A Living Laboratory: Activity Template

We are creating a cross-disciplinary collection of teaching activities that use the best practice approaches fostered in the "Living Lab": adoption of City Tech's General Education Student Learning Outcomes, George Kuh's High Impact Educational Practices, place-based learning, open digital pedagogy (the OpenLab), and formal assessment methods.

Share your best practices with your colleagues! Use this form to record a favorite activity; an activity can be as small as an in-class exercise or as large as a semester-long project. Your description can be short or extensive – take as much space as you need.

Activity Title:	"Know Your Community"
Your Name:	Lenore Hildebrand, DSW, LCSW, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Human Services
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Course:	HUS 2307 – Community Organizing and Development
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Activity Description:
Provide a brief description of the activity.

Students will create blog posts and orally report findings from a series of 20 questions about their community (based on their own research) and aspects of its quality of life that are new to them. They will also upload photos taken during their community walkabouts of features/scenes/images/ conditions/artifacts that pleased, surprised, and/or troubled them. Photos should be labeled "pleased me," "surprised me," "troubled me" and be accompanied by a written explanation of why they chose their images and how the captured image adds to or detracts from the community's quality of life.

Learning Goals:
What do you aim to achieve with this activity?

Community change and development, though historically a core component of human service activity, is not what has drawn most students into the major. For many, there is a disconnect between human service work, social justice, and social change. While HUS 2307 introduces students to the theories and techniques of community organization theory and practice, this exercise in getting to know their own community is designed to fill a gap in their civic knowledge, a learning process which best begins on their home turf. Their home communities are literally a "living laboratory" of the processes of community change and development they will study in the course. While many think they know their neighborhoods well and they have opinions and attitudes about what needs to be changed which they are not adverse to sharing, they have yet to develop a more informed understanding of the strengths and assets (the so-called visible and invisible "capital") and gaps and needs of their communities, to say nothing of the power sources and dynamics that shape these neighborhoods and affect their quality of life. "Know Your Community" is, therefore, both an initial place-based and source-documented activity designed to engage students in the process of making a preliminary assessment of their community's demographics, trends, assets, and gaps with the goal of identifying two or three key issues that represent current or potential targets of change in their neighborhoods. These issues will become the basis of negotiation among students as a topic for their group

advocacy/lobby project due in week 12 of the semester. Specifically, students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their observation skills, identify and document new source material, communicate in writing what they have learned, engage in self-reflection about their own professional goals, exchange and critique insights with one another through blogs, and begin to build in-course a virtual and actual community of their own while increasing, in the language of the course, their personal and professional "capital."

Timing:

At what point in the lesson or semester to you use this activity? How much classroom time do you devote to it? How much out-of-class time is expected?

This exercise (due by week 4), for which students will receive extra credit, is an enhancement of a preliminary assignment given early last semester. It will take place during the first month of the term (research and photo-shoot walkabout should take no more than the first 3 weeks of the semester, while blog writing will continue throughout this period) and, as noted, will help students to identify actual issues of concern to them in preparation for their group project. A portion of class time during the first 4 weeks of the term will be devoted to a discussion of student progress in completing their answers with feedback from me. This activity provides a transition to a series of follow-up required course assignments designed to link community change to professional practice---ethical standards of responsibility to community and society (week 2), attendance at a community meeting (week 7), development of a position paper/statement and letter to elected officials (week 10), and the aforementioned group advocacy/lobby project (due week 12 with group presentations scheduled for weeks 12, 13, 14).

Logistics:

What preparation is needed for this activity? What instructions do you give students?

At the beginning of the semester, I need to make sure that students are familiar with the Open Lab and how to set up an account, a blog post, and upload photos. If students need additional help in setting up an account, creating their posts, or in uploading images, they will be encouraged to seek help from the Open Lab team as soon as possible. Assuming that everyone is familiar with the Open Lab and how to access it, I will give students guidelines for the activity which I will also post on blackboard and on the Open Lab. I will review the guidelines in class and be available through Open Lab and by e-mail for additional questions as needed.

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General Education SLOs:
Which of City Tech's General Education Student Learning Outcomes does this activity address?

