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Developing Civic Agents by Framing Lessons with Children's Concerns

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During recess, fourth grade teacher Angela stays in the classroom, organizing supplies for a dynamic lesson integrating social studies and language arts that she had planned for over a week. Suddenly, her students stream into the classroom with obvious agitation: a group of boys are red-faced, talking loudly, and clearly frustrated. Angela puts her lesson plan on temporary hold; she can tell the children aren't ready for instruction. Even before she can ask what happened, the conversation explodes like an overcooked egg:

Kevin: "It's not fun at recess."

Tommy: "Things aren't working!"

Eddie: "The football game was unfair!"

Angela replied, "This sounds serious. Let's identify the problems and figure out what we can do about them."

Seizing Teachable Moments

Most teachers can relate to this scenario: we often alter our plans to take advantage of the energy and opportunity presented by our students, to "go with the flow." Rather than being frustrated by students' "interruptions," Angela looks forward to these moments of opportunity. She knows they will come—they happen every year, whether she's teaching fourth grade or kindergarten. Some of the issues students will express she can predict; some surprise her. But she is always prepared to co-

create emergent curriculum based on children's concerns and to generate projects meaningful to them.

When students bring their concerns about fairness, friendship, and play to the forefront of the school day, Angela can use that concern to begin an inquiry into fairness and community. She can teach about civic agency in ways that are immediately useful to the students, and that play out, over time, to reinforce her students' identities as civic actors. They have an effect on their immediate situation and on the world. Angela has found that when she frames instruction with "existential questions" that capture students' current concerns, she has a rich context for teaching any procedures of reading, writing and learning required by curriculum and disciplinary standards. (See **SIDEBAR**, page 29.)

Angela assists her students in describing and analyzing problems, using a large anchor chart to record and document their observations and ideas. This chart serves as an "anchor" for their work, in that they return to it throughout the unit to add and revise their ideas regarding the problems, what they are learning, potential solutions, and the like. By the end of the unit, there are several poster-size sheets hanging in the classroom, documenting the story of their thinking.

Existential Questions and Unit Goals

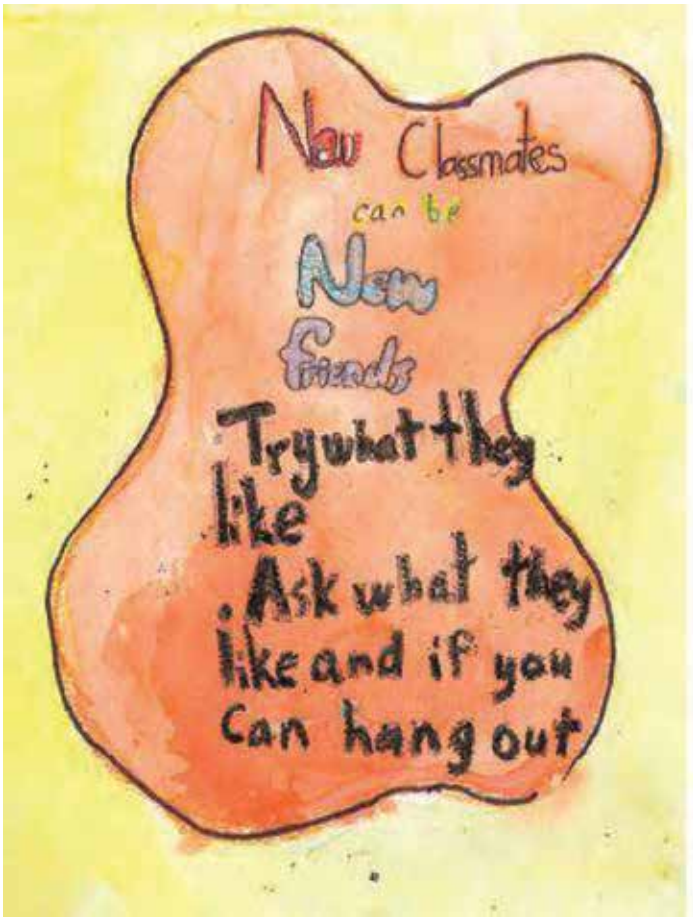
Teachers can frame an emergent topic as a thought-provoking "existential question"—i.e. as a compelling personal as well as community or social problem to address and perhaps solve.[1] Existential questions focus on how to be and act in the world. For example, Angela moved from an essential question: "What is a friend?" to an existential one: "How can we be better friends and citizens?"

The existential question becomes the how and why behind the "what" of the essential question. Pursuing such questions, and committing to addressing them, brings academic content to life in the context of students' experiences using what is learned for meaningful service to self, peers, and community. Very early in Angela's unit, the students were already brainstorming concrete ideas about how to solve relational problems in the classroom, on the playground, or on the bus.

Identify Central Goals

With inquiry questions developed, usually through negotiation and collaboration with students, the teacher can identify one conceptual goal (Angela's: defining friendship) and procedural goal (composing an argument about ways to promote friendship and democratic community). Angela's affective/social goal was for students to develop an attitude of inclusion, as well as behavioral strategies for solving problems to make the learning spaces they inhabit more welcoming, kind and reciprocal.

