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Civics in Action

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Halfway through a school day, I received a text from one of my high school students, a boisterous young woman from Uganda. "Ms. Lander, we've set up a meeting this afternoon with the Greater Merrimack Valley Food Bank to ask them to help us open up our food pantry! Can we use your classroom?"

For the past two months, one of my classes of 27 recent immigrants and refugees has been researching, writing, and advocating for a food pantry based at our school.

I teach at a large urban high school, and my students come from across the globe, hailing from more than 30 countries. Many have fled violence in their home countries to find safety and opportunity in the United States. In their short lives, many have also experienced periods of hunger. It is these experiences that have made them especially sensitive to the food insecurity faced by some of their American classmates.

They chose the topic, but their advocacy work is a central component of our U.S. history class and our study of American civics.

Traditionally, civics education has focused on teaching key facts about our nation's founding and the basic workings of our government.

Such knowledge is tremendously important. According to a 2012 survey by the Center for the Study of the American Dream at Xavier University, roughly one in three native-born Americans cannot pass the civics portion of the citizenship test administered to foreigners wanting to become citizens. Only one in four students scored "proficient" on the civics portion of the 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress exam (NAEP). In 2013 the civics portion of the NAEP test was postponed indefinitely.

But teaching facts about civics is not enough. Our students can only truly learn civics by doing civics.

To cultivate engaged citizens, we need to ensure that students have real-world opportunities to develop, practice, and apply civic skills. When civics education centers on bringing about concrete change in our students' community, it has the power to transform our students into engaged citizens.

When I teach my students action civics, there are four key ideas I hope they internalize.

One: Active citizenship means working with government to tackle community challenges.

In the months leading up to our meeting with the regional food bank, my students worked to understand the structure and function of our local government. Their learning is not abstract but salient to them as a means to an end—convincing decision makers to help them.

My students researched food insecurity, including the effects of hunger on growing minds and bodies; they interviewed more than a dozen local food pantries; they corresponded with local agencies; they assessed their own school's need; they met with our school leadership and staff to propose setting up a pantry; they drew up cost analyses; and they detailed a strategy for acquiring food donations.

Two: Active citizenship includes building coalitions.

For the past three years, I have partnered with the nonprofit Generation Citizen,

Generation Citizen's approach to action civics. For more information, visit generationcitizen.org.

which supports schools and teachers in six states, providing professional development and an action-civics curriculum that offers students a roadmap for making civic change.

My students are passionate about wanting to make a difference in their community, but making effective change can be daunting for students and teachers alike.

With Generation Citizen as a guide, students start each year by identifying community issues they care about. They eagerly created a list brimming with challenges that are deeply personal—teenage depression, police brutality, gentrification, opioid abuse, and the lack of supports for teen parents.

We discussed and debated, finally narrowing to a single topic we could tackle as a class. Like students across the country, one of my classes was particularly

upset by gun violence in their community. But they wondered how they could make a difference.

The first step is identifying a root cause—why does the problem exist? From there, they turned to formulating a goal.

Together, the class dove into articles and reports, pored over state laws, and invited local experts to their classroom. There were too many unsecured guns in homes, they learned. It was too easy for young children or depressed teenagers to find them and harm themselves. My students fashioned a two-part goal: Create a citywide gun-buyback program, where residents can exchange unwanted guns for grocery gift-cards and create an awareness campaign about the need to keep household guns locked and away from children.

To create citywide change, they need to identify who holds the power to enact change—is it the mayor, superintendent, city council members? And they need to build coalitions of groups and individuals who can help convince that decision maker.

Next they must determine what tactics they need to convince these adults. Do they need to write and publish an Op-Ed to gather community support, hold a meeting with local organizations, research and compose a policy memo to present, or create and conduct a survey to gather public opinion?

The work is inherently less structured than regular classroom assignments. Gone is the comfort of a familiar five-paragraph essay or PowerPoint presentation. Letters to interfaith communities soliciting help or Op-Eds published in the local newspaper detailing the danger of unsecured guns require numerous rewrites, not for a grade, but because my students want to accomplish a goal.

