

Learning through Doing: A Project-Based Learning Approach to the American Civil Rights Movement

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“What do we need if we want to build a movement—how are we going to get it going?” the teacher (Stacie, the co-author) asked.

“We need a good idea,” called one student.

“A leader,” chimed another.

“We need people for that leader to lead,” said a third, “You know, people to go along.”

“Wait, we need organizers—you know we can’t get anything done without them,” added a fourth.

Stacie wrote the responses on the board as quickly as she could—the students were bubbling with ideas, their responses coming fast, and their words piling on top of each other. Despite the heat and humidity of a late-May, New York City day, the class was abuzz. They were in the middle of a project-based learning (PBL) unit on the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and were on the verge of building their own movements for change. The students in this 11th grade class in an urban high school were propelled by the realization that ordinary people, motivated by a passionate commitment to social reform, could make extraordinary changes. Through this unit, they would be ready to launch their own movements for the betterment of society, testing the skills they had learned about organization and the power of such mundane acts as creating compelling fliers; photocopying and distributing material; talking to others about their beliefs; creating clear



Sit-in at the Woolworth store’s lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., in February 1960.

and impactful pieces to persuade key decision-makers; and having succinct and multi-step plans of action on how to bring about the changes they sought. Several days into what would ultimately be a weeklong unit on the civil rights movement and its legacies, the students were chomping at the bit to put their own organizational skills to the test.

We taught this PBL unit on the American civil rights movement multiple times in the past 10 years to classes of middle school, high school general education, Advanced Placement, and college-level students. Each time we do it with our different classes, we are reminded of the impact that PBL can have on students’ engagement with the material and the power that authentic engagement can have on true understanding of a topic and on students’ abili-

ties to *use* what they learn in sustained, meaningful, and transferrable ways.

What is Project-Based-Learning—and Why Use It?

Like other articles in this issue of *Social Education*, we see project-based learning as an approach that focuses both on the content of curriculum and what students *do* with what they learn. Organized around real-world challenges that students engage in and ultimately master in their learning, PBL units look and feel very different from traditional classroom learning. They are usually sustained (at least a week and often longer), and they are teacher-shaped but student-driven, with the main emphasis on *what students learn* rather than *what teachers teach*. PBL units are rigorous and meaningful, and they matter deeply in

terms of learning and assessment. In other words, they are the “main course” through which students learn, not the “appetizer or dessert” that supplements another kind of learning.¹

To make sure that project-based approaches lead to high level, rigorous learning in secondary classrooms, there are several requirements we build into our curricula: First, it is essential that PBL be authentic. By authentic, we mean both *internally authentic* to the profession in terms of disciplinary connections, and *externally authentic*, in terms of intrinsic value and connection to students’ lives outside of the classroom. For a project to be considered *internally authentic*, it must engage students in the kind of work that practitioners in the field actually do. In our case, students must *learn to do* and then *practice doing* the kinds of work that real historians do, including uncovering and evaluating evidence, deliberating over and debating what constitutes “evidence” in terms of content and quantity, sorting through competing interpretations of what the evidence means and for whom, and creating compelling narratives—whose conclusions may vary based on the evidence used—that seek to make sense of past events and shape our understanding of them today.² In order for a project to be *externally authentic*, it should feel intricately connected to real-world problems or concerns that students believe are important and worthy of their effort and attention. There has to be an audience who matters, as well as social value associated with the project.³

Authentic PBL projects therefore should involve the kinds of tasks and applications of knowledge that model the ideal of learning based in collaboration, support, and active engagement in school, local, and global communities. It must be *minds on* as well as being *hands on*.⁴ Only by engaging in projects that invite transfer—the extension of learning from one project to another, across and outside the curricular realm—do students truly come to own the material they learn and see the value and meaning

of the work they are engaged in. Those are the prerequisites for real learning to take place.⁵

Further, PBL enables students to connect with and deeply understand key events and trends in U.S. history and can make rich historical material accessible as well as exciting to a wide range of student learners. Our PBL units tie to the English Language Arts Common Core standards as well as to the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards; they build and develop in students the most rigorous historical thinking skills and raise students’ historical literacy and practice skills—ultimately, helping them perform effectively on standardized tests such as NAEP, state history tests, and the Advanced Placement History exams.

Here, we describe a unit we created and have taught on the civil rights movement and share resources on engaging diverse learners in a complex and multifaceted project that builds their historical thinking, creating, speaking, and writing skills while at the same time teaching them relevant, meaningful, transferable lessons about organizing for social change and the power of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary feats.

The Unit

The decision to ask students what they might need to create a successful protest movement, though key to stimulating student thinking, was certainly not the first step in the process of teaching the civil rights movement through a PBL approach. Before focusing on the precise content that students would learn, we considered the larger ideas and lessons that we wanted students to take away from the unit. It was important that students learn about events in the 1950s and 1960s, but it was even more important to us that they internalized those ideas and could make sense of them in the context of their own lives. We therefore developed four essential questions to guide the unit: (1) What roles did the leaders, organizers, and masses all play in the movements of the civil rights era,

and how can we evaluate their relative importance to the success of the movements? (2) In what ways did the print, radio, and television media of the time help move the localized events of the time to national attention? (3) How can “the mundane” be transformative—what does it mean to argue that the power of the civil rights movement developed from “mundane” efforts and what are the implications of such an argument? And (4) Why do we say that the civil rights movement is never ending? With these questions as our guiding foci, we crafted the Civil Rights PBL unit.

