

PUTTING IT IN PRACTICE

LESSON 11: ACTING AS A CIVIC PROFESSIONAL— WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 💡 Develop a capacity to recognize complexity and critically examine real-world situations.
- 💡 Learn to reflect and apply lessons for acting as a civic professional.

LESSON OVERVIEW

Being a civic professional involves thinking-in-action. This lesson enables participants to critically examine complex, real-world situations, with opportunities to discuss and reflect on them with peers.

SUGGESTED PLAN [ø 75 minutes]

LESSON PREPARATION

1. Review the vignettes of complex situations provided at the end of this lesson. These vignettes offer examples in community-based, campus-based, and facilitation settings. Consider crafting additional vignettes or editing the scenarios provided to make them relevant and timely to your students.

2. Print each selected vignette on an individual sheet of paper (perhaps 4 to 6 total, depending on the size of your group). Hang the vignettes in locations spread out across the room. Bring post-it notes and pens to class for participants to write responses to each scenario. (Note: this activity can also be done remotely using shared online sites, such as Jamboard or Padlet).

GALLERY WALK [⌚ 25 minutes]

Hand out post-it notes and ask participants to move around the room and review the posted vignettes. As they reflect on the situations, ask participants to write responses to the scenarios on individual post-it notes. Their responses should answer the question, "What Should You Do?"

Give participants time to move around the room and respond to each vignette.

SMALL GROUPS [⌚ 20 minutes]

Invite participants to go to the situation they are most interested in exploring further, forming small groups throughout the room around the self-selected topics.

Keep the groups to manageable sizes, encouraging participants to go to a second choice if a particular group gets too large. Ask participants to review the posted responses and discuss the vignette with their groups.

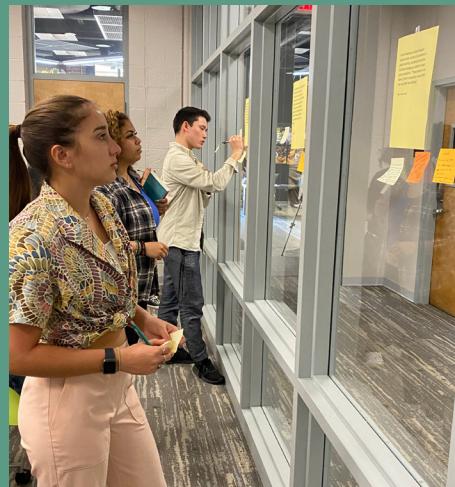
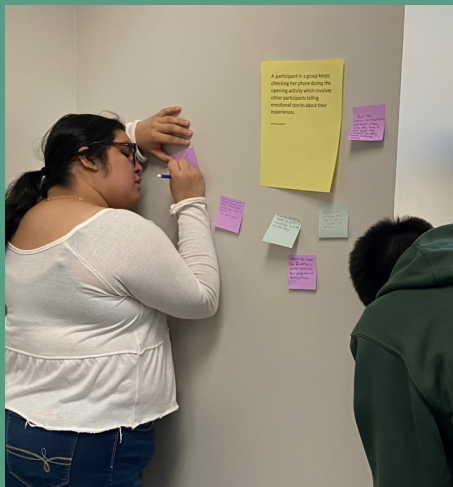
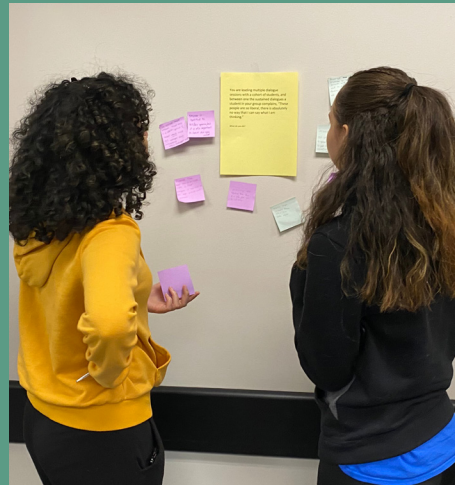
If time permits, you can have participants move to a second vignette to discuss in newly formed small groups.

LARGE-GROUP HARVESTING [⌚ 30 minutes]

Reconvene the full class and ask members of each small group to reflect aloud on their conversations. Try to steer students away from repeating or summarizing conversations. Instead, invite them to share innovative solutions, along with tensions and questions that emerged.

Have students briefly explain the scenario they discussed and then use prompts to initiate deeper reflection. Examples might include:

- Did everyone in your group agree on what to do? Why or why not?
- What were the conflicts or tensions—either in the scenario itself or in your conversation about what to do about it? What aspect of your scenario seemed most challenging to address?
- What skills would be required to navigate this situation?
- After discussing this scenario, what questions does your group still have?



