



Educating for Civic Well-Being

SUMMARY

The government and civics debate series is an intensive and student-centered effort to understand and articulate a variety of issues that affect contemporary public discourse. After several weeks of preparation, students will debate these issues in front of an audience of their peers. The instructor plays a vital role, but only as a facilitator, to assist students in their understanding of the issues, to acclimate students to the debate process and to promote the articulation of ideas.

Multiculturalism in the United States

was once relegated to big cities. Now towns and villages across America have become home to people from every corner of the world.

Our nation's ethnic makeup is changing rapidly. By mid-century, minorities in the United States will, collectively, form an American majority. It is now more imperative than ever to acclimate all students to the issues that dominate public discussion and encourage a sense of civic responsibility that, some suggest, has become captive to more technocentric interests.

The predominance of information technology and the broadening of the base of scientific and mathematical knowledge required of all students to prosper in a 21st century economy has contributed to a pronounced decline in the emphasis on the role of civics in our

public schools. True, all New York State public school students are required to pass a government and civics class, but it is often given in their senior year of high school. For many students, this class marks the first and only time they examine important civic issues. Many receive their diploma having acquired only peripheral knowledge of the issues that drive today's public debates and affect the lives of millions.

Only through civic involvement and public discourse, argued the early 20th century educational reformer John Dewey (1968), could a true democracy take hold in the United States. The 19th century progression of public education in America emphasized the evolution of the quintessential citizen who, through a proper understanding of government and civics, could develop a critical consciousness of what it means to be an American.

David Michael Fischer has taught American government and civics, American history and economics at Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical High School in Jamaica Estates, New York City, for 15 years. He has served as an adjunct professor at the City University of New York, Queens College. Fischer holds a master's in American history and expects to pursue a doctorate in history.

David Michael Fischer, United Federation of Teachers

The government and civics debate series is designed to familiarize students with the issues that influence contemporary public discourse. It is implemented in 11th or 12th grade American government and civics classes with 17- and 18-year-old students. This activity can also work with younger students, provided they receive appropriate preparation. The project takes time. Over two to three weeks students will research, interpret and articulate varying points of view on multiple political and social issues. It concludes with a series of debates in which students, assigned to groups of four (depending on class size), present their points of view and argue against opposing points of view. The activity addresses the following New York State Social Studies Standards for civics, citizenship and government (found at nysed.gov):

Standard 3: Students analyze issues at the local, state and national levels and prescribe responses that promote the public interest or general welfare; students explore how citizens influence public policy in a representative democracy.

Standard 4: Students evaluate, take and defend positions on what the fundamental values and principles of American political life are and their importance to the maintenance of constitutional democracy; students take, defend and evaluate positions about attitudes that facilitate thoughtful and effective participation in public affairs; students participate in school/classroom/community activities that focus on an issue or problem.

In addition, the activity addresses the following C3 (college, career and civic life) standards for social studies:

D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2 Civ.9.9-12. Use appropriate deliberative processes in multiple settings.

D2 Civ.13.9-12. Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.

Only through civic involvement and public discourse could a true democracy take hold in the United States.

continued on following page

The goal of civics should be to address the development of civic-related knowledge and skills rather than the development of students' participatory skills.

Recent research elaborates on the high value of activities like this on the civic well-being of students. In 2010, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement published the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study for 2009, testing the civic knowledge engagement and attitudes among secondary school students in more than 36 countries. The study concluded that the goal of civics should be to address the development of civic-related knowledge and skills rather than the development of students' participatory skills. This project accomplishes just that (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010).

In *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*, Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn argue that the most effective means of promoting citizenship and participation in an electorate that is generally poorly informed is through civics education. This work is particularly appropriate because it specifically draws on the governmental and political knowledge of high school seniors from all over the country. The authors conclude that effective civics curricula enhance students' knowledge of American government and politics. But they caution that for a civics class to be effective, instructors must veer away from traditional textbook-centered lessons toward methods that have relevance in the students' lives (Niemi, & Junn, 1998).

Project Description

Upon distribution of their assignments, the students work in groups of three and four over a two- or three-week period to address one aspect of a particular social or political issue relevant to the times. In the last debate series (in 2015) the following issues were presented (with key words to assist the students to locate relevant information and to facilitate the development of clearly focused arguments):

- National Security Agency spying scandal: Is the federal government's collection of millions of Americans' phone and internet data a violation of the fourth amendment's illegal search protections even if the information gathered is used to fight against terrorism? (key words: Edward Snowden, NSA, 'metadata')
- Legalization of marijuana: Does the legalization of marijuana provide overall greater benefits to society? (key words: Colorado and Washington state legalizations, medical vs. recreational marijuana, government regulation of people's private lives)
- Torture: Is the use of torture by the government to combat terrorism an appropriate way of keeping Americans safe? (key words: Guantanamo Bay, waterboarding, 2014 Senate report on torture)

Framing a debate with yes/no questions facilitates the audience's understanding.

