Whole-Class Inquiry: Social Studies

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards identify the primary purpose of the social studies as helping "young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." To sustain and improve our democracy, future citizens must possess certain habits of mind and certain key skills, including data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision making, problem solving, and inquiry.

What, then, does one-to-many computing have to do with teaching for citizenship? In the hands of an effective teacher, the combination of a whole-class display (such as a projector, an Internet connection, and access to online materials) can offer useful tools for inquiry. They can be used to convey important knowledge about the democratic process, to teach students how to engage in democratic discourse, to use information to make decisions, and to engage in inquiry. This article describes a lesson that includes an online simulation to highlight the potential of a whole-class discussion and inquiry to teach knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for active, engaged citizenship.

Traditional Textbook Lesson

Every U.S. government/civics course includes attention to the process of amending the United States Constitution. An excerpt from the textbook *American Government* introduces the topic in this way:

> Changes made to the Constitution are called amendments. All amendments must be proposed and ratified through a formal process. The ability to amend the Constitution has allowed the government to meet new needs and challenges. One way amendments may be proposed is by a vote in Congress. In fact, all amendments to the Constitution so far have been proposed by Congress. (pp. 51–52)

This textbook section goes on to describe methods of amending the Constitution, how to propose and

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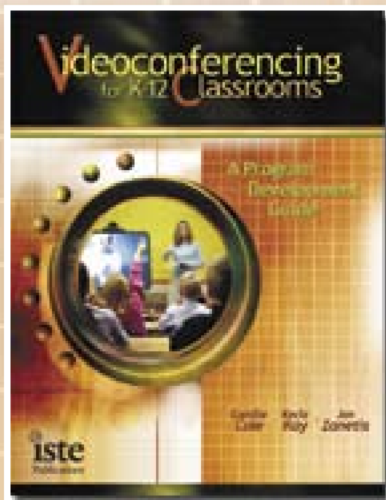

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ratify amendments, and a description of the 27 amendments that have been proposed and ratified during our nation's history. The textbook, although informative, provides a clinical view of how to amend the Constitution and glosses over the complexity of the process. Additionally, reading a textbook excerpt does not engage students as active learners nor does it allow them to develop deep understandings about how government works.

Hands-on Lesson in the Lab

A simulation can allow students to participate in the process of government. Typically these kinds of simulations require students to serve in the role of a legislator, processing information and making decisions at key junctures. A growing number of very good government and civics simulations can be found on the Internet and are readily available for educational use.

For example, the Center on Congress (http://congress.indiana.edu) at Indiana University offers a number of electronic modules that offer insight into the legislative process. The Center's director, Lee Hamilton, relies on 34 years in the U.S. House of Representatives to ensure that these educational materials are authentic and grounded in the actual workings of the Congress.

One module, in particular, is well suited to understanding the Constitutional Amendment process. This module, titled *How a Member Decides,* is based on an actual legislative event, a proposed Constitutional amendment to ban physical desecration of the flag.

At the beginning of the simulation, students sign in as members of Congress. Students decide whether they wish to represent a rural, suburban, or urban district. They also answer questions that identify them as conservative or liberal.

These simulations can be used by students working individually in the computer lab. There are several limitations to students working in isolation. A student who is not engaged can simply choose to quickly select the same option repeatedly, going through the simulation without gaining much insight. Even a student who is engaged and interested does not have the opportunity to engage in discourse and dialogue as the simulation unfolds.

Whole-Class Exploration

This use of the simulation may be contrasted with the possibilities offered through whole-class inquiry. This type of social studies use has a rich heritage grounded in activities such as Tom Synder's Decisions, Decisions series, designed by an actual teacher for the constraints of the one-computer classroom.

Today, of course, the technical capabilities of computer projectors—visibility, number of lumens, screen resolution, and size—are much enhanced. The dynamic of the social studies classroom is much the same.

