

Building Community-Engaged Learning into the Online Political Science Classroom

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Abstract: Translating community engagement activities from face-to-face courses, where students share a common space and community, to online courses, which lack a shared place, is challenging. This paper presents two approaches that have been used to successfully connect online undergraduate students to their communities and increase their level of civic engagement. Both of these approaches focus on building attachment to place as an alternative to service learning that leads to higher civic engagement. The success of these approaches in terms of student satisfaction and learning outcome attainment also demonstrates how alternatives to service-learning based civic engagement efforts in online classrooms can be more attainable and accessible for online students and for non-traditional students.

Keywords: online learning, placemaking, community engagement

Introduction & Statement of Problem

Community engagement is a core mission of many institutions of higher education and community-based learning is a recognized high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). At the university level in particular, civic engagement¹ is important for “grounding academic knowledge in real-world conditions, connecting knowledge to practice, bringing academics and practitioners into closer relationships, improving conditions in local communities, and building democracy and civil society” (Ostrander, 2004, 74). Indeed, as argued by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement in 2012, “as a democracy, the United States depends on a knowledgeable, public-spirited, and engaged population. Education plays a fundamental role in building civic vitality, and in the twenty-first century, higher education has a distinctive role to play in the renewal of US democracy” (2).

The discipline of political science is especially well-suited for community engagement activities, not only because “political engagement grows out of civic engagement either directly or indirectly,” (Rios Millet McCartney 2013, 14), but also because political science instructors are more likely to be politically engaged than the larger population (Frank, 2013, 96). Most political science instructors realize the importance of building civic engagement in our students. However, out of both necessity and demand, many courses are moving online and some students may never set foot on the physical campuses at which we teach. Traditional methods of building civic engagement and community engagement through attending events, participating in service learning, or engaging in community-based research become exponentially more difficult with a

¹ We follow the definition of civic engagement offered by Alison Rios Millet McCartney, that it is a “catch-all term that refers to an individual’s activities, alone or as part of a group, that focus on developing knowledge about the community and its political system, identifying or seeking solutions to community problems, pursuing goals to benefit the community, and participating in constructive deliberation among community members about the community’s political system and community issues, problems, or solutions” (2013, 14).

geographical gulf between educator and student and the extra effort in managing and facilitating these types of activities may outweigh potential benefits. Faculty committed to civic learning may feel challenged by how to build engagement when students are spread across the state, country, or even globe.

There is a wide array of scholarship to suggest substantial declines in civic and political engagement among Americans over the last two decades (Brundidge & Rice, 2009; McCartney, 2017). In 2012, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement argued, "colleges and universities are among the nation's most valuable laboratories for civic learning and democratic engagement" and called on higher education institutions to refocus their efforts on civic engagement. At the same time, the growth of online education has been rapid with nearly 15 percent of students taking exclusively online courses (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018).

The political science program at our institution has mimicked these national trends, with most growth coming from online-only students in our regional service area and beyond. Because of this, any efforts at inculcating an awareness of "place" among students – essential for avoiding what Elizabeth Minnich terms "a disaster of thoughtlessness" – and developing a broader commitment to civic engagement must transcend local/regional particularities (2012, xi). In other words, consideration of place can help promote the reflection and engagement that is essential for building civic skills and a sense of efficacy among our students. However, translating community engagement activities from face-to-face courses, where students share a common space and community, to online courses, which lack a shared place, is challenging. This paper presents two approaches that have been used to successfully connect online undergraduate students to their communities and increase their level of civic engagement.

This paper offers two approaches to developing community engagement in online learners with a focus on place. The first is from an Urban Politics class, American Politics subfield. The second is from an upper division political theory topics course, entitled *Monuments, Memory, and Meaning*.

Online Instruction & the Rationale for Place

Across American higher education, service learning has emerged as the dominant form of student-focused civic engagement, especially since the early 21st century (Rogers, 2017, 81). Indeed, there are many document approaches to promoting civic engagement in both face-to-face and online courses involve service-learning (e.g. Guthrie and McCracken, 2010; Eudey, 2012, Kulkarny and Coleman, 2017). While service-learning is a recognized high impact practice, it is not a feasible option in all cases (for example, students that are active military may not have access to community partners in their home communities for extended experiential learning experiences). Our approaches to promoting locally-minded civic engagement in our upper division American politics and political theory courses address the needs of online students unable to complete a more traditional service-learning experience, while still allowing them to graduate with the civic education necessary to be part of a knowledgeable, capable, and engaged citizenry.

Online courses pose the challenge of how to create opportunities for community-engaged learning that are relatable for students from diverse communities and aligned with program learning outcomes that encourage students to “engage in the process of co-constructing knowledge through inquiry, discourse, and problem solving” (Thomas & Brower, 2017, 31). Through reflection and experimentation, we independently settled on place, and inculcating a sense of “place” through placemaking and other approaches as an appropriate frame for

incorporating civic-engagement into our online classrooms. Sense of place concerns the ways that “people’s identity is a function of membership in a number of collective identities: gender, race, social class, profession, nationality, and last but not least, place. Sense of place is a collective identity tied to a particular place, perhaps best thought of as the unique ‘character’ of a place” (Flint, 2016. 26). Our approaches and focus on place align with recent scholarship demonstrating that teaching that intentionally focuses on increasing place attachment also enhances civic engagement and social trust (Stefaniak, Bilewicz, and Lewicka, 2017).

The approaches that we have developed are innovative, highly scaffolded semester-long activities intentionally designed to connect students to their communities in ways that promote local-level civic engagement that endures after the end of the course. Recognizing that our online students do not necessarily share a common community outside of our online classroom we have emphasized activities and projects that we believe are engaging for students from outside the immediate community being analyzed. In doing so, these activities help guide students to become lifelong learners, effective communicators, and critical thinkers, in keeping with our campus learning outcomes and in ways consistent with the university’s mission statement of “enhancing the educational, cultural, and economic development of the region it serves through community and civic engagement.”

