

An Interview with Jared Benson and Nick Lee High Impact Teaching Practices grant recipients

1. What is the Social Movement Project?

In our course, “Resistance and Revolution,” we explore the constructs of revolution historically and sociologically by examining varying degrees of social, economic, political, religious, and cultural, movements. As the class progresses, students often inquire, within our current politically-charged atmosphere, what is real change? Moreover, how can all of us work to “turn the world upside down” to meet our growing challenges?

Many students note that society is not perfect. No matter their age, major, gender, or background, there is at least one thing that they would like to improve within current society. In that spirit, we decided to develop an assignment that tasks them with taking the lessons from our content and applying them to a current, real-world issues that they feel passionate.

For the Social Movement Project, they work as small groups (5-7) to create a theoretical non-violent social movement whose aim is to address a social issue of their choice. Student projects can be a global problem and movement (e.g., climate) or something that is hyper-local (e.g., homelessness in Colorado Springs).

In addition to making use of the historical examples and sources from the course, they’re guided through this assignment step-by-step by the instructors using current theory-based materials and strategies. The project asks them to demonstrate how to analyze the dynamics of power in a social structure, which phases social movements evolve through, how to recruit members, how to brand, how to spread messages, and how to organize people for a movement

Their deliverables include a fifteen-minute presentation persuasively outlining their social movement to the class (specific outline available upon request) as well as a copy of presentation slides, and a small, informal write-up turned into the instructors on Canvas.

2. How did you incorporate a service-learning activity into the project?

While the vast majority of the assignment was hypothetical, one portion was not. Student groups design and perform some real-world action to advance their movement in some way. They were encouraged to reach out to local groups that were already working on similar issues and coordinate efforts with them if possible. We asked students to get creative (within reason). Their real-world actions included outreach,

community service, canvassing, tabling, holding round tables at UCCS, and making thought-provoking art installations.

3. What did you gain from the teaching experience?

The most important thing that we as educators gained was an insight into the topics and issues that our students care about. It is one thing to draw up a class with content that we think is important or want to discuss, but often we overlook what's relevant to students and what they care about, and in many cases, they pleasantly surprised us and even taught us a significant number of things on a wide array of topics. Students held events on everything from food waste to the opioid epidemic to delegitimizing puppy mills.

We also witnessed some of the current theories on manufacturing awareness applied through the lens of our students.

4. What do you think your students gained from this experience?

One of the most important things students appeared to gain from this experience was empowerment. We saw students develop into active agents at first, in the classroom, and later, on campus (or even the greater community). Many seemed to understand that they can shape their education in certain ways rather than, for lack of a better term, spend it "coloring inside the lines."

Students also gained an appreciation of all the past actors that worked tirelessly for social movements as the project and the service-learning piece revealed that organization and moving people is no simple task.

In terms of academics, they also clearly learned how to take theory from the classroom and apply it.

5. From your perspective, how did the community agency or agencies benefit?

Since there was no one specific topic for the entire class to work on, we observed the most important communal benefit was that our campus here at UCCS hosted a more vibrant and engaged discourse stemming from a variety of topics, ideologies et al.

Additionally, we brought in local activists as guest speakers working on important issues here in Colorado Springs which allowed both the guests and students to interact and learn from each other.

6. What was your greatest success story in this experience?

While all groups performed well, one group, who sought to bring awareness to the issue of mass incarceration planned and organized a meeting at El Paso County Justice Center to bring attention to the injustices of over-incarceration. They rallied and collected more than 100 signatures for what they called the STOPP Bill (Stop the opening of Private Prisons).

7. What was your biggest challenge in this experience?

In short, “letting go.” As faculty, it is more comfortable to have everything laid-out in syllabi, assignment guides, and the like, even in classes that seek to cultivate critical inquiries of power, oppression, and resistance. Even prior versions of this assignment contained rigid outlines to follow (and still do), but for the social action piece, we let them essentially choose their methodology and timing. It felt risky, but they came through responsibly.

As expected, all grievances and hiccups typical of group work did appear. Since the students select their topics and members, these issues seem to be minimal in occurrences.

8. Would you recommend the incorporation of service learning to other instructors? Why or why not?

We would. The most important thing, in our ever-so-humble opinion, that students can take from the collegiate experience is applicability. Regardless of the topic or content of a given course, students want to know, “what am I getting out of this; what does this mean for my life?” We’re often guilty of tunnel vision in academia and assume whatever it is we’re teaching, saying, researching or whatever is automatically important for all those around us and those that don’t feel the same don’t “get it.” By taking on service-learning projects (both students and instructors), all members of the classroom create a new space and opportunity for convergence.