The Civic Lab at Skokie Public Library Overview and FAQ

If you're just becoming familiar with the Civic Lab at Skokie Public Library, you can explore a few resources to get a general overview of the initiative:

- The Civic Lab webpage from Skokie Public Library
  https://skokielibrary.info/resources/civic-lab/
- Program Model: Civic Lab on *Programming Librarian*
  http://programminglibrarian.org/programs/civic-labs
- The first year of the Civic Lab on *The Show Me Librarian*
  https://showmelibrarian.blogspot.com/search/label/Civic%20Lab

Do you have a formula for what is included for Civic Lab appearances?

Here's the rough checklist we use; I'm also attaching our template for our Civic Lab resource handouts. You can also see all of our past handouts linked on the individual events from our Civic Lab website.
Civic Lab Event Standards - What does every appearance of the Civic Lab entail?
- Listing in event calendar using a template and our naming convention
- A central prompt or question with any of the following in support of exploring that prompt/question: visuals, activities, conversation starters, resources
- Handout with information and resources on the topic
- Direct staffing/facilitation of the appearance (For extended appearances, i.e., over several days, select portions of the appearance may be directly staffed/facilitated.)
- After-appearance recap/notes on the basecamp (including what elements appeared at the installation, numbers and details of participants/engagement, links to resources shared at the installation, lessons learned, etc.)

Do you have any tech with you (laptop, iPad) to demonstrate websites, podcasts, digital collections, etc.?

We do often bring some tech components to the Civic Lab, depending on the topic. We have an iPad stand in which we'll mount an iPad and show a specifically chosen video, for

instance, or we'll bring a laptop to the installation so that we can look up information alongside patrons in real time.

What does the physical pop-up setup usually look like?

We use some wooden crates that we can move and structure as we please, and those tend to form the structure of the Civic Lab pop-ups. We also have a standing banner branded with the Civic Lab for help identifying the pop-up. We've recently added some rolling white boards to our supplies, which we can use to encourage people to share information and thoughts on a larger space. We also typically have sticky notes for patrons to add comments and thoughts, as well as a laptop so we can do information seeking at the Civic Lab. After that, the topic of the Civic Lab and the activities we have planned will determine any other components we include, which might be materials for gamified components, a materials display, etc.

Is there rationale for the days and times you pop up with the Civic Lab?

Honestly, the first factor in scheduling Civic Lab pop-ups is the availability of the staff leading each pop-up—which definitely adds some constraints to when we're able to have pop-ups. Once staff schedules are taken into account, however, we then try to take into account busier times for the library (around programs, after school, etc.) as well as trying to have a variety of timing options so that patrons who visit at different times might have a chance of running into the Civic Lab. We try to avoid the first and last open hours of the day, too.

Do you leave Civic Lab installations up beyond the time of the staffed pop-ups?

We do not currently leave up any passive displays on any of our Civic Lab topics—rather, the installation is up for only the amount of time that it's directly facilitated. This is a choice because of the ways our library spaces are used and the fact that we don't have a great spot to leave the installation up without it becoming disruptive for other library activities.

The CIVIC LAB at Skokie Public Library offers information and thought-provoking activities to support dialogue and engagement on issues that affect our community.

Are news sources and articles vetted ahead of the pop-ups? Are copies provided for participants at pop-ups?

When the staff member coordinating the Civic Lab around a particular topic is preparing their pop-up, one of the responsibilities involved is putting together the curated resource list handout. We strive to include a variety of types and formats of information on these handouts: key definitions, conversation starters or discussion questions, things to read, things to listen to, things to watch, etc. These handouts are very intentionally curated and annotated—any content that is shared on a handout is chosen by the Civic Lab team because it offers a credible perspective on the topic being explored. Our handouts do not function as "pro/con" lists of resources; rather, we strive to include many different perspectives and takes on the topic at hand so that participants can dive more deeply than the typical pro/con arguments or quick facts they might see on social media or on their news source of choice. You can see examples of our handouts linked from individual events on our Civic Lab webpage. We'll frequently have copies of key articles or resources available at the Civic Lab pop-ups, too.

How do you create experiences that engage all ages?

For us, this comes down to a few core tenets that we try to apply where relevant to engage all audiences.

