

Occupy Wall Street: Examining a Current Event as It Happens

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On September 17, 2011 (Constitution Day), Occupy Wall Street began as a protest movement when approximately 2,000 supporters assembled in lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park. The group's concerns focused on the corporate role in the current financial crisis and economic inequality. On October 1, a large group of protesters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge, causing traffic problems and generating a great deal of publicity. As the protesting continued, U.S. Representative Eric Cantor (R-Va.) expressed his view during an appearance on CBS News: "I for one am increasingly concerned about the growing mobs occupying Wall Street and the other cities across the country."¹ Rhetoric both in support of and against the protest began to flood the media. Newspaper, television, and social media reports of the activities of Occupy Wall Street increased dramatically, along with editorials and political cartoons.

The "Occupy movement" began to spread. In October, *Time* magazine reported that over 200,000 people had "protested in more than 900 cities across the world."² For example, in Texas, protests emerged in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, El Paso, Fort Worth, and Austin within four weeks of September 17.

Media attention to Occupy Wall Street in New York and its extensions prompted one teacher (Mary Ledbetter, the fourth author of this article) to discuss the issue in her class of fifth grade students in Austin, Texas, nearly three months after Occupy Wall Street began. The situation also caught the attention of her educational colleagues (her co-authors). The University of Texas Elementary School where Mary teaches is a laboratory school that encourages teacher-professor collaborations. In this article, we report how fifth grade students engaged in thoughtful consideration of the growing Occupy movement, and discussed its connections to our constitutional rights. We begin with a summary of previous learning activities that led to the students' informed responses.

Understanding the Roots of Democracy

Mary's students had previously learned about the Constitution

and their Constitutional rights during Celebrate Freedom Week. The third week of September, the social studies curriculum in Texas (grades 3-12) focuses on the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights. For fifth graders, the state curriculum indicates students must be able to "describe the fundamental rights guaranteed by each amendment in the Bill of Rights ... including ... the right to assemble and petition the government."³ Because Occupy Wall Street began during Celebrate Freedom Week, the event served as a powerful contemporary example that helped her ten-year-old students understand the meaning of citizens' right to assemble.

The class also explored how child laborers have expressed this right in the past, and what the consequences of their actions were. They watched clips from and discussed the musical *Newsies*, which is based on the New York City newsboys' strike of 1899.⁴ Earlier in the school year, students had learned about the 1963 March on Washington during a Civil Rights unit.

The Occupy Movement Comes to Austin

Mary recognized that when Occupy Wall Street made its way into her students' hometown of Austin, the event provided an excellent opportunity to extend their understanding of citizens' rights and to practice discussing a controversial issue. Furthermore, a study of the protests would allow Mary's students to explore **10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**, from a contemporary perspective and to address a Texas standard for social studies that deals with identifying various points of view about current events.⁵

With these goals in mind, Mary planned a series of six learning activities to teach her students about Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin. We report these activities in the order that Mary presented them to her students during this brief unit of study: What do You Know; Analysis of Art; What's Happening in Austin; Examining News Media; Document-Based Questions; and Final Discussions.



Using an iPad for a news broadcast about Occupy Wall Street



Observing the “crazy lady” political cartoon

What Do You Already Know?

The study began with a general discussion of what the students already knew about Occupy Wall Street. Students generated the following list of words that they associated with the protests and elaborated on their comments: stock market, people marching and protesting, September 17, 2011, Constitution Day, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, and the slogan “We are the 99%,” which was coined by Occupy protesters to indicate “the vast majority of Americans who have failed to gain economic ground while Wall Street profits have grown.”⁶ This initial conversation provided Mary with valuable information about students’ understanding of current events to help her make instructional decisions for future activities.

What Can We Learn from Art?

Using her Promethean Board and the Picturing America website,⁷ Mary projected the image of Norman Rockwell’s “Freedom of Speech,” which was featured on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on February 20, 1943. (Earlier in the school year, Mary had her students discuss and analyze Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photo as part of a unit about the Great Depression.) While looking at the Rockwell picture, Mary reminded the students of the era when it was painted, during World War II.

While Rockwell’s image is pleasant and inspiring, expressions of protest often make people feel uncomfortable as they are happening. They can even be offensive. Mary wanted her students to begin making connections between constitutional freedoms and Occupy Wall Street. Excerpts from their discussion below show how Mary’s guiding questions enabled the fifth graders (S) to do so.

Mary: What do you see?

S: A man giving a speech.

Mary: What might he be saying?

S: We are the working people.

S: We are the 99%.

S: Occupy Wall Street.

Mary: What is in his pocket?

S: Is it his speech?