ACTING AS A CIVIC PROFESSIONAL: COMMUNITY VIGNETTES

You are the Director of Planning for a medium-sized urban city. The new mayor is eager to support alternative forms of transportation—especially the creation of bike lanes throughout the city. The mayor’s office is pushing you to use the summer months to build new sets of lanes close to local colleges, because they are sure college students will want to bike safely.

Your staff assures you they have a plan in place that will use cutting-edge plans developed on the West Coast, but to get the lanes implemented in time your office won’t be able to get input from stakeholders, including the campus community or local neighbors.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You are a bilingual hospital employee assigned to work with a new patient who tells you that he is undocumented, but asks you not to disclose this information to anyone else in the hospital. The patient is fearful of putting his legal status and his family in jeopardy, and adamant that he cannot sign the consent to treatment forms until he is assured that there will be no negative implications. You assure the patient you will maintain confidentiality and work toward a solution but do not push him to sign the forms immediately.

Your manager approaches you after the session and reprimands you harshly, implying that you have been wasting precious time with the patient and warning you that you are jeopardizing the patient’s health and your job by not insisting that he sign the consent forms.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You are a woman working as a research lab associate in the male-dominated industry of biotechnology. The director of the lab has been a mentor to you and is well respected in the field. He has offered to write letters for your graduate applications to leading universities, where he has many friends.

The only other woman in the lab has confided in you that she is being harassed by your mentor and feels uncomfortable with comments he often makes. This doesn’t surprise you, but you have not been directly harassed in this way.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You are a recent college graduate who is deeply passionate about climate change. You receive an offer at an organization with a public reputation for climate change advocacy work. Soon after you start working, you find out that the organization has not divested from fossil fuels; you also notice that there is a lot of plastic waste generated and feel the organization could be much more mindful of its internal environmental sustainability practices.

Your peers have advised you that most managers who have worked with the organization for many years are slow to warm to new ideas. You feel strongly that you want to work for an organization that "walks the talk;" on the other hand, you are relying on your paycheck to start paying down your student loans and realize there could be consequences for speaking up as a new employee.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You are a history teacher in an urban public high school in which the majority of students are people of color. Many are children of immigrant parents, or are immigrants themselves.

The school is under scrutiny because of low test scores, and an external evaluator is overseeing the close of the quarter to ensure that the school is meeting curricular standards. You have almost 3 weeks of material to cover in your last week. Generally, you feel that the curriculum leaves little space for students to reflect on current events that deeply affect them. Nonetheless, you frequently reserve time in your classroom for students to engage in conversation and reflection about current events (which is why you are behind). You have been warned several times by school administration that you must teach all of the remaining history curriculum material for the quarter by the end of the week. Poor test scores will mean negative consequences for you and the school.

In the middle of the lesson, before the quarter ends, a

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You are the Chief Operating Officer at a small, grassroots nonprofit doing educational work in prisons that also does advocacy work to end the school-to-prison pipeline. The Executive Director of the organization is well respected in the community and has been cultivating a major gift from a large foundation. The foundation supports prison reform but is headed by a conservative activist and has donated major funds to causes that you feel are counter to your organization's principles, such as elimination of the social safety net.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

ACTING AS A CIVIC PROFESSIONAL: CAMPUS VIGNETTES¹⁹

Student athletes and assistant coach take a knee. At a homecoming football game, the stadium stands are full, with alumni, students, faculty, staff, town residents, as well as several trustees. During the national anthem, several players lock arms and take a knee to protest what they see as ongoing racism on campus and in the larger society. They are joined by an assistant coach. As they do, some in the audience hiss and boo. Even as the game is underway, the university starts to receive angry phone calls and email messages from alumni and others, including a message from a local major donor addressed to the school's president, calling the protesting players unpatriotic and demanding that the players be disciplined.

On social media, images of the players and assistant coach start trending, with some posts decrying the protest and others praising it. The state senator whose district includes the university tweets, "Students and coach disrespect the flag while taxpayers' foot the bill for their education—Disgraceful!" Social media posts also indicate a coalition of anti-racism groups are planning to gather and kneel in the main quad the next afternoon in solidarity. A trustee in attendance at the game receives email messages from classmates, including one who has given a major gift and has the capacity to give another, asking whether the university will discipline the players and assistant coach.



YOU ARE ASKED TO GIVE ADVICE ON HOW TO RESPOND TO THE ESCALATING CONTROVERSY.

