

I Am Engaged: Action Civics in Four Steps

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An understanding of our political system, including the role of citizens, is a central component in any social studies curriculum. Preparing students to become citizens in a democracy is a complex endeavor. In addition to learning civics content knowledge, it is equally important that students have opportunities to apply this knowledge to authentic civic tasks, including identifying and seeking solutions to important social issues in their local community and in other parts of the world. To prepare students for their roles as active and informed citizens, social studies curriculum should engage students in a comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, and encourage students to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions based on information from multiple perspectives.¹ Active citizens not only understand how the Constitution and our government

works, but also their role as informed and active participants.

Action Civics is a promising new citizenship model for that puts students at the heart of civic action and has them do and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection about problems they care about personally, while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action.² Action Civics “is a broad term used when describing curricula and programs that go beyond traditional civics programs by combining learning and practice.”³ This model of civic education deviates from traditional rote memorization of dates, names, and processes and encourages teachers and students to engage in democratic action via technology and social networking. Educator Shira Epstein calls this process “phases of civic literacy.” She names the first phase “problem



identification,” in which student describe a social problem as completely as possible. The second phase is “problem exploration,” or the study of the problem, paying particular attention to reveal its complexity. The third phase is “civic action,” whereby students publicly address the problem, seeking to ameliorate or fix it.⁴ In the final phase, “celebration,” students have the opportunity to share their advocacy projects with members of their families, schools, and communities.

As teacher educators and researchers, we have been working to implement a specific Action Civics education curriculum, called Building Bridges, with both upper elementary and middle school students in our local community for the past two years. Building Bridges immerses students in the Action Civics cycle by encouraging them to identify a community issue of interest, research and interview various people about their issue, develop and write a persuasive letter advocating for the issue, and, finally, create an advocacy campaign that raises awareness and calls for action. The Building Bridges project model is similar to the Project Citizen⁵ approach familiar to many civic-minded educators, but goes further to address dimensions of inquiry as described in the C3 Framework by providing opportunities for students to examine their community and develop questions about a community issue of interest (Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries).⁶

Phase 1: Identifying a Problem

In this first phase, students critically examine their community and identify issues that they are personally interested in exploring. Students chose a variety of important and meaningful topics, including poverty, homelessness, quality school lunches, bullying, and animal euthanasia. Teachers need to be cognizant of supporting student voices and striking a balance in helping students choose appropriate topics. This youth-adult partnership allows both students and teachers to contribute to the decision-making process of choosing a community issue.⁷ For example, one small group of students wanted to choose the topic of poverty. The teacher was able to help facilitate conversations with professionals in the community who dealt with the complexity of poverty daily. One boy commented, “We chose poverty, because our city is trapped in it.” In this way, the teacher was able to scaffold students’ choices of issues and provide the necessary resources for learning in such a way that student input was valued and their participation was meaningful.

One example of a student-selected project was animal adoption. Alissa’s project was inspired both by her choice to help out a shelter while playing the game *Activate* and because of her actual personal experience working with the local animal shelter. After adopting a pet from a local animal shelter and volunteering at the same shelter, Alissa recognized the heartbreaking process of animal adoption and euthanasia. Alissa recognized that her community had a large number of stray animals, and, after Internet research, she was outraged that local animal shelters euthanized un-adopted animals and decided she wanted to do something about this issue.

Examples of Topics Chosen by Students

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| • Local area homelessness | • Healthier School Lunches |
| • Bullying in Schools | • Stopping Animal Euthanasia |
| • Poverty | • Supporting a |
| • Drug Abuse | Local Animal Shelter |
| • Child Abuse and Prevention | |
| • Immigration and Naturalization | |

We hold a Community Issues Fair to help students begin to identify a community issue they wanted to study as well as to connect with existing organizations and their resources. Representatives have attended from Animal Birth Control, Hunger Initiatives, City Housing Shelters, Meals on Wheels, Friends for Life, and City Recycling. Students rotated through stations hosted by each of the representatives.

Phase 2: Exploring a Problem

In the second phase, students spend time researching their issue and set a goal. They examine multiple sources and perspectives to better understand their community issue. Teachers help students find the appropriate agencies and civic leaders (in both government and nonprofit offices) and also help those adults make their resources available to students. Teachers may invite guest speakers into the classroom to address specific topics of interest.

