platform through which the world is to be experienced, as opposed to how it has been experienced, interpreted, and packaged within traditional didactic methods. In experiential education, instructors and facilitators of learning actualize real and existing experiences for students to educate themselves, others, and the community (James, 1980). Service-learning provides a mechanism that bridges mainstream education and experiential practices with the purposeful commitment to community involvement, engagement, and action (Berv, 1998). In the intentional act of altering the traditional didactic relationship by turning the responsibility of educating, instructing and learning over to students, we offer the Critical Issue Investigations¹ as a pedagogic strategy that creates space for students to simultaneously engage with curricular content, experiential methods, service-learning connections, and the ongoing, unfolding real world issues of communities. The result transcends the traditional strategy of discussing where a field is going and what will affect it by allowing students to illuminate their own learning and understanding of their personal and professional commitments, responsibilities, and actions.

What is the Critical Issues Investigation?

Imagine that it is two-thirds into the semester, foundational professional skills have been taught, and the students are ready for a challenge. The Critical Issue Investigation creates an opportunity for students to transition into a leadership role in relation to what they will learn and how they will learn it. The Critical Issues Investigation begins with the “flashlight protocol.” In the classroom, the lights are turned off and a single flashlight is switched on. The metaphor that the instructor has been “holding the flashlight” is introduced, which represents the traditional pedagogic strategies of directing students to “look over here,” “pay attention to this aspect of content,” and to “learn this.” Then the instructor physically hands the flashlight to a student in the room and explains that in the next segment of the course, the students (in small groups) will determine where to shine the light and how to investigate the issues that they find.

An introduction to the assignment informs each group that they will chose from a specific topic area (we have consistently used Education Reform, Economic Challenges, Underserved Populations, Healthy Lifestyles, and Sensitivity to the Outdoors) to represent distinctly different ways of addressing the overarching course outcome: “How can I identify and respond to the critical issues that impact leisure services delivery.” Each group is tasked to achieve the following tangible products to help guide their research: (1) design an information product for the local community; (2) create a handout, presentations and exam review questions for their classmates; (3) create and partake in an individual and group reflection regarding the knowledge gained. Students research, investigate, and contact community partners to broaden their knowledge on current, critical issues impacting the community. Pedagogically, the instructor now becomes more of a “moderator,” no longer directing the focus

¹The authors are happy to share moderator’s guides and detailed assignment sheets to assist with implementation.

or determining the outcomes or products, but helping students maintain focus and motivation.

Philosophical and Theoretical Commitments

The Critical Issues Investigations rest on a foundation grounded in experiential education philosophy and service-learning practices combined with a belief that leisure studies provides a natural platform for active citizenship. Student engagement and empowerment are pedagogical outcomes at the core of this investigation. In experiential education, the student's direct relationship with the subject material provides the nexus for learning (Joplin, 1981). As the originators and innovators of their learning, students are invited into relational connections with subject material. With the focus on relationships, students move beyond rote regurgitation of content, and instead engage with ideas, needs, challenges, and solutions on an ongoing and evolving level. Real critical issues that face local communities, our nation, and the world provide the rich environment within which students can work, plant ideas, cultivate community action initiatives, and harvest both the educational and personal fruits of their efforts.

The field of leisure affords an exceptional opportunity to create positive change through initiatives which promote democratic and active citizenship. Hemmingway (1999) asserted how leisure activities provide a potential platform for active democratic citizenship through its role in the formation of social capital. Specifically, social capital encourages and highlights the interconnectedness of human activity and goals, as opposed to maintaining pillared isolation. Similarly, Maynard and Kleiber (2005) noted that, "leisure services . . . offer some of the best prospects for providing activities, resources and facilities that are conducive to the strengthening of citizenship" (p. 484). By broadening simplistic and traditional notions of leisure, the Critical Issues Investigation affords the ideal platform to actualize engaged and active community involvement.

Achieving more engaged and active community involvement through leisure services and activities can seem foreign to many students. Therefore, through the use of the National Issues Forum institute protocol (www.nifi.org), provides a foundation both context and content. The National Issues Forum offers topical issues guides on a variety of topics and presents a protocol within each guide for engaging topics from multiple angles and perspectives. It provides an established and credible medium for students to link with existing critical issues which address a multitude of concerns throughout our nation and world. Specifically, it is a "nonpartisan, nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums for the consideration of public policy issues. . . rooted in the simple notion that people need to come together to reason and talk — to deliberate about common problems" (www.nifi.org/forums/about.aspx). Students access and read their specific topical area's issue guide and brainstorm the connections to the field, creating opportunity to see the recreation and leisure field more globally and be proud of the difference their future profession can make to complex challenges.

