

What Having Students “Write the Constitution” Taught Me

Thomas Ladenburg

The fifth graders were ready for my grand entrance. Dressed in a borrowed colonial outfit, I was playing George Washington and welcoming my granddaughter’s class to their “Constitutional Convention.” Thanks to the work of a very competent fifth grade teacher, the class was well prepared to deliberate whether each state should retain one vote as it had under the Articles of Confederation, or whether states with more people should have more votes. I did not need to explain the issue to the class. They were eager to give their speeches and engage in heated discussions.

As I listened to the reasons why it was not fair for Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York to have as many votes as the rest of the country combined, my mind traveled back some thirty years to my daughter’s and my son’s fifth grade classes, where similar discussions took place. I remember when, at his convention, my son argued that states should not be allowed to “quit the country,” for it would be the same as if his friend, David, “quit their clubhouse and took the building with him.”¹ Although the founding fathers would not have made this exact statement, it was a great indicator to me as a teacher. It showed that my son was imagining himself in the role of an advocate for federalism, and this emotional involvement meant that he was more likely to remember the historical material. It also suggested that he was imagining that he might, with his peers, engage thoughtfully in the civic challenges that would face his own generation.

I do not recommend that every middle school teacher try to replicate the debates that resulted in the creation of our current Constitution. My unit of study on the Constitution was designed for high school students,² but I would like to use

the example of middle school students “helping to create the fundamental law of the land” to make a few points about planning this and other units of study. I want to do this because my success with this unit and those based on similar principles of curriculum development helped me survive 47 years in the classroom and live to enjoy all of them.

Four Steps

Let me begin by explaining the pedagogical core of my Constitution unit of study. It incorporates a sequence of activities that give essential structure to the units. The first informs students about the background and context of the event to be studied; the second challenges students to decide what action should be taken; the third teaches them what actually happened; and the fourth directs them to assess the actual results. This assessment may require students to determine the underlying cause of an event (such as the Civil War), analyze the motives of the actual decision-makers (the Constitutional Convention), or evaluate the wisdom of the decision (dropping the bomb on Hiroshima.)

While my granddaughter’s class was

taught a few things about the Articles of Confederation and the problems the United States experienced during the that critical era, high school students were introduced to a far more sophisticated version of the Constitutional Convention unit. In addition to the question of fair representation, the older students must decide how power should be divided between the national and state governments; whether a system of checks and balances is needed; what should be done about slavery and the slave trade; and what personal rights, if any, need to be protected. Students assigned to take on the roles of the 23 most important founding fathers are provided with brief biographies and excerpts from the debates at the Convention so they can faithfully argue their founder’s position on each of these five issues. Invariably, passion and intensity fills the classroom as students give speeches, debate, caucus, compromise, and finally vote to resolve the issues set before them.

After the Convention simulation, students are ready to learn what actually happened in Philadelphia in 1787. They learn how the issues at the Convention were resolved; they learn of the delicate balance struck between national and state powers; and, by having gone through the process themselves, they more fully appreciate the Great Compromise. In addition, they learn about the intricate system of checks and balances, the shameful compromises on slavery, and the decision not to include a Bill of Rights.



The author addresses a fifth grade class in the role of a founding father.

High school and middle school students gain an appreciation for the framers of a Constitution that has allowed the Union it created to survive and prosper for well over 200 years.

The fourth component of this unit has students examine the founding father's work. Having students reflect on the entire unit by evaluating the decisions they had made in their roles as founders and comparing them to the decisions made more than 200 years ago revives the dynamics of the simulated debates and makes for thoughtful assessments.

Moving Through History

But can the kind of dynamic illustrated in the Constitution unit be found elsewhere in the U.S. history curriculum? I believe it can and that it should in order to make history relevant and exciting. The Federalist Era, which can start with the debate over ratifying the Constitution as written by the founders, is replete with questions on the role government should play in foreign and domestic policies. It can end with the evaluative question: whether the Federalists deserved to be re-elected. The pre-Civil War period lends itself to moral dilemmas: dealing with the issues surrounding slavery, expanding westward over lands occupied

by Native Americans and Mexicans, and fighting a war within a nation to keep that nation whole. The evaluative question here can be to decide on the underlying causes of the Civil War: north-south economic differences, the westward spread of slavery, or the “fanaticism” of specific abolitionists and slaveholders.

Reconstruction raises the issue of racial justice again at the price of national (white) unity, and sets the stage for a later unit on civil rights. The Industrial Revolution pits laissez-faire capitalism against concern for smaller businessmen, workers, and immigrants. Units on foreign policy, the Progressive Era, the 1920s and 1930s, World War II and the Cold War, Indochina, and the Civil Rights Movement also contain critical issues that lend themselves to “deciding” what actions the participants in the historic process should take.

Student-to-Student

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned from my Constitution unit was the importance of exercises that require students (in the fifth grade, high school, or even college) to interact with one another. Nothing is more conducive to involving students in understanding the process of how history is made than

seeing that people living at the time had choices. Students can simulate making these choices, learn what choices were actually made, and then evaluate those choices.

I can see an opportunity for a Constitution Convention-like simulation activity in so many places in history courses in the middle and high school grades. Not only do students learn the material, they rehearse with people their own age a vital role that they will play their whole adult lives—that of a citizen. 🌐

Notes

1. Sadly, this particular 21st-century mock Convention never did get to decide how power should be divided between the national and state governments. Lesson time had to be saved to prepare for the Massachusetts Academic Assessment tests.
2. In the years that I have been teaching, I have created many units and a collection of lesson-chapters (some professionally published and others self-published) in American history, based on the principles outlined in this article. Educators who are interested in examining PDFs may send an e-mail to t.ladenburg@verizon.net.

THOMAS LADENBURG taught for 37 years at Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts. Earlier, he was at the Education Development Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts and at high schools in Connecticut (Lee and Hillhouse, where he served as Department chairperson; North Haven; and Meriden) and New Jersey (Westfield High).