For kids, we've found engagement is most successful when there are aspects of the pop-up that are fun. In many cases, this will translate to us including a gamified activity in the pop-up (as with Actually, She Did That, which had a matching game component).

For teens, engagement is most successful when the topic is personally relevant, so we'll try to make concrete connections to the community, lives of teens, etc., in how we're exploring the topic at hand.

For adults, the key to engagement seems to be that content is intellectually stimulating, at once allowing adults to share what they know about a topic and also to dive deeper in a way they hadn't seen before. This can mean displaying a variety of resources for browsing, asking questions that build a community information resource on a topic, and asking for opinions.

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How long does it take to prepare to facilitate a topic?

The time it takes to prepare a topic depends on both the topic and the staff person leading it. We stress a lot that the staff are not experts on the Civic Lab topic—rather, they are information experts, and in the same way that we approach topics at the reference desk on which we aren't experts, we are committed to having a baseline knowledge and then diving in to learn and discover more alongside the patron. That's the same for the Civic Lab, so most preparation is complete when the staff facilitating the topic has completed the handout of resources— which essentially acts as the framework for the topic and ensures they have enough background info to get started.

What ground rules do you use for Civic Lab pop-ups to ensure that conversations are productive and respectful?

We don't specifically state ground rules for the Civic Lab, although they're certainly implied. At the core, our goal for the Civic Lab is exploring reputable information on a topic, ideally from lots of different vantage points. To that end, it's somewhat of a ground rule that a) we're going to look to the source of any information shared, and b) we're going to ask questions to get at deeper consideration of a topic at hand (rather than just continuing to hold previously-held viewpoints without considering others). It's also a core tenet of the Civic Lab that we are NOT trying to persuade patrons to come to a certain conclusion on a topic. We're operating under the premise that people can make the best decisions when informed, libraries are information experts, and so our end goal is to support patrons in considering all the information that they need in order to understand a topic and come to their own conclusions.

How do you train staff to feel comfortable and confident leading Civic Lab pop-ups, especially on controversial topics?

We work hard to frame this for staff who do the Civic Lab that this is similar to working an information desk—that is, they don't need to be an expert on the topic of the pop-up, but rather should be able to engage conversation around reputable resources and information. Staff will usually opt to lead a Civic Lab on a topic they know about or care about, so they do tend to have some baseline background knowledge, but the point of the Civic Lab conversations is more to help everyone explore lots of resources and viewpoints in order to ultimately make up

their own minds. We've not had any of these get heated, and I would say that's in large part due to our philosophy: the goal of the Civic Lab is to connect patrons to information so that they can make informed decisions—not to get participants to think a certain way about any given topic. Since we're not trying to persuade anyone to agree or disagree with a particular take on an issue, we don't tend to have any arguments taking place, etc. For example, when we had a pop-up on Narratives of Gun Violence, the goal was not to get people to think a certain way about gun violence, gun rights, etc. Instead, the goal was to facilitate people considering lots of different viewpoints (rather than just the one they already agree with). Participants are guided in considering lots of reputable sources of information, and from that they form informed opinions and often talk about why they have the opinion they do. I guess all of this is to say that, even if the issue we're discussing feels controversial, we're not discussing it in a controversial manner. Our goal is for patrons to have access to and consider all the facts, and from there make up their minds. We're not asking questions that make people self-identify as being pro- or con- any one issue, but rather coming from a viewpoint of "What have you heard about X topic? Have you thought about it from Y perspective as well? Here are some resources to help do that."

How did you train library staff in facilitating?

Aside from mandatory all-staff customer service training, which specifically included sections on difficult conversations and conflict resolution, we haven't had any formal facilitation training for our staff who work in the Civic Lab. A lot of it has been learning as we go. As new staff members step up to lead Civic Lab pop-ups, we'll pair them with some veteran Civic Lab folks so that they can see pop-up facilitating in action. Some of the core pieces that we talk about (and put into practice in pop-ups) are strategies for responding to patron-shared information we know to be inaccurate or misleading ("That's interesting, I hadn't heard that before. Can you tell me where you got that information? Let's explore it."); strategies for redirecting patrons to the topic at hand when they go on a tangent; and equipping staff to feel like they can confidently seek out information as patrons ask questions (which is really just like doing live reference work). Most staff already have the facilitation skills necessary to successfully lead a Civic Lab pop-up, but they perhaps haven't thought about those skills in that way before.