Placing Placemaking Online: Our Innovations

I. Urban Politics: Using Place-Making as a Framework for Civic Engagement

Beginning in fall 2014, POLS-Y 308: Urban Politics was converted to a project-based and experiential experience. Underlying the course design was the belief that we need to save our cities, both big and small, and the individuals most likely to step into revitalizing those cities are the generation we are currently educating. Overall, American cities face shrinking budgets,

federal mandates for expensive programs, changing demographics, shifting populations, aging infrastructure, and a host of other problems. Our urban centers also operate within a complex political environment. Many different political entities can claim control for areas in and around our cities. The course explored these major premises by asking what solutions exist to our pressing urban problems.

As stated above, the basis of the redesign was the burgeoning field of placemaking. According to the Project for Public Spaces (n.d.), a leading organization in the field, placemaking “reimagines public spaces as the heart of every community, in every city. It’s a transformative approach that inspires people to create and improve their public places. Placemaking strengthens the connection between people and the places they share.” Furthermore, “rooted in community-based participation, placemaking involves the planning, design, management and programming of public spaces.” Placemaking is intimately connected with the concept of social capital. City planners and community developers note placemaking is built upon community assets and that “healthy communities exhibit healthy doses of social assets” (Arefi 2014). How and where residents interact with one another can contribute to higher levels of social capital and a stronger connection to one’s community. In fact, research has found low-density suburban communities—the bane of the placemaking movement—may actually depress political participation and spur apathy (Hopkins and Williamson 2012). While Sander and Putnam (2010) note that political interest among college students has grown in the post-9/11 years, there are still real concerns that social capital is wavering among older Americans and that the era of “bowling alone” is not entirely over (Putnam 1995; 2000). Ensuring a growth in both social assets and social capital is essential for the revitalization of our urban core and the health of our democracy.

Civic Engagement “Intervention”

As part of the syllabus modification, students were asked to create an electronic portfolio that profiled urban revitalization, economic development, and placemaking in their hometown (or a town of their choosing). It was an incremental project, rolled out over the course of the semester, and directly related to the topics covered in class. The portfolio culminated with students developing one specific, and achievable, project that could spur revitalization and development in their selected city.² The redesign fully tapped into the idea of building civic engagement among students enrolled in the course by ensuring students became more active and engaged in their own communities and learned how the materials discussed in class applied to them on a very personal basis. Below, I discuss each of these interventions in more detail.

Urban Revitalization Posts: At the beginning of the semester, students selected a city to profile and research as part of the course. The hope was the city selected would be the student’s hometown or current residence, but some students (especially those living in rural areas) selected cities that they had visited or hoped to move to in the future. Throughout the semester, they were required to make a series of posts about the city in reference to the materials covered in the class. Students had the option to utilize either Tumblr, a popular microblogging platform, or WordPress, a free website development site, to complete their posts. Both platforms were free, though they required user registration and powerful enough to allow easy embedding of pictures, video, or audio clips, which was a required component of each post.

The choice of Tumblr and WordPress was driven by both practical considerations, like those discussed above, but also existing literature on the use of social and participatory media in education. Rheingold (2008) notes that participatory media, “can help students turn their self-

² Students also participated in community-focused problem-based learning, which is not profiled in this paper.

expression into a form of public participation” (101). Rather than produce assignments meant only for the instructor’s eyes, the posts were viewable to all students in the class and any member of the public who happened upon the student’s post. As such, students were informed and constantly reminded that posts should be clearly written, well-researched, and properly cited and became more comfortable with the idea of producing content for public consumption.

Figure 1: Leisure Reports Tumblr Assignment



This week, we are focusing on the importance of organic, street-level experiences. Unlike the packaged events that are consumed by many, many argue that city dwellers value the opportunity to happen across events that are authentic, participatory, and experiential. These types of events are essential in creating a place that people want to live. This week’s post (and the last one of the semester!) asks you to profile one of these events in your city.

For cities that want to attract new residents, having a variety of events is essential and many cities work hard to create their signature event, like SXSW in Austin. In your post, profile that event. If you were a resident of the city you’ve been profiling, what leisurely pursuit couldn’t you miss? What happens during the event? Why is it so special? What makes it the kind of experiential experience that people claim is so important?

In Marquette, Michigan, one could argue that the signature event is Midnight Run, the unofficial start of the UP 200 sled dog race, which is pictured above. The main city street is closed down, packed with snow, and becomes the starting line of a 230-mile race across the Upper Peninsula. Watchers line the streets, but are also able to interact with the mushers and dog owners beforehand. While not as participatory as some events (and I should note, not without controversy), it does bring in a large cross section of participants.

Remember, your executive summary is due in just a few short weeks and it will be asking you to pinpoint a flaw in your city and offer up a suggestion on how to improve that flaw. This post might spur you to realize that your city has a dearth of authentic, street-level experiences!

General Information

These posts should be clearly written, well researched throughout, and should contain audio or visual extras. Proofread your posts for grammar, spelling, and flow. Remember, these are public sites and you’re presenting yourself to an outside world, so you want to make sure each submission is your best work. **You should never include the assignment prompt questions, you should instead make sure you are writing these in narrative, paragraph format.**

Students were required to complete ten posts over the course of the semester. Students began the semester identifying the characteristics of their ideal city and identifying the city they would profile for the rest of the semester. Other topics included the city’s history, overall livability rating, government structure and leadership, co-creators, economic health and vitality,

housing inventory, transportation challenges, and a report on “street-level” culture in the city. Dozens of cities were profiled, from small towns of less than 10,000 to international cities of millions. Each assignment was posted in the LMS and on the instructor’s Tumblr account. Figure 1 provides an example of one assignment as posted in Canvas. Assignment guidelines were relatively open-ended to allow for students to approach the posting in a way that made sense for their selected city. Furthermore, examples from the instructor’s own hometown were profiled to give students guidance on the type of activities and information to include. Participants were reminded that the assignments provided a practical, hands-on, real world way to engage with the material and would allow them to develop a deeper understanding of the city they selected to profile. Each assignment was meant to provide evidence for the second “intervention” of the semester—an executive summary—which served as the capstone assignment for the course.

