



pARTicipation

a civic engagement curriculum

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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

AND THE PARTICIPATION CURRICULUM

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUTH

Across the nation, fewer than half of 18- to 25-year-olds believe they can make a “great deal” or even “some” difference in the problems affecting their communities (Lopez and Kirby 2005). Despite the fact that the past two presidential elections were decided by fewer than four million votes combined, in the past four elections, 18- to 24-year-olds have failed to cast well over 77 million votes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). According to Reeher and Cammaran (1997), “Even political science majors appear to lack both interest in and knowledge of American political life; [and] are distinctively repulsed by what they consider to be ‘the political’.” Niemi and Chapman (1998) report that the problem is worse among public school students.

Some of the news from recent elections is positive. Youth turnout increased in the 2004 presidential election, the 2006 off-year elections, and in the spring 2008 primaries (Kirby et al. 2008). But many young people still choose not to vote, and some data from the 2008 primaries is troubling: of young voters with some college, one in four voted on Super Tuesday, of young voters with a high school education or less, only one in 14 voted (Marcelo and Kirby 2008).

Civic education can be an important stimulant to political participation among young people. As Barber points out in the foreword to *Education for Citizenship: Ideas and Innovations in Political Learning*, Thomas Jefferson was so committed to civic education that he prized his position in founding the University of Virginia more highly than his Presidency (Barber 1997). “Learning,” says Barber, “above all civic learning, needs to be experiential as well as purely cognitive. . . . In serving community, the young form commonality; in acknowledging differences, they bridge division; in assuming individual responsibility, they nurture social citizenship.”

NONPARTICIPATION AND THE POWER OF SPECIAL INTERESTS

When citizens do not participate in government, the consequences can be significant. One consequence of particular concern to the authors of this curriculum is the power that nonparticipation by the citizenry gives special interests. According to Downs, in an imperfectly informed society—that is, when citizens know less than everything about the government and its actions—“it is irrational for a democratic government to treat its citizens with equal deference” (Downs 1984). As Denzau and Munger (1986) note, “the amounts interest groups must offer a legislator for his services are shown to depend on that legislator’s productivity and the preference of the voters in his district.” However, as Caplan (2001) points out, “for most individuals the private cost of choosing one political ideology over another is about zero.” Because of what Caplan calls “concentrated benefits, diffuse costs” in the vast majority of legislation, “No voter, therefore, will bother to even learn of the existence of the legislation, but its beneficiaries may well employ a full-time staff of lobbyists to protect their livelihood.” Denzau and Munger suggest that:

Legislators must depend primarily on interest groups to provide them with enough resources to make themselves known to the uninformed voters. By actively serving interest groups, legislators ensure interest group primacy in policy. Because voters are completely ignorant, legislators can use these resources to advertise themselves with little concern about adverse voter response (page 12).

That is, legislators support bills that don't "cost" much to any individual, so only the rare individual takes the time to learn about them. Because few individuals take the time to learn about the government, politicians receive the money they need to market themselves for reelection from private interest groups who then expect preferential treatment when the politician is reelected. The reelected politician then writes more legislation with "concentrated benefits" and "diffuse costs" benefiting the special interests. Once again the costs are diffuse so individuals don't take the time to learn about the legislation, and the cycle has restarted. It becomes, in effect, a private sale of "public interest."

How can this cycle be stopped? Several possibilities exist. The first is to raise the private cost of such ignorance and irrationality—to raise the "cost" of legislation to each individual to the societal cost (that is, the overall damage done to the integrity of democracy by the way that each piece of special interest legislation compounds upon others). Another approach is to lower the individual's cost of obtaining information. Even low private benefits might justify seeking information if the cost of rationality and information were low. Providing an education in civics, and especially civic engagement, is one way to lower that cost.

Niemi and Chapman found that "schools can play a positive role in developing good citizens" (1998), a finding echoed in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report (2003). Because education in civic engagement teaches students how to efficiently research events and act upon them, it lowers the "cost" of knowledge and rationality. Because it teaches students about the societal costs of inaction and ignorance, it raises the cost of irrationality and ignorance.

According to the Denzau and Munger formula, this combination will lower the supply of politicians who can be "purchased" and will raise the price for special interests attempting to profit from government action. Because the people are aware, politicians will not need as many resources to educate the people about themselves; because the people are aware, taking money from interest groups (and giving them preferential treatment) becomes more dangerous to politicians. Education and its effects therefore provide significant benefit to the common good.

