Doing Geography in Partnership with Local Organizations

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Community Geography
Doing Geography in Partnership with Local Organizations
Dr. Amy Rock

On the surface, Community Geography—a new offering in the GESA curriculum—is a class about making maps. But to call it a “map class” is to ignore the fundamental purpose of the course: connecting students and community organizations around spatial issues. Community Geography is an emerging subfield that applies geographic methodologies to community issues. For geographers, this connection is obvious, but bringing the power of maps to illustrate community challenges and opportunities can be eye-opening for many others.

The connection of students to their local community during their time in school has been shown to foster lifelong civic engagement and sense of place (and in the short term, boost retention rates). Folding in spatial thinking creates a process in which decision making is space- and place-driven, geographically coding the learning environment and enhancing memory. The focus of Community Geography efforts at universities around the nation is to co-produce solutions and knowledge, rather than students-as-cheap-labor or top-down researcher-driven projects that may or may not directly benefit the community. These types of courses often fall under the category of service learning, but that designation does not always mean the exchange of knowledge is a two-way street, as it is in this course.

Community Geography developed from my past life working at nonprofit organizations. Working at a nonprofit, I saw it as a no-brainer to apply spatial thinking and GIS to our community projects and environmental reviews, building capacity and improving where and how we served the community. Later, as I moved into teaching full time, I had the opportunity to introduce many of my nonprofit contacts to enthusiastic students who helped them visualize data in ways that made powerful statements, evolving into a course called GIS and Nonprofits. But not all geographers are GIS folks, and just as geography isn’t only about maps, neither is Community Geography. In this new course, offered for the first time by GESA last spring semester, students learned about the power of community involvement and how they could use their skills to achieve some of the change they want to see in the world.

Throughout the course, we discuss the role of nonprofit organizations in serving the public, how to identify community needs, and how to collaborate in developing the capacity to meet community needs. Students are paired with local organizations, working with them to design and develop their projects. Most students in the spring 2020 class opted to build projects using Esri’s StoryMaps, a web-based platform that allows them to develop interactive stories and videos and, yes, make maps, without requiring programming experience. Students were responsible for communicating with the organizations on needs, data transfer, and outcomes. When the pandemic caused us to switch abruptly online, we were fortunately able to do so relatively seamlessly. We had to get creative with some of the data collection, but for the most part, communication and data transfer shifted to the virtual setting with few changes to project goals. (Many thanks to all our project partners for their grace under pressure at a time when many of them faced enormous challenges themselves due to COVID-related restrictions and impacts.) Projects ranged from environmental awareness and education campaigns to historic preservation.

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efforts, local food security initiatives, and arts programs. Students shared their perspectives in a recent issue of *Redwood Roots* magazine, an HSU Press publication focused on community-engaged learning at HSU, and now in this issue of *Humboldt Geographic*.

Last spring, Community Geography was taught with a one-unit Depth Experience class designed to take a deeper dive into a topic than is permitted within the typical course framework. For Community Geography, this Depth Experience represented the first step in creating an annual survey, dubbed the Eureka Survey, which would capture public opinion on a variety of topics. Based on the Detroit Area Study, a University of Michigan long-form survey project that spanned more than 50 years, the goal of the Eureka Study was to create a questionnaire template that could be used each year, with modifications as needed, to help inform city planning efforts and build a data repository that would allow for longitudinal research projects. The class traveled to a Eureka City Council meeting to introduce the proposed study and receive approval to proceed with the project, which many students reported as an eye-opening experience.

The pandemic caused a significant disruption of the Eureka Survey, as a key component involved public-release events followed up with in-person interviews to collect a stratified random sample. Lockdown precautions meant that all of that was scrapped. Nonetheless, students did gain valuable experience in developing survey questions and building the survey instrument. A handful of responses were collected to test the instrument, but the number was insufficient to draw meaningful conclusions or claim any significant representation of broader community sentiments. Once HSU returns to something resembling normal classroom operations, GESA aims to relaunch the Eureka Survey, as enthusiasm from the Eureka City Council and other community stakeholders was high.

Spring 2021, Community Geography students worked virtually from the outset. So, while we were able to shift to virtual, this year’s projects are designed with COVID-related restrictions in mind, making it easier for students and partners to manage expectations. Even with the pandemic restrictions, we had more community partners wanting to collaborate than we had students to pair up, which is encouraging. Students are engaged in learning about the power of nonprofits and community efforts in the Humboldt area, and we will see some amazing projects emerge even in a time of pandemic.

As geographers, many of us want to help make the world a better place. What’s the saying? “Think globally, act locally.” And that is what we are doing with Community Geography: bringing our geographic lenses to impactful local issues and adding spatial perspectives to the amazing work that Humboldt-area community organizations are doing.

**SAMPLE SPRING 2020 PROJECTS**

- **Humboldt Botanical Garden**
- **Friends of the Dunes**
- **Zero Waste Humboldt**
- **Klamath Watershed Councils**
- **Cooperation Humboldt**
- **Jacoby Creek Landtrust**

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