

# Thermometers to Thermostats: Designing and Assessing Informed Action

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The College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards published by the National Council for the Social Studies<sup>1</sup> advocates the need for students not just to acquire and produce knowledge, but also to live a life of active engagement in the workings of our democracy. Dimension Four of the C3 Framework articulates this goal as “taking informed action.” Informed action gives students an authentic platform to practice literacy skills as they address real world issues through the use of interdisciplinary content, aptitudes, and evidence, developing partnerships with institutions in their community as they work for improvement and sustainability. Students move from being “thermometers,” taking the temperature of their environment, to “thermostats” that can alter the climate of their community. They become agents of change.

Young people care deeply about the issues that affect their community and have expertise that can be harnessed to promote sustainable change. Whether the issue is as local as the quality of school lunches or as broad as the effect of media on body image, students have a unique perspective and voice that needs to be heard. My students have taken informed action that has resulted in global dialogue on issues of identity and equality, state legislation allowing “suffrage at 17,”<sup>2</sup> and local policy changes addressing school climate. Each of these informed actions were rooted in classroom inquiry and culminated in real-world results.

Many of our schools do a wonderful job of helping students become involved in civil society through community service projects. However, informed action is explicitly tied to the curriculum; it is a natural extension and application of the information and aptitudes being

explored in the classroom. Best practices engage student voice in choosing, planning, and implementing the endeavor with meaningful reflection.

Brené Brown in her famous TED Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” shared her struggle with the paradigm, “If you cannot measure it, it does not exist.”<sup>3</sup> Many social studies teachers are wrestling with the same premise as they work to assess informed action. How do you measure civic engagement? How do you measure growth in personal efficacy? Is it a test? Is it a portfolio? I have come to look at these questions in a different way. I do not see informed action as something additional to assess. I see informed action as *the* assessment of how students apply disciplinary content and proficiencies to address compelling questions investigated in the classroom. (For an example, see the rubric on page 373 for assessing letters written by students to government officials on public policy issues.)

## 1. The Action is the Assessment: Start with a Good Question that Compels Learning

Good questions facilitate assessment of student learning that is embedded, not extraneous. Recently, my American Government curriculum team focused on the compelling question, “How does my vote count?” for a unit on voting and elections. We wanted the students to investigate supporting questions involving the Electoral College, gerrymandering, open vs. closed primaries, voter apathy, campaign financing and the methods many used to gain suffrage rights. This inquiry personalizes the electoral process for students in a way that leads to informed action as they evaluate the need for electoral reform.

After using disciplinary content to investigate the question, “How does my vote count?” students were appalled at the level of voter apathy among their peers. In light of the history of how individuals sacrificed for the franchise, they could not believe that so many took their right to vote for granted. They also concluded that this lack of participation had an unintended consequence: policymakers do not value the issues that are important to young people because the youth vote has a minimal impact on election results. They realized that to “make their vote count,” they needed to increase voter turnout among their peers. They designed an inquiry to identify the

| Root Causes of Voter Apathy  | Informed Action   |
|--|---|
| Kids are afraid of the process and of looking foolish.   | Mock election at school with equipment from the Board of Elections so students can “practice.” Inform juniors and seniors with a 3.0 GPA that they can serve as election judges in Illinois and become familiar with the process and earn money.  |
| People do not know they have to register to vote.  | Have the League of Women Voters conduct a voter registration drive during lunches and at homecoming games when many graduates return to school. Advertise opportunities in announcements and flyers in the school.  |
| Kids are unaware of how people in the past valued the right to vote and sacrificed to gain suffrage.           | Write PSA's (Public Service Announcements) for the announcements and flyers to be hung in the school, communicating the history of how people sacrificed for suffrage and why one should register to vote.  |
| Kids do not know the candidates on the ballot and are afraid of making the wrong choice.                       | Students can create non-partisan voter education guides and distribute them to kids in social studies classes before the mock election. Students will survey students to discern what issues are important and reflect the candidate positions on those issues.   |
| Kids who start voting when they are young are more likely to continue the habit of voting when they are older. | Submit witness slips* online to state officials to advocate for “Suffrage at 17” legislation in Illinois, which allows students to participate in primaries at 17 if they will be 18 on the date of the general election. This allows more high school students to participate in elections while still in school with the encouragement and support of their teachers. |