S: Oh—I can read it: “An annual report.”

Mary: Where did Rockwell want our eyes to go?

S: To the eyes of the man speaking.

Mary: Remember Migrant Mother? Think about what we have learned about the artist’s pyramid. What can you tell me about these people surrounding the man speaking?

S: They look like they are in court.

S: They look like the 99%.

Mary: Are these educated people?

S: Maybe.

S: Yes—they look like they want to know, they want to listen.

Mary: How are the people dressed?

S: In everyday clothes.

S: I see someone in a suit.

Mary: Who are they listening to?

S: The man in the center who is standing up and speaking.

Mary: Look at the man’s clothes. What do you see?

S: He’s wearing a work shirt and jacket.

Mary: What do his hands tell you?

S: That he might work in the dirt.

S: That he might be a mechanic.

Mary: Think about the freedom of speech. How is the man using this right?

S: He is giving a speech.

Mary: Is the audience listening?

S: Everyone is turned toward him.

Mary: How are the people exercising their freedom of speech? What kind of meeting is this?

S: PTA?

S: City Council?

Mary: They’re in a town hall meeting, where everyone has a chance to speak. Now think about the other areas of important rights we have learned about this year, other civil rights.

S: Yea! We learned about this from the lawyer [a guest speaker during a previous unit of study in which immigration was



Student and her letter to the president



Students with their joint letter to the president

discussed].

S: We listed some of them before [in the opening discussion for this unit].

S: Speech, press.

S: And assembly!

What's Actually Happening Now?

Having used Rockwell's art to connect the current protests to the freedom of assembly, the students read the following information and then discussed what they had observed about the protest in their hometown:

- The first demonstration in Austin was held at City Hall on October 6, beginning with about 150 people and growing to about 1,300 over the course of the day.
- That day, people marched from City Hall to a Bank of America branch downtown and then back to City Hall.
- On Thursday, October 13, four people were arrested for refusing to leave the area during a 2:00–6:00am clean up (power-wash).

Most students had driven past the Occupy Austin encampment and seen the food tables and tents of the participants. A few students had heard about protesters being arrested. At the same time, some students knew about the peaceful start of the protest and how the group worked cooperatively with the police and did the cleanup, trash disposal, and power-washing of the site themselves.

Examining News Media, Pro and Con

Now that students knew something about Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin from whole-group discussions, Mary wanted them to explore artifacts related to the protests. She set up three stations in the classroom for students to visit at their own pace, and she provided a handout to guide their exploration and small-group discussions (**HANDOUT A**). The stations included:

- Political Cartoons:** Mary provided two political cartoons for student groups to interpret. An illustration by

John Sherffius depicted a wealthy 1% with money bags in the percent sign, and a larger 99% with pennies in their percent sign.⁸ The caption read, "It was the best of times (for 1%). It was the worst of times (for 99%)."

Another cartoon showed a woman with a wild expression on her face holding a protest sign in one hand that said, "We Protest Corporate Greed!"⁹ In the other hand she carried a McDonald's bag and an Apple iPhone. She was wearing a Coca-Cola t-shirt, a Nike cap, an REI backpack, and Dolce & Gabana pants.

- Newspaper Articles:** Mary provided several newspaper articles about the protests from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Austin American Statesman*. Mary marked the specific parts of the article for students to focus on.
- Audio files:** Mary set up two iPads with Internet connections as listening stations. On one iPad, students could view and listen to a story about Occupy Wall Street from CNN.¹⁰ On the other iPad, students listened to a brief story from NPR-8 about Occupy Wall Street.¹¹

The students were particularly eager to hear the NPR story because Mary mentioned that she listened to it over the weekend and wanted to share it with the class.

Mary divided the class into five small groups, distributed **HANDOUT A**, and invited each group to discuss the questions on the handout, which helped students compare and analyze the materials on the tables.

Document-Based Questions

After providing her class with multiple opportunities to explore the protests, Mary assessed each student's understanding with document-based questions about two posters announcing Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin (**HANDOUT B**, page 22). The students responded to questions such as: What do the posters have in common? How do they differ? What is the message of the poster? (There may be several, so you may list more than one.) What do you know about Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin?

Handout A

Observing a Protest

Observe the primary or secondary source at your table. Discuss these questions with your table partners and record your ideas below.

1. What do you see?

2. What do you think is the problem or issue?

3. What amendment to the Constitution is involved?

4. Do you agree with the message? Why or why not?

5. What connections do you see to the peaceful protests of the 50s- 60s during the Civil Rights Movement?

6. Do you think that Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, or Cesar Chavez would participate in this movement if they could? Why or why not?

