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## Increasing Faculty Collaboration and Community Engagement through Critical Librarianship and Public Sphere Pedagogy

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# Increasing Faculty Collaboration and Community Engagement through Critical Librarianship and Public Sphere Pedagogy

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## Introduction

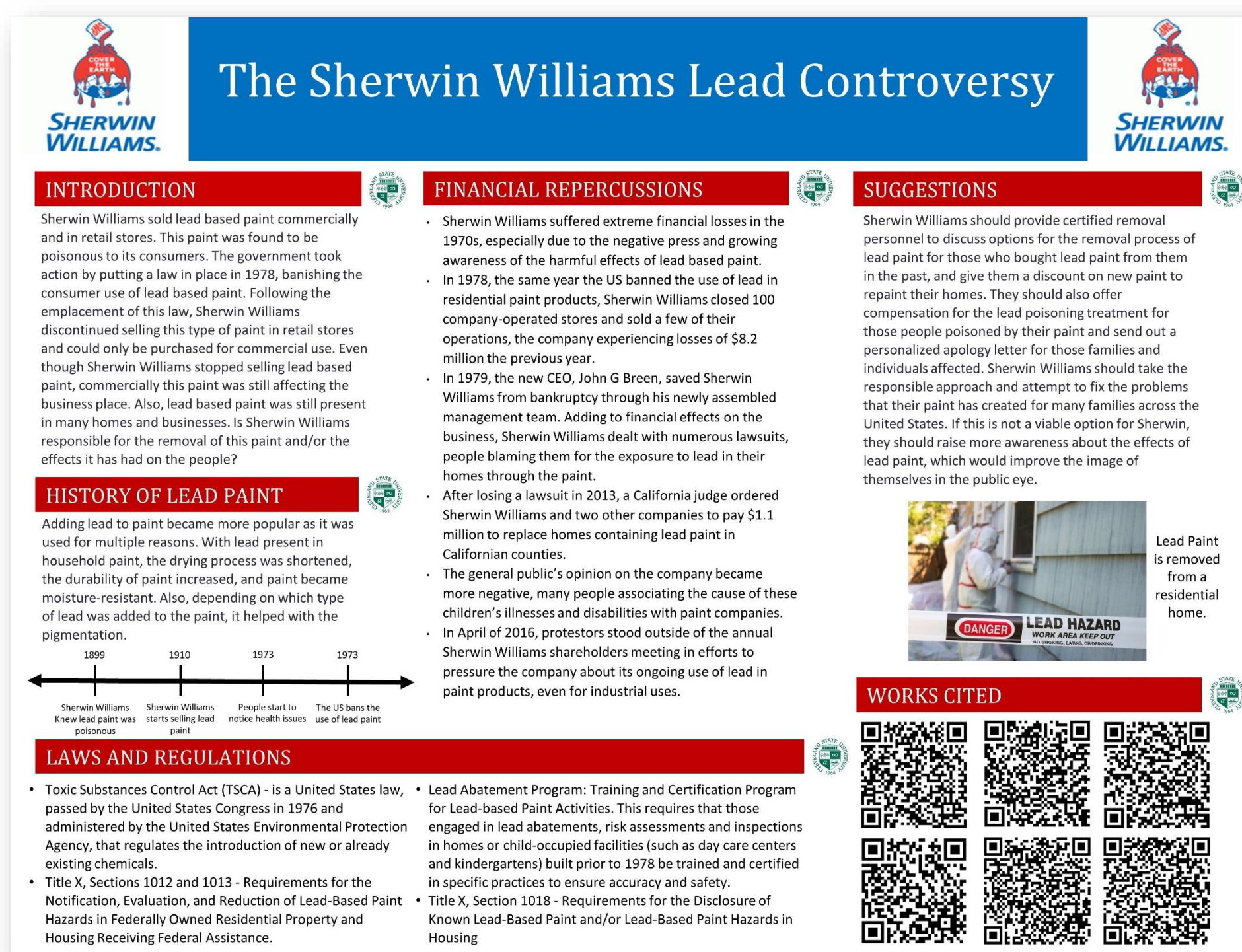
Through the lens of critical librarianship, librarians are becoming increasingly involved in social justice and human rights issues. This poster describes a collaboration between a subject librarian and a faculty member in which students were given an assignment that drew on Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP). The goal of PSP is to increase students' sense of civic agency and personal and social responsibility by connecting their classwork to public arenas.

