

EDT 532: Online Communities for Social Change

Fall, 2009 edition: The Michigan Student Caucus

Instructor: Jeff Kupperman
jkupp@umich.edu
cell: 734-604-6117

Project co-directors: Gary Weisserman
gweiss@umich.edu

J. McDowell
jgmcowell@gmail.com

Office Hours: by appointment

Project website: <http://www.michiganstudentcaucus.org>

Overview

The Michigan Student Caucus (MSC) is the currently offered project for EDT 532. Online participation in the MSC makes up the core of this course. (Required tasks and expectations are outlined later on in this syllabus.)

The Michigan Student Caucus is an organization representing the interests of students, K-12 through post-secondary, in Michigan. It is not affiliated with any political party.

The Michigan Student Caucus began its existence as the Michigan Youth Caucus, a program developed in partnership with the Michigan Civics Institute, The University of Michigan, and The Michigan House of Representatives Special Commission on Civic Engagement. This program was originally developed by and for students to give young people a say in Michigan affairs. In its current guise, the MSC strives to represent the interests of students of all ages.

Under the leadership of former Michigan State Representative Doug Hart, the program thrived for two years, during which thousands of students around the state actively took a part in shaping policy. Resolutions were written and voted upon online using a (then) state-of-the-art website developed by students in the Instructional Project Design course

at The University of Michigan; testimony was given in front of legislators in Lansing; and real legislation made it onto the books as a result of the MYC's efforts.

Beginning in fall, 2005, the project has been revived as the MSC. With the help of numerous state and local politicians, not to mention the University, our goal is once again to have the voices of young people heard in state government.

Because the work of the MSC comes out of the issues that are raised and discussed, much of the coursework, including your reading and writing tasks, will depend on the collective interests and actions of the MSC community. In other words, success in this course depends on you taking an ongoing, proactive role in the MSC.

Big Questions

The MSC is, in one sense, an open-ended project, and so the issues that come up and the experiences that occur are, in large part, dependent on the ideas and interests of the participants. There are some broad questions, though, that underlie the project as a whole. For example:

- What are the most important issues facing young people and students of all ages, today and in the future?
- How is it possible to effect change at a local and state level?
- How do particular electronic tools help – or hinder – decision-making in a group?
- What can a person learn through participation in a project like this, and what are its benefits and limitations as an educational experience?

Through the tasks outlined below, you will address these questions both explicitly and implicitly.

1. ONLINE REQUIREMENTS.

Overall requirement for consistent contribution. *At the absolute minimum, you must make numerous thoughtful postings in public discussions areas about the current topic or topics at least three days a week.* It goes without saying--but we'll say it anyway--that these posts should be well-researched, well-reasoned, and articulate, and add substantively to the level of civic discourse in the program. Combined with the other programmatic requirements listed below, this is a bare minimum required for a passing grade. Higher grades will require considerably more commitment and input on your part. In-person work with other MSC members, interest groups, and people in the community is also encouraged; to get credit for this work, documentation (such as meeting notes) must be submitted to the instructors *before the end of the semester*. If you are not able to log on for more than a day or two, you must contact the instructor as soon as possible.

Areas of online activity:

a. Resolution authoring. You must author or significantly co-author a resolution in at least two of the five main topic areas. ("Service" is a separate requirement; see below.)

Your contribution to a co-authored resolution will be judged based on the clauses that you have authored, so be sure to post your contributions under your own name.

Additionally, to encourage substantive research into those other communities: for a resolution to be considered valid, its authors must consult with at least three people outside of the MSC who are knowledgeable about the issue (including but not limited to professionals, professors, government officials, community leaders, and other members of the communities that would be affected) and engage in substantive discussion on the MSC website regarding the resolution's need, scope and likely impact. These consultations must be listed in the "consultations" section of the resolution, and they must be documented by (a) a video or audio clip of the discussion (b) a text summary of the discussion (b) a text transcript of part of the discussion. All documentation must be uploaded to the resolution as an attachment.

b. Discussion. You are expected to contribute to brainstorming discussions, critiques of resolutions, and discussions about votes on a daily or near-daily basis. Discussion posts may be informal in tone, but they should be as specific and detailed as possible.

Good discussion posts may reference related ideas within or outside the MSC; they may offer alternate perspectives or relevant background information; they may provide specific suggestions for improving ideas, they may broaden or narrow the scope of proposal, and they may constructively point out weaknesses or inconsistencies.

Needless to say, while criticism and debate are expected and encouraged, we expect that all discussion posts be constructive and respectful in tone. Personal attacks on others will not be tolerated.

c. Service activity proposals. Before October 18 you must author or significantly co-author at least one service proposal. By October 26 you must commit to at least one service activity other than your own. On or around October 28, several service proposals will be "featured" (chosen for enactment), based on appropriateness and number of commitments. At that point, all MSC members who are not committed to a featured proposal will then re-commit to a featured proposal. (Authors of featured proposals will be excused from their commitment to a second activity.) Enactment and documentation of featured service activities should take place in November. You should contact the instructors if your schedule, location, or life situation prevents your meaningful participation in a featured service proposal.

Service proposals should have the following characteristics:

- They should allow for broad participation by students of a broad range of ages in a broad range of locations in Michigan.
- Participation should be possible with no (or very minimal) financial commitment from participants.
- The activity should not focus on a particular political party.
- The activity should not involve simply volunteering for or contributing to an existing organization in a standard way.
- All parts of the activity must be legal and must not put participants at increased physical or mental risk.

