

INTEGRATING *PROJECT CITIZEN* AND ENGAGING YOUR STUDENTS

In order to maintain our democracy, we need to instill the importance of civic values in our future generations, which is not an easy task. Plagued by controversies, scandals and nepotism, it is hard to communicate the need to believe in and work for our democratic values. It is particularly hard to convey the importance to teenagers who are more concerned about social obligations rather than civic responsibilities. When I started teaching and I received my curriculum for a 7th grade Civics course, my first thought was, “How in the world am I going to make law and government interesting for a group of 12 year olds?” Six years of teaching later, I can say that it has been a lot easier than I thought it would be, thanks to programs such as *Project Citizen*.

Too often in our content area we are constrained by an over-abundant curriculum that must fit into 180 days. Too many social studies teachers fall into the trap of teaching from the textbook and rapidly moving through material, regardless of whether or not the students have understood the lesson objectives. In a curriculum where you are covering so much information, how is it possible to make sure you cover all of it in depth, using differentiated instruction and cooperative learning? Cooperative learning activities are extremely time consuming and when you are trying to cover 500 years of history in 180 days, there is simply not enough time. At least this is what I thought when I first started teaching Civics. However, the more I learned about the *Project Citizen* program, the more I realized how this program actually eliminated a lot of my time constraints.

My curriculum consists of the following units: Roots of American Democracy, Blueprint for a New Nation, The Constitution, The Bill of Rights: Then and Now, Federalism, Rights, Duties and Responsibilities of American citizens, and New Jersey government (including a segment on local governments). The *Project Citizen* program has allowed me to cover all of these units by actively engaging the students. Bloom and my professors were right: when the students are engaged, they will remember! This program allows the students to take ownership of their learning. They are allowed to choose their own issues and they learn important social skills necessary for them to become informed productive citizens.

I use the program in all five of my civic classes. Every class works on a different topic of their own choosing, and puts together its own portfolio. We hold a competition between the classes in front of a panel of judges, made up of members of the community, to determine which class will represent our school at the state *Project Citizen* competition. Many students who have started 7th grade with distaste for social studies leave at the end of the year with a positive attitude and perspective.

Two centuries after the writing, ratification and implementation of our democracy, America continues to thrive. Our young democracy has not only withstood the test of time, but has been able to adapt and endure through the many challenges it has faced in the past and continues to face today. Through wars, regime changes, prosperous and poor economic conditions, and ever-changing social conditions, we have been able to establish what many before us have tried and failed. We are a country built on diversity and, unlike other countries; our diversity is our source of strength.

It is crucial for us to remember not only the struggles that we endured to establish our democracy, but also the importance and necessity of civic participation to ensure its survival. If citizens become apathetic towards democracy we, as a country, will very quickly lose the form of government we have fought so hard to establish.

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