Students explore a variety of digital and print resources on topics. Teachers and students work together to review headlines of local news and events, develop questions, evaluate sources, and examine evidence (Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts and Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence). To evaluate either a print or digital source, students can complete a chart with spaces for the title of the article or news item, author, the kind of source (newspaper article/website/blog), two key quotes from the source, the author’s purpose in writing, and at least three words, names, or terms that are essential to the text.⁸

During the Building Bridges project, teachers wanted students to gain some familiarity with their legislators, to talk with local government leaders who could listen to their ideas about community action. Teachers phoned the offices of our local city council members and our U.S. representative, as well as at least two community leaders, to inquire as to who could share their perspectives and insights on the issue. Remarking on this experience, one student said, “Councilmember Wilbert Austin came and talked with us this morning. Today we learned about the legislative branch. Me and my friend wrote Councilmember Austin about spreading awareness for the new Humane Society.” Councilmember Austin listened to the students and then made a call to the city manager to make sure the issue of a new animal shelter was on the next meeting agenda. In this way, students had the opportunity to not only research specific details about their issue, but to experience how constituents communicate with legislators and see how laws are made and changed.

Alissa’s teacher guided her in researching the various reasons that animals were not adopted. Along with Internet research, Alissa scheduled phone interviews with the director of the animal shelter, as well as with a shelter volunteer. She found statistics about animal adoption and euthanasia, explored various ways animal shelters had sought to increase adoptions, and connected with others who were concerned with this issue. Alissa honed in on a particularly problematic element of animal adoption—animal intake photos. She stated, “Typically, animal shelters take a quick photo of an animal as they are checked into the shelter. Most of the times these pictures aren’t very good. The pictures don’t have the animal looking at the camera, the background is junky, and the animal looks pitiful.” Such images might not help the animal get adopted. Alissa’s evidence-based research provided her with a realistic problem that she believed she could tackle.

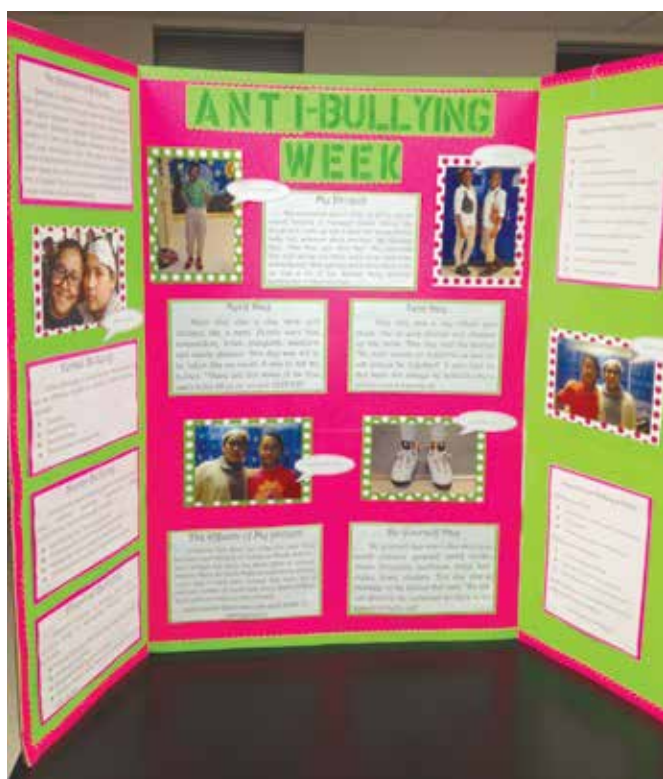
1. *Defining the Issue:* Provide an overview of the issue informed by your research and a call to action
2. *Advocacy:* Showcase your work on this advocacy project (such as videos, murals, posters, persuasive letters, etc.)
3. *Resources:* Provide information and hyperlinks to resources related to your community issue, including links to organizations as well as government (local, state, and national) agencies or offices.
4. *Reflection:* Post some of your daily reflections about your experience in this Action Civics process. For classrooms where technology may not be readily available, students can communicate the same information using trifold or poster boards.

To take action on her issue, Alissa used Photoshop to create appealing pictures of the animals which she helped to post on the humane society’s website. At first, she “glamorized” photos of the pets and artfully decorated the background. “These photos are focused on the animals and their big smiles,” said Alissa, who went on to shoot many intake photos. Don Bland, Executive Director of Humane Society of Central Texas, says, “When Alissa began volunteering and taking photographs at our shelter, we had a very low exit rate [of successful adoptions]. It is a proven fact that a good photo will result in an animal getting adopted faster. She has taken thousands of photos over the years, which has assisted many animals in putting their best paw forward.” Any child that had the opportunity to pick a topic and explore the idea and turn their learning into action has made connections that will last a lifetime.

Alissa also wrote a letter to the local city council, detailing her Action Civics project, asking for their support in keeping the humane society open, and providing resources so that the shelter could continue to take quality intake photos. To prepare for such an activity, students learn about the various elements of a persuasive letter and study examples.

During phase 3, students also learn about effective argumentation, which teachers can introduce with an issue relevant to the students’ lives. One teacher asked students to think about assigned seating at lunch. She asked students to think about why they might want that procedure changed and what key ideas should be in an argument for open seating. One student said, “Well, we could sit with our friends and talk, so we don’t have to talk during class.” Another said, “Yeah, we need a break and some time to visit about things outside of class.”