As a preservice teacher, co-author van Horne used the simulation to support whole-class inquiry in a 12th-grade government class. This particular class was one in which many of the students had been identified as having a learning disability—presenting challenges but also offering opportunities for engaging multiple modalities. A computer linked to a projection system allowed everyone in the class to see and participate in the simulation as it unfolded.

Prior to the simulation, the students reviewed background information related to the bill. The teacher ensured that the students understood the key issues of the amendment. She also ascertained their respective positions on the issue at hand before beginning the simulation.

At the beginning of class on the day of the simulation, students wrote

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a journal entry that reviewed the key aspects of the issue. Each student received a structured worksheet developed by the teacher that included free-response, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the-blank questions.

In this instance, each student was provided with numbered paddles so that they could register their position (for, against, or undecided) after each meeting with a constituent or special interest group. The numbers of students in each category were tallied by hand in this lesson, but a remote response system could have also been employed, automating the process.

The students discussed and voted on whether they wanted to represent a rural, suburban, or urban district as a class. They also voted on whether they were liberal or conservative. Another variant on this approach that is sometimes employed involves dividing the class into two sections—liberal and conservative.

As the simulation began, students systematically went through a week in the life of a Congress member. The simulated week included meetings with a variety of constituents and special interest groups, all with opposing viewpoints regarding flag desecration. Students can select meetings available on their schedule and hear and see different constituents describing their viewpoints. After each meeting, students indicated whether their viewpoint had changed.

For example, on the first day of the week, meetings with Tony Lorenza, president of the American Veterans for the Flag (AVF) and a fellow congressman, Ed Carpenter, were scheduled. Tuesday began with a meeting with the Legislative Director, Karen Albright, to provide a briefing on letters from constituents on the issue, followed by a meeting with the winner of an AVF national essay contest, Brooke Brown. It is possible to skip a scheduled meeting, but just as in actual life, it is not possible to go back in time to participate in a meeting once it is cancelled.

Each group advocates for a particular perspective, in a welter of contrasting views. Phone calls from constituents and late breaking news periodically interrupt scheduled activities, just as in actual life.

As the simulated legislative week progressed, the teacher facilitated discussion among the members of the class. Students were also queried about key concepts, such as the definition of "special interest group" to check for comprehension and understanding. After discussion, the class voted, and advanced to the meeting.

After the class discussion and participation, a briefing by Congress members about the actual outcome is available. This allows a class to compare their deliberations with the actual event.

The simulation took one-and-a-half class periods to complete. The teacher facilitated discussion about the various factors that influenced students' decisions in the simulation. Throughout the simulation, the students were actively engaged.

Why One-to-Many?

The Center on Congress Web site offers teacher materials to assist teachers in implementing this simulation. The lesson plans and instructional materials on the site suggest the use of a projector for this simulation.

We often associate whole-class instruction with a "sage on the stage" telling students what to think and what to learn. However, in this instance, the simulation placed the teacher in the role of facilitator, scaffolding information, probing students' thinking, and encouraging students to discuss key issues.

The teacher in this instance never told students what to think. Rather, she asked students to summarize key information, to discuss different points raised by constituents and special interest groups, to vote on issues, to take notes on facts and information that might sway their vote, and to talk with each other about the amendment on flag desecration.

She did help break down and explain difficult vocabulary, answer student questions about the democratic process, and keep students on task. Students walked away from this simulation with an in-depth understanding of the influences that affect how a member of Congress votes on a bill or Constitutional amendment.

Their understandings would most likely not be as rich by solely reading a textbook excerpt on Constitutional amendments or listening to a slideshow lecture that displayed the flow chart of how a bill becomes a law.

Theoretically, students could have gone through the simulation individually in a computer lab rather than working together as a class. Would they have learned as much? We argue no. In some cases, in the hands of an effective, capable teacher, whole-group activities are incredibly powerful learning experiences that offer students the opportunity to learn the vital citizenship skills discussed in our introduction. This example, however, is designed to spark conversation and to provide the opportunity to generate ideas for future research on this topic.

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