Suggested Steps for Implementation of Critical Issues Investigation

The ideal size of the groups ranges from four to six students, although this number can vary or be adapted. Often, we have two groups investigating the same broad topic (i.e., Education Reform), while choosing their own specific direction (i.e., Intersections with Poverty and/or Role of Extracurricular Activities) in order to allow for one moderator the ability to supervise multiple groups. Depending on the size of the class, we have asked graduate students (both masters and doctoral students) to serve as moderators, providing them an opportunity to facilitate group work, address complex issues in the field, and potentially earn independent study credit for their role. We suggest that instructors of the course visit the National Issues Forum website to choose the topic areas from the available issues guides. The following provides a summary of the three main sections of the investigation.

Educate Self

After topical areas are chosen (we typically choose four topics for 50 students), students participate in a “Pitch Day” where each of the chosen broad critical issues are presented. Links to specific National Issues Forum Issue Guides are made available to students along with a short, non-academic article from a source such as a newspaper or magazine that loosely demonstrates the complexity and influence of the topical areas. Students are responsible for reading each article, skimming and taking notes on the issue guides, and deciding which group they would like to join. Once the groups are determined (we fill them on a first-come, first-serve basis via an electronic bulletin board), students critically read the issue guide for their topic and meet with their moderator to brainstorm overarching themes and the relevance to recreation and leisure studies. In the spirit of effective brainstorming, all ideas should be written down without critique, and moderators work to keep students focused on the big picture instead of fixating on solutions. Near the end of the session, students identify which specific aspect of the topic they are interested in and proceed to research it. They are asked to find resources (articles, videos, information, etc.), create a list of potential community contacts who can speak on the issue, and begin to think of ways to share their findings with others.

Educate Others

Students regroup during subsequent class sessions to present their findings and narrow the diverse topics down to one. In keeping in the spirit of experiential education, the moderators (i.e., instructors) empower the group to decide how best to select their specific topic. Once a narrowed focus is identified, the group begins to delegate responsibilities and roles are assigned. Next, students work to create an informational handout and 10-minute class presentation on their topic. Groups are then split into smaller groups to use a “jigsaw format” so that a representative from each critical issue group is with students from the other groups (for an excellent description of the power and effectiveness of the jigsaw format, see Aronson, 2007). Students take turns presenting their content and handouts in their jigsaw groups, providing

them with practice on how to address these issues and giving them breadth of content because they hear from the other groups as well. As a result, students gain experience in creating dialogue and promoting perspective taking and reflective thought concerning appropriate action with regarding their topic. Finally, students receive written feedback on their presentation skills and handout (from peers and moderators) prior to working within the community.

Educate the Community

As groups transition to Educating the Community, the *Critical Issues Investigation* evolves from personal and individual knowledge acquisition, into community and civic action. Students are responsible for working with the community to increase awareness for their issue (i.e., students visit local homeless shelter to address issues on the health care debate regarding access to preventative services, conduct a trash audit of a large campus building to raise awareness, etc.). The community action piece, ideally, arises from the unfolding of what the group finds through their specific investigation of their topic. As part of this process, groups are expected to identify and establish a relationship with community partner(s) that are intimately connected to the issue. This step allows for the students to focus on being the facilitator of dialogue and discussion, as opposed to being the “expert” on a given topic, and realize that other people are actively engaged in seeking solutions.

The culminating experience requires groups to bring together their investigation into a final presentation (for a level of importance and prestige, we hold these final presentations at an on-campus conference center). Students invite community partners and other contacts that have assisted them in the process. Students prepare a new handout and a 20-minute presentation on their project with a 10-minute question and answer period with the audience.

Desired Outcomes

A month of course time at the end of the semester is dedicated for the Critical Issues Investigation, although it could be adapted to fit other time constraints. Recommended courses are classes that focus on theory, practice, leadership, and professional/community issues. The Critical Issues Investigation, as a culminating experience, provides the actualization of course objectives. As such, students get a more personal and intimate connection to the current social, economic, political and environmental concerns that influence their personal lives and the field of recreation and leisure services. It is through this connection that students are exposed to the complexity and interconnections that exist around a host of issues that affect our communities, nation, and world. Students have a real-world platform to enact and actualize their personal and professional development through the ownership of their learning process, advocacy of an inclusive and open democratic dialogue, and the empowerment that results.

Recommendations for Courses, Populations or Audiences

As an instructor, facilitator, and moderator of the experience, there must be a commitment both philosophically and pedagogically to empower students to direct their own learning. At times, it may be difficult to allow students to feel what it is to take personal ownership of their learning, and the empowered action that results from that learning. The instructor must confront his/her own need to control both content and direction of learning so that students can. Therefore, this investigation is not recommended for any course. A strong foundation based in theory, practical skill development, and structure must precede this experience.

The focus is more than students knowing ideas, facts, definitions, or answers; it is the equally important concept of civic connection through empowered and informed action. The Critical Issues Investigation provides a foundation and template for a life committed to future action, not just assignment completion. Students are made aware of a host of issues facing their profession, community, nation, and world, while simultaneously providing them an opportunity to see that they can make an impact on addressing those issues to better themselves and the community.

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