

## MN Generations in Conversation Project Reflection

Connor Rowher, Kenzie Putz, Peder Tune, Sarah Sheldon

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how civic engagement projects would look this service year, and ours was no exception. The MN Generations in Conversation Project came about from Connor's prior civic engagement proposal from last year that he proposed again this year. The original idea for our civic engagement project this year was to partner with youth in either Minneapolis or St. Paul public school districts to talk to them about food justice, the myriad of problems surrounding school lunch including both the food offered and the time allocated to eat the food, and to incorporate media projects such as zines and interviews in order to communicate the issues surrounding school lunch to both the local community and to local legislature.

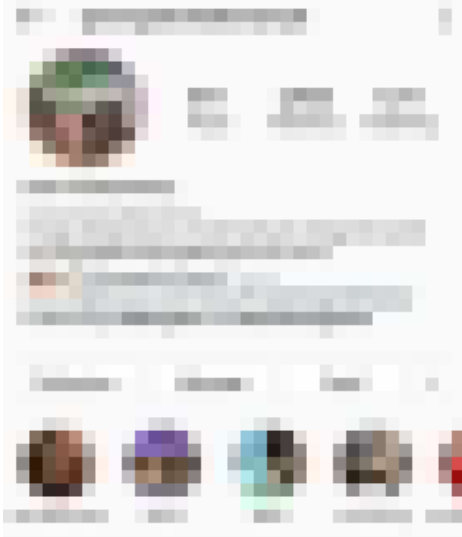


When the pandemic started affecting the U.S. and we began working from home, we realized we needed to switch our project to accommodate the stay at home orders and eventual distance learning decisions, we drew more heavily on ideas from StoryCorps and from the presenters from one of our training days, Daniel Bergin and Kristen Delegard, especially as we were realizing the realities of general isolation from our peers. The other main source of inspiration for this project was a talk David Isay did about StoryCorps. The goal of StoryCorps is to record and preserve conversations from Americans of all backgrounds. We recognized that both the youth we would partner with were just as isolated as elders in nursing homes generally are outside of the pandemic, and with the pandemic were becoming increasingly isolated as what little visitors were allowed could no longer come into the building. We switched gears to putting together a curriculum to teach youth how to interview people, in our specific case elders, to have them discuss the ongoing pandemic and if the elders had ever experienced anything similar.

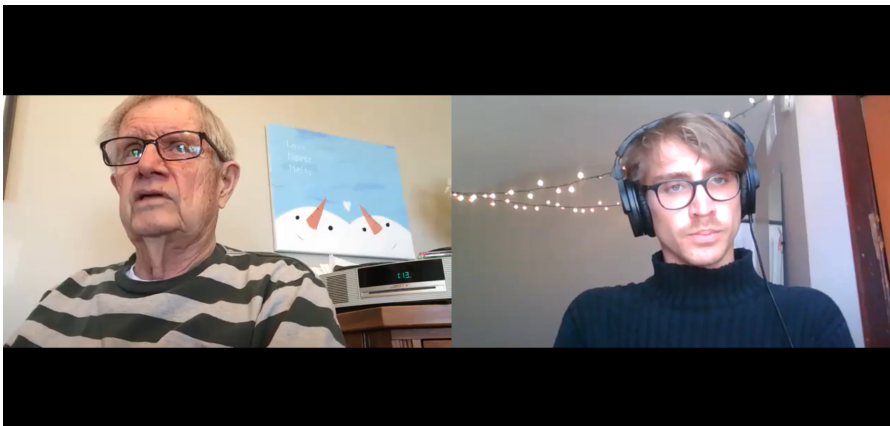


Our final switch of our project came following the murder of George Floyd on May 25th. We had never felt like limiting the youth on what topics they would want to cover; although we would present them the topic we had proposed our project under we understood that they might not want to focus on school lunch and instead focus on issues in school that they found more pressing. However, due to the pandemic and then the murder of George Floyd, we felt that giving the youth space to address the topic of police brutality or other pressing social issues would fit the project better. After altering the theme of the interviews for the final time, we altered our already written curriculum to suit the new aspects of the project so that when we conducted our trainings with our youth partners over zoom, it would be ready to go.

Over the course of the project, we were able to accomplish the following: development and implementation of a curriculum, conduct virtual trainings, and have two participants complete their interviews and submit them. Due to the pandemic, we were struggling to find youth to partner with and so we made the decision to have Sarah reach out to various AmeriCorps programs in the state of Minnesota following an ICC meeting where she pitched the project to other programs as many were struggling with coming up alternative ways to conduct service. Connor also reached out to the KAYSC youth at the Science Museum and garnered some interest there as well. Our main partner, who we connected with through Kenzie, was the Green Garden Bakery, a part of Urban Strategies. The youth who partner with Urban Strategies and Green Garden Bakery work with the Heritage Park community in North Minneapolis, and so were connected to elders in their community to conduct interviews with.



