

The Courtroom as Classroom: Integrating Civic Engagement in Public Law Courses

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Abstract

In this article I discuss logistics (course design and implementation) as well as course outcomes (the effects on what students learned about the judiciary as well as the results of the civically engaged classroom) related to the Courtroom Observation Research Paper Assignment in *Introduction to Law and Politics*. The assignment required students to visit a variety of federal and state courthouses and to observe criminal and civil cases at the trial and appellate levels. In their research, students were asked to integrate what they learned during courtroom observation with what we were covering in lecture and in assigned readings. The courtroom became an extension of the classroom, providing valuable lessons about the state and federal judicial processes.

Introduction

Political scientists have expanded their knowledge of the judicial process by using the methodology referred to as “participant observation,” or, as Richard Fenno called it, “soaking and poking” (Fenno 1978 and 1986; Johnson 1990; Heumann 1977).

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Fenno also referred to this strategy as “just hanging around” and “interactive observation.” In *Introduction to Law and Politics*, undergraduate students used this approach, observing cases in a variety of courtrooms for their Courtroom Observation Research Paper Assignment. (Holmes 2004) Students were required to visit a variety of federal and state courthouses and to observe criminal and civil cases at the trial and appellate levels. In their research, students were asked to integrate what they learned during courtroom observation with what we were covering in lecture and in assigned readings. The courtroom became an extension of the classroom, providing valuable lessons about the state and federal judicial processes. In this article I will discuss logistics (course design and implementation) as well as course outcomes (the effects on what students learned about the judiciary as well as the results of the civically engaged classroom).

Courtroom Observation

While the Courtroom Observation Research paper assignment discussed in this article differs from traditional service learning projects, this project certainly is an example of incorporating civic engagement in the curriculum. First, students need to have a basic understanding of the political process in order to be informed citizens and to become actively engaged. Second, this assignment quickly moves from passive observation to interactive engagement with court personnel. Both of these aspects of civic engagement were addressed by the students in the Courtroom Observation Research papers.

During the course of the semester, students developed an appreciation for the role of the courts in American constitutional democracy, and they recognized the importance of learning more about the judicial process. Indeed, some described their participation in the courtroom observations to be a part of their “civic duty” (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009). As one student remarked, “An open and fair judicial system is crucial to democracy, yet most Americans would just as well have nothing to do with it” (Gay, Summer 2008). Another student noted

Most of the general population does not know that anyone can simply walk into a courtroom and observe with no strings attached. . . . I think everyone should spend some time in courtrooms observing. It helps give a perspective that makes a person want to be a better person and rethink his or her steps in life (Rowe, Spring 2006).

As a result of this courtroom observation assignment, students learn how to navigate the local courts: how to find out what cases are being heard and how those cases are being decided. One student explained, “I learned how to check

the docket, find rulings, and make my way through the courthouse” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2008). Students no longer have to rely on the media to learn about high profile cases (e.g., the students observed the cases involving Terri Schiavo and Casey Anthony). This knowledge about how to access our local courts serves students well in their quest to become citizen scholars.

Moreover, students emphasize the interactive nature of this assignment; they have been called into judges’ chambers, taken to lunch by attorneys, given tours of the courthouses, spoken with journalists covering the cases, and have met with prosecutors and defense attorneys. One student described the project as “an interactive and unforgettable experience” (Swetland, Spring 2009). Another remarked that “there is a lot to be learned from this active engagement” (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009). Interestingly, students use action verbs to describe the project: “It allows you to dive in and see the way the court operates first hand which allows you to become sincerely interested” (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009). The research paper title “Not Just an Observation, But a Total Experience” captures the essence of the courtroom observation research project (Cole, Spring 2006).

The Course

Introduction to Law and Politics provides an introduction to the judicial process. In the syllabus, I describe the course objectives as follows:

In this course, we will study the courts as the third branch of American government. The sources, nature, and legitimacy of the judiciary’s power in our constitutional democracy will be explored. We will examine the legal and political processes and products of Supreme Court decision-making and the response of the political system to the Court’s decisions. We will also study the role of state courts and lower federal courts in our judicial system.

Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to do the following: discuss the role of courts in constitutional democracies; describe the history and organization of the federal and the Florida judicial systems; define “law” and describe the sources of law in the United States; describe the various methods used to select state and federal judges and discuss the impact of these various methods on the background, qualifications, and behavior of those judges; describe key elements of criminal and civil procedure; discuss competing theories of statutory and constitutional interpretation; describe how lawyers,

litigants, and interest groups affect agenda-setting and judicial decision-making in the courts; discuss internal and external limits on judicial power as well as issues related to the implementation and impact of court decisions; and, after a series of courtroom visits, to be able to navigate the state and federal court systems and to access information about pending cases and corresponding legal documents.

I employ active learning strategies in class, such as a Senate Judiciary Committee confirmation hearing simulation. I invite guest speakers, take students on a slide-show tour of the U.S. Supreme Court (that I created when I worked in the Office of the Curator), and organize other special events for the students (such as an overnight field trip to Tallahassee to visit the Capitol, the Supreme Court, and Florida State Law School).

The highlight of the course is the Courtroom Observation Research Paper assignment, as this project allows the students to take what they are learning in class and to apply it in a real-life setting. If the students are unable to complete the Courtroom Observation Research assignment, however, they may opt to write a traditional research paper instead. Typically, no more than one or two students a semester will select the traditional research paper option.

The Assignment

For the Courtroom Observation Research Paper Assignment, students are required to observe at least five cases in at least two different courthouses (although they are encouraged to observe more) with as much variety as possible: federal and state courts, criminal and civil cases, at the trial and appellate levels. (Holmes 2004) Students are expected to spend at least twelve to fifteen hours in court actively observing and analyzing cases. All students are required to sign a liability waiver prior to venturing into courthouses. (The waiver is posted on the Center for Civic Engagement website on the faculty page, www.stpt.usf.edu/community)

To prepare the students for their courtroom experience, I include in the assignment packet a lengthy appendix that includes detailed information about how to access Florida and federal courts in the Tampa Bay region.

I have offered this course during the Spring and Summer sessions, and students often take advantage of the opportunity to visit courtrooms in other jurisdictions during their travels. During the Spring 2009 semester, for example, students attended court sessions as far away as Arizona, California, Washington,

D.C., as well as other Florida regions, such as Orlando and Sarasota, during Spring Break.

As the students observe the necessary number and variety of cases, they are expected to keep a log of the cases they attend. (A Log Form is included in the Courtroom Observation Research Paper Assignment Packet.) They are also to record their observations and reflections in a Courtroom Observation Journal. Throughout the semester, they should integrate the lessons learned from lecture and the assigned reading material with what they observed in the courtroom in their journal entries. A few weeks after I distribute the assignment, I collect and review the journals. This is to ensure that they have begun their courtroom visits and that their entries reflect the necessary depth of analysis. It is also an opportunity for me to answer any questions they might have. These journal entries – students’ reflections and observations -- serve as the data for their research papers, so I emphasize how important it is for them to be as thorough and as thoughtful as they can be while writing in their journals. In addition to their reflections and observations, students also include sketches and diagrams of courtroom layouts, newspaper articles about cases they observed, court documents, as well as business cards and materials (such as the “Criminal Punishment Code Scoresheet” used in sentencing) from the lawyers and court personnel they met with while at the courthouses.

In the research paper students discuss and analyze their case and court observations. This analysis should include comparisons between and among the different types of cases and courtrooms they observed. It is critical that students integrate themes and concepts from lecture material and assigned readings into their paper.

The Results

In the Courtroom Observation Journals, Courtroom Observation Research Papers, and the anonymous Pre-Test and Post-Test Surveys, students profess, and, indeed, demonstrate, that they have gained knowledge about court proceedings and a better understanding of concepts discussed in lecture. The theme throughout student reflections is the extent to which their understanding of the subject matter was enhanced by their courtroom experiences. As one student remarked: “Law and the judiciary is unique in the sense that you can memorize textbooks until your eyes bleed and you will never fully understand how the process works until you observe . . . ” (Peters, Summer 2008).

