

Increasing the Relevance: A Who Done It Mystery

Nancy Peterson

As a high school government teacher, I often have to juggle the demands of helping students learn conceptually complex material while trying to maximize their engagement. Just as I want students to enhance their understanding of government concepts, I also want them to be attracted to their work, to persist despite challenges and obstacles, and to show delight in their accomplishments. It's not an easy task.

As a pre-service student, I learned traditional ways to approach teaching, and for a time I thought that was the only way to teach. During my first and second years of teaching, I was bored and my students were bored, and I suspect that very little learning took place.

After those beginning years, I took a very hard look at what I was doing, along with comments from my principal, and decided I needed to change my teaching methods. I first reflected on my memories of growing up and which teachers had suited me best. What I realized was that the teachers who most impacted me were those who tapped into my curiosity and gave me choices.

During my third year of teaching, I decided to try a different approach to teaching American government to seniors. I started with a court procedure unit. The lesson that I created to teach the court procedure had a variety of components: rigor, relevance, choices, and fun. The activity was further improved when I attended my first workshop on learning styles. This workshop opened my eyes to the variety of teaching methods that could tap into students' natural ways of absorbing information. I also realized that most of my teachers, using the traditional methods to teach, were not tapping into my natural way to learn.

A Mindful Approach to Teaching about the Courts

The central strategy I used for the unit on court procedure was a murder mystery. This strategy builds on students' curiosity, encouraging them to think like scientists and lawyers. The court procedure lesson uses a variety of teaching methods. To teach a concept, daily class discussion and notes are given; on other days, students participate in role-play. The lesson culminated with a two-day trial.

On day one, I explain the lesson, assign students their roles, give rubrics, and provide the first day of information, outlining how to collect evidence at the scene of a crime. I teach four sections a day and each section receives the same information.

The anticipated "murder" takes place on day two. Five minutes into the class period, the school secretary calls over the classroom intercom requesting detective assistance in room 121. The student detectives rush to the scene of the crime; then they return to our room and ask for the judge. The judge listens to the report and okays a search warrant. The student clerk fills out the search warrant (figure 1), and the judge signs it. The student CSIs (crime scene investigators) head to the scene to collect evidence (figure 2). The student reporter and photographer check out the crime scene to see what information they

can obtain. The detectives then work the room, interviewing student witnesses to ascertain what events led up to the murder. The game begins!

How Learning Takes Place

On day three, before the students move forward with their investigation, the class learns about how to obtain a search warrant and about which Supreme Court cases have determined the rules the detectives must follow. In groups, the students learn about the case of *Mapp v. Ohio*, which addressed illegal search and seizure. They need to determine what constitutional right was violated and how the court should rule. I take the students step-by-step through the proper procedure in collecting evidence. On day four, after extensive questioning of witnesses, two suspects emerge. The detectives and the student district attorneys approach the judge with the information they need to obtain a warrant to search the suspects' lockers. On day five, during classroom discussion, the class learns about the process to make an arrest. The students read a summary from *Miranda v. Arizona*, a case that addressed the issue of self-incrimination. Before an arrest is made, students need to learn about the role of a public defender and about the Supreme Court case *Gideon v. Wainwright*, which outlined the right of all suspects to have an attorney. Working in groups again, students work through the mini-lesson procedure used with the *Mapp* case. On day six, the CSI, detectives, and the district attorneys study the evidence to

Figure 1. **Search Warrant**

Detective(s) _____, have the right to Search (location) _____

belonging to (person being searched) _____

This right is made possible by the _____ code of _____ (state) section _____

The items they are searching for are as follows: _____

_____ Judge _____ Clerk of Court

Dated _____

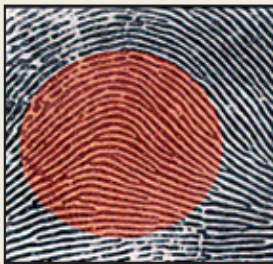
Figure 2. **Crime Scene Lay Out**

Items in the room:

You will need the following physical evidence:

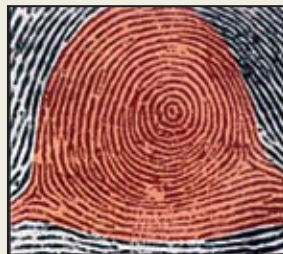
- Two different DNA slides samples (see information on DNA)
- Three different fingerprint samples (see information on fingerprinting) Your “know all but can’t tell” student will need to manufacture
- Two sets of foot prints
- A note written in the defendant’s hand writing
- A chalk outline of a body on black paper with red paint on her head.
- Red paper to represent splatter blood from the victim

Sample Finger Prints



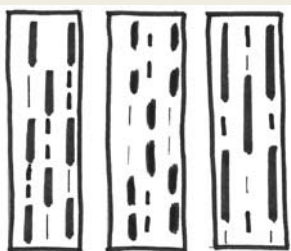
ARCH

In an arch pattern the ridges enter from one side, make a rise in the center and exit generally on the opposite side.