EFFECTIVE DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION AND THE PARTICIPATION CURRICULUM

Educating for democracy is not simple. Democracy cannot be fully experienced or discussed in a semester-long high school class. Some approaches to teaching for citizenship function better than others, however. Lee H. Ehman found that attitude changes were related to the following social studies classroom variables: (1) the extent to which controversial issues were studied in high school social studies classes, (2) the extent to which social studies teachers treated more than one side of controversial issues, and (3) the extent to which students felt free to express their own opinions while discussing controversial issues (Ehman 1980). *The Civic Mission of Schools* report also reviewed several studies that indicated that classrooms that foster and encourage nuanced dialogue about important, complex issues encourage positive attitudinal

change in relation to America's political systems.¹

Dialogue and the focus on politics are essential. Walker (2000) compares low voter turnout among youth to the very different statistics suggesting that 53 percent of young Americans volunteer. Walker suggests that the vast majority "have volunteered in non-political organizations" and that "students understood how to serve; they did not know how to effect political change." Without undermining, for instance, the importance of working in a soup kitchen, it is important to note that no amount of soup fixes the problem of poverty. If Americans only work in soup kitchens, without working in politics for systemic change, each generation of Americans will simply have to work in soup kitchens until their children are ready to take over. Service, without politics, is not enough.

To address this identified need, in fall 2006 Celebrate Possibility, a nonprofit organization established by recent college graduates, ran the first-phase pilot of a semester-long class in civic engagement at George Washington High School, a large urban high school in the Denver Public Schools system. The class was designed to give students the skills and knowledge they need "to create the change they wish to see in the world."² That class has evolved into the *PARTICIPATION* curriculum. At the beginning of the semester, the students are organized into groups, preferably in a manner such that students are working outside their comfort zones. Working outside of the students' comfort zones promotes a respect for diversity (and commonality) and enhances problem-solving skills.

Within these groups, students choose an issue for study. The issue can be as broad as a major national issue or as narrow as a problem facing their particular school district or neighborhood. In either case, the students create at least one achievable, documentable goal to accomplish by the end of the semester.

The semester itself, and particularly the teacher's involvement in the semester, are designed to provide students with a series of tools they will be able to use in exercising their civic responsibility throughout their lives. As the semester progresses, the students learn skills in research, letter writing, petitioning, lobbying, community organizing, creating socially conscious art, and more; as they learn about all of these things, they implement the tools in their group's work on the selected issue. The attention given to political art, attention we believe to be unique in civic engagement curricula, accounts for the curriculum's title.

With students, teachers, professors, and activists, we dissected such questions as: What are the skills that students need in order to appropriately, and deeply, engage with the socio-political world around them? What forms of the written or spoken word, which artistic styles, which managerial strategies, best achieve change and elevate communication? The curriculum reflects our best collaborative thinking on these questions. Each unit in the curriculum serves a

¹ *The Civic Mission of Schools Report* also identified five other approaches that hold promise for developing engaged citizens: (1) providing engaging instruction in government, history, law, and democracy, (2) designing and implementing programs that provide students with opportunities to apply what they learn through community service linked to civic outcomes, (3) offering extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities, and (4) encouraging student participation in school governance, and (5) encouraging student participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.

² A slight variation, of course, on the famous quote by Mohandas Gandhi.

specific purpose that enhances students' ability to meet the overall curriculum goals.

As Reeher and Cammarano (1997) suggest, "One learns about democracy, and for democracy, by practicing it." An educational system that teaches students how to research, how to effect social change, and how to do so in an open and profound way has the potential of transforming our political system. By re-engaging the coming generations in a truer form of democracy, we can give them the chance to create the world in which they wish to live.

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USING THE **PARTICIPATION** CURRICULUM

The *PARTICIPATION* civic engagement curriculum is designed to give high school juniors and seniors the skills and knowledge they need to create the change they wish to see in the world. Specifically, the curriculum teaches skills in research, letter writing, petitioning, lobbying, community organizing, and creating socially conscious art—all in the context of studying a problem of interest to them and developing a plan for advancing their views on that issue through a variety of mechanisms.

This student-driven curriculum is less structured than many high school curricula available today. Students, in groups assigned by their teachers, will choose an issue that relates to their lives and within which they can accomplish a tangible, obtainable goal by the end of the semester. Each group writes its goal, researches the issue, writes about the issue, speaks about the issue, creates art about the issue, and begins the process of organizing others interested in the issue. At the end of the semester, they host an event at which they make presentations, display their art, and continue the process of community organizing around their issue.

How you group students for their work in this curriculum is critically important. In addition to the usual factors you consider in grouping students, we recommend that you think about ensuring that students work with some classmates with whom they would not normally interact. The research on cooperative learning has documented the benefits of this kind of heterogeneous grouping; furthermore, successfully working for change in the community often requires working outside your comfort zone, and practice in the safe classroom environment is excellent preparation. You should carefully monitor group functioning throughout the semester, to ensure that groups are able to make progress, provide conflict resolution assistance as needed, and regroup students if absolutely necessary.

The curriculum comprises ten units:

- **Introduction**, in which students are introduced to the goals and structure of the curriculum by doing a trial run of the process. They choose an issue on which to work.
- **Structure of Government**, in which students get a grasp of the way things work (or review what they have learned in previous classes).
- **Research**, in which students examine bias and learn basic research skills that will help them develop some depth of understanding about their issue.
- **The Economic Angle**, in which students cultivate understanding at a deeper level by examining economic aspects of their issue.
- **Essay Writing**, in which students create a position paper.
- **Public Speaking**, in which students present a message orally.
- **The Art of Social Change**, in which students share, analyze, and understand contextual messages in art and create art with a point of view.
- **Grassroots Organizing**, in which students learn skills necessary to organize, maintain, and grow community groups.
- **Event Planning**, in which students share information in multiple forms.
- **Reflection and Evaluation**, in which students reflect on their work and the teacher assesses learning and provides final feedback.