1. Encourages engagement in personal, professional, and civic communities
2. Acquires tools for lifelong learning---how to learn, how they learn, knowledge of resources
3. Communicates in diverse settings and groups, using written, oral, and visual means
4. Derives meaning from experience, as well as gathers information from observation
5. Transforms information into knowledge, and knowledge into judgment and action
6. Demonstrates social and civic knowledge
7. Gathers, interprets, evaluates, and applies information discerningly from variety of sources

High Impact Educational Practices:
Which of George Kuh's High Impact Educational Practices does this activity incorporate? Does it use the OpenLab for open digital pedagogy? Does it include place-based learning? Choose all that apply and/or add your own.

George Kuh's High Impact Educational Practices:

☐ *First-year seminars and experiences*
☐ *Learning communities*
√ *(Lead-up to) Collaborative assignments and projects*
☐ *Diversity and global learning ("difficult differences")*
☐ *Internships*

☐ *Common intellectual experiences (core curriculum)*
√ *Writing-intensive courses*
√ *Undergraduate research*
☐ *Service- or community-based learning*
☐ *Capstone courses and projects*

√ Open Digital Pedagogy (the OpenLab)   **√ Place-Based Learning**

☐ **Other (please describe):**

Assessment:
How do you assess this activity? What assessment measures do you use? Do you include your evaluation in grade calculations?

Students will receive extra credit (points to be determined will be added to 15% of course grade on syllabus apportioned to "Assignments") for completing all 20 questions and taking photos, all of which must be submitted on time (due week 4 of the semester). They are expected to respond in a paragraph to 4 questions (not evaluated for grammar, spelling, or typos), each of which will be posted weekly and timed to coincide with the length of this assignment, and to engage in at least **one** exchange to a posting by one of their colleagues (total blogposts=5). The written work and exchange will be assessed by the maximum number of blogposts (4+1) completed by week 5.

In addition, they will be asked to report orally on their findings. These brief oral reports are meant to give them public-speaking practice for a larger collaborative presentation later in the course. This exercise will also introduce them to the criteria that will be used to evaluate them---organization and clarity of materials (20%), research/data to study problem (25%), advocacy plan (20%), presentation aids (10%), public speaking skills (15%), and audience involvement (10%). Students will receive ongoing written and oral feedback from me as they complete all the tasks of this activity.

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Reflection:
How has this assignment impacted your teaching? What challenges did you encounter and how did you address them? What feedback did students provide? How would you imagine this activity being used in different disciplines?

I had created a very limited version of this assignment in my HUS 2307 class in Fall 2013. Most students completed it willingly as extra credit for assignments is always a positive incentive that gets students' attention. Results, however, showed that in general they had little civic knowledge about their communities, who represented them, the differences between city, state, and federal levels of government, what a stakeholder was, who held power and how was it being used, and what were the specific strengths, assets, gaps, and needs of their own neighborhoods. In fact, students who were naturalized citizens knew more about American civics than those who were American-born, though very few who were eligible to vote actually voted, especially in local elections. They neither knew the names of their public officials nor the names of candidates seeking to replace them.

The place-based experience of visiting the Brooklyn Navy Yard (as well as the readings about high-impact practices) stimulated my thinking about how to re-conceive the assignment and link it to the other demands of the course in a meaningful way. As an adjunct, I don't get to select my courses or to design a syllabus, though feedback is welcome by Course Coordinators, but HUS 2307 is one of my areas of interest given my long-term experience working in the community helping to build and sustain coalitions. In thinking further about the course syllabus, it seemed that my proposed activity not only met the task of the seminar project but also served to introduce students to the skills they would need to complete subsequent course assignments. While I don't know what I will be teaching in Fall, 2014, if I do find HUS 2307 on my schedule, I plan to discuss this assignment with Prof. Ben Shepard, the Course Coordinator, to demonstrate how it could be an effective platform on which to base the core work of the course.

The proposed activity is not designed as a formal exercise in ethnography, though it bears some resemblance to it. A course in ethnography, if students chose to take it, would introduce them to this skill in a more structured way. Rather this activity simply asks students to observe their neighborhoods, think about the extent to which human service majors have a responsibility to improve the quality of life not just of individuals and families but of whole communities, and examine their assumptions about the role of human service professionals in society as a whole. In other words, what kind of human service professional do they want to be.

Additional Information:
Please share any additional comments and further documentation of the activity - e.g. assignment instructions, rubrics, examples of student work, etc. These could be in the form of PDF or Word files, links to posts or files on the OpenLab, etc.

"Know Your Community: Twenty Questions" (see attachment)
Blog post questions (see attachment)
HUS 2307 – original course syllabus has a bibliography (see attachment)

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Additional references:

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