

Encouraging Civic Virtues

A Collaborative Model Developed by a Teacher-Librarian and a Classroom Teacher

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Teacher's Perspective

As a government teacher I have always been interested in the level of political knowledge that my students bring with them on the first day of class. For a period of five years in the mid-1990s my students were surveyed on questions concerning elected officials and the processes of the three branches of the federal government as well as on questions about state and local government <www.primaryresearch.org/civic/survey.php>. I asked, for example, Who is the mayor? Who is the governor? What is a referendum? On what ocean is Beverly located? There were nearly three hundred respondents to the pretest over the five-year period. The results of the yearly statistic were consistently poor. The sad reality was exacerbated by my realization that the students responding had *chosen* this elective course because they were *interested* in the subject matter.

For me, the question that now begs discussion is, "What, if any, is the core body of civic knowledge that all Americans should possess?" Immigrants seeking citizenship are given a test in American history and civics as part the naturalization process, yet there are no such civic knowledge tests required of native-born Americans. While the percentage of immigrants who pass the citizenship test is around 90 percent, ironically most high school students would have difficulty passing it. One might even surmise that today's adult population would find the test just as challenging.

Out of curiosity I began investigating my students' responses compared to similar surveys of the adult population over the past fifty

years. These survey questions are similar in nature to many of those on the naturalization test. Unfortunately, these findings demonstrate that although Americans today may be painfully lacking in civic knowledge, there has never, at least over the past fifty years, been a golden age of civic education.

In recent years, civics has become an elective or, worse, been cut because of state-mandated standardized testing, in spite of studies by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that report that students who have taken civic classes have better "civic knowledge, skills and engagement" (Comber 2003, 1). So that our students understand the context in which this class operates, they are asked to conduct research into various aspects of civic education at Beverly High School during the early part of the twentieth century <www.primaryresearch.org/PRTHB/schoolhistory>.

Librarian's Perspective

When our students go to Google and looks up the Bush administration's record on energy policy, what will they find? Will their judgment be based on whose Web site has the most hits and appears at the top of the results list? Will they find articles from the *New York Times*, and, if they did, would they know how that paper's articles differ from those in the *Washington Times*? How do they learn the difference between ad copy and editorial content in *USA Today*? How do my students learn from

(and about) blogs, RS feeds, and IM? What is the difference between *E! News* and *ABC News*? Is there such a thing as unbiased media?

These questions are central to both civic education and media literacy. With the exponential spread of media outlets vying for the attention of an increasingly fragmented society, access to information has increased—but unbiased information is rare. In the past I focused on teaching the skills to access information. Now that students can easily obtain some results, my emphasis has shifted to teaching media literacy—the analysis of those results. We school librarians have a mandate to teach our students the skills necessary to weed through the morass of data, fact, and opinion in order to make sense of civic issues.

Collaboration between the School Librarian and Social Studies Teacher

Like many public schools in recent years, our high school in Beverly, Massachusetts, has had a history of financial challenges. One school year 80 percent of our students were released at 12:20 P.M. because there were not enough funds to pay for a complete school day. More recently, we faced the loss of accreditation due to the unacceptable condition of the school building. Classroom resources are limited. There are no computers in the classroom in which the government class is taught. Our civics textbook was published in 1991. The television can only be used to play videos.

How can civics and media literacy be taught in a system constrained by ideology, time, and funding? We've found that the answers lie in creative planning and collaboration that takes advantage of civic learning opportunities in the local community as well as at the state and federal level.

At an institutional level, we work together on civic education initiatives. We are coordinators for the annual student Project Close-Up insider trip to Washington, D.C. We also serve on the steering committee for the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union Bill of Rights Foundation, which offers student workshops about the impact of the Bill of Rights on everyday life.

Collaboratively we maintain PrimaryResearch.org <www.primaryresearch.org>, a Web site that features the achievements and contributions of our students. It also provides them with Web resources, including class assignments and course study guides. For example, our students learn about the evolution of democracy from its earliest stages in Ancient Greece and Rome; to British examples expressed in the Magna Carta, the Petition of Right, and Declaration of Rights; to the ideals expressed in our Mayflower Compact, Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Women's Declaration of Rights, and Emancipation Proclamation. These documents have been posted by the school librarian as a study resource for the class. Both of us have reworked or paraphrased some of the more difficult readings in order to accommodate various reading levels. Study questions are linked to the documents. In addition we have created study guides on various readings, such as Carl Becker's *The Declaration of Independence*, Bernard Bailyn's *The Origins of American Politics*, and David Jacobsen's *The English Libertarian History*.