Executive Summary: As a culmination of the research profiled online, students produced an executive summary of their findings. The executive summary was also required to include one major change, addition, or activity the city could sponsor to make it more livable and loveable.

Students were given the following instructions to guide their responses.

Your executive summary should answer WHO, WHAT, HOW, and WHY regarding a proposal to improve your city. The who is the target audience for your project, the what is the problem or issue that you found in your research that needs to be improved, the why is an exploration of why you think a change needs to be made and the how is the specific or primary course of action that you recommend that the city takes. Finally, you should answer why it's so urgent that the city prioritize this particular plan of action.

Let's take a hypothetical example of Anytown, USA. In your Tumblr research, you found that Anytown has poor health outcomes, high obesity rates, and a lagging population. You decide that one way to improve upon this problem would be to make the city more active. Since Anytown, USA lacks bike lanes throughout the city, you identify that as your primary course of action. In your research, you found that bikeability is an important factor in getting younger professionals to move into the city, so you know they will be your target audience. You could then

describe why it is so urgent that you address walkability/bikeability in the city (rising health costs, shorter life expectancy, etc.).

Your executive summary should reference specific information about the city and the problem you identified, as well as research on why your solution is the most important. Even if you are writing about the same city as a classmate, your proposal will likely be different. Try to select something that you are passionate about.

The summaries were relatively short—no less than three single-spaced pages—but required extensive reflection and research. Each was required to include an introduction, problem definition, course of action, and target audience. Students were provided with a rubric in advance of submission to further aid in writing, since many were unfamiliar with the concept of an executive summary.

Some students choose to address large and seemingly intractable problems within their city, including crime rates, poverty, or homelessness. Most, however, approached the assignment directly from the placemaking mindset, focusing on smaller, more manageable projects. For instance, many students from the Louisville area noted that traffic congestion is one of the most pressing issues affecting livability in their city. Students approached that problem from many different angles. One student argued for a more developed hybrid bus system, another claimed a new bridge would help ease congestion, at least two students felt that returning street cars to the city could be the answer, and a handful felt that developing a more significant cycling commuter culture would eliminate rush hour traffic jams. The executive summaries were largely of a high quality, students thought of not only how to solve the problem, but developed specific areas and neighborhoods to target, and addressed alternative suggestions and potential drawbacks to their problem.

II: Monuments, Memory and Meaning: Political Theory in the Community

Cultivating student engagement in political theory courses, especially at the undergraduate level, can be daunting. As Gorton and Havercroft note, political theory “often presents the toughest sell to undergraduates,” in part because of its focus on “big, abstract ideas,” whereas students prefer to focus on “the concrete, the factual, and the practical” (2012, 50).

Whereas a lecture-based approach to introducing the historical context, core theoretical contributions, and contemporary relevance of such thinkers as Machiavelli, Locke, Rousseau, and Marx can be effective in the face-to-face classroom, conversion of such an approach to the asynchronous online format was less successful. Although curated discussion forums provided some opportunity for students to consider contemporary contexts and how the theoretical works under consideration could be applied towards interpreting them, there was little-to-no opportunity for spontaneous peer-peer or instructor-led seminar style discussions.

Although student performance overall met expectations in the upper division political theory courses that were taught online at IU East, specifically one semester courses in classical and modern political thought, end-of-semester evaluations noted that students struggled especially with interpreting the material. As an instructor, too, I struggled to highlight the connections to contemporary issues in ways that students could relate to. In an effort to increase student interest, and to highlight the important role that political theory can play in appraising contemporary political and ethical puzzles, and taking advantage of the ability to offer upper division topics courses, I created a course entitled “Monuments, Memory, and Meaning,” directly in response to the controversies surrounding the Confederate monuments that entered the public discourse in 2017, gaining momentum after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia that August.

This course was also an opportunity to highlight not just the relevance of political theory for understanding the nature of political community and one's place in that community, but also to highlight global issues of identity politics and national identity formation, demonstrating how the subfields of political science often interact and are informed by one another. The course provides a rich intellectual foundation anchored in classic and contemporary theoretical works on nationalism and identity-making, including those by Ernest Renan, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Rogers Smith.³ These more abstract works are complemented first by evaluating the evolution of official and vernacular expressions of nationhood and national identity in the United States during the twentieth century, focusing primarily on research centered in the Midwest by John Bodnar.⁴ Since the majority of online students at our institution are located in, or are originally from, the Midwest, this helps make the content more relatable. Finally, in addition to theoretical content and contextual background, the course included a substantial application component wherein students were expected to conduct an ethnographic analysis of a monument, museum, or memorial in their own community.

The summer 2018 course emphasized building a personal ethnography of place focused on students' own communities, and then sharing that ethnography as it developed over the course of the semester with their peers. The two major projects were a three-part paper (literature review, ethnographic analysis, and personal reflection), and a public-facing website. While the paper allowed student to demonstrate their deep familiarity with and mastery of the more abstract idea of political theory related to collective identity formation and maintenance and the nature of