How do you ensure staff leading the Civic Lab are avoiding personal bias in how they frame a topic?

When we develop a Civic Lab on a topic or issue, we very purposefully do NOT have a standard conclusion in mind. Rather, the interactions (always facilitated by at least one staff member) center around asking what a patron already knows about a topic, and then challenging them to consider other reputable resources. We emphasize to all staff involved in the Civic Lab that we're never trying to get participants to reach a particular conclusion—rather, we're trying to get participants to consider the fullest range of information so that they can be confident in their informed opinion, whatever that may be. Suffice it to say that participants don't all walk away from the Civic Lab sharing an opinion on an issue, or sharing (or even knowing) the opinion of a staff member. They do, however, have at least a slightly more nuanced understanding of some of the other ways of thinking about the issue at hand.

Do staff leading Civic Lab pop-ups need to be experts in the pop-up topic?

We work hard to frame this for staff who do the Civic Lab that this is similar to working an information desk—that is, they don't need to be an expert in the topic of the pop-up, but rather should be able to engage conversation around reputable resources and information. It is true that it's staff who are the ones choosing the topics for exploration; creating curated handouts of resources to help participants find various points of information on the topic; developing conversation questions; and facilitating discussion during the actual pop-up. Staff will usually opt to lead a Civic Lab on a topic they know about or care about, so they do tend to have some baseline background knowledge, but the point of the Civic Lab conversations is more to help everyone explore lots of resources and viewpoints in order to ultimately make up their own minds.

Do you bring in content experts to facilitate Civic Lab conversations?

Our Civic Lab is staff-run—as a rule of thumb, we don't bring in outside speakers to facilitate discussions, etc., except in special circumstances. For example, when we explored the topic of suicide, we felt it was important to bring in mental health experts from the community so that they could help to ensure the safety
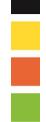
of participants and the veracity of information. For most topics, however, the goal is to leverage librarian information expertise to help participants explore reputable resources and viewpoints on a topic in order to ultimately make up their own minds. That's not to say you couldn't go the outside expert route if it were best for your community or staff levels.

Do participants approach the Civic Lab with an intent to argue or debate on political topics? What if someone shows up with the express purpose of upsetting the other attendees?

We've been doing the Civic Lab for a while now, so many patrons are familiar with it as an information-centered initiative (rather than an issue-centered one). So we don't really get that many people coming up to participate who are ready to be combative around their own opinions on a topic, or anticipating that we're trying to convince them of a particular viewpoint. Rather, people see our Civic Lab branding and tend to be open to learning more about the topic at hand, in the process deepening their own understanding. We feel this works quite well for a staff-based initiative, since we are not issue experts, but rather information experts. In the event a participant insists on being combative rather than conversational, library staff will redirect that patron to another topic or another part of the library. If ever conversation veers toward the offensive, aggressive, or inappropriate, staff will remind the participant of the library's policies around appropriate library behavior.

What if my administration/board/community is against the idea of exploring any topics that might be considered controversial?

If you feel like you don't have the institutional or community support to jump into topics and issues that are often portrayed as controversial, don't forget that you can start with civic discussions that have an end goal of understanding how government works. We've done lots of Civic Lab pop-ups on topics like how bills become laws, what is the Supreme Court, what is the EPA, etc.—all topics that are important for people to know about. Again, since it's all based on information rather than personal feelings about issues or government departments, etc., it ends up being about developing a deeper understanding of how government, policy, and issues work.

Do you have any general words of wisdom for building experiences around civic engagement?

1) Know your intent in offering civic events: for us, that's making sure all staff are 100% clear that the goal is good information, NOT reaching a specific conclusion on a topic. Being firmly rooted in the intent of the project can help staff troubleshoot potentially sticky situations.
2) Be willing to try different things: different set-ups, conversation questions, activities, etc. There are a myriad of ways in which civic engagement pop-ups can be successful, and we keep iterating new ones alongside reusing old standards.
3) Document all events you lead. There is tons to learn from each iteration.
4) Don't think you need to be an expert on a civic topic in order to do a pop-up on that topic. Remember, when the event is ultimately about information, what you need is to be an expert in information (which librarians already are). It's great to prepare for a pop-up by doing some research so you have a baseline of knowledge, but any deeper content learning can happen on the spot as questions arise.