2. OFF-LINE REQUIREMENTS. While the lion's share of work in the course will be online, all students must fulfill the following off-line requirements:

a. Orientation session. A mandatory orientation session will be scheduled on a weekday evening within the first two weeks of the term.

b. Town Hall Meetings. Topic coordinators will schedule one “town hall meeting” per topic in which you will have the opportunity to talk with experts and stakeholders about your proposals and ideas related to that topic. Meetings will be video recorded and posted online soon after the event. You must attend and **at least two** of these meetings during the semester; if in-person attendance is not possible, you may view the event online. Either way, you should take notes and be prepared to document in your final portfolio at least one important thing you learned from each meeting attended.

c. Service activity enactment. Part of the work of the caucus this semester involves proposing, discussing, and enacting service/social activism projects. In addition to participating in the online writing and discussion of service proposals, you must commit to and actually participate in at least one of the projects that are chosen for enactment. (If you wish, you may fulfill this requirement by leading a group of younger students in a related service activity.) You must document your participation through photos and/or brief video clips, and submit this documentation with your final portfolio.

d. House Commission on Civic Engagement Hearing. All resolutions that are passed into the MSC platform will be presented before a special commission of the Michigan House of Representatives in Lansing at a date to be determined, near the end of the term. Topic coordinators and resolution authors will do the actual presenting, but **attendance is mandatory for all MSC members.**

3. ONLINE ACTIVISM EXPLORATION PAPER. You must find and explore another project that uses online tools for pro-social purposes in a significant and interesting way - in other words, more than simply presenting static information -- and compare and contrast it to MSC in a 4-5 page paper.

4. FINAL SYNTHESIS/PORTFOLIO. This should be submitted via email to the instructors, and it must include:

- The title and committee of each resolution and service proposal you have authored or co-authored, a few words describing changes or revisions that you have made along the way.
- The title of the service activity that you actually participated in, with supporting documentation.

- Two or three comments you made on other resolutions or in the "brainstorming" sections, which you think were particularly helpful or relevant contributions to the caucus.
- One important thing that you understand now which you hadn't understood before -- about state government, about effecting change, about particular issues, or anything else meaningful that you will take away from your experience in MSC.
- Advice for the people who will be participating in the MSC next semester. (We will take the best of these and give them to next semester's participants.)
- (Optional) Suggestions for improving MSC in the future -- either technically or programmatically.
- Any other relevant information you would like to be considered by the instructors when considering your final grade.

Finally:

- It is your responsibility to read the announcements on the MSC site, and check your email regularly for messages from the instructors.
- It is your responsibility to make sure that evidence of your participation and contributions to the caucus is accessible and apparent to the instructors.
- If you are a classroom teacher or youth leader, you are welcome -- nay, highly encouraged -- to get your students involved in the MSC, formally or informally, at whatever level of participation you find fitting. If you do so, please be sure to include some details of their participation in your final portfolio.

Topic Coordinators and Service Coordinators

Experienced MSC members will be chosen to be "Coordinators" of each topic and of the "Service" area. Topic Coordinators will facilitate discussion, schedule expert chats, help organize the MSC platform from those resolutions receiving the most votes, and introduce their topic area at the hearing in Lansing. Service Coordinators will help choose service activities for enactment based on appropriateness and number of commitments, and they will help coordinate and schedule the enactment of the activities. Please give the Coordinators your utmost cooperation.

Grades:

Grades will be based on the following*:

(a) Completeness, consistency, and quality of your online and offline contributions to the MSC: 60%

(b) Online exploration paper: 15%

(c) Final portfolio completeness and quality, including documentation of service enactment: 25%

Final grades will take into account your work over the entire semester, viewed holistically. You may email the instructor at any time for an assessment of your work to date.

Grading scale:

A: Meets expectations for **all** tasks and exceeds expectations in one or more areas.

B: Meets minimum expectations for **all** tasks*

C: Meets minimum expectations for most, but not all tasks

D/E: Fails to meet minimum expectations for several or all tasks.

*Failure to complete any of the required tasks at the minimum level will result in a grade of B- or lower, regardless of the quality and quantity of other work.

Schedule (TENTATIVE -- DETAILS TO FOLLOW):

Unless otherwise noted, MSC activity is ongoing, and you are expected to make substantial contributions on a minimum of 3 days each week. Expert roundtables will also be scheduled as the semester goes on. Schedules for individual topics will be posted on the site.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Tasks</u>
September (date TBA)	Orientation; MSC activity begins immediately after orientation.
September - November	Brainstorming, resolution writing, discussion, and voting.
Oct 19	Exploration paper due (via email).

October 26	Service commitments should be posted by this date; featured service proposals chosen by October 30
November	Service project enactment
Early December	House Commission hearing (exact date TBA)
December 14	Final summary/portfolio due by midnight

Conditions and disclaimers:

SYLLABUS DISCLAIMER: This syllabus is subject to change.

GOOD CONDUCT: Participants are encouraged to take strong positions and debate issues passionately. However, any activity that is intended to prevent other members from participating, or that is intended to damage the technical infrastructure of the MSC, is strictly prohibited. In addition, participants must adhere to the policies of the computing environment from which they are accessing the MSC. Violators will be suspended from the course, and additional disciplinary action may be taken as necessary.

PLAGIARISM POLICY: As a participant in a public forum, you are expected to refer to ideas and statements from both inside and outside the MSC. Such references are expected to be respectful and appropriate, and they must give clear, specific attribution to the original source. It is assumed that anything posted under your name is your own work, unless explicitly attributed to someone else. Outright plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course.