In further support of the curriculum, the librarian adds relevant books and journals to the collection and acts as a co-teacher, editing student civic research projects and teaching before-school civic seminars using the library as the classroom.

The guiding focus of our class is the preservation of local civic documents and

the creation of local history digital databases, which are then published on our Web site. Students develop sophisticated research skills while acting as apprentice-historians conducting original research using primary source documents and databases.

Course Overview

Our course attempts to provide students with the knowledge and critical thought processes needed to meet challenges to democracy, such as tyranny of the majority, separation of power, individual liberties, limited government, and equality. Through a variety of hands-on activities we hope to develop the political awareness necessary for students to be informed and discerning citizens in a participatory democracy with civic responsibility and civic virtue as the intended outcomes.

While we can only suggest the scope of this curriculum in an article, one library-intensive unit teaches both media literacy skills and research to explore voting and the history of voting rights. Since our students are almost of voting age, we see voting and the evolution of the franchise in the United States as a cornerstone of our curriculum. Students study not only who was allowed to vote, but why certain groups were not given the franchise (see figure 1).

Rather than merely reading in a civics book that many citizens never register to vote for lack

Time Period	Group Receiving Franchise	Method (State Law, Federal Law, Constitutional Amendment, Supreme Court Ruling)
1787–1850	Non-Protestant Males, Male Non-Land Owners	Individual State Laws
1851–1900	All African American males	15th Amendment (1870)
1901–1950	All women	19th Amendment (1920)
1951–2005	1. Citizens of Washington, D.C.	23rd Amendment (1961)
	2. Poor people (Southern African Americans uses as a device to discriminate against African Americans. End of the Poll Tax.)	24th Amendment (1964)
	3. Literacy tests banned. These tests sometimes used to discourage certain groups from voting.	Federal Voting Rights Act (1970)
	4. Eighteen-year-old voters rather than twenty-one-year-old.	26th Amendment (1971)

Figure 1. History of the Franchise in the United States

of interest, lack of political efficacy, or because they feel alienated from the government, students gather data on the registration rates of their own ward using the city's voter registration list for their street. Each student compares registered versus nonregistered voters by age and gender, then interviews their nonvoting neighbors as to why they are not registered.

Then we put American's voting history in a larger context by comparing our voting rates with those of other democratic countries. Why are we so low? Do other countries require voter registration, make it mandatory to vote, call for holidays to vote, have fewer elections, and so on? What role does literacy play in this equation? Looking for patterns, we inspect the voter alignment of certain groups toward particular parties and examine the rationale for this behavior. Recently we have been examining the data from a longitudinal study of group voting, beginning with the 1968 presidential election.

This data analysis involves critical thinking. When discussing nonvoting, the most reliable indicator of voting is strong party identification. In class we consider how the increasing tendency toward declaring oneself an independent voter impacts voter turnout. We compare voter turnout among states with closed primaries (the best motivator for party identification) with the turnout in states with open primaries. We examine what has been described as "ballot fatigue" (for example, are candidates further down on the ballot at a disadvantage?). Using articles and statistics found through careful research in the school library, students study longitudinal voting data and look for patterns—reasons for group realignment. Students conduct extensive polling research and analysis with the help of both the content-area teacher and the library media specialist. To test their ability to apply this knowledge, they design specific types of polls and questions to be voted upon during a mock campaign.

We study the history of party platforms, conventions, and elections, including the role of third parties, always connecting national history with local examples. Through primary documents we examine the influence of the Populist Party. We learned that voting for a third party is not a wasted vote, as many of the platform's issues were eventually co-opted by the major parties, such as the populist planks of direct

election of U.S. senators and the graduated income tax.

Primary sources found through the library media center support student investigations of the suffrage movement locally, statewide, and nationally. We are particularly interested in the ideological differences among the leaders of the suffrage movement regarding race, immigration, and prohibition; the ideological and demographic differences among women in the Suffrage and Anti-Suffrage movements; and the impact of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Every student writes a research paper selected from almost thirty topics on all aspects of political campaigns and elections. In order to accomplish this, they spend a significant amount of time working independently after school **QY: wording accurate??** in the school library. After careful analysis and examination of many issues, each student develops a political platform with planks reflecting their chosen positions on a number of contemporary issues. This is developed into an individual campaign Web site that also includes (as we spend a great deal of time on political advertising) a résumé and scanned pictures of the student's family and leisure activities. Further, our student-politicians create mock polling results to reflect their knowledge of a variety of political polls their use. Then they issue mock calls for campaign contributions (listing various campaign finance restrictions) and a call for volunteers.

