

Youth Civic Identity Development in the U. S. History Course

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“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Rutgers researcher Beth Rubin to share her ‘design experiment’ in a U.S. history course. Its straightforward goal was *civic learning that’s meaningful*—learning that’s deep and lasting because it connects to students’ daily lives.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Washington

One of the essential questions, whenever we took a test, was “Who has the ability to make change?” And I think, *people*. The general public has an ability, you know, they have the ability to make a change. We as the public, we can change things. We, we have the power to change...
—Vincent,¹ high school U.S. history student

Recent research on civic learning shows that students’ *civic identity*—the sense of who they are in relation to the nation—is shaped by their lived experiences. Yet, efforts to integrate civic learning into the social studies curriculum do not generally build on this notion. Vincent was one of over 100 students in a high school U.S. history course that was developed to test this very idea. In this project, a design team of teachers and researchers considered how the state mandated U.S. History II course might be turned into an opportunity for meaningful civic learning while still teaching the required content. What might the course look like, we wondered, if it were restructured based on research showing that students’ civic identities are shaped by their daily lives and experiences?

This article describes the transformed course.² I begin with the principles upon which the reform was based and then turn to (a) the themes and essential questions that were used to connect the study of U.S. history to students’ lives and (b) the skills strands through which civic learning flowed over the course of the year. I conclude with the results of these efforts, presenting data from students and teachers that demonstrate the power of engaging young people directly with civic questions that are both timely and relevant to their lives outside school.

Design Principles

Our curricular and pedagogical reform rested on four “design principles”³ drawn from recent civic education research.

Principle 1: Civic education should build upon students’ own experiences with civic life, including daily experiences with civic institutions.

In our democratic society, inequity is fundamental, not incidental to the lives of many young people, and “concepts such as freedom, equality, justice, and even democracy are far from unambiguous.”⁴ Researchers who explore the civic

identity development of diverse youth find that students’ daily experiences with civic institutions (school, law enforcement) and with racial and socioeconomic inequalities are integral to their evolving understandings of their place in civic life. Involving students in active consideration of the problems they encounter in their daily lives as citizens allows them to directly consider and confront the tensions of U.S. civic life, promoting critical yet engaged civic identities.⁵

Principle 2: Civic education should provide opportunities for students to consider and discuss key controversies in civic life.

By engaging students in consideration of genuine controversies in civic life, we are incorporating our newest citizens into the ongoing discourse that is U.S. civic life, making them active participants rather than passive observers of perennial civic issues and dilemmas.

Principle 3: Civic education should build students’ skills of discussion, analysis, critique, and research.

Researchers and civic educators agree that civic skills are essential for an active,

well-informed citizenry. Skill development should be an explicit part of the curriculum—learned and practiced over the course of the year.

Principle 4: Civic education should build students' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a way that connects directly to their own concerns.

This is perhaps the most commonly agreed upon purpose of civic education, but with a twist. Citizen rights and responsibilities are fundamental civic knowledge; learning these abstract concepts in relation to students' own concerns roots them in a meaningful context.

Themes, Questions, and Skills

Decades of research point to the dominance of a textbook-driven approach to social studies education in which bookwork, lecture, and notetaking are primary methods of instruction, and content rarely touches upon current concerns. This approach, and the disinterest it engenders, was reflected in our students' descriptions of prior years' social studies classes: "All we did was watch movies, hand out dittos." "The teachers don't teach ... they'll give us a worksheet and we'll have to read it and then just answer the questions." "It was the teacher teaching and the students taking notes." As Bennie described, "We talk about things that happened like 13,000 years ago, that don't got nothing to do with today."

This approach reflects the prevalent notion that the core of social studies learning is student accumulation of the facts and sequence of history, with the textbook as the primary tool. Teaching and learning proceed "as if there are simple answers to the questions we have about the nature of society, or worse ... without asking those questions for which there are no answers."⁶ Beyond the consistent reports of boredom from students, such a framework does not allow for students to ponder Vincent's "big questions," to grapple with the enduring issues so

central to civic learning. Nor does it satisfy the perennial teacher complaint of never "getting to today."