- Gun control: Are the federal government's efforts to regulate gun ownership a violation of Americans' second amendment right to protect themselves and their families? (key words: NRA, Newtown, Conn. massacre, McDonald v. Chicago)

By presenting each debate topic as a yes/no question, the instructor concretely establishes solid points of view to debate in favor of and against. Framing a debate with yes/no questions also facilitates the audience's understanding; vitally important as the audience vote determines the debate's winner.

These topics of debate will certainly change over time. It is important that the instructor is well-versed and up to date on the issues of current public discourse. For example, the immigration debates that roiled the 2016 presidential campaign might also be appropriate for classroom debate. The instructor's own knowledge of the issues is vital to the success of this activity.

The students will advocate their assigned points of view and counter the points of view of the opposition. They are required to obtain information from reputable sources (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, etc.). Material collected from tabloids or untrustworthy sources (*New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, unregulated and

unfamiliar websites, etc.) is unacceptable. Some educators may harbor concerns that the sources I have listed are too advanced for high school students. These resources are "reputable," not "scholarly." I always tell my students when they examine articles from such resources that they will not understand everything but they should understand most of what is in the article. Whatever they do not understand they can research on their own, discuss with me, or leave out of the debate. Instructors can also include a glossary that lists relevant terms for each debating group. This often helps. By the senior year of high school most students can understand and expound upon an article from a reputable resource.

The teams prepare by gathering facts to support their claim, formulating thoughtful, highly analytical questions to pose to the opposition, and predicting questions that the opposition will ask them, with appropriate responses. These mental exercises promote higher-order thinking skills and the ability to articulate complex ideas. Each team introduces its topic with a five-minute PowerPoint that clearly introduces its point of view and cites the flaws in the opposition's point of view. The debate that follows normally lasts 15–20 minutes.

Non-participants serve as judges in the debates. They will submit ballots

continued on following page

twice: the first ballot follows an impartial three- to five-minute introduction to the topic by the instructor in which the students vote “yes,” “no” or “unsure” based on their limited knowledge of the topic (instructors may wish to assign a simple reading activity to non-participants prior to the debate so they understand the basic facts and issues). The second vote takes place after the debate has ended. The two sets of votes are then compared. The winning side has convinced more audience members to switch votes in their direction on the second ballot.

Using the NSA spy scandal as an example, on the first ballot, which asks, “Is the federal government’s collection of millions of Americans’ phone and Internet data a violation of the fourth amendment’s illegal search protections even if the information gathered is used to fight against terrorism?” 10 vote “yes,” 15 vote “no,” and five vote “unsure.” Following the debate, the second ballot vote is 12 “yes,” 14 “no” and four “unsure.” The “yes” side has won the debate because it convinced two students to support its point of view, while the “no” side, which still had greater overall support, lost a student during the debate.

The instructor’s role is relatively limited. He/she is a facilitator, furnishing students’ understanding of

the issues and the resources that they have selected and conducting mock debates with each group individually in order to acclimate the students to a debate scenario.

Follow these steps in order to ensure effective results:

STRATEGIC GROUPING:

Arrange groups to ensure that weak academic performers or students with limited English language proficiency are not bunched in the same group. Certify to the best of your ability that all members of a group can work together comfortably. If a student has prior knowledge of a certain issue, he can request a corresponding group.

CLARIFICATION AND

EMPHASIS: Spend 10 to 15 minutes at the outset reading the instruction sheet with the students so that they fully understand the tasks. The instructor must emphasize the use of appropriate material from reputable journalistic sources, some of which may be unfamiliar to the students. It is perfectly appropriate for the instructor to recommend and distribute to the various groups specific articles from these resources while encouraging the students to seek additional relevant resources. The instructor must emphasize that the debate is not to be a back-and-forth question and answer session. Debaters should follow up on

opponents’ responses with questions that promote specifics and accuracy. This impromptu “grilling,” which is what good attorneys and judges do in court in order to illicit more honest, accurate responses, is vital to the success of this project.

INFORMATION GATHERING AND UNDERSTANDING:

The keys to debating are to understand all sides of an issue; to clearly state one’s claim; and to articulate responses that challenge the opposition’s claim. During the first group meeting, students are required to present the resources they have acquired and share out with the other members of the group. As they share out and become more familiar with the issues that form the core of their argument, they will list facts that support their claim; they will pose a series of questions to the opposition (with probable answers noted) and questions that they think the opposition will pose to them (with answers).

CONTENT AND

UNDERSTANDING: Debating is extremely difficult. It requires comprehensive knowledge of all points of view, the capacity to clearly articulate and support multiple ideas, and the ability to think on one’s feet. The debaters must prepare with pre-debate role-playing exercises.

The instructor must conduct those exercises with each group individually. She/he must do the same research as the debaters, gleaning information from the same reputable sources. The instructor must evaluate students' knowledge of the fundamentals, follow up on those answers in order to probe for comprehensive understanding, and foster the development of probing questions and follow-ups posed by the students to the opposition. If the instructor does not accept his/her role as a model for the students, the debate will suffer.

There may be instances when the instructor's base of knowledge may not be sufficient to actively coach the debaters. I acknowledge that I know nothing about guns, so my efforts to enhance the debate performances of the gun control groups probably would not have borne fruit. My colleague is a lifelong hunter and is thus well-versed in New York State gun laws and gun control. It was through his willingness to coach the debaters that the gun control debate proved highly effective.