Examples of Hands-on Outreach and Inreach Civic Adventures

In order to encourage and develop positive democratic attitudes and practices, many of the hands-on activities and field trips we've designed are inspired by John Dewey's models of student participatory activities (Westbrook 1991). In more than twenty-five years of this course, some of these adventures were only attempted a few times, while others are an integral part of the yearly curriculum. As teachers we've learned that the most important lesson is to never fear failure in designing curriculum.

Experiencing Government

We invite local elected officials to shadow individual students to get a better sense of the

high school experience. As a reciprocal gesture, the Beverly city government has a Model City Day where students take on the role of elected and appointed city officials. We also arrange for students to tour the Massachusetts State House, usually led by our State Representative or State Senator. An outgrowth of these tours was a program that we set up with then-State Representative Michael Cahill where, once a week, two of our students took the train to Boston and shadowed him for the whole day. Over the semester, every student in class had the first-hand opportunity to see committee meetings, fact finding trips, and actual voting on legislation. In the current school year we are working on a video in Spanish that helps introduce immigrants to the various procedures and services of the local and state governments.

Political Campaigns

We run mock school elections on all levels: local, state, and federal. These include student registration, tabulation, and analyses. As a result of their learning, many students are motivated to volunteer in myriad political campaigns for all levels of government. During these elections we encourage all students to donate their time, effort, and expertise for the greater good. Our students are not just sign-holders; they volunteer for tasks that apply what they have learn in class (for example, polling and data analysis). In the school's auditorium, students host and moderate campaign debates for local city council, school committee, state legislature, and, once, for Congressional candidates. Their statistical analysis skills became extremely important on one occasion when they were asked to be official Beverly counters for a Congressional recount. Occasionally students have produced local cable TV shows in which they discuss election issues, offer predictions, and analyze post-election results. Throughout they are learning that civic knowledge and voting are only the beginning of civic responsibility.

Academic Connections

A week-long, before-school seminar on de Tocqueville's (2000) *Democracy in America* culminated with an invited visit by Harvard political philosophers Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop at an evening session held in the

Beverly Public Library. Mansfield and Winthrop discussed their book on the latest translation of de Tocqueville's work. This year students will attend a lecture at Harvard on de Tocqueville by Harvey Mansfield. Other experts have shared their interests; renowned historian Sally Matson came to class to discuss Susan B. Anthony.

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As the late Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neil was reported to have said, "All politics is local." The more understanding students have about their community and its history, the more pride and responsibility they will demonstrate in community affairs. We encourage our students to share their new-found expertise in a variety of ways. Over the past fifteen years they have spent countless hours before school, on weekends, and during school vacations on a number of community study and document preservation projects. The bulk of the research on <www.primaryresearch.org> is the result of the dedicated civic virtue of students from a voluntary, out-of-school program called Project: Apprentice to History (PATH), a course called Primary Research through the History of Beverly, student work from the History of Beverly High School course using the Beverly Educational Archives, and our government course. Our students have also created online textbooks on archaeology and architecture to serve as an instructional aids for other educators interested in teaching their own community's history. Other online digitization, database, and research projects are listed at <www.primaryresearch.org>.

In every civic research project we keep these four objectives in mind:

- **Immortalization:** To give life and meaning to the contributions of the people in our community's history who have either been forgotten or have never before been appreciated. To preserve documents and cultural artifacts that illuminate these lives and their contributions.
- **Intersection:** To focus on the point where the local history meets the larger historical context. To discover the spot where truth and myth may be separated.
- **Collaboration:** To combine the greatest number of resources (archives and organizations) to ensure a collective sense of community responsibility and appreciation. Any project we undertake is based on a spirit of caring, sharing, and daring.
- **Accessibility:** To make the documents, databases, and previous research accessible to a wider audience. We aim to blend research and technology via online access to resources that may have been previously inaccessible or relatively unknown. In modern hip-hop parlance, we are providing the samples to allow the audience to create new and exciting mixes.

Our Future

We are entering an age when access to information no longer defines those who are enfranchised and those who are not. The haves and the have-nots are those who know and those who don't know the difference between good and bad information. To borrow a phrase from

The X-Files, "the truth is out there," but it's also buried under a mountain of half-truths and lies. If American democracy is to grow along with the unprecedented changes in technology and the media, we educators must protect the future-voting public's ability to choose between candidates and to fully understand all sides of every issue. These decision-making skills lie at the root of meaningful civic involvement. It is the reason we teach government and civics in high school. For these reasons the library media specialist has never been more essential. ●

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