ENG 208 is a General Education course at Cleveland State University (CSU) that intersects with Black Studies and Women's Studies. The PSP project built on an assignment to read *Blanche Cleans Up*, a detective novel by Barbara Neely that targets lead poisoning in poor urban areas. Students created research projects that not only explored the ramifications of lead poisoning, but also the ways in which their chosen disciplines addressed issues surrounding lead poisoning. Students then shared their findings in a poster presentation sponsored by CSU's Michael Schwartz Library on Monday, December 5, 2015.

## Librarianship and Critical Pedagogy

Librarians have been promoting critical pedagogy in library instruction for over a decade. The combination of information literacy and critical pedagogy is often referred to as "critical information literacy." Tewell defines critical information literacy as the "ways librarians may encourage students to engage with and act upon the power structures underpinning information's production and dissemination" (2015, p. 25). An important aspect of critical information literacy is its emphasis on student-centered learning, and the encouragement of students to take an active role in their own education (Tewell, 2015). Students are asked to consider what is happening in their world, ask questions, and take action to make necessary changes.

While higher education is increasingly focused on producing graduates who will have specific job skills and be primed to enter the capitalist workforce, critical information literacy tries to promote education that has a purpose beyond the production of capable workers. In critical information literacy, students are encouraged to acknowledge problems in society and work for social change (Tewell, 2015). For librarians, this means introducing dialogue and social issues into the information literacy session. Public Sphere Pedagogy is one way of accomplishing this task.