\*The Illinois General Assembly allows citizens to file online opinions about proposed legislation through “witness slips” that are transmitted to the committee responsible for reviewing that legislation.

root causes of low voter turnout among young people, and developed a strategy to address each root cause to affect change. The chart above illustrates some of their findings and plans for action.<sup>4</sup>

The compelling question provided a good foundation for assessment because it is easy to create a rubric that articulates to students how their learning will be assessed, and it helped me structure my feedback to them about how they addressed the compelling question. For each informed action, I measured how well they used evidence to support their claims for the causes of low voter turnout. I measured how they employed the strategies they learned from examining individuals such as the suffragettes in their efforts to get out the vote. I evaluated whether their informed action addressed possible counter claims and unintended consequences.

## 2. The Action Is the Assessment: Empower Student Voice, Student Choice

In addition to dealing with questions such as “How Does My Voice Count?” it is important for students to take informed action about issues affecting

their own schools. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools advocates six proven practices for civic education, one of which elevates the importance of student voices in the classroom: “Giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes.”<sup>5</sup>

A resource that I have found very useful is Project Soapbox by the Mikva Challenge,<sup>6</sup> which allows middle and high school teachers to promote student voices and encourage informed action. Project Soapbox was designed to be a stand-alone, one-week public speaking unit in which students articulate issues of concern in their community. Rubrics are provided to assess how well students communicated the importance of the issue, provided evidence of its societal impact, and used rhetorical devices to persuade others to action. The Soapbox Speech itself is an informed action if given to an audience of stakeholders who have the power to initiate change.

One semester, a large majority of the soapbox speeches centered on issues of school climate ranging from bullying to gender inequity and body image issues.

The students and I invited administrators, police resource officers, school board members and county officials who worked with at-risk teens to listen and provide feedback. The adults in the room valued the passionate, heartfelt pleas for change and encouraged the students to present their findings to the school board. The students did some further investigation and presented a six-point plan of action at a school board meeting. This resulted in policy changes, the development of a more comprehensive plan to address bullying and a new school touchstone created by the students to articulate what kind of school climate they wanted. The touchstone was created through student body input and now hangs in every classroom as a foundation of how *all* members of our school are to conduct themselves.

This project harnessed student voices with the objective of promoting sustainable change. The students chose the topics for the soapbox speech. After feedback from community members, the class developed a further plan of action to present to the school board, and the students equitably divided the tasks. Throughout the process, I was able

to assess their speeches, research, survey work, interviews, PowerPoint presentation to the school board, and their reflection of the process. I could give them feedback on their plans, and remediate when necessary to help them achieve their learning objectives. Students were provided an authentic experience of how local government works, how to identify agents of power, and how to tailor a message to various audiences.

### 3. The Action is the Assessment: Build Administrative and Community Support

As social studies teachers, we often face challenges because we get students involved in public issues, but it is my experience that we can gain community and administrative support for this involvement by communicating clearly how it prepares students to be active and effective citizens. For example, this past fall, I was asked to show my immediate supervisor a copy of an assignment I had given my American Government students which required that they contact their elected officials about an issue of concern. Some of the legislators who received the letters were taken aback by

Photo by Mary Ellen Daniels



Seniors Kiana Kamrad and Izzy Cruz display the school touchstone

the content and were concerned about partisanship and voiced their concerns to school administrators. What could have been an intimidating conversation turned into an occasion to bring the community into my classroom. I responded with transparency. Throughout the years, I have invited local, state and federal officials into my classroom; this event provided another opportunity to extend an invitation. To their credit

and the students' delight, the lawmakers and administrators came to watch the students in a mock legislative hearing where students advocated for the public policy initiative they first proposed in their letters. I wanted our guests to see how the letter was just one instrument in a range of deliberative and democratic strategies and procedures suggested by the C3 Framework that students used to demonstrate their growth in civic knowledge and skills.

