

DEVELOPING CONCEPTS

LESSON 3: CIVIC PROFESSIONALS IN ACTION

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 💡 **Develop ideas and innovative solutions for responding to complex public problems.**
- 💡 **Learn about the complexity of wicked problems through real-world cases.**

LESSON OVERVIEW

A study of real-world examples is a useful way to prepare for the messy realities of work as a civic professional. This lesson examines several case studies drawn from news articles, talks, and essays to encourage participants to explore the complexity of wicked problems and begin to conceptualize solutions for addressing them. Participants will continue to expand their definitions and understanding of civic professionalism by putting public engagement into context.

SUGGESTED PLAN [🕒 75 minutes]

LESSON PREPARATION

1. Consider incorporating some of the following case studies, or add your own and adapt the plan below accordingly:

- **Albert W. Dzur, "This Problem Belongs to Everyone,"** in his book *Rebuilding Public Institutions Together* (Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 4-8. The story of how Vanessa Gray, principal at Forest Grove Community School, brought seventh graders together to resolve a disciplinary issue.

- **Sheri Fink, "Whose Lives Should Be Saved? Researchers Ask the Public,"** *New York Times*, August 21, 2016. How one physician enlisted community residents to discuss decision making in the rationing of care. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/22/us/whose-lives-should-be-saved-to-help-shape-policy-researchers-in-maryland-ask-the-public.html>

- **Ernesto Sirolli, "Want to Help Someone? Shut Up and Listen,"** TedTalk, August 2012. A funny and revealing talk about how aid workers and others must listen to the people they're trying to help in order to get results. www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirolli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen?language

- **Patrick Waechter, "A Safe Place to Talk: Raising HIV Awareness Through Barbershops,"** Our Towns Civic Foundation, April 29, 2022. An exploration of local barber shops as venues for discussing public health and other social issues. www.ourtownsfoundation.org/a-safe-place-to-talk-raising-hiv-awareness-through-barbershops/

- **David Gelles, "The U.S. Will Need Thousands of Wind Farms. Will Small Towns Go Along?"** *New York Times*, December 30, 2022. A complex case that gets at the tension between professional expertise and the mistrust of rural communities in the fight to combat climate change. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/30/climate/wind-farm-renewable-energy-fight.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

- **Ed Yong, "America is Sliding into The Long Pandemic Defeat,"** *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2022. A look at how local community health workers can build trust in addressing public health issues. www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2022/06/pandemic-protections/661378/

OPENING FRAMING [• 25 minutes]

Share the “Citizen Professional vs. Outside Expert” chart developed by Harry Boyte, senior scholar at Augsburg University (below).

CITIZEN PROFESSIONAL VS. OUTSIDE EXPERT

	OUTSIDE EXPERT	CITIZEN PROFESSIONAL
MOTIVE	Altruistic service	Co-creation and joint problem solving
WHO IS IN CHARGE?	Experts	Citizens, both professionals and amateurs
GOAL	To fix problems	To solve problems while also building community ties
METHOD	Expert intervention	Public work
APPROACH TO TEACHING	Didactic	Apprenticeship, relational, conveying craft heritage
SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE	Abstract theory, book learning	Local situation, experience, and practice, as well as theory
SKILLS	Disaggregation, analysis, application	Synthesis, integration, contextual understanding, relationship building
KEY ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS	Service providers	Catalyst

Source: Harry Boyte, *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008)

Spend time reviewing the chart, giving participants the opportunity to grapple with the alternative approaches being presented. Discuss how the chart emphasizes various aspects of citizen/civic professionalism—and how this approach differs from an outside expert-driven approach.

Make note of the distinction between experts being “on top” vs. “on tap.” Ask participants how they think about this distinction.



Next, introduce Will McPhail’s *New Yorker* cartoon, “These Smug Pilots” as a way to spark dialogue on the pitfalls of dismissing expertise. Use the message underneath the cartoon’s humor to explore the tensions between technical expertise and other ways of knowing.¹⁷

Connect questions about expertise in democracy with other contemporary issues using case studies. For instance, consider introducing topics such as trust in public health expertise with regard to the Covid-19 response, or the role of parents and community members in setting K-12 curricula, especially given the recent push to eliminate lessons about racism and other social issues in schools. Ideally, the case studies should add further context to these tensions and allow for robust dialogue.

17. Readers can search for Will McPhail’s *New Yorker* cartoon, “These Smug Pilots” (ID # TCB-143805) at <https://cartoonbank.com/>.

CASE STUDIES IN SMALL GROUPS [⌚ 30 minutes]

Briefly introduce the selected case studies and explain to participants that they will review them in small groups.

Assign participants to groups, or have them self-select by interest areas. Give participants time to read/review their assigned case (10-15 minutes, depending on length).

Once the group has finished reviewing, ask them to analyze the cases as a way to consider effective responses to wicked problems. Some questions to ask groups include:

- What wicked problem(s) does the case present? What makes them so complex?
- What might a more narrow, technical response look like? What would a citizen-centered alternative response entail?
- What response(s) does the case introduce or consider? What would be most effective? What are the trade-offs?
- How might these ideas apply to other complex problems?

LARGE-GROUP DEBRIEF [⌚ 20 minutes]

Bring everyone together and have each small group present a short summary of their case to the class. Ask the groups to report key insights and questions that emerged.

Connect the conversation back to the earlier discussion on the Citizen Professional vs. Outside Expert chart, along with the cartoon about the role of expertise in a democracy.