The teacher then directed the conversation to help students articulate counter arguments for open seating asking, “Why might the principal be opposed to open seating?” One student said, “The noise level might be too much. The teacher replied, “Yes, what might be a response to that criticism?” Another student spoke up, “Yes, but we would quiet down with a signal just like we have now.” During this process, students were asked to record their arguments on small Post-It notes (one argument per note). Using a different color Post-It, other students



Phase 3: Developing a Plan of Action

In this phase, students develop an evidence-based argument for their issue and create a plan of action (Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts). The plan of action can include a variety of products, such as persuasive letters to adults, web-based advocacy projects, or hands-on acts of service (Dimension 4: Taking Informed Action).

In one iteration of the project, students created a video and website advocating their issue. We utilized Edublogs.org to create a template that could be modified by students. The template included four webpages:

recorded counter arguments and rebuttals (again, one per note). The teacher then displayed these sticky notes to help students put the arguments, counter-arguments, and rebuttals in logical order. Finally, the class worked together to construct a persuasive letter to the principal using this outline.

Phase 4: Sharing Results with the Community

In the final phase of their projects, students share their advocacy projects with members of their families, school, and community. Students create flyers and posters to advertise their community showcase. Teachers send the flyers to school leaders, community members, and parents. Students write a brief letter to an adult who has been involved in their issue of choice and send it along with the flyer.

Throughout our work with the Building Bridges project, we have been overwhelmed by the turnout at each of the community showcases held over the last two years.

Becoming Civic Agents

Because students chose community issues that held personal meaning for them, they were excited and committed to their Building Bridges projects. Throughout the process, we sought to give students experiences that allowed them recognize the importance of becoming active agents of change in their community. When given an authentic civic task, such as a cause to support, students see the value of being active members of their community. As a result, Action Civics projects help increase students' civic agency and efficacy by helping students see that they can make a difference.

Reflecting, Alissa said, "I have a heart for animals, and I wanted to inspire others my age to take action. I want them to see that anyone can help, and age doesn't matter." Another student remarked that the project "showed me that there are a lot of problems in our community and we can fix it." Another said, "It showed me I am important."

Implementing and Assessing Action Civics

We recognize that these kinds of projects can be somewhat overwhelming for students. A topic like "poverty" is complicated and contextual. A checklist, based on the four phases of civics engagement, helps students take ownership of their own projects, while, at the same time, allowing teachers to monitor students' progress.

Using a variety of assessment methods can reveal students' perspectives and strengths, as well as their misconceptions and opportunities for growth in future projects. One student wrote in his reflection, "This morning we learned what it means to be a good citizen and how to do it. Then we did rotations and learned about problems in the community and how to fix them!"

An assessment tool known as four-square graphic organizer can also be helpful. Give students a sheet of paper divided into quadrants, each with a separate question or directive at the top. Students write four brief responses in the spaces below. For example,

1. How do you think that you can make a difference in your community?
2. Describe your community issue.
3. What do you want people to do to help with your issue?
4. Who are people you might contact to help you with your issue?

Weaving formal and informal assessment into Action Civics projects gives maximum support to student accomplishments and solidifies civic participation as the goal of social studies instruction.

Conclusion

Maintaining democratic ideals and practices associated with citizenship is central to elementary education. As NCSS states, the purpose of social studies is to promote the value of citizenship by helping young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. Action Civics programs that require students to examine their community, choose and research an issue of interest, analyze policy and power, develop solutions and strategies, and take action provide rich opportunities for elementary students to learn, not *about* citizenship, but *through* citizenship.⁹ In order to provide high quality civics education that moves beyond traditional textbook instruction and truly engages students as citizens, teachers can capitalize on the digital literacies of our students and scaffold opportunities for students to continue to develop these skills as they learn about and engage in civic action. In the end, we must empower and engage our students so that they will enact positive change as citizens of the United States and the world.🌍

Notes

1. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Springs, MD: NCSS, 2010)
2. CIRCLE. "Civic Learning Through Action: The Case of Generation Citizen," (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Tufts University, 2013), www.civicyouth.org/civic-learning-through-action-an-example-of-action-civics.
3. Meira Levinson, "Diversity and Civic Education," in *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, D. Campbell, M. Levinson, and F. Hess, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012), 224-236.
3. CIRCLE.
4. Shira E. Epstein, *Teaching Civic Literacy Projects* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2014).
5. Center for Civic Education, "We The People Curriculum," www.civiced.org/wtp-the-program/curriculum.
6. 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).
7. Stephanie Serriere, Marilynne Boyle-Baise, and Jack Zevin, *Young Citizenship of the World: Teaching Elementary Social Studies through Civic Engagement* (New York, NY: Routledge 2014).
8. Epstein.
9. Meira Levinson, "Action Civics in the Classroom," *Social Education* 78, No. 2 (2014): 68-70.

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