As part of the curriculum, each of us conducted our own interviews with an elder in our lives in order to provide examples of what we were looking for in terms of the interviews and the directions you could go with them. Connor and Sarah conducted their interviews over Google Voice so as to test the success of the recordings as they are saved in a voicemail format. Kenzie and Peder conducted their interviews over Zoom so that both formats could be compared to each other and the youth we partnered with could have several different options to record their interviews through. Each of the interviews that we conducted ended up taking different shapes than what we were expecting, but that is something we wanted to share with the youth so that they could be comfortable with the unpredictable nature of interviews, even if you come prepared with questions ahead of time.



Over the course of three days, we conducted virtual trainings with the Green Garden Bakery youth over zoom to teach them basic interviewing skills and how to conduct and record virtual interviews. Through the trainings we implemented, it falls within CTEP's parameters of imparting digital literacy skills through instructing the youth on how to conduct virtual interviews, and then how to record those interviews. We recognized as well that not every elder would have access to a computer with a video

camera, and so we provided information on how to record phone interviews through Google Voice, which can record incoming calls and save them as voicemails. Following the trainings, we also answered any questions the youth had and joined one of their meetings to discuss the project with youth who hadn't been able to attend the trainings. The results of our project will be recorded on each of our CTEP tracking sheets.

We were able to accomplish our first set of trainings and the completion of two interviews, one from a KAYSC youth participant who conducted an inter-generational interview with her grandma and her aunt acting as translator, and one with an AmeriCorps member from the Green Corps program. So far, we have yet to receive any submissions from the youth at Green Garden Bakery, although we were anticipating that possibility as they too became increasingly busy with community work following the murder of George Floyd with cleanup and supply runs. Through this, we feel like we were able to meet most of the goals we set out to accomplish. However, we do feel like we didn't quite accomplish our goals in getting more than two completed interviews for the project, as we were hoping for more participants from the youth. We recognize that this was difficult to accomplish as distance learning took a toll on many students and so pitching the project to school students didn't quite work out. We may not have received any submissions from the youth at Green Garden Bakery, but we have established a connection with the youth if the project were to be continued next service year.

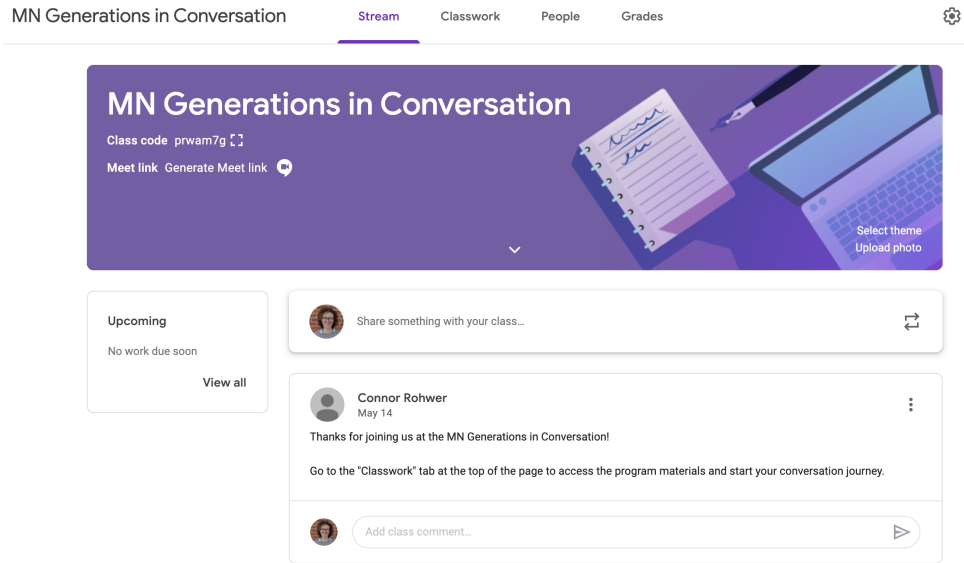
Another goal we felt we didn't quite accomplish was how our curriculum turned out. While we are proud of the hard work we put into developing the curriculum, we feel that more could be done to improve the curriculum and make it better suited to both virtual trainings and to translate better on the Google Classroom we set up. There were also several stumbling blocks we had to overcome, including the reshaping of our project following the stay at home orders. Prior to the switch to conducting digital interviews, we were still trying to figure out how to move forward with our first project iteration with no camera equipment following the stay at home orders and pause on checking out camera and editing equipment from SPNN. This was prior to distance learning being implemented for the remainder of the school year and the likelihood of meeting in person decreasing entirely. We moved forward in finding different ways to record interviews virtually, such as through Zoom or over Google Voice.

