

SOC 270: Community Organizing and Social Action

Eastern Mennonite University
Spring 2022: Independent study

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Course description

This course is an introduction to the history, theories, and tactics of community organizing in the United States since the early 20th century. Community organizing is fundamentally a project of power building within and among groups of people marginalized from existing power structures. In this class, we begin by asking what community is and how power functions and proceed to learn about issues, tactics, and campaigns that have been used in fights for local change over the past century and continue to be used today. We work to understand how local concerns and campaigns to address them are situated within larger structures of power and inequality.

Course learning outcomes

Students will be able to:

1. Discuss the meaning and significance of community.
2. Describe and evaluate the meaning and dimensions of power.
3. Interpret the role of churches, civic associations, and community organizations in local political mobilization.
4. Summarize key historical figures, eras, and strategies in community organizing.
5. Discuss and critique community organizing objectives and tactics.
6. Situate local political mobilization within larger democratic processes and social movements.

Course requirements

Weekly meetings (25%) – In this independent study course, you will be meeting for one hour each week with the instructor to discuss the week's readings. For full credit, you are expected to come to each meeting prepared to discuss the assigned material, including questions and insights that have arisen for you.

Critical reading and response blogging (30%) – Critical engagement with the assigned readings forms the backbone of this independent study. To facilitate your preparation for our discussion and so that I have a sense of the questions and responses that the readings have raised, you will write a response blog of between 250 and 400 words each week during the semester. Your response blogs are due by 11am on the days when we will be meeting and should be emailed to me.

In each blog entry, you should:

- 1) Summarize the central argument or story of each reading in three to five sentences.

- 2) Identify two key ideas that stand out to you after finishing all of the reading. For each of them: (a) summarize the idea and (b) explain why it matters (Why did it stand out to you? Who cares?). For full credit, this should reflect thoughtful engagement with the material.
- 3) Write two discussion questions. Your questions should relate to either: (a) something you feel prepared to speak to; (b) something you would like to discuss to increase your understanding; or (c) something that ties the readings to an issue currently in the news.

Paper (45%) – You will write a paper that tells in detail the story of a recent or ongoing organizing campaign. Your paper should:

- 1) Provide background and context on the social issue being engaged, the motivation for the campaign, and the campaign's objectives.
- 2) Describe and critically assess the campaign's strategies, situating them within the historical context of community organizing philosophies and methods.
- 3) Draw on published sources and interviews with individuals involved with the campaign.

To facilitate the development of this project, there are two required submissions.

- 1) The first submission is a paper proposal identifying the organizing campaign you will be profiling, due February 14 by 11am. Your proposal should be at least 600 words and should provide an overview of the issue motivating the campaign, identify one or more organizations working on the campaign, and include a discussion of why it matters (to the world and to you). Email the proposal to me and be prepared to discuss it during our meeting that day. The proposal represents 10% of your final grade.
- 2) The final paper is due Monday, April 25 by 11am. The paper constitutes 35% of your class grade (thus the proposal and paper together are worth 45%). The body of the paper should be between 3,000 and 4,500 words (approx. 10-15 pages).

Course texts

Our readings this semester will center on four texts:

- 1) Garza, A. (2020). *The Purpose of Power: How to Build Movements for the 21st Century*. Random House.
- 2) Sen, R. (2003). *Stir it up: Lessons in community organizing and advocacy*. Jossey-Bass.
- 3) Alinsky, S. D. (1971/1989). *Rules for radicals: A practical primer for realistic radicals*. Vintage Books.
- 4) Freire, P. (1970/2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

The reading schedule will be developed as we go and is subject to revision. Additional shorter readings may be added at different points.