Most students who enroll in *Law and Politics* identify themselves as “pre-law,” and, while they are enthusiastic about the opportunity to observe actual court proceedings, they are also intimidated by the prospect of figuring out how and where and when to visit court. In the end, students find their perseverance rewarded. Not only did students feel more comfortable making their way around the courthouses, but also they became familiar with the legal jargon and terminology used during court proceedings. As one student explained, “The first few observations were overwhelming. It was difficult to follow everything that was being said and done with the speed with which it was handled. . . . The more I observed the easier it became to understand what was happening” (Chaney, Spring 2009). Another said, “The more time I spent in the courtroom, the more I felt that I understood what was going on. I learned about most of the things that went on in court in class, but it really took the experience of being there to understand what goes on in a trial and how much work goes into each case” (Jansen, Spring 2005).

After learning their way around, students have the opportunity to view a wide variety of cases: murder, immigration, mortgage fraud, child custody, child molestation, insurance fraud, divorce, tobacco liability, child pornography, carjacking, domestic violence, and welfare fraud, to name a few. At times our students were the only observers in the courtrooms, on other occasions they found a crowded courtroom with extensive press coverage. One student described the diversity of cases she observed as follows:

Within the confines of this semester I managed to observe a handful of Florida criminal and civil cases, and witnessed amazing and intensely personal struggles unfold in the public arena. As a citizen I was allowed to peer into the private lives of murderers, swindlers, victims, jurors, attorneys, and judges. I heard horrific murder plots, sad stories from lonely defrauded widows, accounts of cocaine addicts resorting to prostitution, tales of finding religion in prison, and the list goes on. My journey through the Florida court system took me all the way to the Florida Supreme Court in Tallahassee when the class participated in a mock trial and met Justice Peggy Quince (Austin, Spring 2006).

During their courtroom observations, students quickly appreciate that they are watching real cases that have a dramatic affect on real people (in some cases, people that they know, such as neighbors or high school classmates).

Students describe in their journals how they sat next to a victim's family or next to a defendant's family, and they describe the reactions to the verdicts. They have seen the anguish of mother as her child was taken away and the pain of a victim's family as they re-live tragic events during testimony.

In a carjacking case, one student noted that after the defendant in was sentenced to fifteen years in prison "his family started crying very loudly -- they were destroyed" (Schneider, Spring 2005). In another case, when describing a reaction to a jury verdict, a student noted that "Sandra Rozzo's family all broke down in tears. It was hard for me to be in the courtroom at that time because I felt it was a personal moment for Rozzo's family."

Unlike fictional characters and events on television, the events in the courtroom are real, and students are moved by them. One student explained, "To see the pain, suffering, and anger plaguing victims firsthand really brought to light the reality of the courts" (Chedid, Spring 2005). What the students observe can, at times, be disturbing. For example, one student remarked that she "felt particularly affected by the graphic sexual assault charges."

Most of my students, as do most Americans, form opinions about the judicial process based on popular television crime dramas, and they often compare their observations with their preconceived notions (Robben 2005). In their responses on the on the Pre-Test Surveys, almost all students indicated that they watch crime dramas on a weekly basis, with *Law & Order* being the most-watched show. In their research papers, students made these comparisons:

Television courtroom dramas provide the basis of knowledge of the law for most average Americans. After watching an hour-long drama, most television viewers consider themselves near experts on the inner workings of the legal system. I was one of the many naïve fans of *Law & Order* who felt as if I could walk into any courtroom and feel at home within the judicial walls. . . . Of course, real life is never as exciting as television. I never did see any courtroom outbursts; in fact, I was usually the only observer in the courtroom (Henderson, Spring 2006) .

Students were asked on the Post-Test Surveys about whether and how their television viewing habits changed during the course of the semester. Many students indicated that they were more interested in watching crime dramas, "because I've become more interested" (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009). At the

same time, they report that they “look for different things” in the programs and that they “can see the flaws of the programs” (Post-Test Surveys, Spring 2009).

Not only did students report that they watch more television crime dramas, they also reported on the anonymous Post-Test Surveys that they paid more attention to coverage of cases in the local news media. During the Spring 2009 semester, in response to the question, “Did you become more interested in following news about court decisions since taking this class?” 71% indicated they were more interested.

Indeed, after spending time in court observing judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys, students report that they have a greater interest in the judicial process. One student explained that the assignment “broadened my understanding and sparked growing interest in our legal system” (Bornstein, Spring 2009). Another responded on the anonymous Post-Test Survey that he or she “truly enjoyed it and am now more keen to follow up on law and different political events nationally and locally” (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2006).

