

National Museum of American History's OurStory Program: History, Literature, and Civic Literacy

Naomi Coquillon and Jenny Wei

In 1998, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center launched OurStory: History through Children's Literature, a history and literacy program series for family visitors to the Museum that was designed to help children and adults enjoy exploring history together. Ten years later, to reach a broader, national audience, the Museum began an online version of the program that was designed to give families at home the resources they need to discover Museum objects and exhibitions, read award-winning children's literature together with assistance from our reading guides, and continue exploring history with hands-on family activities, suggestions for further museum visits, and more.¹ These online materials now consist of more than fifty activities framed around fourteen children's books. Through this program, the Museum builds reading skills, historical content knowledge, and parent-child interactions, and addresses the need for interdisciplinary resources at the elementary level. Though designed for parents and caregivers, OurStory resource sets are easily modified for classroom use. The activity types included in each resource set— "Read Together," "Play and Create," "Take a Trip," "Learn from Objects," and "Use Technology"— are intended to connect with different learning styles, interests, and multiple intelligences. Many of these activities are open-ended, and encourage young children to "play and create" through craft activities, songs, and more, while others are designed to reinforce specific information or develop certain skills, and are more closely aligned with classroom instruction. Each resource set also includes "Step Back in Time" resource sheets, which are designed to provide historical background at an elementary level. This essay will focus on three structured, skill-based activities from three OurStory resource sets, which, in an effort to make real-world connections for students, not only combine literacy skills and historical content, but also encourage young people to become active and informed citizens.

The Story of History in OurStory

Through the narrative of historical fiction, young people become engaged with the story of history. As education researcher Kieran Egan has shown, young learners are able to engage with specific content when that content is presented through fluid narratives, rich imagery, metaphor, and the rhythm of language. Furthermore, as children reach the middle of their elementary school years, they become particularly fascinated with stories framed by heroic qualities and the limits and extremes of human existence, which often appear in biographies geared to this age level.² These narratives allow young children to begin to consider topics and themes with which they may be unfamiliar, including civics and government, in an accessible format. Additionally, reading together and using the related activity guides help young people build new vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Over the past two years, educators at the Museum have developed several OurStory activities that not only introduce historical topics through reading, but also build civic literacy. Civic literacy, as defined in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills framework, includes "participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes; exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels; and understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions."³ Using three children's books on political history and civil rights, we created activities that encourage young people to consider modern political issues and identify basic rights and responsibilities of citizenship. These books are *Martin's Big Words* by Doreen Rappaport, an illustrated biography of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that includes quotes from his writings and speeches; *Mama Went to Jail for the Vote* by Kathleen Karr, a fictional story of a young girl set against the backdrop of the woman suffrage movement; and *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers* by Karen Winnick, a story about an 11-year-old girl named

Grace Bedell and a letter she wrote to Abraham Lincoln. Our hope is that the selected activities related to these works will provide a basis to discuss representation in government and civic responsibility with young learners through literature and authentic experiences.

Martin's Big Words

After reading *Martin's Big Words* and the related resource sheets, adults are guided to ask children to think about and discuss what Dr. King believed in or supported through his actions and whether these issues are still concerns today. To begin the activity, adults are asked to remind children that in 1965, Dr. King led protests to Montgomery, Alabama, because that was the state capital. Adults and children are provided guidance for performing a simple Internet search to find the seat of that child's state government and suggestions for what to do during an actual visit to the state capital. These suggestions include:

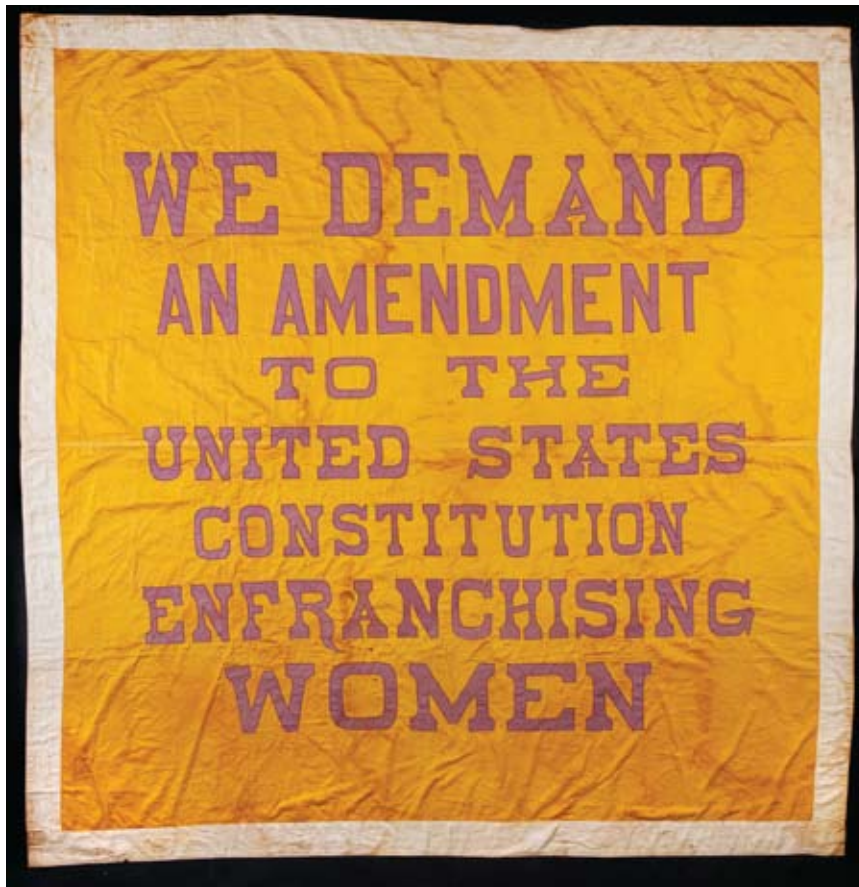
- Draw a sketch of the building or any interesting rooms you see.
- Label especially interesting parts of your picture with words, so you will remember what you saw!