My students come early and stay late, reviewing their research before meeting with the superintendent of police or conducting a radio interview promoting their event.

Working together on drafts; comparing opposing arguments on gun legislation to understand opposing views; practicing a presentation for the eighth time so that it can be delivered confidently—these are the 21st century skills teachers try to foster and that colleges and employers value.

To create change as adults, our students need to know how to collaborate effectively, problem solve on their feet, think innovatively, and communicate their ideas clearly and powerfully.

"When civics education centers on bringing about concrete change in our students' community, it has the power to transform our students into engaged citizens."

Through countless emails, phone calls, and meetings, my students built a robust coalition that included four state and city agencies and more than 30 houses of faith, nonprofits, and local businesses.

When successful, civics education should transform and empower. At its heart, civic engagement is about seeing needs in the community, knowing how to make change, and believing you have the power to make a difference.

As we prepared for our final meeting with the police and other collaborators, one shy young Brazilian woman, who had for months been too nervous about law enforcement to attend the meetings, spoke up. "Ms. Lander, I think I would like to run this next meeting." And she did—confidently convening eight adults from four agencies and organizations. In a quiet moment, after the meeting, she came over to me, "They really aren't that scary after all."

One chilly Saturday morning, my students gathered in a parking lot with the members of the police department, the Middlesex County Sheriff, the health department, and various faith leaders. By mid-afternoon, they had collected 39 unwanted guns.

As the semester came to an end, my students were abuzz with ideas about new projects and new challenges they wanted to tackle. They ticked off Op-Eds they were going to pen. And while half of the class would graduate in only weeks, the entire class insisted that they would return next year to run a second citywide gun buyback. "The next time will be easy!"

Three: Active citizenship works to support and teach others.

Two years ago, I designed a seminar exploring our evolving understandings of diversity in America. Together, my class and I set out to explore the country's complicated understanding of what it means to be an American.

As my students read and discussed historical movements and events, they grew increasingly concerned by the rise in intolerance across the nation, troubled by attempts to narrow what it means to be American. My students decided they needed not just to learn but also to teach others.

And so, they set about researching, writing, editing, and finally publishing a book of their own: *Defining Diversity*. Each student chose to tackle and explain a key concept, federal law, or Supreme Court decision, which together trace the complex history of our country's fight for equity. They explored topics ranging from the 13th Amendment to the Violence Against Women's Act; they dove into the history of Supreme Court cases from *Korematsu v. United States* in 1944 to *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015; and they teased apart and contextualized terms including structural racism, unconscious bias, and identity. And they wrestled with how to make these topics relatable for their peers.

By becoming teachers, my students found their voices and deepened their

convictions that they can be powerful advocates for causes they care deeply about.

Late one afternoon, I watched with a quiet smile, as two young girls—recent Cambodian and Yemeni immigrants—pulled out their phones to Snapchat images of their final essays. They had just spent the past two hours in the computer lab—and the past two months crafting essays that transformed over more than 30 drafts. "I can't believe we are going to be published authors!" they texted to dozens of friends.

But they did not stop there. Believing it was essential that their peers be armed with an understanding of our past, they packaged copies of their book and sent it out to schools across the country. Copies of their book are now in more than 160 schools in almost all 50 states.

Four: Active citizenship is grounded in making lasting change.

One morning last November, my students gathered with city representatives and heads of the Merrimack Valley Food Bank.

Our class had officially ended the previous June, but these young men and women continued to work together, making follow-up calls, creating posters, and speaking with school leadership.

Together we trooped through a school office to a backroom that was now the home to our newly created Mill Market food pantry—complete with shelves and clear plastic bins brimming with rice, cereal, tomato sauce, peanut butter, cups of soup, bags of lentils, cans of beans, and boxes of pasta.

We unrolled a bright red ribbon, and with foot-long scissors, my students officially opened the school's new food pantry.

In the months that followed, the pantry has been helping to nourish scores of students at our high school.

For my own students, it's also nourishing the sense that, if they're willing to do the work, they have the power to shape the world.

