

COMMON SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING PRACTICES AND THEIR CIVIC OUTCOMES

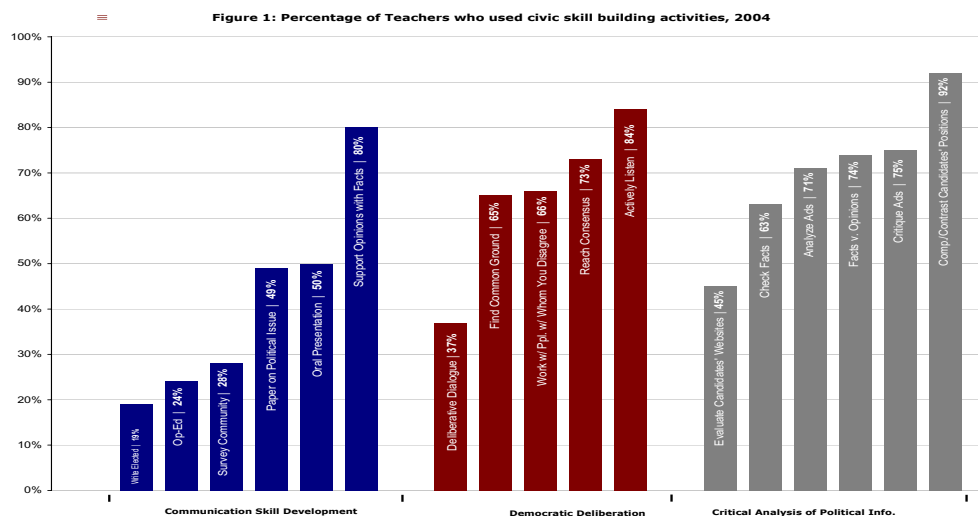
CIRCLE Working Paper #57 examines the association between activities regularly used in high school civic education courses (e.g., staging a mock election) and their impact on key student outcomes. The authors report on the prevalence of a variety of teaching practices used by social studies teachers and assess whether various practices have a demonstrable impact on targeted civic outcomes for students. The paper was written by Amy K. Syvertsen, Constance A. Flanagan, and Michael D. Stout of The Pennsylvania State University and can be downloaded from CIRCLE's Web site at <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=226>.

The study is based on two waves of surveys with 1,670 students ages 14 to 19 from 80 social studies classes in the United States. Classes were recruited from a pool of teachers throughout one mid-Atlantic state who had expressed interest in training in an election-based curriculum.

TOP TEACHING ACTIVITIES

The researchers asked social studies teachers about the types of teaching activities they used in the classroom. They broke activities up into four distinct groups: (1) exercises that provide students with opportunities to practice and hone civic skills, (2) practices that encourage students to think about and engage in electoral politics, (3) discussions that encourage awareness of civic issues and concepts, and (4) other specific activities (watching presidential debates, visiting candidates, etc.). (Please see the authors' previous report, "CIRCLE Working Paper 55: Civic Measurement Models: Tapping Adolescents' Civic Engagement," for more information on the measures used in this paper.)

They found that for the most part teachers use a variety of teaching activities to promote civic outcomes. Looking at the "civic skills" category most teachers employ an assortment of techniques to encourage critical analysis of political information and



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democratic deliberation. For example, 92 percent of teachers ask students to “compare/contrast candidates’ positions” and 84 percent encourage “active listening.” Activities that encourage communication skill development were more varied. While 80 percent of teachers reported that they encourage students to “support opinions with facts” only 19 percent ask their students to “write elected officials” and only 28 percent have their students “survey the community.” (See Figure 1 on page 1.)

When it comes to electoral politics, teachers again used a range of teaching strategies. The most popular strategies included: discussing the presidential debate in class (99%), mock elections (90%), and acquainting students with the voting process (90%). The least popular activities included: field trips to local polling sites (9%), mock debates (26%), and candidate visits to the class (23%).

Nine out of ten teachers reported discussing the following issues: why young people do not vote, important issues to the students’ generation, democracy as a form of government, and domestic issues in the U.S.

Finally, the researchers asked teachers whether they facilitate student discussions that encourage awareness of civic issues and concepts. Nine out of ten teachers reported discussing the following issues: why young people do not vote, important issues to the students’ generation, democracy as a form of government, and domestic issues in the U.S. The least discussed issues tended to cluster in the “contested issues” category and included: the civil rights movement, cultures outside the U.S., and the Patriot Act.

THE CIVIC OUTCOMES OF VARIOUS TEACHING ACTIVITIES

In addition to asking about the types of teaching activities that teachers employ, the researchers also measured the impact of these activities on student behavior and knowledge. The results of the analysis were mixed. Some activities had positive impacts while others had a negative impact (although some of the negative results may be due to issues with the research methodology and may be explained by the response shift bias theory).

The study suggests that engagement with electoral politics and/or field trips to government offices have a negative impact on students’ sense of political efficacy and make them less likely to want to pursue a career in politics. This may, in part, stem from students’ increased understanding of the day-to-day tasks of political figures and first-hand accounts of the political process. On the other hand, the authors found that when teachers discussed concrete ways other than voting that students could have a voice in political affairs they found positive effects on students’ self-reported political

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efficacy.

Moreover, the authors found that there was a positive relationship between discussion of basic civic education concepts and students' civic knowledge (measured by their ability to correctly identify the governor and answer a series of basic questions about the electoral process).

Discussion of hotly contested issues seems to encourage students' interest in the topics. The researchers found that discussion of issues such as the war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, civil rights, and homeland security positively predicted students' concern about the unjust treatment of others.

Discussion of hotly contested issues seems to encourage students' interest in the topics. The researchers found that discussion of issues such as the war in Iraq, the Patriot Act, civil rights, and homeland security positively predicted students' concern about the unjust treatment of others. They hypothesize that "controversy invites deliberation thereby providing students with a forum to voice their opinions and, potentially, spark their interests." According to Syvertsen and colleagues, "One of the more surprising findings was that discussion of international issues like America's role in the world over the course of the semester made students more likely to express concerns about their economic future."

Finally, the authors suggest using caution when interpreting the results of their analyses. According to Syvertsen et al., "It is important to keep in mind the relatively short interval of time between the two times of measurement. Further, in terms of generalizability, it is important to note that these data were collected during a semester when a national election campaign was taking place. Thus, it is unclear whether these same results can be generalized to other semesters (with or without an election)." ★

REPORT RELEASE: NOVEMBER 7, 2007

CIRCLE, in partnership with the Charles Kettering Foundation, cordially invites you to attend the upcoming release of a new report about college student civic engagement entitled:

"MILLENNIALS TALK POLITICS: A STUDY OF COLLEGE STUDENT POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT."

The event will take place on November 7th and will include a briefing on the report findings as well as several panel discussions. It will be held at The University of California, Washington Center (<http://www.ucdc.edu/>) in Washington DC.

*For more information about the event or to RSVP, please contact Dionne Williams at dwillia8@umd.edu.
RSVP required.*

The report revisits the 1993 study "College Students Talk Politics" by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton of the Harwood Group. There are notable differences in the research findings between the 2007 and 1993 reports.