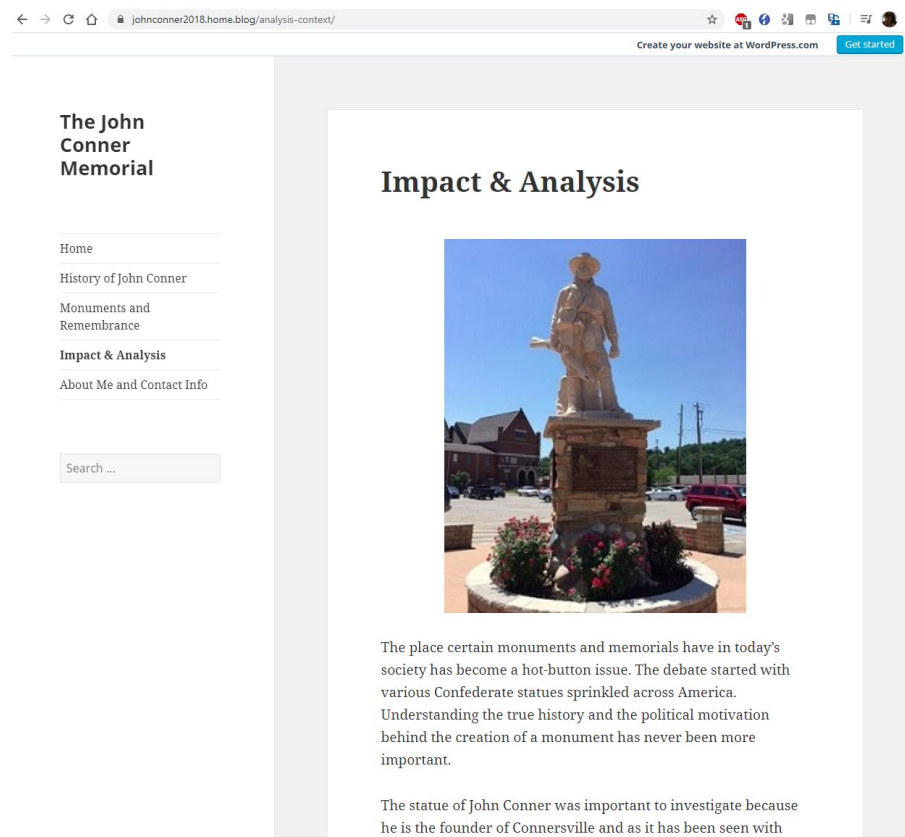
³ Renan, E. (2007). *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (p. 891). Le Mot et le reste; Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso books; Smith, R. M. (2003). *Stories of Peoplehood: The politics and morals of political membership*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Bodnar, J. E. (1994). *Remaking America: Public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century*. Princeton University Press.

belonging in political communities (and the attendant issues of power, justice, and freedom), the websites were intended as a way for students to engage with monuments or memorials in their community and anticipate and respond to how these monuments could be politicized in the future (See complete assignment instructions in Appendices 1 and 2).

These websites, in particular, proved effective at helping students make connections between themselves and their own community, in part because successful completion of the assignment required visiting the monument or memorial of focus, and in part because these visits were informed by the theoretical framework introduced earlier in the course. Below is a screenshot showing an example of one of the still publicly available websites that a student created.

Figure 2: Student Produced Website Example



Demonstrating the increased attachment to their local communities that resulted from the project are comments students provided in their end-of-semester reflective essays: One student remarked that “as an individual not originally from this community, knowing the history of this area instills pride and the desire to continue the work needed to help restore Connorsville to its former glory.” Another student described how bringing a friend to the memorial they selected while conducting the ethnographic analysis “proved to be valuable for two reasons: one, when discussing feelings of inclusiveness and belonging, it is often difficult to fully grasp someone’s interpretations of a memorial when you don’t know them on a personal level.”

Having now been offered twice, once in an accelerated summer session, and once as a more traditional semester long course, student evaluations indicate increased satisfaction, as revealed by end-of-semester evaluations, and from an instructor perspective, more evidence of critical engagement with the material being considered. The course is well-suited to encouraging *political*⁵ engagement above and beyond the civic engagement outcomes, but revision is needed to reach that outcome. In the summer version of the course, students were specifically asked to “Offer a normative agenda for what should be done with your monument: retain, remove, relocate, re-interpret, and advocate for why this is the best course of action,” which aligns with the element of *taking action* that is an important subcomponent of fully-actualized civic engagement.⁶ However, in addressing that element of the assignment the overwhelming majority

⁵ We follow here the definition of political engagement offered by McCartney (2013): “Political engagement refers to explicitly politically oriented activities that seek a direct impact on political issues, systems, relationships, and structures” (14).

⁶ The AACU, for example, develops its VALUE Rubric for assessing civic engagement from Erlich’s 2000 definition, which states that civic engagement is “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivations to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes...in addition civic engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community” (vi).

of students suggested that no action needed to be taken towards their chosen monument, and the assignment design did not allow for a hypothetical problematization and outlining of a potential course of civic action. In the semester-long version of the course, the theory-heavy first two-thirds of the course reading load was complemented with a case study that highlighted and critically evaluated the power of individual and collective civic action in shaping the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC.⁷

Outcomes

Both the Urban Politics and the Monuments, Memory, and Meaning courses incorporate assignments that require direct community engagement outside of the classroom. Moreover, in completing the requirements for both classes, students were required to familiarize themselves with the history and contemporary circumstances of their chosen communities and to reflect on local political processes and institutions. Both courses emphasized assignments that culminated in a public-facing presentation (Tumblr / Wordpress site), which bridges the academic-real world divide and which can be used to assess students' civic engagement. The final products produced by the students result in original research that exemplifies civic literacy scholarship, one of the five dimensions of the scholarship of engagement as defined by Barker (2004).

The interventions were designed to improve student engagement in courses traditionally centered on content acquisition. The innovations instead promote community-based learning regardless of where an online student is located. In Urban Politics, students investigate their place of residence and develop a concluding proposal to make the city a more livable community. In the contemporary political theory course, students profile a monument, memorial, or museum and critically evaluate the state-framed and vernacular forms of power relations

⁷ In part based on reading Reston, J. (2017). *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial*. Simon and Schuster.

reinforced by these sites. Both are upper division major electives, but draw a substantial number of students outside of the degree program.