Students also indicated that they have a better understanding of the lecture material. When students are able to integrate the themes, concepts, and questions we discuss in lecture – issues related to jury selection and behavior, “one shotters” versus “repeat players,” the quality of legal representation, the courtroom workgroup, behavioral differences between men and women judges, judicial selection, judicial decision-making, court procedures, access to the court system, for example – they demonstrate how much they have learned in class and how much they have gained from the opportunity to watch those theories in practice.

Many students explain that the courtroom observations reinforced what they were learning in class and from the assigned readings, and that their courtroom experience went “hand-in-hand” lectures.

Although much of the knowledge I gained through this experience was a confirmation of what we learned in class, it was still very educational to see all these principles and theories being applied in the courtroom (Bishara, Spring 2009).

I do not think I would have been able to understand the proceedings if I had not been taking this course. The lecture reading material seemed to go hand-in-hand with the courtroom proceedings I was observing this semester (Cole, Spring 2006).

Students observed all phases of the judicial process, from jury selection to sentencing, and there was ample opportunity for the students to integrate material from the assigned readings into their descriptions of their courtroom observations. In the research papers the students demonstrated that they were able to gain a deeper understanding of the material we covered in class.

The most striking finding gleaned from the survey data is the comparison between the pre-test and post-test responses to the question: "Do you feel well-informed about the judicial process, court proceedings, and decisions?" In general, approximately one third of the class professes to be well-informed about the judicial process prior to the courtroom observations; by the end of the semester, almost the entire class believes they are well-informed. The exact numeric breakdown is as follows: on the Spring 2006 Pre-Test Survey, 42% of the students responded "yes"; after the courtroom observation project, 94% responded "yes." During the Summer 2007 semester, 35% of the students responded "yes" on the Pre-Test survey; 100% reported feeling well-informed after the courtroom observations. During the Summer 2008, 27% responded "yes" prior to the courtroom observations, and 85% responded "yes" after completing the assignment. During the Spring 2009 semester, 42% responded "yes" prior to the courtroom observations, and 94% responded "yes" after the courtroom observations.

In addition to the lessons learned by observing court proceedings, students take advantage of informal interactions with court personnel to enhance their learning experience. When they identify themselves as students working on a class project, court personnel and private attorneys are welcoming and helpful. Students have been invited to judges' chambers, treated to lunch by attorneys, taken on behind-the-scene tours, and given special seating in the courtroom. As one student explained, "As soon as they learned that I was a college student working on a class project, they were eager to point me in the right direction or answer my questions" (Chedid, Spring 2005). Another explained, "Surprisingly, being a student and wanting to learn makes you the most must-speak-to person in the courtroom" (Rowe, Spring 2006). Court personnel have gone out of their way to ensure that students understood what was happening in the courtroom. For example, one student mentioned that "The clerk asked me to sit in the front row and occasionally checked in with me to see if I understood what was going on" (Svoboda, Spring 2006).

Students have taken advantage of the opportunity to interview attorneys, judges, and other personnel about the cases they observed as well as to ask

questions about the judicial process and even about law school. During the height of the controversy, one of my students was able to meet with the federal judge who was the first federal judge to review the Terri Schiavo case (Boltin, Spring 2005). These interviews and informal interactions with court participants further enhance the courtroom observation research assignment.

In addition to the assistance given to our students by court personnel and case participants, newspaper and television reporters took our students under their wings as well. Consider this student's experience with the producers of *48 Hours*:

My second day in that courtroom, when we recessed for lunch, this woman approached me . . . and ended up buying my lunch and I got to sit with all the producers and directors of the show who were filming. This turned out to be an excellent experience, because they showed me the hidden cameras they had placed in the courtroom to catch Tim Humphrey's reaction and the whole courtroom from different angles. . . Through *48 Hours* I ended up meeting Mr. McDermott, head attorney for the defense, and Mr. Schaub, state prosecutor on the case (Cole, Spring 2006).

In addition to helping the students learn more about the cases they were observing, interaction with lawyers and court personnel often has led to internship opportunities for several of my students, e.g., in the Public Defender's office, the State Attorney's office, Guardian ad Litem program, judicial campaigns, and CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse, a non-profit that works with survivors of domestic violence: <http://www.casa-stpete.org/>). As one student explained, "I feel that I have gained not only new knowledge, but have extended a branch to a whole new network of opportunity for myself in the future as a result of this courtroom observation assignment" (Peters, Summer 2008).