Therefore, our redesign began with a reorganization of the year's curriculum so that students and teachers could easily access enduring questions that would allow them to explore historical content, relate the subject to their own lives, and "reach today" right away. Working with a historian and drawing upon the "understanding by design" approach of Wiggins and McTighe,⁷ the team rethought how to approach historical content, collaboratively organizing the required content into *themes with an overarching question and underlying essential questions* (see table 1). We then worked to build lasting pedagogical change into the model, developing four "strands" drawn from

the literature on best practices in civic education and meaningful social studies instruction (see table 2).⁸ By weaving discussion, writing and expression, action research, and current events throughout the year, teachers incorporated student-centered, active learning practices in an ongoing, developmental manner. The strands were designed to help students build key skills while grappling *directly* with major civic dilemmas that connected both to current events and their own lives.

Results

For both teachers and students, the redesigned course was a salient experience. Students reported many differences between their previous year's social studies class and the new effort.

Table 1: Themes and Essential Questions

Theme	Overarching Question	
	WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?	
	Essential Questions	Content (not inclusive)
Government	What purpose does government serve? What is a good American citizen? Am I a good American citizen?	branches of government; democracy; federalism; political ideology; electoral politics
Economics	What do Americans owe each other? Why are some rich and some poor? Is the American economy fair?	capitalism; stock market; Great Depression; industrialization; economic reforms; world economy
Conflict and Resolution	What is America's role in the world? Why does the U.S go to war? When should it? Can nations cooperate?	WWI; WWII; Cold War; Vietnam War; Korean War; Gulf War; Iraq War; war on terror; genocide
Movement of People	Who is an American? Why do people come to America? How do different groups define their American identities?	immigration; migration (various groups); Japanese internment; gentrification; globalization
Social Change	Are all Americans equal? How do Americans make social change? Who has the power to make change? Do you? What forces shape society?	race/civil rights movement; Latino rights movement; gender/women's rights movement; social protest

Most striking, students at the school with the closest adherence to the design principles reported a 20% or more difference between last year and this year in terms of talking about racism, sexism, and discrimination in class; having discussions where they could freely offer their opinions; learning about people who work to make society better; learning about things in society that need to be changed; learning about problems in society and what causes them; and talking about current events. One hundred percent of the students reported that the above characteristics were true of this year's class.

In terms of a shift from textbook-oriented instruction, only 12% of students reported that this year they worked mostly from a textbook (63% described the previous year this way), 22% reported the teacher mainly lectured while students took notes (down from the 51% last year), and 27% said that they were required to memorize dates and facts (down from 52%).

In terms of political action, there was a 10% or greater increase in the number of students responding "I will certainly do this" to participating in political

activities, refusing to buy clothes made in sweatshops, and working with a group to solve a problem in the community. And, students' convictions strengthened on several measures of responsibility: 10% more said they strongly agreed that it was important to be concerned about state and local issues, 17% more strongly agreed that by working with others they could help make things better, 19% more strongly agreed that they could make a difference in their community, and 26% more strongly agreed that it was important to protest when something in society needed to be change.

The qualitative data give a more intimate view of how students experienced the new approach. The next section presents a small piece of that picture, focusing on students' experiences with themes and questions and with the discussion strand.

Essentially Different: Themes and Questions in the Classroom

One scholar has argued that "The primary benefit of teaching U.S. history thematically is that it affords a better grasp of the principal developments in

the nation's history by treating issues in depth.⁹ Or, as Kristin, put it, "I like it better when it's jumping around just because of the fact that I think it makes it easier for us to learn ... sometimes the topics will overlay from the past ... and then when you go back, you kind of interlock what was missed and understand it better." Rebecca saw the approach as a way of getting beyond "just trying to remember a timeline in my head." It "actually gave me a better map of history in the end," she concluded. This sense of developing a "better map of history" was echoed by classmates, who described how this year they were able to see the links between historical events in a new way, getting at the concepts beneath the events. It was, noted Jackie, a good way for "us to develop the skills of learning history."

Teacher Jill Tenney felt that the essential questions were the key tool. They allowed her to draw links across time and to get to current issues right away. She pushed students to continually consider the essential questions by making them central to final assessments. Jill described this strategy:

Table 2: Civic Skill Building Strands

Strand	Discussion	Writing and Expression	Civic Action Research	Current Events
Activities	Seminar Take-a-Stand Structured conversation	Social studies journals Persuasive Letter Persuasive Speech Newscast Five Paragraph Essay	Problem identification Research Solutions Presentation	Related to themes Related to questions Related to election
Purpose	Develop discussion and listening skills, ability to analyze and present a well-supported opinion on a controversial issue.	Develop skills of written and oral expression, ability to work alone or in a group to prepare/present.	Develop ability to investigate public issues and concerns using primary and secondary sources; to develop a plan for action.	To weave students' consideration of current events into themes, events, and questions under study.

