

Critical Teaching  
SPOTLIGHT

## Facilitating Understanding of Critical Criminology and Social Justice Through Civic Engagement

DR. SHELLY CLEVINGER

Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, Illinois State University

Email: [slcleve@ilstu.edu](mailto:slcleve@ilstu.edu)



*Dr. Shelly Clevenger grew up in Pennsylvania. She received her PhD from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). She considers herself an activist through her research, trying to raise awareness about sexual assault and intimate partner violence. In addition to being a criminologist, Dr. Clevenger is also a comic book enthusiast, which she incorporates into her classes. Her all-time favourite comic is the Incredible Hulk.*

In the courses that I teach, I use a critical criminology and social justice framework for all of my lectures, discussions, assignments and projects. The primary objective that I have for my students is for them to develop empathy for others, or to be able to understand what it is like to be in another person's shoes. In my course *Sex Offenders and the Criminal Justice System*, I am asking them to understand what it is like to be an offender, how someone ended up in that position and how it impacts the rest of their life. In my *Victimology* course, I am asking students to understand the

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

### CRITICAL TEACHING SPOTLIGHT

experience of being victimized and a victim in our society. I have found that the best way to get students to understand these experiences and assist them in developing empathy for these populations is through civic engagement. This involves students working with the community.

Each semester, my classes partner with different community organizations. We meet with them to learn what it is that they need and we work to make their needs a reality. This helps the organization, which is non-profit, to be better able to serve the community. It also allows the students to get experience with a population that they would not otherwise have interacted with, which often helps to increase empathy among the students and let them understand social justice issues a bit better. Most recently in the fall of 2017 in my *Sex Offenders and the Criminal Justice System* course, the students were able to select a community organization to work with. Students had the choice of working alone, with a partner or in a group of three to complete their civic engagement project. They were required to create an item that the organization needed and then present that item to them after its completion. I had spoken with the organizations ahead of time to see if they would be interested in collaborating, but the students were the ones who worked to create the items and the partnership. There were three choices of community partners for the civic engagement project.



*“Many of the students had their ideas and beliefs challenged...”*

The first was to create a comic book that explained how to be safe from online sexual

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

## CRITICAL TEACHING SPOTLIGHT

predators and sexual abuse prevention strategies. The students created the comic book and I had them printed to be distributed to homeless children living at the local homeless shelter, *Home Sweet Home*. This was a great learning experience for the students. Not only did they learn about sex offenses and how to explain it so that a child would understand the content, but they also learned about homelessness. The main take away for the students was that many people who experience homelessness are not that different from them and that the children at the shelter had access to computers and smart phones, just like their family. They also learned that homelessness was temporary for most and that there were larger forces at work that led to someone being homeless. Many of the students had their ideas and beliefs challenged about who made up the homeless population of the city.

The next choice consisted of two different groups from the same organization, *Marcfirst*, which serves individuals and families with developmental disabilities. Students could select to create a brochure/informational pamphlet on online safety and sexual consent tailored specifically for parents of children with developmental disabilities or to create a book for children with developmental disabilities about how to be safe online or topics related to sexual abuse. Students then presented their items to the parents or the children. This was a great learning experience for both groups as students were able to see that this population experiences victimization and predation in a different way and have different needs.

The final selection was for the students to create an informational book for current registered sex



CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

### CRITICAL TEACHING SPOTLIGHT

offenders, under supervision with the probation and parole department in McLean County. The book that they created listed places of employment, recreation, housing and spirituality that is sex offender friendly. The students had to present the items to the sex offenders at their weekly group meeting at the Law and Justice Center. This was a very eye opening experience for the students as they were shocked to see that the sex offenders looked like they did, were mostly clean cut, "normal" and were not "scary" as they previously had thought. It changed their perceptions about sex offenders and also assisted in developing empathy after creating this informational book because they saw how restricting the registry is for sex offenders within this community.

In my *Victimology* classes, I also usually do a similar project as just described where the students pair with community organizations to create an item. However, the most impactful civic engagement project for both the students and the community for this course involved the students creating a piece of art that was on display for the community designed to raise awareness. In the spring 2017 semester, students in my *Victimology* class were asked to take a children's toy and manipulate or change it in a way to make a statement about sexual assault for sexual assault awareness month in April. Students seized this opportunity to express what they learned in class. They created pieces that reflected child sexual abuse, intimate partner violence and sexual assault against pregnant women, the school to prison pipeline seen in regards to the victimization of African-American females, male sexual assault, LGBTQ+ victimization, and the sexual exploitation of undocumented individuals. The art piece along with a card that explained the piece with some information about the topic, was on display in the library for the month of April in a high traffic area where lots of people from the university and community pass through.

There was also a reception held in which the students/artists met with the public and answered questions about their work and the topic. This project allowed students to really engage with the community in a meaningful way to discuss victimization. It gained a lot of attention and students took a great deal of pride in their work and the attention they received for creating such impactful pieces. They also reported that they learned more from this than writing a paper as they had to think "outside of the box" and "really apply what we learned."

Since I began my Tenure Track job at Illinois State I have incorporated civic

---

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

### CRITICAL TEACHING SPOTLIGHT

engagement into my courses as a mandatory project that students must complete as part of the course requirements. I have found that this teaching technique has given my students the opportunity to connect with the material and population and to understand social justice and critical criminology in a way that has allowed them to become more empathetic and enthusiastic for these issues. The key element for success in these projects is to prepare the students with the knowledge ahead of time. Before they create the item or go into the community, having classroom discussions, readings and assignments related to the course material and/or population you are serving is important. Reflection as a required component is also a way to ensure success in these projects. I require my students to have written reflections before and after the project so that they can process, think about and apply the experience to the material and what we have learned. Our students are the future caretakers of the criminal justice system and I think that these types of projects will help prepare them to treat offenders and victims better when out in the field. ●

***For more information about any of the projects mentioned here, email Shelly Clevenger at [slclev@ilstu.edu](mailto:slclev@ilstu.edu)***

*To see news coverage of the Victimology civic engagement art project, go to:*  
<http://www.centralillinoisproud.com/news/local-news/students-used-kids-toys-to-teach-others-about-intimate-partner-violence/690579196>

*To learn more about the Sex Offender and the Criminal Justice System civic engagement project, go to:*  
<https://news.illinoisstate.edu/2018/01/class-worked-break-cycle-sex-offenses/>