

Welcoming Citizens: Naturalization Ceremonies that Encourage Service Learning

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Most people have a fond memory of a particular assignment or classroom activity from their formative years that stands out from the usual day-to-day tasks at school. Perhaps it was participating in a classroom dramatization of a historical event, writing a report on a special field trip, interviewing a grandparent for an oral history project, or competing in a “50 State Capitals Bee.” My favorite project was from Mrs. Rundle’s fifth grade social studies class where all students were given an opportunity to select one of the fifty states and write a comprehensive report on it. To complete this assignment, we each spent the majority of a semester

absorbing every detail of that particular state. We studied the history, climate, topography, industry and agriculture, politics, landmarks, education, demographics, sports, notable residents, and other important information about “our state.”

As a native-born Arizonan, I chose to study the seemingly faraway state of Maryland. What a challenge it was to draw an outline of the state of Maryland and its intricate flag! I can still remember my excitement about the learning process as I researched and “discovered” the state of Maryland.

Several weeks after we turned in our

reports, I embarked on my first trip to Maryland. I have such fond memories of that visit, during which my own written words on paper transformed into a real place that I was to experience. I felt as if my state report came to life before my eyes!

Throughout middle school, high school and college, my favorite courses typically focused on one of the social studies disciplines. Social studies not only gave me the opportunity to study main events in history, but often provided experiences that connected me to the real world.

Today, how can we as educators provide our young students with opportuni-



Lee Holston, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services supervisory adjudications officer and event emcee, addresses the naturalization ceremony audience.

Photo by Manya Paul

ties to take classroom learning and then apply it to the real world? Are there activities that we—given limitations of time and resources—might create to instill positive, lasting memories in our young students?

Lost Learning v. Service Learning

These are, of course, challenging times for social studies teachers. “The time available for teaching the basic tools and concepts of the social sciences that can contribute to understanding human behavior receives an ever-shrinking slice of the school day.”¹ This erosion is especially apparent in elementary schools. Part of the foundational knowledge that today’s youth must learn includes our country’s history, as well as its core democratic values. By studying American heroes, our founding fathers, major historical events, basic geography and national symbols and holidays, elementary students learn to take pride in being an American and to appreciate the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen of our great nation. If we fail to instill the knowledge and attitudes that uphold our democratic society, the results could be troublesome.

Citizenship is more than an academic subject; it means applying lessons learned in the social studies classroom to active civic involvement in the community. The students’ involvement should be more

than isolated community service. The work should involve skills that truly build good citizenry. Service learning aims to make the most of community service efforts and to encourage youth to reflect on and learn from their experience.² It puts valuable content knowledge and skills from the social studies curriculum to work in the larger social world.

Family History

My grandmother, Gerda Weissmann Klein, is one of the key influences in my life. She is author of *All But My Life*, which recounts six years of a prisoner of the Nazi regime, including over three years in slave labor camps and three months in a winter “death march” from Germany to Czechoslovakia.³ At an early age, I learned about the use of fear and hatred to mount genocides against groups of people. Through studying the Holocaust, I have become more knowledgeable about the importance of advocating for universal principles aimed at combating prejudice, hatred, and discrimination.

My grandmother has committed her adult life to sharing her story as Holocaust survivor with the hope of promoting tolerance and understanding in our world. In her travels, she has spoken in small and large communities in all 50

states and in countless countries across the globe. The majority of her speeches take place in school environments where she shares her story of survival and then encourages the students to embrace their classmates, regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity. She stresses the importance of understanding and appreciating each other’s differences because, ultimately, the classroom is a microcosm for the world. The goal, she states, is to learn how to live with one another—first as classmates, and then as neighbors, citizens, and members of a global community.

My grandmother is now 85 years old. For the last three years, I have managed her speaking engagements and traveled with her, all the while learning by observing her work—and by listening to the teachers and students in the schools that we visit.

A Caring Community in Texas

What I learned early in our travels is that my grandmother is a strong proponent of democratic institutions and believes it is the duty of governments to instill in their young populations a sense of civic efficacy. She tells her audiences that human tragedies such as the Holocaust do not occur spontaneously; they can happen when young adults leave school with little knowledge of the democratic principles

Rights and Responsibilities of U.S. Citizenship

The U. S. Citizenship and Immigration Services states, “Becoming a U.S. citizen provides you with new rights and privileges. Citizenship also brings with it important responsibilities.” The “Citizenship” webpage at www.uscis.gov lists seven rights and six responsibilities of a U.S. citizen, but this is not an all-inclusive list. For example, one might add the rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution. Are there other rights and responsibilities that you can think of? (See, for example, the discussion of rights and responsibilities on pages 20-21 of *The Path to Citizenship: A Naturalization Project for Your School*.)

Rights of U.S. citizens

- ★ Vote in federal elections
- ★ Serve on a jury
- ★ Bring family members to the United States
- ★ Obtain citizenship for children born abroad
- ★ Travel with a U.S. passport
- ★ Run for federal office
- ★ Become eligible for federal grants and scholarships

Responsibilities of U.S. citizens

- ★ Support and defend the Constitution
- ★ Serve the country when required
- ★ Participate in the democratic process
- ★ Respect and obey federal, state, and local laws
- ★ Respect the rights, beliefs, and opinions of others
- ★ Participate in your local community



Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, right, reaches out to Holocaust Survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein, as Klein receives a standing ovation for her speech.

Photo by Manya Paul

that distinguish free nations from those that are not free. When citizens know and cherish their rights and responsibilities, they are less likely to participate in undemocratic behavior.