For pre-law students this courtroom observation assignment proved to be immensely helpful. For some, the experience confirmed their interest in a legal career, for others their courtroom observations gave them reason to doubt their original decision to attend law school. Consider these student reflections:

Despite my lifelong fascination with the law, I had never set foot inside a courtroom until now. I was able to witness firsthand some of the day-to-day activities and responsibilities of the lawyers and other court personnel. This is a chance I desperately needed since I

wanted to be sure this was the right career path before I commit the necessary time, energy, and money. The experiences were interesting and enlightening to say the least, but, much to my surprise, I was not further inspired to dedicate my life to seeking justice for the people, as I had believed for so long (Chedid, Spring 2005).

The observation assignment was doubly important not only because of sheer curiosity, but also because I had misgivings about applying to law school. After every observation, my interest piqued and I learned something new about the mechanics of law and the social implications of our legal system . . . now I can move forward in my plans to enter law school both knowing and understanding the road that lies ahead (Heffner, Spring 2009) .

Indeed, several students responded on the Post-Test Surveys that the most important thing that they learned as a result of the courtroom visits was the sense that they would make a more informed decision about whether to go to law school. One student wrote in response to the question "What was the most important thing you learned from your courtroom visits?" "For me, the most important thing was that it confirmed that I want to be a part of this system" (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009). Another answered "That the law is definitely the profession I wish to follow" (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009).

In the pre-test and post-test surveys I question what were student expectations prior to the assignment and whether those expectations were met. Generally, the students answer the Pre-Test Surveys indicating that they expect to learn "how things work in a real courtroom," "understanding of what lawyers do," "how proceedings are organized and executed," "a first-hand account of how the system works" (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2007). When asked whether the assignment met their expectations, 100% of the students respond "yes." One student commented, "I enjoyed this assignment much more than I thought I would. It more than exceeded my expectations. I wasn't always excited about getting up early and going to court, but I was always disappointed to leave" (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009). As another reflected in her internship paper:

Who knew courtroom observations could be so interesting? Going into this assignment I had no clue what I was getting myself into. I

did not know that I would be forming relationships with courtroom personnel, that people would be so inviting to have us there, the types of cases I would have the chance to observe or that I would be physically less than five feet away from people on trial for murder and drug charges. . . . I also had no clue the emotions that would go into observing these courtroom procedures. I can now admit that when I first walked into the courtroom I was expecting to be bored and to just write down everything I saw, but once I was there . . . I became engulfed in the cases. During one particular murder trial . . . I got so involved that I followed the case closely throughout the whole phase of the trial and returned for four more days of observations (Cole, Spring 2006) .

In response to the question “Would you recommend that future *Law and Politics* students opt for the Courtroom Observation Research Assignment?” 100% of students every semester respond with a resounding “YES.” To explain, the students responded:

It really helps you understand the process in a way the book never could (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2007).

Excellent opportunity to go places I would not have gone on my own (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2007).

Helps clarify the readings and you learn the material better (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2008).

What you learn in this project will stay with you through life (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2008).

Because I grew as a citizen (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011).

Conclusions

The Courtroom Observation Research Paper assignment illustrates the value of incorporating a civic engagement opportunity as a supplement to traditional lecture and reading materials. While this civic engagement assignment differs from service learning, the civic learning that takes place during the course of the semester leads students to develop the knowledge,

skills, and community contacts that are necessary for active citizenship. As described throughout this article, despite the passive-sounding title of courtroom “observation,” by its very nature, this assignment requires significant interaction and engagement with court personnel to be completed successfully.

As mentioned above, 100% of students recommend that future students should choose the Courtroom Observation Research Paper Assignment option. In answering the “Why or Why not” follow-up to that question, many students describe the value of the assignment in terms of their growth as a “citizen.” One student explained, “I believe I have grown as a citizen of my city and state” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011). Students have described their participation in courtroom observations to be a part of their “civic duty” (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2009).

At the heart of this perceived increase in “citizenship” is the knowledge and understanding of the judicial process that students gain as a result of this project. One student admitted in the Post-Test Survey: “I didn’t know anything prior to the class; now I have a basic knowledge” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011). Survey data reported earlier in this article revealed that typically more than 90% of the students enrolled in the course believe they are “well-informed” about the judicial process after completing the Courtroom Observation assignment.