Example of Student Poster for the PSP Poster Session

## What is Public Sphere Pedagogy?

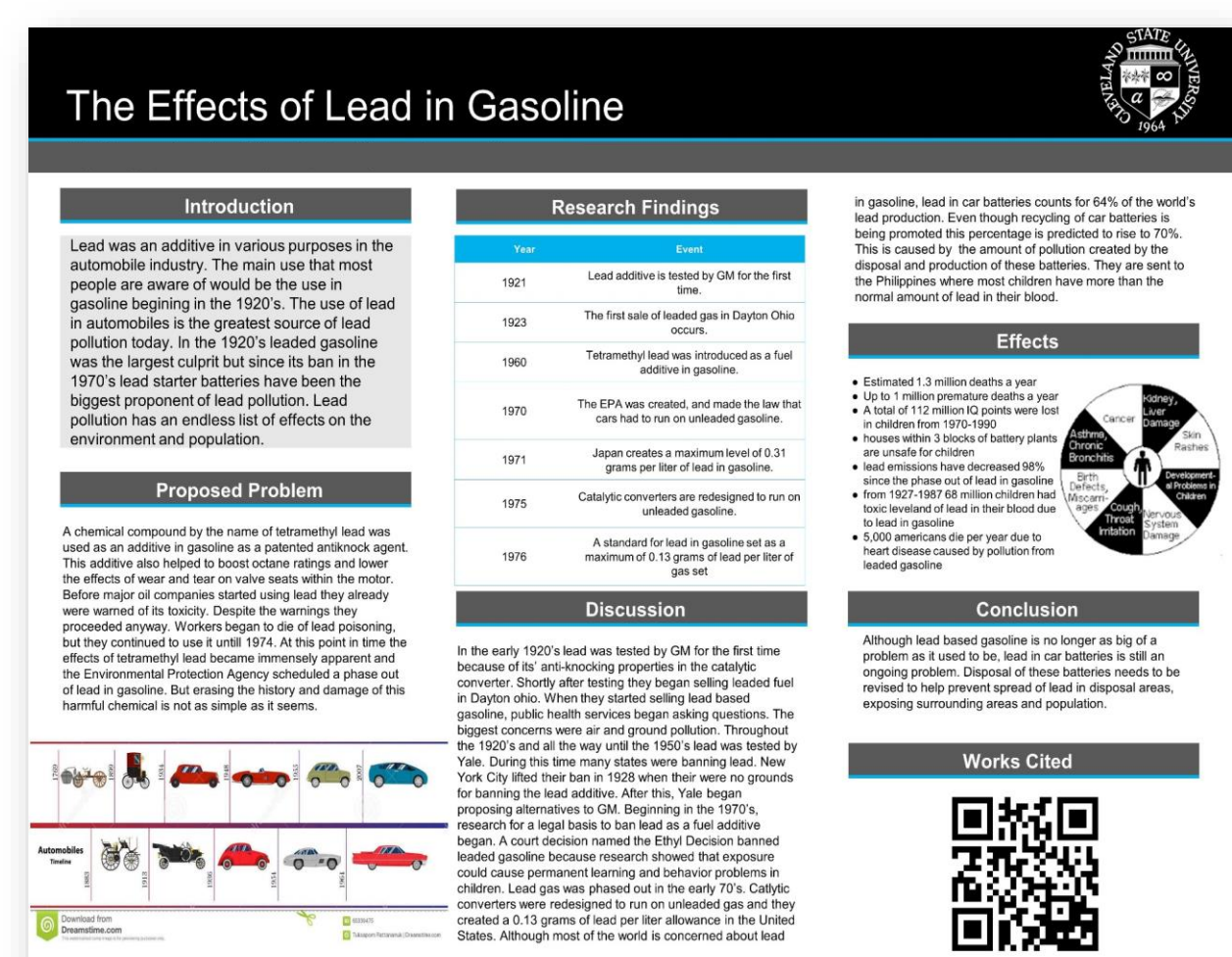
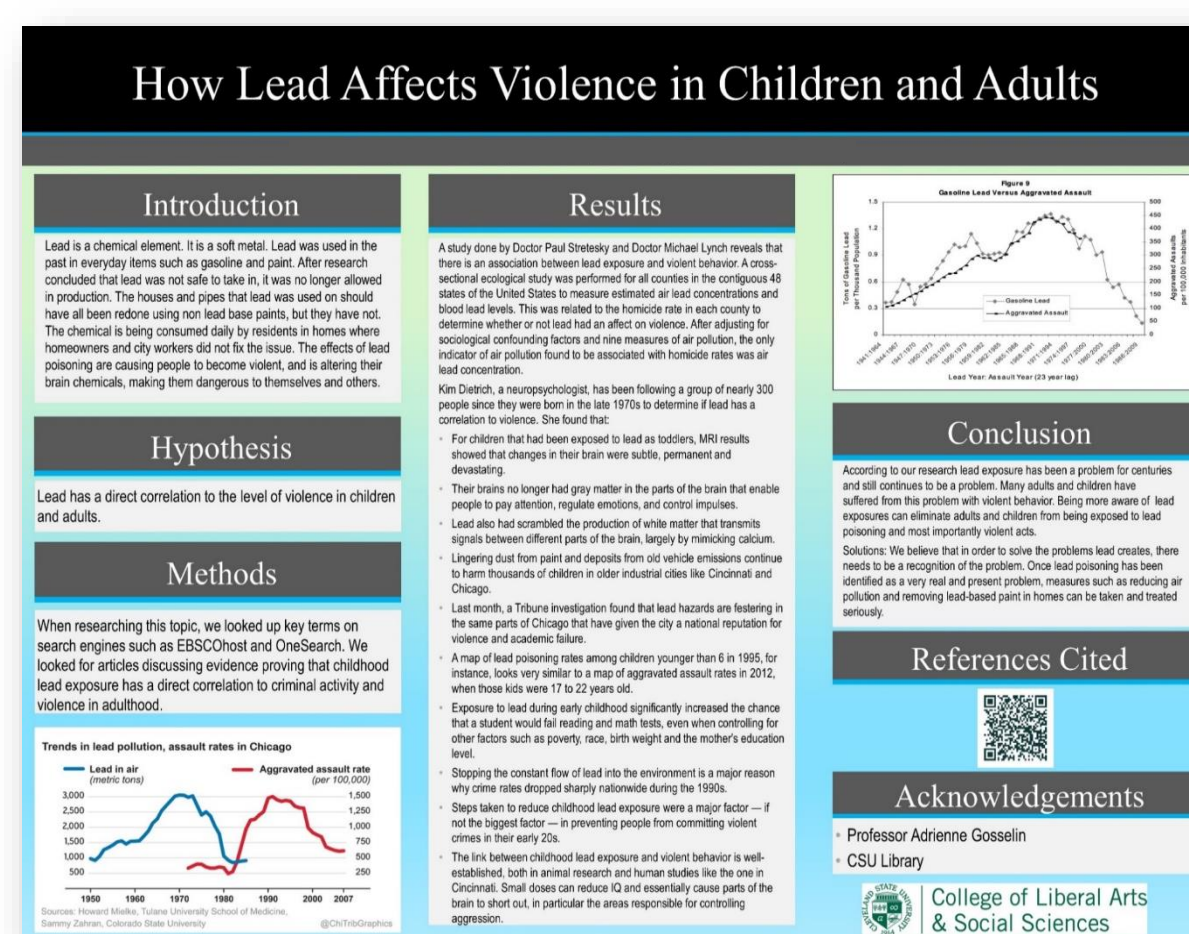
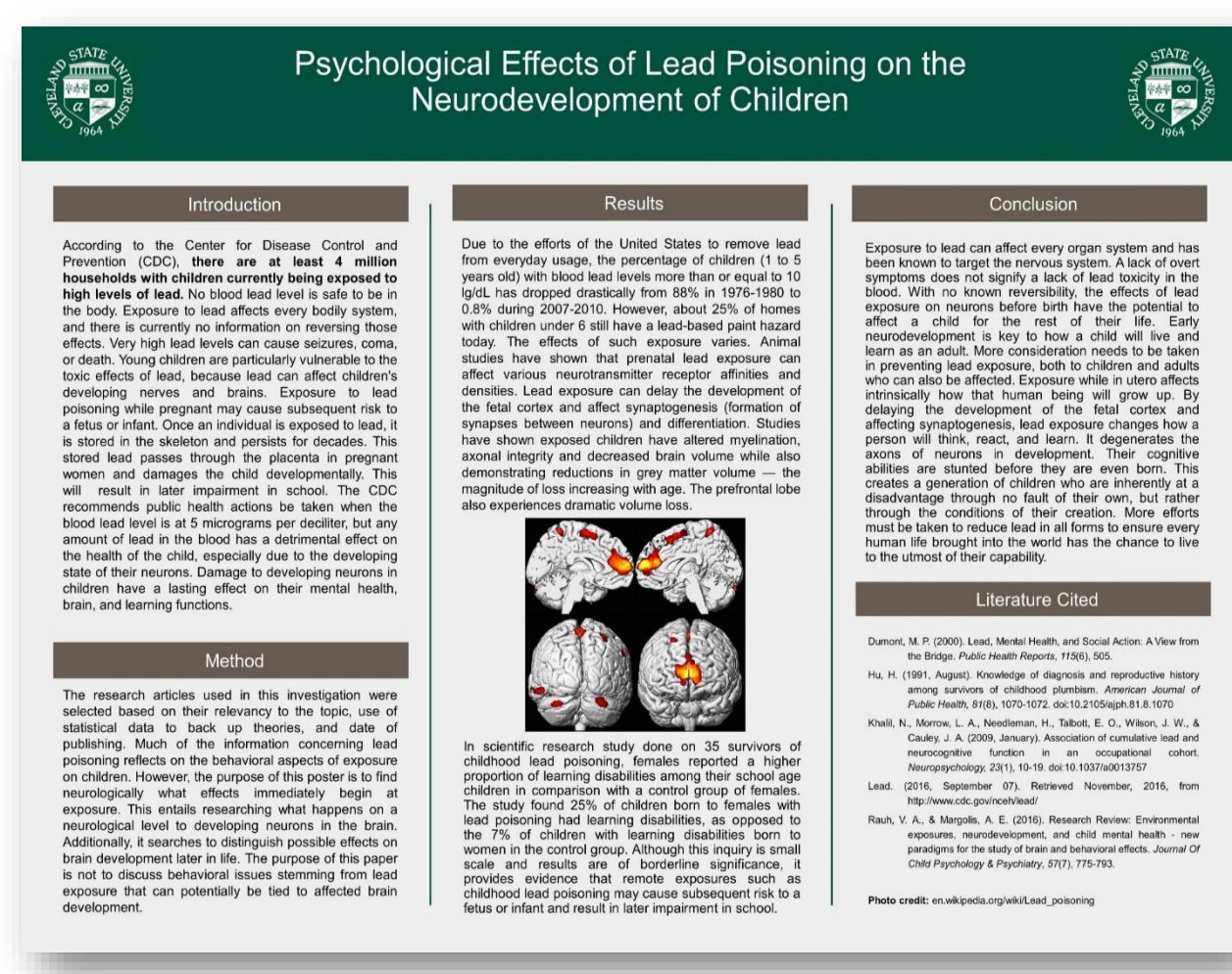
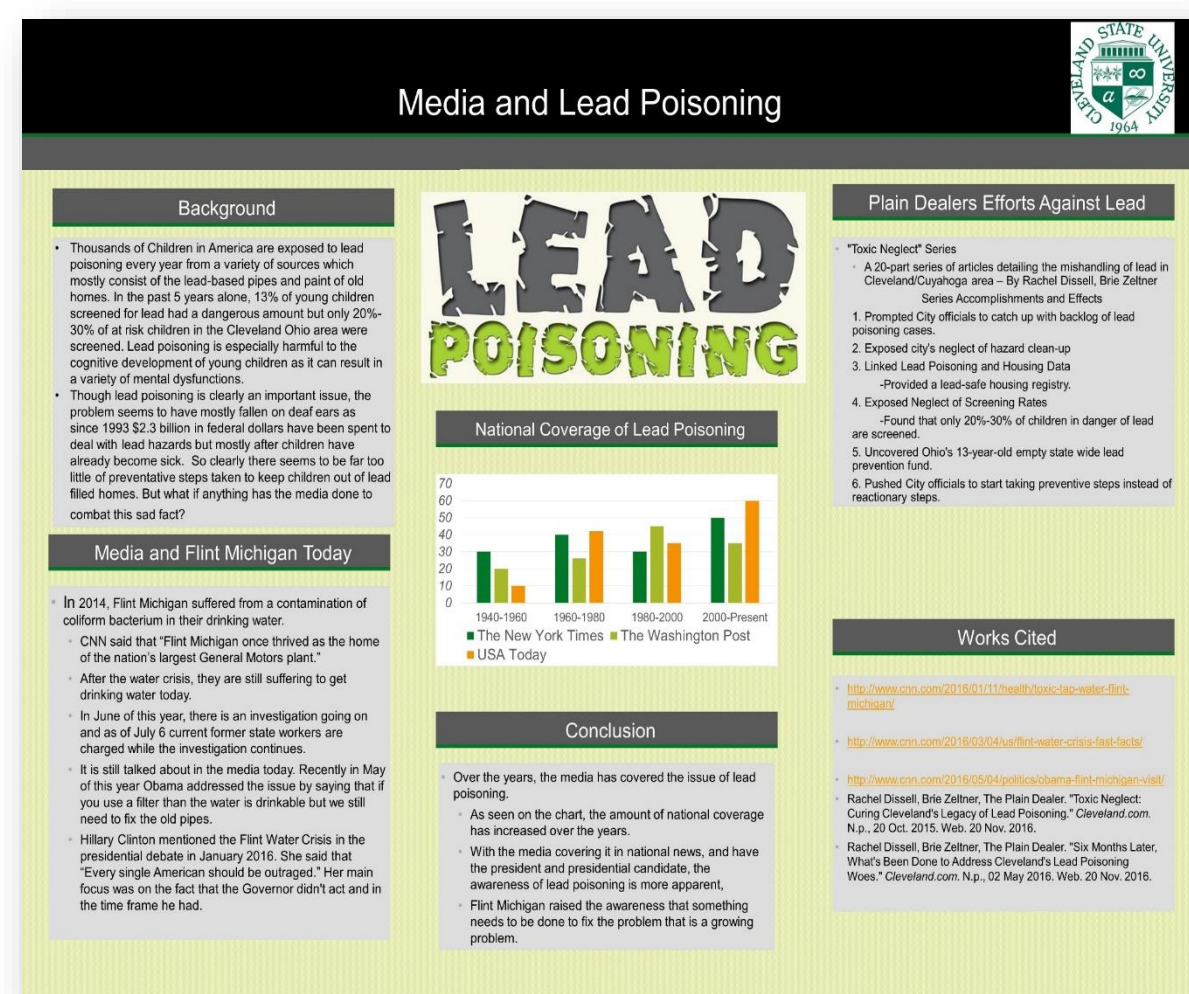
The underlying approach to Dr. Gosselin's ENG 208 course is called "public sphere pedagogy" (PSP). PSP describes a method of teaching that adds a public component to instruction in an effort to address contemporary, public issues and help students gain a deeper sense of civic engagement and responsibility (Horowitz, 2016). This approach was first introduced by First-Year Writing instructors at California State University-Chico (CSU-Chico), where the instructors used two approaches to help students develop the dialogue and research skills necessary to be more civically engaged (Swienicki et al., 2001). The idea of PSP builds on the work of John Dewey, who argued that students should be active participants in their learning, and that education should reflect the "life activities" in which students participate (Dewey, 1916). It also builds on the idea of "communities of practice," developed by Lave and Wenger in the 1990s. In communities of practice, student groups engage with shared issues and are driven by a common purpose (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Both of these theorists, while not explicitly referencing the relationship between their ideas and the development of an active democratic community, support the premise of PSP—that students be actively involved in their learning with others in their communities, such that they become more informed and active participants in a democracy.