Direct and indirect assessment of student work and student attitudes, based on the assigned civic engagement focused projects, reflective essays, and student evaluations suggests that students who performed well on the civic engagement projects became more critically literate and reflective about the politics of place within their communities. Moving beyond the impact of an individual course, where gains in civic engagement may be contextual or limited only to the semester and course, we have also begun incorporating the major products produced in these courses into the portfolio-based Senior Seminar course. Having students revisit, revise, and reflect on their civic-engagement focused assignments provides an opportunity to assess the durability of the engagement that may have been fostered years before the senior seminar course was taken. One student described the development of the Senior Seminar version of the monuments and identity focused political theory paper as “the most challenging of the assignments given during this Senior Seminar course, [but] it was, by far, the most beneficial to my learning experience at IU.”

Conclusion

Consideration of place and, especially, focusing students’ efforts on placemaking are uniquely situated approaches for building civic engagement among college and online students. As discussed earlier, placemaking is “rooted in community-based participation” and placemaking advocates note the importance of building public spaces that are user-friendly and reflect the needs of the community. It is generally seen as a grassroots effort to improve communities and placemaking often involves small, easy projects, like pocket parks or free libraries. Therefore, student projects could easily be put into place with small amounts of funding

or government support. Additionally, neither considering place, nor focusing on placemaking are tied to any specific location. Indeed, the place-focused model of assignment design can encourage community engagement even in courses where such engagement is not necessarily a formal learning outcome of the course, demonstrating the flexibility that our place-based approaches offer. For example, in an introductory international studies course taught online, students were asked to evaluate processes of cultural globalization through analysis of a site or object of cultural significance in their community. One student, an active military member, visited and documented the baptismal site of Jesus Christ at the Jordan River within a military zone at the Jordan-Israel border. Not only was the student highly engaged in and excited about completing this assignment for the course, so too were their classmates who read and responded to the experience as part of an online discussion activity.

Our experiments with incorporating place-based civic engagement activities in our online upper division American Politics and Political Theory courses demonstrate that the concept is flexible enough to encourage students to research their own communities or a city of their own selection. Moreover, and of particular benefit to online courses, unlike service learning, using placemaking did not require a significant investment of instructor effort in finding placement locations or monitoring student performance. Instead, projects were student driven and personalized to their own situation. Looked at from a student perspective, place-based civic engagement activities, as compared to service-learning, are more accessible for active military students, students that may already have full time employment, and other non-traditional students.

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Appendix 1: Scaffolded Assignments for Monuments, Memory, and Meaning

WRITE | Paper #1: Imagining the Nation

Instructions: This is the first of three Application, Analysis, and Reflection papers that you will write in this course. In this paper, you will apply the theoretical readings concerning the nature of nationhood and nationalism from Part I of the course towards critically analyzing and reflecting on the nature of what it means to be an “American” (and/or citizen of your own country) from collective and individual perspectives.

Skills: The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course and in your professional lives beyond school:

- Appraising and synthesizing competing theoretical approaches to understanding and “solving” perennial problems of political identity.
- Applying theoretical frameworks to novel and/or personal contexts.
- Expressing complex ideas and relationships in written form.

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you master the following important content knowledge in the field of political theory:

- Competing theories of nations and nationalism.
- Relationships among forms of collective identity and political and economic systems.
- Various tools used by political and economic entrepreneurs to acquire and maintain power and/or wealth.

Task: Write a well-organized essay of not less than 1000 words appraising Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. How important and/or useful is Benedict Anderson’s work for understanding contemporary nationalism and/or other forms of collective political belonging? Is his argument broadly generalizable, or is it limited to specific cases and/or historical periods? Your essay should reference at least four reputable and appropriate sources in addition to *Imagined Communities*, and address at least the following three broad themes:

- The nature of nations and nationalism in the 21st century.
 - What is a nation? How does Benedict Anderson define the nation? Is this definition sufficient for understanding nationalism today, in your opinion? Use competing definitions of the nation and of nationalism, as provided by Renan and Gellner (or [explore the definitions of nationalism at the Nationalism Project website](#)) to support your definition and your analysis of Anderson’s definition.
- Reappraising American national identity.
 - Review the discussions of what it means to be an American that we examined in the first week of the course (including your own analysis). How well does Anderson’s discussion fit the American case? Consider issues like print capitalism, the role of English and other languages in American society, the official nationalism of the American state, as represented by institutions of power, like census, map, and/or museum, the relationships between nationalism, patriotism, and racism, etc.
 - You should support your discussion in this section with specific empirical evidence from the American case.
- Appraising your own identity:
 - How important is *national* belonging to your own sense of identity? Is your national identity an important part of who you are? Why or why not?
 - How do the concepts of nationhood, nationalism, and other big ideas introduced by Anderson relate to how you perceive the world? Are you part of an imagined community or communities? Are there alternative ways of understanding political identity or collective political belonging that are at least as equally persuasive as national identity?

Content Guidelines: Your discussion should be *extensively* and *directly* anchored in the assigned readings (in particular *Imagined Communities*). You should also incorporate or refer to additional outside sources that help support or sustain your discussion, including other readings assigned in the course. In general, your Reading

Response and Analysis papers should be structured around the focus questions above. Consider the following suggestions for incorporating textual evidence into your own discussion:

- **Summarize:** You may wish to identify and summarize the key arguments or main points of the assigned readings. Ask yourself what the author(s) is/are trying to convince you of and how. This component should not be descriptive; it should be analytical. Remember that summaries are not exhaustive: select the more important key arguments or main points, and briefly explain them. The summary should constitute no more than 1/3 of the total response.
- **Synthesize:** You may wish to identify a few ways in which the arguments or discussions presented in the assigned readings relate to one another, other course readings, or other material with which you are familiar, and elaborate on these connections. How, for example, do the readings challenge, complement, complicate or in some other way relate to other readings, case studies, or outside-of-class materials? Look for points of similarity or difference, then generate and evaluate connections, contrasts, or comparisons between them.
- **Apply:** You should consider the readings and how you have summarized and synthesized them (either formally or informally). How can you use what you have learned to address the focus questions above? Are there specific ideas, theories, concepts, or case studies that are particularly helpful for interpreting and responding to the focus questions?