A better understanding of the courts gave students a new respect for the caseload and the work of court personnel. One student responded that he/she had “more confidence in the process and the people involved” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011). Another student explained that “completing this project renewed my confidence in our legal system, helped me understand how and why it works the way it does and made me realize how lucky we are to live in a country with due process” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011).

Increased understanding led to greater appreciation for the courts as well as an ability to look critically at the needs of the criminal justice system. As one student explained, “By observing court cases, we are able to see potential flaws within our system, and move towards community problem-solving” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011).

For example, when teaching this course in Summer 2011 I brought my students to the Criminal Justice Center where we met with the Public Defender, the State Attorney’s Office, a County Judge and a Circuit Judge. The Public Defender, Bob Dillinger, (<http://www.wearethehope.org/>) informed students about the ways in which mental health and substance abuse issues are impacting

the courts in Pinellas County. Nearly 75-80% of the caseload in the 6th Judicial Circuit is related to prescription pain pill abuse. Pinellas County is the leading county in the state of Florida for prescription pill related deaths and has the largest number of children being removed from their homes by the Department of Children and Families due to prescription drug abuse. Students were unaware of the magnitude of this public health crisis in Pinellas County, and they learned from this visit as well as from subsequent case observations how this and other social issues are being left to the criminal justice system to address. The Courtroom Observation Research Assignment provides an effective way for students to assess community needs.

Students reflect on these community needs in their Journals and in their Courtroom Observation Research Papers. This reflection often inspires the students to act by signing up for an internship or by volunteering for a community group. As one student responded in the Post-Test Survey, the Courtroom Observation Research Project “makes me want to get involved...further my interest in being a guardian ad litem” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011). It is often the case that I supervise students’ internships (as Political Science “Field Work”) that were secured as a direct result of this project. For example, this semester I am advising students who are interning for the Public Defender, a judicial campaign, and a State Representative’s District Office, all of which developed in last semester’s *Law and Politics* class.

This improved understanding of the pressures facing the courts also leads students to be more informed voters. The Public Defender, the State Attorney, the County Judges and Circuit Judges are all elected officials in Pinellas County. Due to the low salience of judicial races, the drop-off rate here is about 22%. In 2008 78% of those who voted for President also voted for county judge; in 2010 77% of those who voted in the U.S. Senate race also voted for local judges. (www.votepinellas.com) In raw numbers, this means that in the 2008 presidential election, more than 100,000 voters in Pinellas County cast a ballot for President, but not for local judges. As a result of participation in the Courtroom Observation Research Assignment, students will be more informed voters, and I hope, more likely to cast ballots in future judicial races.

Moreover, unlike other branches of government, citizens are called upon to participate in the judicial process as *decision-makers* when they are summoned for jury service. Indeed, jury service is one of our most important civic duties. “The protection of rights and liberties in federal courts largely is achieved through the teamwork of judge and jury.” (www.uscourts.gov) Polls show that

Americans have confidence in the jury system; however, courts are reporting low response rates to jury summons. (<http://www.abanow.org/2005/05/op-ed-jury-service-its-a-privilege/>) Students claim to leave the course with a greater appreciation for and interest in the judiciary – and a greater likelihood to respond affirmatively to the call for jury service. One student claimed, “While I am not interested in a career in law or political science, I will happily serve on any jury I am called for” (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2011).

As a result of the courtroom observation assignment, students demonstrated that they had a better understanding of and interest in the material we covered in class, that they had greater insight into their career goals, and, in many cases, their contacts with attorneys and judges led to internship opportunities that will extend their learning experience into subsequent semesters. In students’ words:

I am graduating this summer and it was by far the best and most informative project I have ever been able to engage with (Post-Test Survey, Spring 2006).

I think I learned more than I would have learned in 3 or 4 more courses combined. The experience was definitely worthwhile (Post-Test Survey, Summer 2008).

The civic engagement component of this course, getting students outside the classroom and into the community, provided a richer learning experience for the students. In many ways, the courtroom became the classroom, a place where valuable lessons about the state and federal judicial process were learned. And, when students brought those courtroom experiences into our discussions, our time in class had a sophistication that would not have been achieved through reliance on the assigned readings alone.

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