

# Civic Zines: Writing, Discussing, and Doing Citizenship

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Common to her practice of posing big, open-ended questions, Jennifer Cody opened a new unit of study by asking her fifth graders: “What do you know that’s going on in the world around you?” Sitting on the floor rug and the classroom couch, her students talked about current events reported in the news: political revolutions in Egypt and Syria, global warming, and U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan. A particularly civic-minded teacher, Jennifer then asked: “So what can we do about these issues in our own neighborhoods and townships?” Her normally chatty fifth graders fell silent, seemingly bewildered.

After students had left the classroom, Jennifer contemplated a few questions. These children (students at Park Forest Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania) knew about global issues, but did not know how they related to people and events in their own location. How could she make the issues concrete and interesting? Just as important, could she find methods to encourage students to investigate ways to do something about an issue?

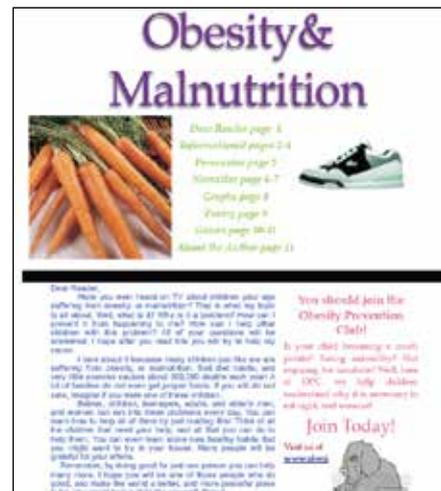
## Social Studies and Citizenship

Jennifer’s questions are central to the field of social studies education. As “the integrated study of social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence,”<sup>1</sup> the social studies converge around questions about citizenship. The College, Career, and Civics (C3) Framework<sup>2</sup> argues that two commonly advocated purposes of schooling, college preparation and career readiness, should unite with a third, equally critical element of society—preparation for civic life. “There will always be differing perspectives on these objectives,” the authors write. “The goal of knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens, however, is universal.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, our country’s need for thoughtful citizenry is undisputed, as is the role of public schools in fulfilling the need. However, the question of how teachers can support students in developing civic agency—the capacity of citizens to act collaboratively regarding matters of public concern<sup>4</sup>—is considerably less clear.

## Civic Zines

This article describes how Jennifer designed and taught a unit, “Civic Zines,” aimed at developing her students’ sense of civic agency. She defined civic zines as “homemade magazines cen-

tered on a current events topic that is of great interest to the students.” Students choose an issue of public concern, research the topic, write about it in a variety of genres, engage in public discourse, and take informed civic action. Each zine included written, visual, and playful elements (including poetry, cartoons, and crosswords), modeled after magazines familiar to students, such as *Discovery Kids* or *National Geographic for Kids*. The final product took the form of a paper magazine or a Pages (software) document that students could e-mail to each other and family members.



Jennifer’s unit is an example of action civics, an approach to civic education that emphasizes doing citizenship instead of simply learning about it.<sup>5</sup> The New Civics Initiative by The Spencer Foundation calls for increasing the quantity and quality of civic participation; the goal of teaching should be to enable students to take informed, critically-considered civic action.<sup>6</sup> Jennifer studied the New Civics and Project Citizen<sup>7</sup> protocols and made her own variation of a five-step process:

1. Select a public issue of personal interest;
2. Research the topic for broad understanding;
3. Write for authentic civic purposes;
4. Propose a plan for civic action; and
5. Take local civic action.

Each step integrates academic content and skills in reading, writing, researching, and fact-finding toward the goal of students taking informed civic action.

### **Step 1: Select a Public Issue of Personal Interest**

Jennifer exposed students to a wide variety of resources, such as online articles about current events, short videos, and fictional children's books with social relevance. She asked students to bring newspapers from home and allocated time for students to browse articles in class. Then, over several weeks, students shared with the whole class the stories or topics they found compelling.

Students selected a wide variety of topics. Some students chose global issues such as disaster relief for Chilean earthquake victims. Other chose ecological issues, such as recycling and the endangerment of killer whales, jaguars, and bog turtles; and a final group selected public health issues, such as child abuse and the need for blood drives. Although students' motivations for topic selection were often personal, Jennifer's encouragement (that students could understand a current issue and could make a difference) proved equally important.

Aaron, a fifth grader interested in blood drives, was motivated by personal relationships. He commented, "I care about this topic because it can save lives, and I have relatives that have had their lives saved. Also, many more people are needed to donate blood because we are low on supplies."

Marie, a student researching childhood obesity, explained how Jennifer played a role in her topic selection:

Part of it was me, a part of it was Ms. Cody, too, because she wanted us to do something that we could change, just like in our town, and so I wanted to pick something that I knew was a problem off the bat. . . . But she influenced me to do something that could really change."

Aaron's motivations started with the personal. He selected his topic based on past experiences; in contrast, Marie started with her sense of agency, the belief that citizens can solve a particular problem, which propelled her to research further. At the end of this step, Jennifer asked students to cut out an article on their topic and attach written answers to two essential questions: Why do you care about this topic? Whom does it affect?