Of the countless communities we have visited, there are two that stand out because they linked my grandmother's presentation with community involvement. In the small border town of Laredo, Texas, three committed educators—Beverly Herrera, Carmen Escamilla and Annie Trevino—created a “One City Cares” initiative to encourage good citizenship. Members of the community were encouraged to attend my grandmother's lecture, reflect on blessings in their lives, and give back to those less fortunate by donating canned goods to the homeless.

On Thursday, September 11, 2008 my grandmother addressed an audience of 2,200 at the Laredo Civic Center (plus several hundred who watched via satellite link). Over twelve tons of canned goods were collected and donated to those in need! This special program was held on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. These three amazing women demonstrated how a few individuals can be role models and create a mean-



ingful program for an entire community.

My grandmother has taught me that reaching out to our neighbors and participating in solving real-life problems are the initial steps to building a community. The social studies classroom is where young people learn about democratic ideals, human rights, and personal responsibility—and then they put their knowledge to use by targeting needs in their immediate social environments.

A Ceremony in Ohio

My grandmother was asked to be the keynote speaker at a naturalization ceremony that was being held at Three Rivers Middle School in Cleves, Ohio. Marney Murphy, library media specialist, had planned and organized this event.

My grandmother was humbled to speak, as her American citizenship is truly among her most prized possessions. After the Holocaust she was homeless in Europe without any family members or friends who could welcome her home with open arms. After marrying her liberator, U.S. Army Intelligence Officer Kurt Klein, she came to this country to build a better life. Two years after arriving she became a U.S. citizen. In her words, she has a love for this country that only someone who has been homeless can understand.

On October 8, 2004, seventy-two people from 44 different countries were sworn in as American citizens before an audience of 800 people, which included

more than 500 middle school students. On this autumn morning, the school's gymnasium was transformed into a courtroom. The school band played "The Star Spangled Banner," the choir sang "America the Beautiful," and National Junior Honor Society members passed out miniature U.S. flags for the new citizens to proudly wave after being sworn in as American citizens. To date, twelve naturalization ceremonies have been held at Three Rivers Middle School thanks to the vision of Marney Murphy.

At this ceremony, my grandmother shared her personal story and congratulated the immigrants on receiving their U.S. citizenship. She encouraged them to become good citizens and give back to their communities in appreciation for all that they will inherit as citizens of the United States of America.

Growing the Concept

Soon after returning home from the community-wide ceremony in Ohio, my grandmother shared with family and friends what she had just witnessed. She wondered, "Could this sort of inspiring, educational event be replicated in other schools?" After countless discussions on this topic, I contacted Marney Murphy to learn more about what is involved in hosting such an event. I was impressed by the attention to detail required to create this unique learning experience for the students. The impact on the students was so significant that I decided to take action so that students in other schools could benefit from an experience such as this.

My grandmother and I initiated discussions with various educational and business leaders about the need for a program to teach students about the naturalization process and the importance of becoming responsible community mem-

bers. Because there is an incredible need for a program such as this, I collaborated with textbook publisher, McDougal Littell. I wrote a curriculum highlighting the naturalization process and importance of practicing good citizenship skills. *The Path to Citizenship*, a 42-page curriculum for grades 5-11, allows for short- or long-term study and culminates in a student-hosted naturalization ceremony.⁴

Citizenship Counts

Hosting a community-wide naturalization ceremony requires a great deal of planning and preparation. With the help of many community leaders, my grandmother and I created Citizenship Counts, a non-profit organization that provides support and training to schools as they implement our program.

In October 2008, Citizenship Counts launched its first pilot program. One hundred middle school students from two schools in the Phoenix, Arizona metropolitan area participated. They completed the *The Path to Citizenship* curriculum, which culminated in a naturalization ceremony held at The Phoenix Convention Center on March 23, 2009. At this most special event, students welcomed 50 adults from 26 different countries who took "The Oath of Allegiance" and were sworn in by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

The ceremony was an emotional experience for all 400 people in attendance, including Citizenship Counts' board members Justice O'Connor; Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne; and my grandmother. Each addressed the audience about the importance of understanding the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship, as well as the need for quality civics education.

Conclusion

Our attitudes towards ethnicity and culture are formed in our youth. Elementary school students have a great proclivity to develop a positive outlook towards diversity when appropriately guided by teachers and school administrators.⁵ As we aim to create an integrated and harmonious society, we need to recognize that these early years are a critical period for teaching tolerance and interrupting the cycle of racism and discrimination.

What better way to teach civics to students—both immigrant and native born—than to engage them in hosting a naturalization ceremony? An opportunity such as this connects social studies lessons with an uplifting, emotional, and lasting educational memory! 🇺🇸

Notes

1. From the conclusion of the 1988 report by the NCSS Task Force on Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies. Twenty-one years later, these concerns are, if anything, magnified.
2. Rahima Wade, ed., *Building Bridges: Connecting Classroom and Community through Service-Learning in Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 2000), 5.
3. Gerda Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).
4. *The Path to Citizenship: A Naturalization Project for Your School* (Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2009).
5. Catherine Lasso and Nelson Soto, "The Social Integration of Latino Newcomer Students in Midwestern Elementary Schools: Teacher and Administrator Perceptions," *Essays in Education* 14 (Department of Education, University of South Carolina, Summer 2005), www.usca.edu/essays.

ALYSA ULLMAN is executive director of *Citizenship Counts*, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, non-partisan organization dedicated to improving civics education by actively engaging America's youth and the greater community in the democratic process. Learn more on the web at www.citizenshipcounts.org.