We found that units organized around such central goals address most CCSS anchor standards in coherent ways because knowledge is an interconnected network. When one node in a



network is emphasized, related nodes also get attention.[2]

A Friendship Inquiry

In the friendship inquiry, the culminating classroom event involves the sharing of "friendship cards" to summarize problem-solving strategies for civic and relational problems. Students begin this project by sharing trading cards they have collected with classmates, and start an analysis of what makes a good trading card. Students generate lists of criteria for good trading cards—developing genre knowledge and considering how cards efficiently use lists, description, and summary (all highlighted in the Common Core as informational text).

Next, students write a definition of "friendship" on a giant Frayer chart,[3] and practice writing brief arguments about what good friends do in problematic scenarios, e.g., "What would a good friend do if she saw a friend making fun of someone who was younger?" Then students compose their own trading cards, providing specific advice, language, and moves for solving relational problems that they witness in the school and community. Students evaluate their own cards in the context of their learning and the audience they most care about: their peers. The unit culminates with a card-trading party.

In addition, the cards are archival; students organize them and put an example of each card in two books. One book is placed in the main office, the other is given to the school's counselor. When children from any grade come to the office or counselor

A School/College Collaboration on Teaching about Writing in Boise, Idaho

Angela offered her classroom for study in an inquiry teaching initiative sponsored by the Boise State Writing Project (**www.bswproject.com**). A major goal of the project was to create an emergent curriculum, one that could meet met all curricular goals, organized around student concerns. A complementary goal was to incorporate service throughout and beyond the learning process.

Creating a space for inquiry and helping teachers to cultivate instructional processes that build from inquiry, are central to the process of the initiative that Jeff organizes and Whitney and Sara participate in as teacher mentors and researchers.

Each of the 40 teacher participants in the initiative works with both another teacher and a mentor, such as Whitney or Sara, who serve as thinking partners. The mentors collect observational data through field notes, photographs and video. The teachers keep a reflective journal, engage in semi-structured interviews in an ongoing basis, and meet together to analyze student work and other classroom events and artifacts and to use these analyses to plan future instruction. Students also keep reflective journals and engage in interviews with teachers about their thinking.

with problems, they are invited to look through the trading card album to see if a card offers a strategy or describes their situation. Though the trading cards begin with service to self and peer, they serve to give back to the larger community to address ongoing issues. This reflective opportunity also gives students space to prepare for genuine dialogue with the counselor or office staff—through the lens of their peers' perspectives.

Connect Students' Experiences with Content

The process of inquiry is most effective when it "guides students to learn challenging content that intersects with their immediate lived experiences."[4] For example, Angela uses her students' schema (background experience, knowledge, and interests)—in this case, their relationships with each other and interactions on the playground—as an introduction to her friendship and citizenship unit of study. Students' concerns provide the opportunity to make one theme of the national social studies standards, promoting Civic Ideals and Practices, an authentic part of her students' lives early in the school year.[5]

Angela has found that this unit helps to set up other future units. Grounded by an emerging understanding of their social responsibility to promote the common good and concrete ways of doing so, Angela's students carry this stance into their exploration of the fourth-grade social studies Idaho history curriculum. For example, students apply knowledge about friendship and citizenship when they analyze fiction and non-fiction accounts of settlers' experiences on the Oregon Trail—which runs near to the school where Angela teaches and through the neighborhoods where the students live.

Using Kristiana Gregory's novel *Across the Wide and Lonesome Prairie*, Angela's students identify and analyze situations that mimic the playground—such as stubborn adults not acting on behalf of the greater good.[6] Because her students have learned to collectively problem-solve playground conflicts through a process that considers multiple perspectives, they recognize that Gregory's book provides only one story. They seek to deepen their understanding by exploring multiple perspectives, welcoming the opportunity to learn how American Indians, as well as pioneers, perceived Western expansion.

Multiple Perspectives

In these activities, we found that honest inquiry always looks at multiple perspectives, particularly those that may have been marginalized or silenced. Community service (and service-learning, which is a requirement for high school graduation in many districts) requires thinking reciprocally, from one's own and others' perspectives. We likewise found that inquiry involves exploring multiple ways to address or solve problems. This became a conscious thrust of Angela's teaching: always seeking to look at and respectfully consider multiple perspectives on every issue that emerged in the classroom.

Angela's students enthusiastically study history as "they more fully understand its implications and recognize its personal relevance because it is taught in a context of personal dilemmas and decision-making." By connecting students with content in this way, we can cultivate caring in our young citizens,[7] and teach social studies in ways that help youth actualize civic agency now, and to act as compassionate democratic citizens in the future. Angela asserts her major goal: "Creating caring community members, now and in the future. And I can leverage this goal to meet Common Core standards and my content standards in different subjects."

Notes

1. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Bruce Novak, *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the BOOK and being the CHANGE* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2011).
2. David D. Perkins, *Knowledge as Design* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986).
3. The Frayer chart is a graphic organizer. Handouts at wvde.state.wv.us/strategybank/FrayerModel.html.
4. Jeffery D. Wilhelm, Whitney Douglas, and Sara W. Fry, *The Activist Learner: Inquiry, Literacy, and Service to Make Learning Matter* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014). P. 5.
5. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013)
6. Kristiana Gregory *Across the Wide and Lonesome Prairie* (Dear America Series) (New York: Scholastic, 1997).
7. Wilhelm and Novak.

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