If you meet an elected representative (like a state legislator) or government worker (like a ranger at a state park historical site) who has time to talk with you, ask him or her:

- What is your job here?
- What do you do that helps our community?
- What made you want to have this job?

Find out how citizens can influence the government at this level:

- Are there special times when citizens can meet with elected representatives or government workers?
- If you wanted to write to an elected representative, whom could you write to?



In this way, young people are encouraged to consider how to take action in response to an issue that concerns them, and in a manner that connects that action with a major figure in American history. While we know Dr. King as a national figure, this activity reminds students that action starts with individuals

and that one can make a change in one's own community, a beginning to a discussion on the rights and responsibilities of citizens at a local level. In addition, this, like many activities in OurStory, prompts families and teachers to use the resources all around them to inspire student learning. By including field trip suggestions in each resource set, the OurStory program encourages adults and children to take advantage of cultural resources in their own neighborhoods, to show that learning happens both in and beyond the classroom, and to develop in young people the disposition

toward lifelong learning. This activity can be found at americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/mlk/mlk_government.pdf.

Mama Went to Jail for the Vote

In the activity titled "Who Represents You?", designed around the book *Mama Went to Jail for the Vote*, we intended to help students better understand Congressional representation through the history and legacy of the woman suffrage movement. After reading the book and the "Step Back in Time" resource sheets, adults are guided to ask children to think about and discuss what the movement was designed to achieve. Using reliable Web resources (the U.S. census and Congressional Web sites), students then consider its impact on the modern world by determining the percentage of their local population that is female, the number of female representatives and senators in Congress, and the number representing the child's state. Students record this in a graphic organizer and then are encouraged to create pie charts showing the percentage of women in their state and the percentage representing that state in Congress. In addition to integrating simple math activities into a social studies lesson,

the activity encourages children and adults to consider the following questions together:

- Do you think it matters if the members of Congress from a state look like the people in their state?
- Can male Congress people represent the way female voters feel about issues? Or the other way around?
- What could you do if you want to change who represents you in Congress?

Through this activity, students will learn basic information-gathering and analysis skills, while also considering important questions about what it means to represent a group and what qualities they might look for in a representative. By empowering



young people to use the Internet to gather information on government, this activity models how citizens can stay informed and introduces essential features of government to young learners. This activity is available at americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/suffrage/suffrage_represents.pdf.

Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers


After reading *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers*, and background information on children's letters to presidents, children and adults read Grace Bedell's letter together. Using free online resources from ReadWriteThink.org, a Web site of language arts and reading resources supported by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, children consider persuasive writing elements and determine if Grace Bedell's letter was successful. Questions to discuss together include:

- Who is Grace's audience? How does she make her letter specifically address the needs of her audience?
- Examine Grace's argument to find each of the following parts of a persuasive letter:

- a. Goal or thesis;
- b. Main reasons that support her thesis.

Based on this model, children then choose their own topic and develop their own letter to the president. Children have the opportunity to examine a primary source, evaluate it, and form and articulate an opinion, all essential aspects of critical thinking. At the same time, the activity introduces the importance of communicating with one's elected officials. Building in young people the knowledge that they can and should directly address their representatives is part of the process of developing the active and engaged adults of the future, those who are willing to advocate for issues of importance to them. This activity is available at americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/lincoln/dear_president.pdf.

Conclusion

Through the power of narrative, OurStory resource sets connect young people to the story of history, and in these examples, infused civic literacy into these lessons through experiential activities. By bringing language arts and social studies together, OurStory builds reasoning and comprehension skills along with content knowledge, and by connecting historical themes and children's literature with museum artifacts and real-world experiences, OurStory helps young people apply their learning beyond the classroom. All of these resources and more are available on the OurStory Web site at www.americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory or through Smithsonian's History Explorer, the National Museum of American History's online portal for free K-12 lessons and activities: www.historyexplorer.si.edu. 

Notes

1. National Museum of American History, "OurStory," www.americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/about.
2. Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
3. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, "P21 Framework Definitions," www.p21.org/documents/P21_Framework_Definitions.pdf

Books Cited

- Rappaport, Doreen. *Martin's Big Words*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2001.
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- Winnick, Karen. *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press, 1996.

NAOMI COQUILLON and JENNY WEI are education specialists at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.