

Using project-based learning to engage students with politics

Teacher John Bosselman explains how he devised a cross-curricular challenge - spanning citizenship, literature and art - to help students engage with complex social issues

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Tuesday 18 February 2014 01.30 EST

In California, where my school is based, anyone can propose a new law if they get enough signatures from citizens of the state. But there is a conspicuous lack of public awareness or discourse around the laws that go through the ballot, despite the fact they're often controversial.

We wanted to design a project to get our students involved with the issues on the ballot, and to investigate what can happen when citizens aren't engaged in the process.

We structured a project around the proposed new laws (propositions) system in California, integrating it with literary analysis of core texts themed around challenging government including Orwell's 1984 and Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. We challenged students to use graphic journalism to share their learning about the propositions and produce a comic-style collaborative mural, which would be displayed on the school grounds.

The first step was for students to break into groups to discuss and choose which proposition they wanted to work on. Student choice is important in project-based learning; if you want students to spend six weeks on a topic, they need to be invested in it. The propositions that were chosen covered a breadth of provocative social issues, including the abolition of the death penalty in California, tougher sentences for human sex traffickers and the abolition of the three strikes law.

Groups of students began work by independently exploring one of the propositions. They interviewed people and organisations for and against their chosen proposition - out in the field, online and through social media. They designed and owned every stage, from drafting interview questions to creating transcripts of each conversation. Students then composed "found poetry" by reworking quotes from people they interviewed and passages from the core texts into poems. Using their study of comic journalism, they created a few pieces of the mural, each taking responsibility for practical construction including cutting, sanding and painting the wood themselves.

The project taught students about local politics, literary analysis and art and design. But it also fostered much deeper skills; students considered the ethical implications of complex issues such as crime, capital punishment and human sex trafficking, as well as what makes a compelling visual and narrative argument. They managed a campaign, which involved interviewing a diverse range of people about their opinions on difficult questions, and had to learn skills of rhetoric and analysis to manage a communications strategy and hone their interview skills.

By the end of the project they found - rather ironically as they were below voting age - that they often knew more about upcoming propositions than most of the general public.

Designing projects like this is not quick or easy. It takes weeks of collaboration between teachers and students to design something that is rigorous in content, high quality and engaging. For example, my teaching partner and I rehearsed a dry run of this project to ensure it all went smoothly.

There is no magic recipe for a good project, but there are some key components which this project embodied:

- **Rigorous content**

The project was structured around rigorous content, which met the Californian core curriculum and that the students could transform and analyse in a way that was meaningful to them. Relevance plays a part too; studying constitutions in their home state allowed them to feel more invested in the project.

- **Peer critique**

Our students learn to deliver and receive critique in a constructive way. In this project, students critiqued each others' work daily and created up to 15 drafts of their work to ensure that each one was of the highest quality possible.

- **Real world value**

The end product of this project was a publically exhibited mural which serves a functional purpose in a communal area. This task was given to us by the head of school, giving the project real value and purpose. By exhibiting the work, students were able to share their opinions relating to each proposition with the community, allowing them to directly influence how people voted. Creating projects with real world value not only ensures that students learn the content, it also enables them to see themselves as meaningful actors within the world around them.

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John Bosselman is a humanities teacher at High Tech High, Chula Vista in the US. For the 2013-14 school year, John is working for the Innovation Unit in London as a project-based team coach, working in five schools throughout the UK coaching teachers in their development of project based learning.

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