The units have several common features: an overview, a list of Colorado civics standards addressed in the unit, helpful websites, suggested journal questions, vocabulary, and brief descriptions of the unit's instructional steps. Three of these features deserve a bit more explication. The journal is designed to focus students when they arrive in class, to stimulate them to tune in to current events, and to prompt self-evaluation as they work in their groups. You should evaluate the journals at regular intervals throughout the semester. The vocabulary words are provided as a planning aid for the teacher—they are not necessarily a part of the instruction provided in the unit, although individual teachers may choose to make them so. Finally, for each instructional step in the unit (a step may represent more than one day's instruction), we provide a goal and a suggested means of reaching the goal. The teaching approaches are intentionally less detailed than the lesson plans provided in some curricula; we wanted to give teachers flexibility and room for creativity in their use of the curriculum. Masters for student handouts are provided where needed.

The units need not be taught in the sequence in which they appear in the curriculum. For example, **Structure of Government** lessons may be taught while the skill-building units are underway. Some teachers believe this approach has advantages because it allows students to begin working on their issues early in the semester; it may also permit the teacher to “deliver” information just as students need it—and are thus motivated to learn. A second example would be the **Event Planning** section. While the event itself is an excellent culminating activity for the semester and thus this unit is at the end of the curriculum, event planning may need to start earlier in the semester. Not every teacher will teach every unit; individual teachers may choose specific sections and focus on them in depth during the semester. teachers can simply choose specific sections and focus on them in greater depth during the semester. To assist with planning, the table on page 10 identifies preparation (beyond such usual tasks as copying handouts, gathering such easily accessible materials as newspapers or forms available online, etc.) teachers must take before using each unit.

When schedules permit, the curriculum can be effectively taught in a cross-curricular fashion, with social studies, language arts, and art teachers collaborating. Collaboration with one or more activists in your community would also be beneficial, as these “real-life” practitioners of the skills taught in the curriculum could provide valuable insight into their work, as well as models of the kinds of communication tools they develop to advance their positions.

Like everything, the *PARTICIPATION* curriculum should be evaluated periodically throughout the semester to ensure that it is functioning appropriately and to address any needs as they arise. We recommend taking time on four days during the semester to evaluate the students' knowledge and the progress of the class. Assessment can be completed via a combination of students' journals, tests/quizzes, and examination of group progress on their projects. Students should also be asked for feedback on how the course is progressing.

We invite you to help us improve the *PARTICIPATION* curriculum. We are especially interested in samples of student work that could be provided as models (with permission of the student authors), but are also interested in other suggestions for improvements. Send student work, suggestions, or other material to: Laurel Singleton, Center for Education in Law and Democracy, P.O. Box 18490, Denver, CO 80218-0490; singleton@lawanddemocracy.org.

Instructional Unit	Estimated No. of Days	Teacher Preparation
Introduction: Understanding the Curriculum	5-10 days	Optional: Arrange for local activists to explain their work to students. Obtain a video clip of political satire.
Structure of Government: Grasping the Way Things Work	10-20 days	Assign the 24-Hour Study prior to teaching the unit. Arrange for legislators (federal, state, and local) to visit the class.
Research: Developing In-Depth Understanding and the Skills Needed to Evaluate Sources	5-10 days	Arrange with librarian/media specialist to present relevant resources to students and provide a lesson on Internet searching. Select clips of two news programs with different perspectives on the same subject. Optional: Arrange for another teacher or student to stage a “crime” in the classroom.
The Economic Angle: Cultivating Deeper Understanding	5-15 days	Select lessons on primary economic concepts (http://ecedweb.unomaha.edu/elelearn.cfm) for use in class.
Essay Writing: Creating a Position Paper	5-15 days	Optional: Invite local activists to share samples of persuasive writing they have done. Gather a variety of materials (ads, art, movies, newspaper articles, school documents) in which students can find thesis statements, as well as songs, novels, and editorials whose closing lines they can analyze.
Public Speaking: Presenting a Message in Person	5-10 days	Gather film clips or transcripts of historic/notable speeches.
The Art of Social Change: Sharing, Analyzing, and Understanding Contextual Messages	15-20 days	Assign students to bring in a piece of art in preparation for the first step of the unit. Bring in additional pieces of art, including some that are overtly political and some that are not.
Grassroots Organizing: Spreading the Word and the Passion Through Local Work	15-20 days	Arrange for several local activists to share the ways in which their organizations are structured, their meeting agendas, and recruiting strategies.
Event Planning: Sharing the Information	10-12 days	Locate a venue for the event. Consider whether the class may be able to generate a budget for the event.
Reflection and Evaluation	1 day	None