WHORL

In a whorl pattern, the ridges are usually circular.



Sample DNA

We have approximately three billion base pairs of DNA in most of our cells. With the exception of identical twins, the sequence of the bases is different for everyone.

RESOURCES

Websites:

The American Judicature Society is offering this lesson to all teachers, free as an Internet download from it’s website: www.AJS.org/hsc

DNA

www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genome/elsi/forensics_shtml#3

This website is useful to help explain DNA markers.

To find DNA images go to Google images and search DNA markers to find the image. The images will be used in the lesson.

Fingerprints

www.fbi.gov/hq/cjisd/takingfps.html

On this website you will find fingerprint images to use for the lesson.

Crime Scene

www.crime-scene-investigator.net/csi-collection.html

Books:

Crime Scene Evidence by Mike Byrd. Wildomar, Calif.: Stagg Pub, 2001.

Practical Crime Scene Processing and Investigation by Ross M. Gardner. Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC Publisher, 2004.

The Forensic Science of C.S.I. by Katherine Ramsland. New York, N.Y.: Berkley Trade Publishing, 2001.

Civil Rights & Liberties by Andrea L. Bonnicksen. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Pub. Co., 1982.

determine if it is enough to make an arrest; if so, they determine what the charge would be and then an arrest is carried out. Ever since I have been teaching this lesson, the correct suspect is always arrested and tried, but not always found guilty. The student defense attorneys and the student private investigator working for the defense begin putting together their case. The student clerk of court assembles a jury from the study hall list (jury members will not come from class). On day seven, the students study the concept of a trial and the events leading up to a trial. On days eight and nine, the students work on assembling their cases and calling their witnesses. The trial takes place on days ten and eleven.

On day twelve, the students take a test on the concepts they have learned during this unit. The scores on this unit test average 80 percent, and are always higher than most American government tests given during the semester. Iowa does not have state standards or a state government test. All students in Iowa must take a government


class as a requirement for graduation.

Student feedback has always been positive. The students learn how to best lay out a case and find out it's not as easy as it looks on television. Some of the students' comments are:

- "It brings to life what actually happens during court proceedings and gets away from the TV-based ideas we have about courts."
- "It really did teach me how court cases work, which was a little hazy for me."
- "It was fun to watch the detectives try to think through the evidence."

Graduate surveys regularly point to this unit as one of the most memorable and enjoyable high school experiences.

The American Judicature Society, seeking to increase public understanding of the justice system through a curriculum for high school seniors, chose to adopt and implement this lesson. The project was piloted in three geographically and socio-economi-

cally diverse schools. Researchers from the Research Institute for Studies in Education at Iowa State University evaluated this project. Dr. Matt Feldmann and Dr. Mack Shelley's research found that (1) The new units conveyed appropriate conceptual understanding of the content; (2) The new unit engaged and maintained student interest; (3) The teachers found the new unit to be usable; and (4) The new unit worked well for students with diverse learning styles. 

NANCY PETERSON has taught various social studies classes for the past 25 years at Gilbert High School in Gilbert, Iowa. She also teaches educational workshops during the summer, specializing in designing lessons to meet students' learning styles. She will be teaching her second Judicial Branch workshop at the Pennsylvania Institute for Government Teachers; this institute is free to qualified Pennsylvania teachers and is sponsored by the Arlin M. Adams Center for Law and Society at Susquehanna University, www.susqu.edu/lawandsociety. Mrs. Peterson is president of the Iowa Council for the Social Studies. She can be reached at nlp2111@uswest.net.

Court Procedure Impressions

2004 Gilbert Seniors

What [did you learn] and like about the court procedure?

- Evidence is very important (especially in this case).
- I learned that there is a lot that has to take place before a case can be tried and that getting evidence can actually be sort of fun.
- I liked how evidence really does prove the truth in the end.

What [did you learn] and dislike about the court procedure?

- I learned and disliked how there are so many rules for presenting the case and how hard it is to prove someone guilty beyond reasonable doubt.
- It takes a long time to get everything together for a case or pretty much any part of the court procedure. What's the definition of a speedy trial?
- It takes a lot of people to set this up and if one person doesn't do their job then everyone suffers.
- If evidence is collected illegally it can't be used in the trial.

What is one thing that was intriguing about the court procedure? Or What was an "ahha" moment for you?

- When I realized that a good lawyer can make or break a case. They have to be intelligent and think between the

lines. They have to ask good questions.

- One thing that intrigued me about the court procedure is the cross-examination/re-direct portion because I have heard those terms before, but never knew what they meant.
- When someone was arrested and tried for murder when not everyone involved in the case believed it was the right person—even though in the end it was.
- You have to be careful what you say in court and how you word things

I liked this court procedure project because...

- It brings to life what actually happens during court proceedings and gets away from the T.V. based ideas we have about courts.
- It really did teach me how court cases work, which was a little hazy for me.

I didn't like this court procedure project because...

- Not everybody took it seriously and if one person didn't do something your [sic] suppose to do then it messed everything else up.