Drawing Conclusions

Near the end of their study of Occupy Wall Street, Mary called the students together for a “closure discussion.” Pointing to the initial list of terms the students had made, she asked, “What can we add to our key words after our explorations?” and wrote the following notes as students responded:

- The protestors are peaceful overall.
- There has been conflict and police involvement and arrests.
- Some business owners (1%) don’t want to hear any complaints from the workers.
- Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin have some goals.
- Occupy Austin has an end date in mind and a list of demands.

When given the task of listing the positive and negative effects of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, Mary’s students unanimously agreed that one positive effect has been the exercise of the freedom of speech. Mary also helped the students list similarities and differences between the Occupy Wall Street protesters and the Freedom Riders and others they had learned about during their previous study of the Civil Rights Movement. They discussed the Constitutional Rights upheld by each group of protesters. Negative effects of the movement that students identified included violence in some cities like Oakland and Atlanta, groups of people blaming one another, and resentment between groups of Americans—the 99% and the 1%.

In closing, Mary asked her students to identify problems in America that have led to the Occupy Wall Street movement, and then brainstorm solutions together as a class. Among the

problems that students raised were a weak economy, controversial wars, conflict between the executive and legislative branches, businesses “too big to fail,” unemployment and home foreclosures, and extensive finger pointing and blaming others.

Reflecting on the Lesson

During the last part of class, Sherry Field observed students and Elizabeth Bellows interviewed small groups of children.

EB: What is Occupy Wall Street or Occupy Austin? And what are people protesting?

S: 99% of the people work, and the 1% are the wealthy.

S: The message is coming from the people, from the 99%.

S: They’re protesting because they think the company owners get too much of the money and they think the economy would be better because they [the wealthy] could pay more taxes ...

S: Yeah, if they [the 99%] had better jobs, they would make more money and then they could spend more money.

EB: How are the protesters exercising their first amendment rights?

S: They’re doing freedom of speech.

S: And assembly.

S: They’re saying, “This isn’t fair.”

S: They are making signs and posters.

S: They are saying, “We do most of the work but we don’t make most of the money.”

Comparing Political Posters with DBQs: Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin

Here are three document-based questions (DBQs 1, 2, and 3) about two posters. Write your answers in complete sentences.

1. What do the posters have in common?

2. How do the posters differ?

3. What is the message of the poster? (There may be several, so you may list more than one.)

4. What do you know about Occupy Wall Street & Occupy Austin? (You may continue your answer on the back of this paper)

Students were able to distinguish between fact and opinion, form their own opinions, and consider opposing ideas. It was interesting to see and hear the students interpret and understand the powerful messages in the media.

Ways Forward

These problems led to brainstorming possible solutions. The students decided that the opposing parties ought to sit down and listen to one another and stop blaming one another. One student, said, “It sounds like they need a Second Step lesson.” This statement refers to the social-emotional learning curriculum at the University of Texas Elementary School.¹² The students all agreed and went on to suggest that our leaders need to visit our classroom Peace Table and follow the STEP problem-solving plan: Say the problem. Think of solutions. Explore the consequences. Pick the best solution.

Other thoughtful solutions included passing laws that made immigrants feel safe so they could do the hard work that helps their families and helps our economy; making sure everyone has equal opportunity for a quality education and better future; and making sure that taxes are distributed fairly so that everyone pays their fair share.

This lesson was a powerful one. Students worked diligently to learn the facts about both Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Austin and to connect this new learning to what they have already learned about the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Civil Rights Movement. 🌍

Notes

1. CBS News, (October 7, 2012), www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7383837n.
2. “Spotlight,” *Time* (October 31, 2011), 16–17.
3. Texas Education Agency, *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills*, www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=6148.
4. *Newsies*, DVD (Disney 1994), 121 minutes.
5. See note 3 and National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
6. “The 99 Percent Solution,” news.harvard.edu.
7. Picturing America, picturingamerica.neh.gov.
8. politicalhumor.about.com/od/Occupy-Wall-Street/ig/Occupy-Wall-Street-Cartoons/Best-and-Worst-of-Times.htm.
9. 2sistersfromtheright.blogspot.com/2011/10/protesting-corporate-greed.html.
10. www.cnn.com/video/#/video/bestoftv/2011/10/24/nr-occupy-whats-next.cnn.
11. www.npr.org/blogs/money/2011/10/07/141158199/the-friday-podcast-what-is-occupy-wall-street.
12. Jennifer Hargrave and Ramona Trevino, *Teaching to the Spirit of Every Child: Lessons Learned in Urban Education, A Teacher Preparation Guide* (Austin, TX: Forty Acres Press, 2010): 41–62.

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