Another stumbling block was some issues we had during the trainings with Zoom. While we had communicated with Urban Strategies about sending the youth our own Zoom link, we ended up for the first two days using the link provided on their end. This led to the issue of not being able to share our screens for the video elements of our curriculum. We also had an issue with breakout rooms on the final training day. While these weren't major issues, they did take away time for our trainings. We also struggled to get the youth to turn their cameras on during each Zoom call which we now know to address in the future if a similar training would be conducted virtually and not in person.

Our civic engagement project is one that we feel could be continued through to another year if a group chose to take it on again next year. The connection has been established between CTEP and the youth at Green Garden Bakery, and could easily be

continued next year when the youth at Green Garden Bakery have more time than a couple weeks to conduct the trainings and then their interviews. One suggestion to further the completion of the interviews by youth participants would be to partner with them earlier than when we connected with Urban Strategies, so as to give the youth ample time to get to know the elders they are paired with before conducting their interviews. It will also give more youth from Green Garden Bakery a chance to participate as well, as we only had anywhere from 5 to 9 participants during the trainings.

Another way this project has the potential to continue next year is that the curriculum is essentially written, although we recognize that it can be improved, especially if the group that takes the project on decides to partner with teachers across the metro as the curriculum would then have to be further adapted to meet the course standards as set by both the school districts, the state, and the federal government. We also have the Google Classroom published, which can be edited to best suit how the project continues next year, and teachers can be added to it to check on students progress if the project were to continue with students. Finally, the project can also be adapted back to an in-person training format if the potential for safe gatherings with people can occur during the project's timeline.



The civic engagement project experience has allowed us to work with youth from an area of the metro none of us were really familiar with prior to the project. The youth from Green Garden Bakery were able to tell us some facts about the Heritage Park area, how Green Garden Bakery started, and how they are continuing to grow. It has also allowed us to learn more about developing curriculum that meets mandated course standards to be able to be utilized in a school setting. The process of adapting our project to fit the current needs of the group, whether it was us as CTEP members or what we felt would best serve the youth we were partnering with more, especially given the circumstances of undertaking this project during a pandemic where in-person interactions weren't allowed. We have also learned the value of trainings that are

conducted in person as opposed to over zoom, as there are issues with conducting virtual trainings such as participants videos not being turned on or connection issues among other issues.

If CTEP were to conduct long-term civic engagement activities next year, we feel that the following would be good suggestions as to how the project concept as a whole could be changed. We feel as though there should be alternative options put together if there is another shut down just in case the pandemic continues and no vaccine is developed and then implemented. Attempting to conduct our civic engagement project during the pandemic and having to switch and figure out a whole new project concept under those circumstances was stressful. While we understand that this is an integral part of the CTEP program, it is much harder to conduct the civic engagement projects under normal parameters when the normal parameters are no longer viable options.

Another suggestion would be to maybe identify areas or groups CTEP could partner with in order to better craft projects to help the community. While all of the ideas that have been produced so far have been great, it might be better to identify the needs of a particular group before then presenting a project idea to help the community in some way. This way, whichever groups that Civic Engagement groups partner with feel as though they are creating something that will be utilized after their service year is over with, as CTEP would have identified needs that need to be addressed in the community and then the projects center around those needs.

The only items for our project that required any funding, which was not reimbursed by CTEP as we didn't feel like that would be necessary, was spending \$15 a month for premium zoom, which Sarah absorbed that cost as she was already using it for movie and game nights with friends over zoom. Otherwise, the project did not cost any money as Google Voice is a free service that is connected to a person's email account, Zoom has free accounts as well, and as we were not able to host the trainings in person we didn't end up having to provide any snacks or drinks for the youth.

In conclusion, we feel like our civic engagement project did well under the circumstances that surrounded the process of establishing the project and then implementing it throughout the course of the stay at home orders and the slow reopening of Minnesota. While the project would have possibly more submissions had the project been implemented in its current form sooner, the project accomplished what we set out to do and we feel satisfied with what we were able to do with the youth of Green Garden Bakery. The project in its current form will be easily adaptable if a group were to take this project on and continue it next year, and even update it for whatever needs their Civic Engagement project were to take.