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Action Civics

The National Action Civics Collaborative (**actioncivicscollaborative.org**) defines a multi-step process for youth-driven civic projects:

Step 1: Examine Community
Youth analyze the assets and problem areas in school, community, city, or nation

Step 2: Identify Key Issues
Youth identify personally relevant issues, focusing on the most salient issue through a process of root-cause analysis

Step 3: Research
Youth do primary and secondary research to find evidence for their issue and proposed solutions

Step 4: Strategize
Youth find community partners to work with and develop strategy for action

Step 5: Take Action
Youth take collective action on issue

Throughout: Reflect
Youth reflect on process throughout, developing positive leadership skills and refining their practice

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Walking with the Wind: **The Power of Persistence**

This lesson uses resources from Chapter 12 of Facing History and Ourselves' Holocaust and Human Behavior, 4th edition, **facinghistory.org/hhb**.

Essential Questions

- What is the importance of persistence when we exercise our civic power?
- What does it take for individuals to strengthen their communities and make a positive difference in the world?

Overview

We often think about civic participation as a matter of politics, activism, and voting. Many people participate in organized campaigns to elect candidates, change laws, and influence the actions of governments and other institutions in our society, such as corporations and the media. But these are not the only ways of choosing to participate.

Scholar Ethan Zuckerman, who studies civic engagement around the world, has noticed a trend toward types of participation that do not rely on the power of government and other institutions to make change. While some individuals choose to participate through politics, activism, and institutions, others attempt to make change through creative uses of art and technology, the formation of small businesses, and attempts to influence the norms and traditions of communities and cultures.

Zuckerman concludes:

> If you feel like you can change the world through elections, through our political system, through the institutions we have—that's fantastic, so long as you're engaged in making change. If you mistrust those institutions and feel disempowered by them, … I challenge you to find ways you can make change through code [technology], through markets, through norms [unspoken rules], through becoming a fierce and engaged monitor of the institutions we have and that we'll build.
>
> The one stance that's not acceptable, as far as I'm concerned, is that of disengagement, of deciding that you're powerless and remaining that way.[1]

Ultimately, Facing History and Ourselves hopes to create a society of thoughtful citizens who think deeply about the way they live. We hope that students will believe that their choices do matter and will feel compelled to think carefully about the decisions they make—as individuals, as members of a community, and as participants in a democracy—realizing that their choices will ultimately shape the world. While that participation may take many forms, one thing is constant: In an imperfect world marked by suffering and injustice, there will always be occasions to act. However, in our world of soundbites, social media, and multitasking, the necessity of persistence—and the need for solidarity in the face of fear, uncertainty, and even the feeling of being unequal to the task—cannot be underestimated or undervalued.

In this lesson, students will explore this idea through an excerpt from Congressman John Lewis's memoir. Congressman Lewis knows a thing or two about persistence, engagement, and civic power. The child of Alabama sharecroppers, Lewis became a civil rights leader in the 1960s and was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1986. In 2013, reflecting on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, during the second term of the United States' first African American presidency, Lewis made it clear that the fight for voting rights continues: "If you ask me whether the election ... is the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream, I say, 'No, it's just a down payment.' There's still too many people 50 years later, there's still too many people that are being left out and left behind."[2] Now 78 years old, Lewis has never stopped working for a more just world.

Using the Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World Teaching Strategy

Reading comes alive when we recognize how the ideas in a text connect to our own experiences and beliefs, our knowledge of other texts, our understanding of history, and events happening in the larger world. The Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World strategy helps students develop the habit of making these connections as they read. When students are given a purpose for their reading, they are able to better comprehend and make meaning of the ideas in the text.

You can use this strategy with any type of text, historical or literary, and with other media, such as film. It can be used at the beginning, middle, or end of the reading process to get students engaged with a text, to help students understand the text more deeply, or to evaluate students' understanding of the text.