The legislators and administrators witnessed how students addressed compelling questions about regional issues through presentations and web-pages that utilized well-researched evidence and considered multiple perspectives. The legislators walked away with a greater understanding of how the letter they received was an instrument used to assess the student's understanding of disciplinary content related to civics, as delineated in Dimension Two of the C3 Framework. The students illustrated to our guests how they used the feedback they received from the letters, as well as additional research, to revise and improve their initial claims and address counterclaims to their public policy pro-

## Resources for Taking Informed Action

There are a number of organizations and resources that provide inspiration, structure and assessment resources for successful informed action.

The National Council for the Social Studies has a C3LC webinar called *Completing the Inquiry Arc: Exploring Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework*. (See [www.socialstudies.org/resources/c3/c3lc/completing-inquiry-arc-exploring-dimension-4-c3-framework](http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/c3/c3lc/completing-inquiry-arc-exploring-dimension-4-c3-framework).) Insights are provided on how students can best communicate and critique conclusions and take informed action.

Register for the Civic Action Project (<http://crfcap.org/>) facilitated by the Constitutional Rights Foundation. This resource is unique in that it not only connects teachers, but also students engaging in informed action projects.

The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago ([www.crfc.org](http://www.crfc.org)) has online resources to support informed action. Many connect with their annual Illinois Youth Summit.

The Mikva Challenge has a number of online resources to help scaffold successful action civics projects. You can sign up for their educator network to access information for trainings and opportunities for students in your region. See [www.mikvachallenge.org/educators/online-resources/](http://www.mikvachallenge.org/educators/online-resources/).

Become part of a network of practitioners committed to student-centered, project-based, high-quality civic informed action. Join the National Action Civics Collaborative. There is a toolbox of resources to help guide best practice (<http://actioncivicscollaborative.org/resources/>).

Join the Generator School Network (<https://gsn.nylc.org/>) hosted by the National Youth Leadership Council to access free professional development, curriculum and a network of teachers ready to support your work. Topics such as assessment, management and inspiration for service learning projects are addressed.

## Informed Action as Assessment: A Rubric for a Letter to a Public Official

|   | Exemplary (4)  | Proficient (3)   | Emerging (2)   | Insufficient (1)   |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Appropriate introduction  | X  | A brief introduction is given with context of assignment. Include such things as year in school, activities and future plans.  | X  | Introduction of self is confusing and or vague. There is no context for the letter provided.   |
| Correct elected official is contacted   | The correct branch of government is contacted at the correct level of government   | X  | Either the correct branch of government or the correct level of government is not contacted.   | Neither the correct branch of government nor the correct level of government are contacted.  |
| Explanation of relevance of issue to limited government.  | A thorough description of the issue is given. The importance of the issue is also explained with a specific tie to the rights of individuals and the role of government. | A description of the issue is given. The importance of the issue is also explained with a tie to the rights of individuals and the role of government.               | A confusing description of the issue is given. The explanation lacks either a specific tie to the rights of individuals or to the role of government.                        | Understanding of the issue is NOT present. The importance of the issue is NOT tied to the rights of individuals or the role of the government.                             |
| An explanation of the public policy solution; providing counterarguments for possible opposition to solution. | An explanation of one's opinion on how the issue should be resolved is provided, with specific counter-arguments made to address possible opposition to the solution.    | An explanation of one's opinion on how the issue should be resolved is provided, with limited counter-arguments made to address possible opposition to the solution. | An explanation of one's opinion on how the issue should be resolved is provided, with no specific counter-arguments made to address the possible opposition to the solution. | The explanation of one's opinion on how the issue should be resolved is confusing, with no specific counter-arguments made to address possible opposition to the solution. |
| A request for information is made   | A clear, concise request is made asking the elected official what he/she thinks. Create new policy? Enforce existing policy? Rescind existing policy?                    | A brief request is made asking the elected official what he/she thinks. Create new policy? Enforce existing policy? Rescind existing policy?                         | A confusing request is made asking the elected official what he /she thinks.   | The question asked of the official is unrelated or inappropriate.  |
| Appropriate conclusion  | There is a concluding statement that strongly articulates the implications or the significance of the topic.   | There is a concluding statement that articulates the implications or the significance of the topic.  | There is an attempt to make a concluding statement, but the relevance of the topic is unclear.   | There is no concluding statement that articulates the importance of the topic.   |
| Craftsmanship correct grammar, punctuation and capitalization are evident.                                    | There are NO grammatical errors or spelling mistakes   | There is an attempt to spell check and avoid grammatical errors, but some are present.   | X  | There is no evidence that spell check was used. The errors in grammar are distracting.   |