- What would you advise?
- How would you name and frame the controversy?
- What questions might you ask? How might civil discourse be helpful?
- What are the limitations of dialogue in this situation?

19. Campus vignettes draw from information in *Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap*, Bipartisan Policy Institute Task Force, 2021, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/a-new-roadmap/>.

Speaker invitation leads to controversy. A faculty member in the philosophy department of a Catholic college invites a well-known scholar to discuss LGBTQ rights and the Catholic Church as part of her course, "Contemporary Moral Issues." The scholar is one of several invited speakers over the term, with talks open to the entire campus. Several faculty members complain to the administration and the local Catholic bishop, saying that the speaker's views go against the teachings of the Church and that he shouldn't be invited to campus. The administration responds by asking the philosophy professor to invite a second speaker who can provide a scholarly response from a Catholic perspective.

The professor says that while she understands that some have a concern, it is up to her to set the syllabus and invite speakers. She notes that the philosopher she has invited has published his views in peer-reviewed academic journals and has spoken on many other college campuses without controversy. She suggests that other faculty members or the administration are welcome to invite speakers with opposing views to campus, but she won't be organizing a second speaker on short notice. As a result, the administration abruptly cancels the speaker.

The controversy heightens long-simmering tensions on campus among LGBTQ students and their allies. They demand that the college write a more explicit statement on non-discrimination around sexual orientation and gender identity into campus policy. Students threaten to protest at the groundbreaking of a new building unless the speaker is allowed to come to campus as originally scheduled and a non-discrimination policy is approved.



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Political free speech and hate speech controversy. A white student who is a Resident Assistant (RA) on campus has Trump and Blue Lives Matter flags in his room, making some of the students of color on his floor feel uncomfortable and unsafe. This leads to complaints, and several students request to be moved to another residence hall. The matter is still unresolved when the RA leads a program in his residence hall on “illegal aliens” in which he shows a controversial anti-immigrant video. At the end of the program, the RA asks students in attendance to sign a petition saying that “President Biden should be impeached because of his failed border policies,” which includes disputed claims and outright misinformation. Multiple students complain directly to the dean of students immediately following the event, asking that the RA be removed from his post for promoting hate speech and creating an unwelcoming space. The dean of students temporarily removes the student RA from his duties, pending an investigation.

In response, the RA writes a long blog post on a conservative site that is shared on social media and picked up by Fox News and other media outlets, in which he claims that he is a victim of discrimination because of his political beliefs. The RA points out that many RAs have Black Lives Matter posters in their rooms, and it is common for RAs to host events that support “social justice” causes. The student is now asking to be reinstated immediately and calling for the dean of students to be fired for removing him from his post during the investigation, something that is gaining traction on conservative social media.



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ACTING AS A CIVIC PROFESSIONAL: FACILITATION VIGNETTES ²⁰


You're facilitating a dialogue with a group of students about the aftermath of the most recent national election, and someone asks you, "What is your opinion about the election?"

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

A participant in a group keeps checking her phone during the opening activity, which involves other participants telling emotional stories about their experiences.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You have spent weeks organizing a dialogue on immigration policy. The day before the dialogue, a new immigrant becomes the victim of a vicious hate crime—and it's all the group wants to talk about.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO? Would your answer be the same if the crime had been committed by a new immigrant?

When the subject of immigration comes up in your dialogue, a student in your group says, "This is really hard for me. I have never told anyone before on campus, but I am undocumented."

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

20. Facilitation vignettes draw from information in Nancy Thomas & Mark Brimhall-Vargas, *Facilitating Political Discussions: Facilitator Training Workshop Guide*, Tufts University Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, <https://tufts.app.box.com/v/idhe-facilit-polit-discuss>.

You are facilitating a conversation on the oppression of women. During a break, a transgender student approaches you and says they are uncomfortable that the dialogue approaches gender as binary.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

In a discussion on gay marriage at a Catholic college, a student says, "The teachings of the Catholic Church are clear on this: homosexuality is a sin, so gay marriage is clearly wrong. We shouldn't even be discussing this issue here." A student in your group who identifies as LGBTQ is visibly hurt by this comment.

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You're facilitating a deliberation on campus with a group of students to come up with policy recommendations for addressing climate change. A student in the group keeps denying that climate change is caused by human activity, which is creating tension and making it difficult for the group to move forward. A frustrated student turns to you and asks: "What is your opinion about the science of climate change?"

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

You are leading multiple dialogue sessions with a cohort of students, and during one of the sustained dialogues a student in your group complains, "These people are so liberal, there is absolutely no way that I can say what I am thinking."

 WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