One PSP method introduced by CSU-Chico (initially in 2006 and continuing to the present) is called the "Town Hall Meeting." As part of this event, students are required to conduct individual research projects on controversial topics of interest, writing annotated bibliographies and working on peer research teams to answer their assigned questions and explore potential action plans (Swienicki et al., 2001). Then, all 1,200–1,400 students come together to discuss the issue in groups of twenty-five, along with subject experts from the community and moderators (Wolf, 2014). With the help of the subject experts, students then develop action plans that some go on to implement through Office of Civic Engagement internships (Wolf, 2014). The event ends with students writing reflections about their dialogues with others about these challenging issues.

The other PSP method employed by CSU-Chico instructors is called the "Chico Great Debate." At this event, which is open to the public and takes place in government buildings in the community, students make speeches, give panel presentations, engage in debate, and conduct an "expo" of sorts, with displays and activities to engage participants (Wolf, 2014). The topics of the all-day event are usually controversial and relevant to the community, and they require students to conduct research in preparation.

The success of these events has inspired other instructors to begin adopting the principles of PSP in their own teaching. At Cleveland State University (CSU), Dr. Gosselin is one of two faculty who have used PSP in their classrooms. Edward Horowitz, a professor in the School of Communication, used PSP to help his journalism students explore public issues in 2014 through interviews of the public and poster presentations. In conjunction with another one of Dr. Horowitz's classes, CSU also conducted a Town Hall event in 2015. This event's keynote speaker was the CEO of a local grocery store chain, and it engaged students in dialogue about food and their community (Horowitz, 2016). These events have met with success and continue to be offered.

Assessments of these events show that participants tend to be more academically engaged, and they often demonstrate (through their reflections) changes in thinking habits as well as higher levels of self-esteem (Swienicki et al., 2001). PSP encourages critical theory by helping students question authority and take control of the democratic process for themselves (Wolf, 2014). Rather than serving in the role of observers in the classroom, PSP asks students to engage in their communities, take the initiative to learn about issues which affect them, and take action based on what they have learned.



Examples of Student Posters for the PSP Poster Session

## Library and ENG 208

There were two weeks allotted for the PSP project in Dr. Gosselin's ENG 208 class. Following reading and class discussion, students organized into eight self-selected groups. Three groups represented various majors within the Colleges of Business, Science, and Engineering. Three groups represented departments within the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS)—two from the Social Sciences and one composed of interdisciplinary majors with CLASS. Two groups represented majors across disciplines.

Project and Instruction Schedule:

- The English Department Librarian, Mandi, created a research guide in collaboration with other department librarians (see: <http://researchguides.csuohio.edu/eng208>).
- Mandi conducted an information literacy session centered around topics relating to lead.
- Students were then required to post a minimum of three sources to discussion boards set up for their respective groups in Blackboard.
- Students were assigned to read and take notes on *Don Pirrungton: Designing Conference Posters* to become familiar with principles of poster design.
- Donna Stewart, from the Library's Digital Production Unit, attended class to discuss components and mechanics for poster design and to describe best (and not-so-best) practices.
- Each group was able to present two progress reports before submitting final posters to Donna Stewart for production.
- Student posters were presented in the lobby of the library during a publicly-marketed poster session.

As a result of this activity, students were able to:

- Connect classroom curriculum with a public issue.
- Explore the ways in which their majors interact with public issues.
- Gain experience in the production and design of an academic poster.
- Gain experience in poster presentation.