X= The grade is not available for this component of the task.

posals. In the end, the lawmakers appreciated the students' learning objectives and requested invitations for future legislative sessions.

This illustrates the importance of building community and administrative support for informed action. A real-world application of curriculum by students often involves students going

outside of the walls of the school. It is wise for teachers to communicate such endeavors to their administrators to avoid misunderstandings. My administration was well aware of my American Government program and had come at my invitation to observe the students taking informed action many times. When they received the phone call concern-

ing the assignment, the conversation with me was not confrontational, but informational. We critically looked at the assignment, and in the end, I made some adjustments to help students more successfully address their intended audience. I also had a conversation with the lawmakers about their concerns and queried them about how the students could



Students deliberate public policy proposals in a mock legislative hearing.

be more successful in their informed action projects. This administrative and community input resulted in a safe and productive learning experience for all involved. Most importantly, after the legislators saw the purpose of the letter they received and the growth in student learning as a result of their feedback, they became more invested in collaborating with their youngest constituents.

## Conclusion

Informed action projects can be the truest measurement of how students can apply the knowledge, skills and dispositions that they have practiced in class.

Because they are the culmination of the inquiry cycle, these projects are thoroughly embedded in both the content and process of student learning, and are an exercise that enhances and consolidates student learning, rather than taking time out to measure it. They can take the good work that we do in social studies and explicitly prepare students for governance as students see they can be agents of change in their community. There is no greater reward for a teacher than to see students grow in their personal efficacy and view themselves a productive and invested members of society. 🌍

## Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies (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).
2. Shawn Healy, “Stevenson Students and Teachers Lead the Way for Suffrage at 17,” *Huffington Post* (blog)(July 8, 2013), [www.huffingtonpost.com/shawn-healy/stevenson-students-and-teachers\\_b\\_3542102.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shawn-healy/stevenson-students-and-teachers_b_3542102.html)
3. Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED.com (June 2010), [www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)
4. For more information, see Diana Hess’s article, “Should Schools Teach Students to Vote? Yes!” *Social Education* 76, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2012): 283-289.
5. The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, “Six Proven Practices of Civic Education,” [www.civicmissionofschools.org/educators/six-proven-practices](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/educators/six-proven-practices)
6. Mikva Challenge, Project Soapbox (Chicago, IL: Mikva Challenge, 2014), [www.mikvachallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Project-Soapbox-2015.pdf](http://www.mikvachallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Project-Soapbox-2015.pdf).

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## Informed Action Ideas

- Write a newspaper editorial
- Create a Facebook or Web page on an issue
- Create short public service announcements
- Write a letter to a government official
- Present to another class
- Write an article for the school newspaper
- Present on the morning announcements
- Have a debate with invited guests
- Work collaboratively to write a resolution
- Contact an organization with whose platform you agree and see how you can get involved
- Create a class position statement
- Initiate an informed conversation
- Organize a “flyer” campaign to raise awareness
- Organize a fundraising event for a cause
- Form a club
- Circulate a petition
- Write (and perform) a song on an issue
- Bring stakeholders together for a classroom forum
- Invite a guest speaker
- Create a poster and hang it in a public space
- Create a community education pamphlet
- Promote a topic on Instagram or Twitter
- Organize community service
- Organize a rally
- Champion a boycott

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