WRITE | Paper #2: Public Memory and Its Discontents

Instructions: This is the second of three Application, Analysis, and Reflection papers that you will write in this course. In this paper, you will apply the theoretical and empirical-analytical readings concerning public memory, memorialization, commemoration and national identity in Part II of the course towards critically analyzing and reflecting on various public expressions of what it means to be an “American” (and/or citizen of your own country) from collective and individual perspectives.

Skills: The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course and in your professional lives beyond school:

- Appraising different approaches to public memory and commemoration.
- Applying theoretical frameworks and empirical examples to novel and/or personal contexts.
- Expressing complex ideas and relationships in written form.

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you master the following important content knowledge in the field of political theory:

- Symbolism of national and other forms of collective identity, and how public memorializations and commemorations reinforce or challenge official conceptions of collective identity.
- Relationships among official and vernacular forms of collective identity and the politics of collective identity.
- Various ideological tools used by political and economic entrepreneurs to influence public opinion and/or acquire and maintain power and/or wealth.

Task: Write a well-organized essay of not less than 1000 words appraising John Bodnar's *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. What can Bodnar's work tell us about public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the United States in the **21st century**? Have public memorializations and commemorations continued to evolve (symbolically or concretely) since *Remaking America* was published? Have pivotal events in America's history, such as 9/11, changed the nature of public memory? What is the relationship of public memory and public commemoration to national identity in the United States today? Your essay should reference at least four reputable and appropriate sources in addition to *Remaking America*, and should address at least the following three broad themes:

- Public memory and its vernacular and official roles.
 - What is *public memory*? How is public memory created, commemorated, and memorialized? Who determines the content of public memory? How does it relate to other forms of memory and

remembering? What makes public memory important or significant from a political perspective?

- Collective memory, public memory, and American national identity.
 - What sites of public memory do you think are especially important for sustaining a collective American political identity today, at a national level? These may be the same sites that Bodnar identifies (in which case you should identify and explain any changes in the ways that these sites serve as places of commemoration and public memory), or these may be different sites that Bodnar didn't consider or that didn't exist in 1992. You should identify at *least* two sites. Evaluate the role these sites and the commemorations that take place at these sites play in forging American national identity in the 21st century.
 - You should support your discussion of these themes with specific empirical evidence from the American case, as described by Bodnar, Casey, and/or others.
- Appraising public memory in your own community:
 - Identify at least one site of public memory in your own community (town or neighborhood). Describe the site and as much of its history as possible (When was it built? Why? What commemorations took place or take place?, etc.).
 - What are some vernacular and official ways in which the site of public memory you identified might be used? What values, messages, memories, is it reinforcing?
 - Is this site of public memory meaningful for you? Why or why not? Consider both direct and indirect influences.

Content Guidelines: Your discussion should be *extensively* and *directly* anchored in the assigned readings (in particular *Remaking America*). You should also incorporate or refer to additional outside sources that help support or sustain your discussion, including other readings assigned in the course. In general, your Reading Response and Analysis papers should be structured around the focus questions above. Consider the following suggestions for incorporating textual evidence into your own discussion:

- **Summarize:** You may wish to identify and summarize the key arguments or main points of the assigned readings. Ask yourself what the author(s) is/are trying to convince you of and how. This component should not be descriptive; it should be analytical. Remember that summaries are not exhaustive: select the more important key arguments or main points, and briefly explain them. The summary should constitute no more than 1/3 of the total response.
- **Synthesize:** You may wish to identify a few ways in which the arguments or discussions presented in the assigned readings relate to one another, other course readings, or other material with which you are familiar, and elaborate on these connections. How, for example, do the readings challenge, complement, complicate or in some other way relate to other readings, case studies, or outside-of-class materials? Look for points of similarity or difference, then generate and evaluate connections, contrasts, or comparisons between them.
- **Apply:** You should consider the readings and how you have summarized and synthesized them (either formally or informally). How can you use what you have learned to address the focus questions above? Are there specific ideas, theories, concepts, or case studies that are particularly helpful for interpreting and responding to the focus questions?

WRITE | Paper #3: Reflecting on the Vietnam Memorial

Instructions: This is the third of three Application, Analysis, and Reflection papers that you will write in this course. In this paper, you will apply the theoretical and empirical- analytical readings concerning public memory, memorialization, commemoration and national identity in Parts I and II of the course towards critically analyzing and reflecting on the controversies surrounding and significance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. .

Skills: The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course and in your professional lives beyond school:

- Appraising different approaches to public memory and commemoration.
- Applying theoretical frameworks and empirical examples to novel and/or personal contexts.

- Expressing complex ideas and relationships in written form.

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you master the following important content knowledge in the field of political theory:

- Challenges inherent to the public sphere memorialization of traumatic events typically remembered privately.
- Relationships among official and vernacular forms of collective identity and the politics of memorializing events and experiences that impact collective identity (political and otherwise).
- Theoretical underpinnings that reinforce the emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects of the politics of memory and memorialization.