### **Step 2: Research the Topic for a Broad Understanding**

In this step, students read, wrote, discussed, and critically thought about their topics to broaden their understanding of it. After students shared their topic and talked about why they selected it, Jennifer modeled how to ask probing and clarifying questions to gain further information. She gave balanced feedback (both praise and critique), so that students understood what constructive feedback sounded like. During her literacy block, Jennifer gave brief instruction about the slant

of an article, finding evidence to support an idea, and locating multiple sources to verify claims. Using these skills, students researched multiple sources to gain a thorough understanding of their topic. These lessons prepared students for their first of two public presentations, "the zine defense," during which students make a case for the importance of their topic. In this talk, students were assigned five questions to consider:

- What is your zine topic?
- Why do you care about it?
- Who will be helped because of your research?
- Why is it important?
- How can you make a change?

Jennifer designed each question to encourage students to continue linking personal interests to the public issues. During her zine defense, Marie said, "Americans all over have been gaining weight since the 1970s. I wanted to [address this problem] in my school because the children, they're all young, and it's easier to get healthy habits when you're younger than to change drastically when you're old." Later in her defense, Marie said that she cared about the topic because children her age across the world were suffering from food malnutrition, and, in America, overconsumption and massive food waste were normal. This disparity struck Marie as particularly unjust, and she called her fellow students to action. "Remember, by doing good for just one person, you can help many more," she said. "I hope you will be one of those people who do good and make the world a better and more peaceful place."

This zine defense served two purposes. First, it was a formative assessment, a gauge Jennifer could use to measure what students had learned and still needed to learn. Second, it was a platform for students to share their research and engage in public discourse. In each case, students applied what they learned through their critical reading, research, and oral presentations as they moved toward a broader understanding of their topic.

### **Step 3: Write for Authentic Civic Purposes**

For four days each week over the next three months, students drafted their zines during writing workshop after lunch, in sessions usually lasting half an hour. Jennifer asked students to use a shared Google Document so she could consistently give feedback. Students usually wrote independently, learning from the teacher's comments about structuring arguments, choosing valid sources, and identifying the evidence as they wrote. They worked at their own paces, creating a timeline and checking in periodically with Jennifer to illustrate their progress.

During the workshop, Marie wrote a fictional narrative about Allison Change, a girl who motivated citizens in the town of Lazyville to exercise every day by running. "She [Allison] gets everyone, and so they all start running," Marie described. "Then they get really excited about how good they feel, and so they keep doing it every day. The town starts transforming into a healthy town."

Aaron drafted his informational piece about blood drives, writing facts to convince others to take the time to donate. “4.5 million people will need a blood transfusion every year,” he wrote, “You only have to donate 1 pint to save over 3 lives.” Anna Lisa, a student arguing against the aggressive fracking of Marcellus Shale in Pennsylvania, wrote a haiku:

“What is this?” I ask  
As the water is aflame  
What is going on?

As students progressed, Jennifer monitored the drafts, conducting one-on-one writing conferences for students who needed individual attention and gave consistent online feedback to all students on their drafts of their Google documents.

#### **Step 4: Propose a Plan for Civic Action**

As students finalized their zines, Jennifer wondered how her students might share what they had learned, and how they might propose action plans, if they wished. Consequently, she introduced the idea of a second public presentation, the “zine update.” For this presentation, Jennifer wanted students to take ownership of content, so she co-constructed the questions with them. After deliberating, they came to consensus around six questions:

1. What do you want to share?
2. What are startling facts that you have discovered through your research?
3. What are others doing to help?
4. What do you plan to do to help?
5. What do you want to know about someone else’s topic?
6. Are you feeling more passionate about your topic because of your research?

The update also provided students with space to think beyond their own topic and to consider their classmates’ ideas and interests. As part of her update, Marie stated that obesity wears on joints, makes it difficult for people to breathe, and creates overall health problems. She also stated that every 3.6 seconds someone dies from hunger problems across the world. “This shocking news made me so much more passionate about my zine,” she said, “I know more facts, [and] I am more aware of how serious this problem has become.” For an action plan, Marie proposed spreading the word about the dangers of obesity and global hunger to her local peer network, starting with her classmates and their families. After suggesting that her classmates should do the same, Marie finished her update by saying, “Every little thing helps to make a big change!”

Other students took different approaches. Some students put up pictures showing an example of a social or environmental injustice or made an emotional appeal by telling a story illustrating a problem. After students finished their updates, they

offered a variety of ideas for civic action, such as:

- I am going to donate to ORCA: the Organization for Responsible Care of Animals.
- I want to inform everyone about recycling and how it helps us. But how will I do that without friends to help? I won’t. I need as much help as I can get from YOU to get the world to recycle.
- Other people are donating right now, and the website I recommend is [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com). I donated, and it makes me feel good inside.