(On) every test, we give (students) the same questions. But they have to answer the questions in relation to the unit they just had. So is war just?—Is war just in World War I? Is war just in World War II? Is war just in Cold War? Is war just in the Middle East? Is war just with genocide, where we didn't go to war necessarily in Darfur or anything like that. So they had to answer the same essential question over and over again in respect to different time periods and now hopefully after the take-a-stand, they'll be able to kind of connect that and really weigh "Is war just?" Should America take action or inaction knowing all the different time periods that they did or didn't?

Jill's words illustrate how themes and essential questions worked together to shape a curriculum in which students considered enduring civic issues across time. Framing a curriculum around large, unanswerable questions allowed students to become part of a continuous civic conversation. History was not a finished story to be memorized, but a set of ongoing questions for collective engagement. As Rebecca put it, "(W)e never came up with a finite answer. It was just, 'Let's try and figure this out together.'"

Talking Civics: Open Discussion for Civic Learning

Students were more enthusiastic about discussion than any other aspect of the approach. Nasir reflected that "If we have a discussion, people actually got to learn about it more." Tamika described the excitement in the air during discussion, how "Everybody wants to have input on everything. And when it's time to leave, everybody's still trying to talk about it." Through classroom discussion, students were able to experience an authentic exchange of ideas that went beyond stale recitations and mirrored

the vibrant talk we enjoy outside of the classroom. Karen described how during Socratic Seminars they would "take turns, and most of the time we wouldn't even raise our hands." This felt like "real life" to her, because "In real life you're not going to sit there, raise your hand to talk to someone ... it was kind of like experiencing how life is itself like, besides history."

Discussion was a conduit through which students could relate their personal experiences to the curriculum. Students in one class participated in a Socratic seminar to kick off the Conflict and Resolution theme. They grappled with Edmund Burke's statement, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," as a lead into the essential question, "Why does the U.S. go to war?" Interpreting Burke's statement through the context of their daily lives in an impoverished, high-crime, urban community, students described the impediments they felt they would face if they tried to "make a difference" in their own community. Students taking part in a Socratic Seminar on child labor during the economics unit connected their experiences in their native countries to the moral and economic issue being studied. Samara noted, "This year it's more, like, everything, and not just, like, Civil War. It's not just about the U.S., it's about everything all over the world."

Conclusion

Social studies classrooms in the United States are seen as pivotal sites for citizenship education. Yet research shows that schools serving low income students and students of color provide the least innovative and most ineffective forms of civic education, and that students in these settings frequently experience classroom-based civic education as alienating and irrelevant.¹⁰ This article presented one "design experiment" aimed at transforming civic learning in the U.S. history classroom. The approach runs counter to how U.S. history generally is taught and requires a fundamental shift in

what many educators consider to be the purpose of the course from covering historical content to building civic identities. 

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all teachers, students, and schools in this article.
2. The project included three teachers from three different school districts and the students in their U.S. History II courses. The racial/ethnic backgrounds of the 121 participating students were: 38 African American, 33 White, 26 Latino, 21 Asian American (of both South and East Asian descent), and 5 Middle Eastern. 63 were male and 58 were female.
3. Design-based research involves "engineering" new forms of learning based on specific ideas about teaching practices, and then studying them in real contexts. The full results of this study will be reported in Beth C. Rubin, *Making Citizens: Transforming Civic Learning in Diverse Social Studies Classrooms* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
4. Jane Junn, "Diversity, Immigration and the Politics of Civic Education," *PS* 37 (2007): 253-255; 252.
5. I elaborate on how societal and classroom contexts interweave to shape civic identity in my article, "'There's Still Not Justice': Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts," *Teachers College Record* 109 (2007): 449-481.
6. Leslie Bloom and Anna Ochoa, "Responding to Gender Equity in the Social Studies Curriculum," in *Crucial Issues in Teaching Social Studies: K-12*, eds. Byron G. Massialas and Rodney F. Allen (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1996), 309-339; 327.
7. Grant Wiggins and James McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1998).
8. Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?" in *Social Studies Today: Research and Practice*, ed. Walter C. Parker (New York: Routledge, 2010), 141-150. Also Walter C. Parker and Diana Hess "Teaching With and For Discussion," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17 (2001), 273-289.
9. Mary E. Connor, Teaching United States History thematically, *Social Education* 61 (1997): 203.
10. Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Jason Harnish "Contemporary Discourses of Citizenship," *Review of Educational Research* 76 (2006), 653-690.

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