Task: Write a well-organized essay of not less than 1000 words appraising James Reston Jr's *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial* and the other materials considering the controversies surrounding this memorial that we have considered, and which relates these controversies to generalizable issues surrounding public commemorations. Your essay should **reference at least four reputable and appropriate sources in addition to *A Rift in the Earth***, and should address at least the following three broad themes (you need not address every question, but should clearly and directly consider each theme):

- Art, Memory, and Politics
 - Consider the controversies surrounding Maya Lin's design, and the resolutions to these compromises (especially the addition of Frederick Hart's *The Three Soldiers* and the memorial flagpole). Describe these controversies and evaluate the extent to which the resolutions to these controversies reflect vernacular versus official interests. In addressing this theme, it may be helpful to consider where the support (financial and otherwise) for the memorial comes from. Why does the balance of opinion ultimately tip in favor of Lin's memorial?
- War, Trauma, and Collective Memory
 - Evaluate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC as it is today. To what extent does it memorialize war? In what ways does it serve as a site of *national healing*? How does it try to achieve this purpose and how successful is it? What sets the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC apart from other memorials? What makes memorializing "America's first national experience with a lost war" (ix) important? Why not sweep this experience into the "dustbin of history"? What do memorials like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial contribute to the *imagined national community* of the United States? Appraise one or more of the "three separate levels that count" (145) - emotional, aesthetic, and symbolic - in your evaluation.
- Framing the Memory of War: Universalizing or Particularizing Memorials in Local Perspective
 - According to [Reston](#) (and [others](#)), over time, the vernacular interpretation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC has evolved from being a memorial particularly to the veterans of the Vietnam War, to a *universalized* representation of the costs of war. How does this compare to Vietnam Veterans Memorials and/or Vietnam War Memorials in your own community? Compare and contrast the *emotional*, *aesthetic*, and *symbolic* features of the memorial in DC with a Vietnam Veterans Memorial and/or Vietnam War Memorial in your community (or one that you are otherwise familiar with). Explain any similarities and differences you observe and reflect on the extent to which the memorial focuses on *particularities* unique to the community and/or Vietnam experience versus *universalizing* themes. There are easily accessible memorials in [Indianapolis](#), [Richmond](#), [Dayton](#), and [elsewhere](#).

Content Guidelines: Your discussion should be *extensively* and *directly* anchored in the assigned readings and other materials (in particular those focusing on the controversies surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC). You should also incorporate or refer to additional outside sources that help support or sustain your discussion, including other readings and resources assigned in the course. In general, your Reading Response and Analysis papers should be structured around the focus questions above. Consider the following suggestions for incorporating textual evidence into your own discussion:

- **Summarize:** You may wish to identify and summarize the key arguments or main points of the assigned readings. Ask yourself what the author(s) is/are trying to convince you of and how. This component should not be descriptive; it should be analytical. Remember that summaries are not exhaustive: select the more important key arguments or main points, and briefly explain them. The summary should constitute no more than 1/3 of the total response.
- **Synthesize:** You may wish to identify a few ways in which the arguments or discussions presented in the assigned readings relate to one another, other course readings, or other material with which you are familiar, and elaborate on these connections. How, for example, do the readings challenge, complement, complicate or in some other way relate to other readings, case studies, or outside-of-class materials? Look for points of similarity or difference, then generate and evaluate connections, contrasts, or comparisons between them.
- **Apply:** You should consider the readings and how you have summarized and synthesized them (either formally or informally). How can you use what you have learned to address the focus questions above? Are there specific ideas, theories, concepts, or case studies that are particularly helpful for interpreting and responding to the focus questions?

Monument Ethnography Project – Research Paper

Introduction: The scholarly research paper component of the monument ethnography project is divided into two parts: Part 1, the literature review and research design, due Friday, July 27 and Part 2, the analyses and conclusions, due Monday, August 13.

Together, and including a peer review activity, the research paper is worth 45% (almost half) of your final course grade.

The research paper and online presentation components of the Monument Ethnography Project are designed to be complementary – while the manner of presentation will be different, you are encouraged and expected to use the same fieldwork, analyses, and interpretations to inform both parts of this project!

The tasks associated with the research paper are designed to help you master transferable skills such as applying core theoretical concepts to new empirical contexts, conducting and sharing original research, and situating your own ideas in broader contexts. Carefully review the general content and formatting guidelines and specific instructions for this project, below.

Instructions: Develop your introduction, literature review, and research design following the guidelines for each section, below. Use these sections as headings to organize your paper.

Introduction: The introductory section of the paper should identify the *specific monument or memorial* that will be investigated, and offer a brief justification for that choice, based on the relevance of the monument or memorial to issues of *nation- building and national identity, history and public memory, and official and/or vernacular forms of cultural expression*.

Literature Review: The literature review should be developed directly from the three Reading Response and Analysis papers that you completed in weeks 1-3 of our course.

The literature review should elaborate the brief justification that you offered in the introduction, based on synthesizing and revising the core themes, ideas, and interpretations discussed in your Reading Response and Analysis papers. The focus of the synthesis and revisions should be on explaining the relevance and potential impact of monuments and memorials *in general* to each of the three core themes of Weeks 1 through 3 of our course:

- Nation building and national identity
- History and public memory
- Official and/or vernacular forms of cultural expression

In other words, the focus in this section should be on interpreting and synthesizing appropriate *theoretical* work. Some of the case studies may also be appropriate, to the extent that they offer novel contributions to a broader theoretical framework.

This section of the assignment should be approximately 3-5 pages (750 to 1250 words). It should *directly* cite at least six of the required readings from Weeks 1, 2, and 3 of the course *AND at least two additional academic sources* (this could include any of the optional resources linked in the course materials or outside peer-reviewed journal articles, etc.).

Research Design: The research design component of this assignment should describe the methods and approaches that you will use to specifically examine the monument or memorial that you are investigating. This part of your paper should be approximately 2-3 pages (500-750 words), and should describe the basic questions you seek to address, and the approaches, tools, and data sources you will use to answer these questions.

Your methodological approach should use a combination of the ethnographic, visual analytic, and other interpretive approaches described in the Week 4 “Conducting Political Ethnography” readings. *Cite at least three of these readings (methodological approaches and/or example cases) in this part of the paper.*

Part II: Ethnographic and Visual Analyses and Conclusions

Instructions: In this part of the project, you will document the empirical research you performed and offer your interpretive analyses. Use the feedback from the Peer Review of your online presentation to further develop the content of the academic discussion you will offer in the *analyses* and *conclusions* sections of this project. Develop your *analyses* and *conclusions* following the guidelines below.