Most of Jennifer’s students proposed civic activity within one of two categories: raising awareness or to donating money to social service agencies. Students like Marie who sought to raise awareness focused on creating a network of peers and adults who might be persuaded to act by their stories and facts. Students who focused on donating money advocated for their classmates to pool money and donate together. Aaron, an exception to these categories, said: “I plan to—when I’m old enough—donate [blood] and even get other people to donate.” In the present, Aaron planned to advocate for blood drives by raising awareness; in the future, he planned to take direct action by donating blood himself.

#### **Step 5: Take Local Civic Action**

In the final step, students practiced citizenship by enacting their project ideas. Seeking to include younger students, Jennifer’s class collaborated with a first and second grade class on selecting a whole-class civic action project. Aaron’s description reveals how Jennifer aimed to empower the younger students:

We started a project with kids down in first and second grade. ...They had to vote on two topics. One was blood drives, and they picked blood drives [from among the possible topics]. Right there my teacher thought that’s a perfect opportunity so they can catch on and really think that the blood drive is basically their idea. What we did there was they started talking about what we can do to help. One of the kids was like, “Hey, what if we have a blood drive?” She was like, “Hey, that could work.”

Throughout the next month, Jennifer worked to support Aaron and Jeremy’s (Aaron’s partner in the project) success in bringing a blood drive to school. She called the Red Cross about the possibility and let them know that the boys would be calling soon. Based on ideas from class brainstorming sessions, Jeremy and Aaron designed posters to advertise the blood drive and placed them in public places around town. They created a radio advertisement using first- and second-grade students as the narrators, and a local radio station broadcast the audio clip.

During the day of the blood drive, Jennifer's students greeted and registered donors, offered them assistance to the resting areas, and even dressed up as the Red Cross mascot. Jeremy and Aaron were at the helm, answering questions from fellow classmates as they sprung up.

In contrast to Aaron and Jeremy's project, Anna Lisa increased awareness about the consequences of fracking at an All School Gathering (ASG). Run by fifth graders, ASGs are monthly assemblies attended by all students, during which they share in-class learning and civic projects and recognize each other for accomplishments. "Fracking is how companies get all that gas out of Marcellus Shale," Anna Lisa announced as she projected PowerPoint images. "They pump in a mix of water and chemicals. These chemicals and the natural gas are getting into our water supply." She finished her presentation by announcing a donation drive for the Sierra Club, an organization that supplied fresh water to communities affected by fracking. She placed a jar in the school corridor for receiving voluntary donations.

## Conclusions

Due to her students' different levels of knowledge and experiences, Jennifer framed civic "success" in a variety of ways. Notably, Jennifer conceptualized this unit as the study of social, political, or ecological questions, during which students learn and apply academic skills to formulate new knowledge about the question or problem. In this way, civic investigations were placed at the center of the curriculum, giving social context to literacy and language content and skills.

As teachers, we can support student civic agency by asking big, open-ended questions about issues of public relevance. Further, we can explicitly teach students the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to construct evidence-based and action-oriented answers and to take civic action on such questions. Young students are often eager to find solutions to problems they experience and are capable of coming up with creative, developmentally appropriate solutions. However, it is important for students to know that solutions they offer, while valuable, are incomplete. Although we should celebrate students' civic successes, we should persist in the narrative that there is more work to be done.

One challenge for teachers who teach for civic agency is supporting the belief that positive, societal change is possible without masking the reality of a largely change-resistant society. Such a challenge can be addressed if we ask students to reflect on and assess their work as civic actors throughout the unit.<sup>8</sup> For example, students in Jennifer's class participated in informal discussions about how they felt about the phrase, "making a difference in the world." In their final reflection, students wrote a paper answering reflective questions such as: What did I learn (from the zines)? How has this project changed me? What disappointed me? What conclusions can I draw? These reflective activities were pivotal for students to recognize the importance of active citizenship and their place in solving complex public problems.

In this unit, Jennifer exemplified one way teachers can support student as "knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens"<sup>9</sup> in a public school context. Since the inception of public schools in the United States, teachers have played a profound role in creating opportunities for students to understand their identity as citizens and how they fit into civic life. Young learners can be thoughtful, capable, and active citizens who, if given the space and knowledge, can sustain, re-imagine, and improve our democracy now and in the future. 🌍

## Notes

1. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), "Executive Summary," [www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsummary](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsummary).
2. NCSS, "The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History" (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), [www.socialstudies.org/c3](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3).
3. NCSS, "C3 Framework," 5.
4. Mustafa Emibayer and Ann Miche, "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023.
5. Center for Action Civics, [www.mikvachallenge.org](http://www.mikvachallenge.org).
6. The Spencer Foundation, "The New Civics," 2010, [www.spencer.org/content/cfm/the\\_new\\_civics](http://www.spencer.org/content/cfm/the_new_civics).
7. Center for Civic Education, "Project Citizen" (Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, 1996), [new.civiced.org/programs/project-citizen](http://new.civiced.org/programs/project-citizen).
8. Center for Civic Reflection, "Mission and Vision" (2012), [civicreflection.org/about/mission](http://civicreflection.org/about/mission).
9. NCSS, C3 Framework.

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