Facilitating Student-Community Partner Collaboration

Purpose
The purpose of this document is to provide instructors with guidance on facilitating student collaboration with community partners in sustainability classes that incorporate a problem- and project-based learning (PPBL) component or are entirely designed as a PPBL course. It provides a checklist for instructors that outlines tasks and important considerations, as well as a set of resources - people, materials, and research - that instructors can draw from in planning and implementing collaborations with community partners.

Engagement with community partners is conceptualized along a fluid line between extractive and collaborative. In extractive engagement, the community partners’ participation is minimal and their control over project outputs is also minimal; their role is to provide information for researchers. In collaborative engagement, community partners’ participation and control over the project are both increased; their role is co-creator of knowledge (Talwar, Wiek, and Robinson, 2011; Lang, et al., 2012), which means they are included in each step of the research project from developing research questions and establishing objectives to collecting and interpreting data. We encourage you to help students make their engagements as collaborative as possible.

Checklist

Before
Identify a community partner. For ideas, consider perusing the SustainabilityConnect database or contacting relevant university coordinators. You might also want to chat with your faculty colleagues to learn with whom they are working or have collaborated in the past.

- Set the parameters for collaboration. Meet with the community partner well in advance of the semester. Discuss the practical objectives of the community partner and explore how these can be aligned with or modified to support your desired learning objectives for students. Discuss other expectations such as how often students and community partners will interact, what kind of product will result, and what roles, tasks and time investments the community partner will assume. Remember, you cannot arrange an official partnership between an organization and ASU-SOS due to branding issues, but you can arrange for yourself and your students to collaborate with community partners on a project basis.
• **Compile instructional material and resources.** Think about what knowledge, skills, and attitudes your students will need in order to collaborate successfully with the community partner. Consider polling students prior or at the beginning of the course to get a sense where they stand. This helps you preparing mini-tutorials. In many cases, we recommend to have a mini-lecture on professionalism and ethics of collaborating with a community partner, and asking students to read key pieces of literature.

**During**

• **Introduce the community partner and the type of collaboration.** Explain the role of collaboration in sustainability research and how stakeholder engagement spans from extractive approaches -- e.g., interviewing, informing, to constructive approaches-- e.g., developing novel knowledge together. Make sure to give as much information as possible about the community partner, their organization, and any parameters you have already set with them. Links to websites, bios, articles, and 1-2 page project proposals can be useful. You can also invite community partners to come to class early on and present themselves and their expectations of working together.

• **Review the basics of research.** Make sure that students are familiar with the basic steps of sustainability research and professional project work, which often include framing the sustainability problem, question, and objectives; selecting appropriate methods; collecting data; analyzing data; drawing conclusions or using research to create an output; testing output; and sharing output and / or ensuring longevity of collaboration (see the RWLE resource *Outlining Steps of Research Activity*). Make sure that students are familiar with basic process of collaborative research, inherent challenges, and strategies for success (see the RWLE resource *Stakeholder Engagement*).

• **Facilitate interaction.** Identify three milestone meetings across the whole semester where community partners meet with the entire class to review the work in progress. In the first meeting, support students and community partners to review parameters for collaboration together. Make sure to define everyone’s roles and responsibilities, the desired output from the project, and a rough timeline for collaboration throughout the semester. These discussions can lead to a *Code of Collaboration* (RWLE resource) between students and community partners. The milestone meetings are opportunities to model or require students to use professional, productive collaboration techniques and tools (e.g. RWLE resources *Meeting Agenda and Notes, Code of Collaboration, Work Plan*).

• **Check in frequently.** Providing frequent opportunities for students and instructors to check in can help students keep on track with stakeholder engagement and provide opportunities for them to take initiative to get the help that they need. 5 minute check-ins at the beginning of class, 15-30 minute meetings every few weeks, and Self- evaluations conducted by students at midterm and at the end of the semester are three options. Check ins can be a useful tool for instructors provide to become aware of problems, challenges, or opportunities so that they can address these issues before they undermine progress, quality, learning outcomes, or enjoyment.
(Ash & Clayton, 2004; Ash & Clayton, 2009). Let students know that the main purpose of check-ins is not for teachers, it is for students to identify and evaluate progress, ask questions, and get feedback. Providing questions (e.g. what progress have you made in your collaborations, what challenges are you dealing with right now, what are you or what can you do to deal with them, do you have any questions for instructors or peers that might help you?) can help structure reflection and reflexivity and thus maximize the productiveness of check-ins.

- **Coach students along the way.** Coaching needs to be flexible as different collaborations with different students and community partners will require different things. Some issues that might come up are managing divergent and emergent expectations of students, community partners and yourself as course instructor; basic communication issues that can lead to misunderstandings or hurt feelings; science-society communication and translation needs, and project management to ensure timelines are reasonable and being met. Remember, good coaching involves asking students questions rather than telling them the answer, pointing students to resources and tools when they are requesting more information, introducing course material like lectures, readings, or even training in engagement methods “just in time”, and sharing timely and actionable feedback rather than telling students what to do upfront.

**After**

- **Present work to Community Partners.** Schedule time for students to present their research to community partners, as well as instructor. Make sure that evaluation guidelines are clear. Aalborg, University has several videos on Procedure for a group presentation and examination.

- **Final debriefing.** Meet with students in groups or as a class without community partners to reflect on the experience and drive home lessons learned.

- **Thank you notes.** Have students write thank-you notes to community partners.

- **Transfer relationships.** Contact ASU-SOS staff to let them know who your students worked with to help transfer the relationship through institutional procedures. Make sure to let community partners’ know that you have done this and who to contact to continue their relationship with ASU.

- **Share results of collaboration and / or extend its life.** Submit a summary on SustainabilityConnect, and / or let us know about it! Consider collaborating with community partner to continue work in a subsequent semester, or connecting them with a colleague interested in RWLEs.

**Bibliography & Resources**