Analyses: Using the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed in part one of this assignment, appraise the monument or memorial that you have selected. This part of the paper should be approximately 3-5 pages (750-1250 words). Your analyses should address at least the following:

- Present a history/overview of what the monument or memorial is commemorating and a history/overview/portrait of the monument or memorial itself and any controversies related to its construction / installation. Identify who created the monument, when it was created, who maintains it, and how. Consider the following sources as starting points for discovering this information:
 - Academic articles
 - Newspaper articles / other reputable news media.
 - Local library
 - Local historical societies
 - Visitor’s center
 - Provide a visual analysis of the monument or memorial, addressing at least the following:
 - What does the monument or memorial look like? What is it made of?
 - How is the monument or memorial situated? Is it isolated? In a park? At a busy intersection? How does the monument/memorial “belong” to its environment?
 - Think about the monument from a larger geographic scale. How is it part of its neighborhood? How does it fit in to its city or town? How, if at all, does it contribute to creating meaning for the region, state, or country?
 - What do you think the “official” cultural expressions imbued into the monument or memorial are? What might be the “vernacular” cultural expressions? Consider the symbolism of the monument/memorial you are examining.
 - Provide a political ethnography of the monument or memorial addressing at least the following:
 - Autoethnographic:
 - What is the impact on you when you observe the monument or memorial? What feelings, emotions, ideas come to mind?
 - How often do you interact with the monument? Is it part of your daily life, or do you have to make a special trip?
 - Is the monument/memorial effective at achieving its goals as you have identified in the visual analysis?
 - Participant Observation:

- How do others interact with the monument/memorial?
- Do people come by themselves, with groups, with family, etc.?
- How long do people spend interacting with the monument?

Conclusion: The conclusion of your paper should appraise the monument or memorial you have examined in terms of how it represents American people, ideas, and/or institutions. In what ways does it represent the “American people”? In what ways does it fall short? How does the monument you have examined fit into the broader themes and issues we have considered in our class? Think specifically about nations and nation-building, official versus vernacular representations, and issues of public memory and “forgetting.” This part of the project should be approximately ½ to 1 page (125-250 words).

One way to frame your conclusion is to consider in what ways does your chosen monument or memorial do the work all monuments/memorials must do: “make an event of the past- what the memorial marks- relevant to the needs and desires of the memorial’s own present” (Blair and Michel, 33, in Olson, L. C., Finnegan, C. A., & Hope, D. S. (2008). *Visual rhetoric: A reader in communication and American culture*. Los Angeles: Sage.)

Appendix 2: Website Assignment

Monument Ethnography Project – Online Presentation

Introduction: The online presentation component of the monument ethnography project is an opportunity to creatively present your original research in a way that is more accessible to a general audience than an academic research paper. In addition, the online presentation allows you to use the analyses you produced in your academic paper to present an opinion or argument about what (if anything) *should* be done with the monument or memorial you are investigating. As described in the Week 4 module materials, you will create a free Wordpress.org site to host your content. The tasks associated with the online presentation are designed to help you master transferable skills such as digital competency, making complex ideas relatable, and theoretically and empirically informed persuasive argumentation. Carefully review the deadlines, goals, and content guidelines below.

The online presentation and research paper components of the Monument Ethnography Project are designed to be complementary – while the manner of presentation will be different, you are encouraged and expected to use the fieldwork, analyses, and interpretations that you arrive at to inform both parts of this project!

Goals:

- Present your original research in a well-organized and visually rich manner for an audience of non-specialists.
- Bring awareness to the “story” of the monument or memorial you chose, including both official and vernacular interpretations, and its symbolic power.
- Offer a normative agenda for *what should be done* with your monument: retain, remove, relocate, re-interpret, and advocate for why this is the *best* course of action.

(Review the instructions for optional Reading Response and Analysis Paper #4 in the Week 5 module materials for ideas).

Content Guidelines: The content guidelines below are *minimum* acceptable standards for evaluation. You are encouraged to be creative and comprehensive with this project!

- A minimum of 4 distinct pages, including Home, History, Analysis/Context, and Contact pages (these are suggested page names - be creative and come up with your own!)
- Each page should have *at least* 2 relevant captioned images, videos, or other multimedia resources and at least 3 complete paragraphs of relevant text. Captions should describe the image and indicate the relevance of the image to the narrative presented on the page. Most, if not all, of the images, videos, and other multimedia resources should be your own original work. Relevant text can be adapted from your academic paper, but should be *engaging* and *simplified* for an audience of non-specialists.
- A menu for page navigation (use the Wordpress tools to set this up)
- Guidelines for each page
 - *Home:* This page should offer an introduction to your project, the monument / memorial that it features, and should entice the visitor to explore further. It should make the case for *why* this project is important. Consider ways to “hook” your visitor on this page with provocative questions or statements.
 - *History:* This page should offer an overview of the history of what is being memorialized. Be sure to contrast the “history” that is being memorialized with the “public memory” that is presented.
 - *Analysis/Context:* This page should summarize and visually depict the original research that you did. Discuss and present the symbolism of the monument or memorial, including both official and vernacular cultural expressions. Either on this page, or on an additional page, you should also discuss *what should be done* with the monument or memorial you have studied.
 - *Contact:* This page should provide relevant biographical information about you, the researcher, and provide a way for interested parties to contact you (if you do not want to use your university email address for this, you may wish to set up a free e-mail account just for this purpose).

Provide hyperlinks to all outside sources (including in-class materials) consulted as well as in-text citations as appropriate. You should make reference to *at least 4 sources*. At least two of these should reference *theoretical approaches*; the rest can be non-academic, but credible, sources that would be readable by an audience of non-specialists