PRE-DEBATE PREPARATION:

The students must receive guidance for their pre-debate PowerPoint presentations. Each group's presentation should last no longer than five minutes; therefore, the group must emphasize just the main debate issues in order to preclude a tedious, minutiae-drenched presentation. The finer points should be

addressed in the actual debate. The instructor must vet the presentations for spelling, grammar, clarity and brevity. The instructor should also encourage the students to incorporate appropriate visual aids to enhance understanding.

As with all performances, appearance matters. Debaters should be encouraged to assume a professional appearance. The intention is to promote a serious and professional debating environment.

TIME MANAGEMENT:

Appropriate time management is imperative in each debate. Instructors must be aware that a well-argued debate will last over a half hour, including all the pre-debate presentations and the post-debate vote. Only one debate should be scheduled in a typical 40–45 minute class period. Instructors should set aside four class periods to conduct a four-debate series.

LEARNING OUTCOMES: The instructor is at liberty to employ a variety of techniques in order to judge the debate's outcome. She/he may wish to employ a rubric to evaluate the PowerPoint, the clarity of the arguments, the clarity of the responses, etc. (A sample rubric is provided on page 109). The instructor may wish to assign a post-debate writing assignment in which all students offer personal responses in order to gauge their

continued on following page

Debating is extremely difficult. It requires comprehensive knowledge of all points of view, the capacity to clearly articulate and support multiple ideas, and the ability to think on one's feet.

Debate encourages students to get involved, to exercise their vote and to make positive changes for themselves, their families and their communities.

mastery of the content. She/he may wish to assign post-debate questions in which all students offer personal responses about the issues. The beauty of a debate is that it is the students themselves who determine the course of the debate and evaluate the performances of the debate teams. Using the evaluation process outlined above, the audience will determine the outcome. Debate teams judged victorious by their peers can be rewarded at the instructor's discretion.

The government and civics debate series is a completely student-centered activity that elicits new ideas, encourages Socratic thinking, and develops sophisticated techniques of public expression. It is a challenging project; the written material to which the students are exposed may be obscure and imposing, but exposure to what is new and different improves standards and enhances broad-based pursuit of knowledge.

Debating promotes direct inquiry and thoughtful analysis. It fosters rational and moralistic thinking, and it requires quick counter-responses to opposition charges. Most importantly, debate encourages students to get involved, to exercise their vote and to make positive changes for themselves, their families and their communities. It is an indispensable mechanism for promoting citizenship and democracy,

encouraging the advanced articulation of thoughts and ideas, and raising standards of scholarship to a collegiate-level.

REFERENCES

- Dewey, J. (1968). *Democracy and education*. Illinois: The Free Press
- Niemi, R.G. & Junn, J (1998). *Civic Education: What makes students learn*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Kerr, D. & Losito, B. (2010). Civic knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among lower-secondary school students in 38 countries. Retrieved from http://www.iea.nl/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Electronic_versions/ICCS_2009_International_Report.pdf

Sample Rubric

1) Opening Presentation

Excellent — Presentation clearly and accurately summarizes the group's point of view; argument is made without excessive detail; relevant images enhance understanding; presentation last five to seven minutes

Good — Presentation slightly lacks clarity and/or accuracy; argument is slightly excessive in detail; images do not enhance understanding; presentation lasts slightly under five minutes or slightly over seven minutes

Needs Improvement — Presentation is inaccurate or unclear; tedious detail dominates the presentation; images are irrelevant or non-existent; presentation is excessively brief or so long that it leads audience to distraction

2) Argument

Excellent — Group argues cogently and confidently providing illuminating supportive details; group members show command of the facts; group members provide counterarguments that sew doubt in the opposition's argument

Good — Group's argument is acceptable but partially lacking in relevant supportive details; some members appear uncertain of relevant facts; counterarguments do not generate significant doubt about the opposition's point of view

Needs Improvement — Group's argument is significantly lacking in relevant facts and/or supportive detail; there is noticeable uncertainty among the group's members about the direction of their argument; no counterargument is presented or the effort to sew doubt in the opposition's point of view is ineffective

3) Response to opposition's attacks

Excellent — Group is clearly prepared to respond to opposition attacks with appropriate counterarguments featuring relevant details; all group members show a clear understanding of arguments and counterarguments; impromptu responses to opposition attacks are quick, clear and accurate

Good — Group's response to opposition attacks somewhat lacks clarity and/or relevant details; some group members appear to lack a clear understanding of arguments and/or counterarguments; impromptu responses to opposition attacks somewhat lack clarity and/or accuracy

Needs Improvement — Group's responses to opposition attacks are unclear and significantly lack relevant details; most or all group members appear to lack a clear understanding of arguments and/or counterarguments; responses to opposition attacks are slow, unclear or inaccurate

4) Optics

Excellent — All members appear in professional attire

Good — Most members appear in professional attire

Needs Improvement — Few or no members appear in professional attire