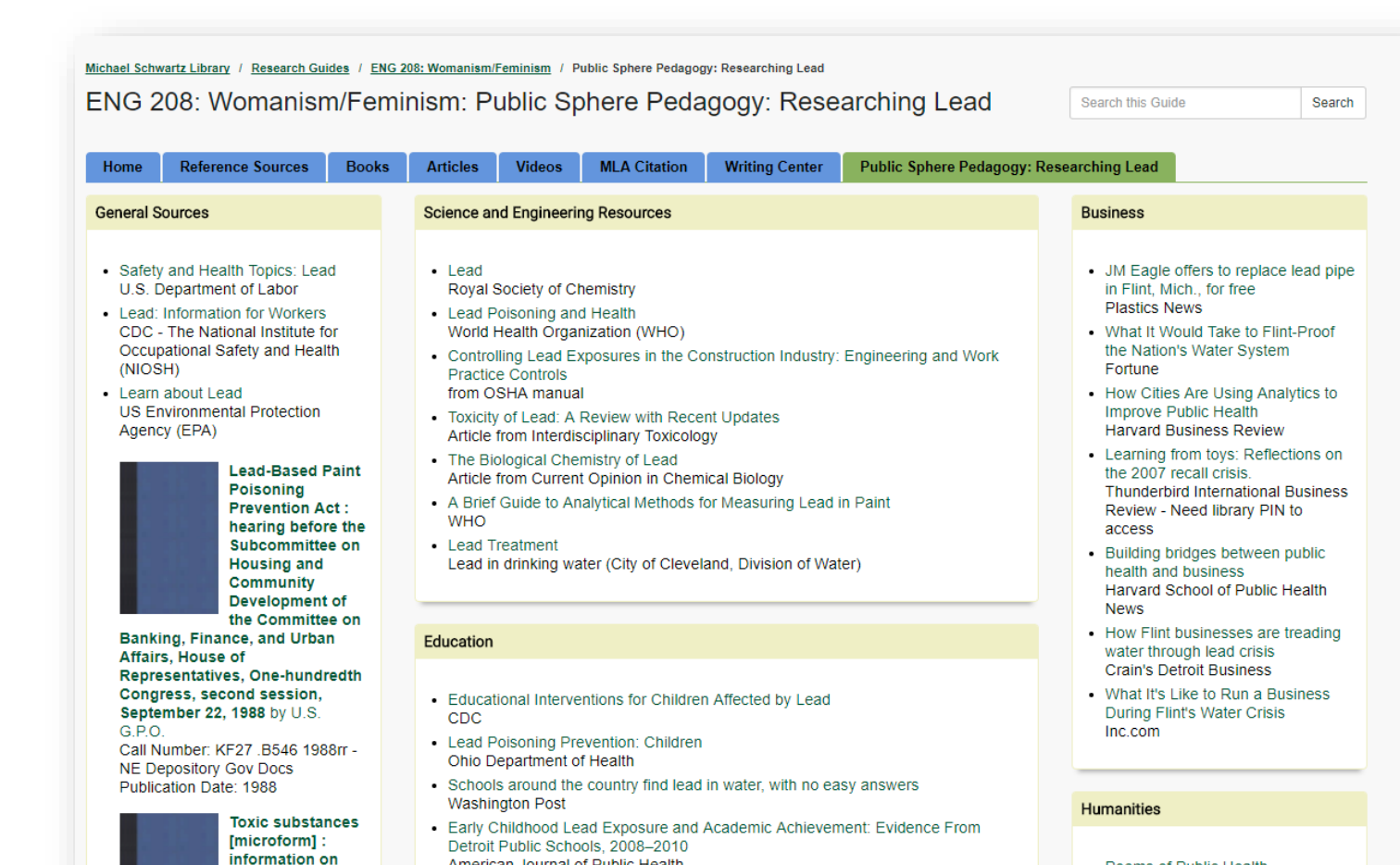
## Recommendations and Conclusions

Librarians have an important role to play in promoting critical information literacy in their instruction. Fortunately, some faculty already prioritize critical pedagogy and subjects of social change in the classroom. In those cases, librarians can provide valuable support in helping students gain the necessary research skills, appreciate the importance of civic engagement, and present their work in a public forum.

Some recommendations for librarians hoping to become more involved in critical information literacy and/or public sphere pedagogy include:

- Involve other librarians in your endeavor.** The research guide created for this course was a group effort by librarians from all of our subject areas at CSU. Students also received valuable training in poster design from a staff member in our Digital Production Unit.
- Encourage students to make their research topics personally inspiring.** One important way of motivating students to make changes in their society is to make the social issues relevant to their experiences and interests.
- Provide the library as a public forum for student work.** Students were thrilled to have various members of the campus community (who were not in their class) stop by to see their posters, which was the result of their placement in a busy campus hub (i.e. the library).
- Consider providing specialized research help for students who are working on PSP projects, or other projects which involve community issues.** Often these projects require special research that can be difficult because it is so specific. Librarians can be particularly helpful here.

Our experience was very positive, and we would recommend the use of PSP in the classroom as a way to promote critical pedagogy and civic engagement. Librarian involvement can be an important component of successful PSP projects.



ENG 208: Womanism/Feminism Research Guide

## References



Or, contact us and see our references at this link: <https://goo.gl/forms/CeeXsTJpcNieohLx2>