Materials

Handout 1: "Walking with the Wind" (p. 269)
Handout 2: Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World (p. 270)

Procedure

1. Read "Walking with the Wind"

Distribute copies of the "Walking with the Wind" reading to students and briefly discuss the life of Congressman John Lewis. After students have read the excerpt, either on their own or as a class, distribute the Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World handout.

2. Guide Students through Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World

The accompanying handout provides you with sample questions that you can give students to guide them through this activity. The questions in the directions are general, but you can make them more specific to connect to the material your class has been studying. For example, you might ask students to connect this reading to specific texts or events you have studied earlier in the school year. If you have limited time, you can give students the option of writing about one connection they have found between the reading and another text, their lives, or the larger world.

3. Debrief Student Responses

Students gain a deeper understanding of the text, their classmates, and the world around them when they have the opportunity to discuss their responses with peers. Students can share their responses in small groups or with a partner (using a Think-Pair-Share teaching strategy):

- **Think**: Have students write their responses to the handout.
- **Pair**: Have students pair up with one other student and share their responses.
- **Share**: When the larger group reconvenes, ask pairs to report back on their conversation. Alternatively, you can ask students to share what their partner said. In this way, this strategy focuses students' skills as careful listeners, an important skill for civic engagement.

4. Connection Questions

Once students have had a chance to share their personal responses to the text, uncover deeper meanings with these Connection questions as a class or as journal prompts.

- How does John Lewis use the metaphor of "walking with the wind" to talk about the role of a citizen in society? What does his metaphor suggest about what it takes to strengthen communities and make a positive difference in the world?
- Why was it important that "the people of conscience never left the house"?
- What do you think about Lewis's conviction that "another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again"? What other examples of this sort of persistence have you encountered in your own experience or in the world around you? How do we sustain our commitment to issues we care about?

Notes

1. Ethan Zuckerman, "Insurrectionist Civics in the Age of Mistrust,"... *My Heart's in Accra* (blog), posted October 19, 2015, www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2015/10/19/insurrectionist-civics-in-the-age-of-mistrust/.
2. Lauren Carter, "Rep. John Lewis Reflects on the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington," The Grio, Entertainment Studios LLC. Posted August 21, 2013, https://thegrio.com/2013/08/21/rep-john-lewis-reflects-on-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington/.

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HANDOUT 1

Walking with the Wind

As a young student, John Lewis worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and became a key leader of the civil rights movement in the United States. He later became a U.S. congressman and a prominent voice for human rights and justice around the world. In the prologue to his memoir, Lewis tells a story from his childhood to describe his vision of how we can face profound challenges and make a better world.

> [A]bout fifteen of us children were outside my aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified…
>
> Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside.
>
> Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped.
>
> The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.
>
> And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.
>
> I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.
>
> That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.
>
> And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.
>
> More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.
>
> It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams—so much tension, so many storms. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.
>
> And then another corner would lift, and we would go there.
>
> And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand.
>
> But we knew another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again.
>
> And we did.
>
> And we still do, all of us. You and I.
>
> Children holding hands, walking with the wind.…*

* John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), xvi–xvii.

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HANDOUT 2

Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World Handout

Use the copy of the text provided by your teacher to make any notes. Read the text once, and then read it again to find ideas that you can use to answer the following questions.

1. **Text-to-Text: How do the ideas in this text remind you of another text (story, book, movie, song, etc)?** Complete one of the following statements:

   What I just read reminds me of ______________________ (story/book/movie/song) because...

   The ideas in this text are similar to the ideas in ______________________ because...

   The ideas in this text are different than the ideas in ______________________ because...

2. **Text-to-Self: How do the ideas in this text relate to your own life, ideas, and experiences?** Complete one of the following statements:

   What I just read reminds me of the time when I...

   I agree with/understand what I just read because in my own life...

   I don't agree with what I just read because in my own life...

3. **Text-to-World: How do the ideas in this text reading relate to the larger world—past, present and future.** Complete one of the following statements:

   What I just read makes me think about ______________________ (event from the past) because...

   What I just read makes me think about ______________________ (event from today related to my own community, nation or world) because...

   What I just read makes me wonder about the future because...

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