The earlier phases of the unit immersed students in the history of the movement. Following an introductory lesson on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Little Rock Nine, as well as the aforementioned brainstorming activity, students worked in groups to evaluate the role and power of organizations and “everyday” acts to affect change within the civil rights movement. Over the course of three days, students studied the Montgomery Bus Boycott as well as the way the African American community in Montgomery mobilized to organize the alternative transportation options and financial support that sustained the boycott for over a year. Students explored the strategies, actions, and impacts of civil rights organizations such as SNCC, the SCLC, and CORE, evaluating the ways that these organizations—and the sit-ins, marches, and Freedom Rides they coordinated—challenged inequality and sought to change laws and bring about new legislation. They did so through reading excerpts of historical works including statements issued by the different organizations. This helped students build critical literacy skills and their own abilities to sort and evaluate evidence—including contradictory pieces that they had to evaluate against each other. Finally, students also spent a day examining the role of the media in the civil rights movement, looking particularly at the way organizers used radio

continued on page 39

In this project-based unit, students evaluate the work and significance of the organizations, infrastructure, and “mundane” acts that contributed to the U.S. civil rights movement’s success. Then, students apply the lessons of the civil rights movement to problems in their own communities.

I. Unit Description:

Organizing and activism throughout the civil rights movement directly contributed to significant changes in the country and in people’s lives. African Americans in the South, together, in many situations, with Northern and white allies, organized coordinated efforts to disrupt the segregation and Jim Crow laws that were a hallmark of Southern life. Protests like lunch counter sit-ins, Freedom Rides, boycotts, voter drives, and marches throughout the South often started small—for example, Greensboro began with four students at a Woolworth’s lunch counter—but the organizing and mass mobilization undertaken by people dedicated to the cause, many of them students, turned these grassroots efforts into a large scale movement for political, social, and economic reform. This unit examines the causes, actions, and impact of the civil rights movement, focusing specifically on the role and work of its organizations and the seemingly mundane acts that supported civil rights protests and contributed to their success.

The following essential questions guide this unit:

- What roles did the leaders, organizers, and masses all play in the movements of the civil rights era and how can we evaluate their relative importance to the success of the movements?
- In what ways did the print, radio, and television media of the time help move the localized events of the time to national attention?
- How can “the mundane” be transformative? What does it mean to argue that the power of the civil rights movement developed from mundane efforts and what are the implications of such an argument?
- Why do we say that the civil rights movement is never ending?

II. Preliminary Project: Organizations of the Civil Rights Era

Students work in groups to explore, evaluate, write about, and present the work of one of three civil rights organizations: SNCC, CORE, or the SCLC. Each group receives a packet of primary and secondary sources detailing these organizations’ approaches and tactics, which they use to construct and write newspaper articles and editorials explaining and taking a stance on the relative success of protests including the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and the march to Selma. Students consider and answer the following questions through their work:

- What did SNCC, CORE and the SCLC have in common? How were these organizations different? Why do you think they sought equality in such different manners?
- Which form of protest do you think had the best chance of achieving success? Why? Is your opinion based more on the level of organization or the form of protest?
- Could these protests have happened without the massive organizations that supported them? Why or why not?
- Did these organizations achieve their goals in the long run? Provide evidence to support your answer.

Students present their work to the class, all learning from one another in a jigsaw manner. All of the students receive copies of the newspapers they create, with each group’s article or editorial included.

III. Daily Topics and Activities

Bus Boycott Lesson: In groups, students discuss and evaluate the foundations of and efforts that reinforced the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955–1956. Student groups identify and debate the work that went into initiating and continuing the boycott, including the development of transportation, communication, and financial networks, and whether these steps were necessary to perpetuate it. They also analyze whether these efforts reflected the need for mass support and organization throughout the boycott. Students present their findings to the class.

Organization Lesson: Prior to class, students are divided into six groups with each representing SNCC, CORE, or the SCLC. Students write and present articles on each organization’s work. See Preliminary Project: Organizations of the Civil Rights Era, for more information on this project.

Media Lesson: Students listen to protest songs and follow along with the lyrics. Each group is then assigned one song, to discuss: how it reflected the ideas/goals/issues of the civil rights movement; whether the artist advocated for a solution to African Americans’ plight; and the impact of African American artists’ ownership of their music on the messages they conveyed. Students also evaluate the importance of these songs, and music in general, to the civil rights movement and the use of radio as an organizing tool. Students present and share their conclusions with the class.

IV. Unit Project: Organizing in the Twenty-First Century

After exploring and evaluating the role and significance of organizations in the civil rights movement, students apply the lessons of the past to problems that they wish to resolve in their own communities. In groups, students choose an issue, problem, or struggle that they see as an injustice in their own community. They research their selection, gathering background information and ascertaining current concerns about and the impact of the issue they chose. Using this research, students create information boards and pamphlets presenting this material and offering potential solutions to the problem in an engaging, accessible, and informative manner. This project culminates in class presentations and community actions, with students sharing their process, rationale, and work with their classmates, and then disseminating their findings and arguments throughout their school and the wider community in actions advocating for a solution to the injustice they identified.

Note to Teachers

This project, as outlined here, is geared towards a high school general education U.S. history class, though we have taught it with simple modifications at the middle school level and with Advanced Placement and college level classes. Middle school teachers may adapt resources to ensure appropriate reading levels. Additionally, teachers may choose to meet with groups individually to help them select causes and plan their strategy as well as modify students' workload. It is important for middle school teachers to check in with groups frequently to coach them on how to conceptualize and deal with their selected issues in meaningful ways. With more advanced groups, we have allowed students to select their own readings in addition to or in lieu of the excerpts provided by the teacher and have set high standards for the materials students create and disseminate in their projects.

STATISTICS

On any given night in US, anywhere from 700,000 to 2 million people are homeless, according to estimates of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

3.5 million people (1.35 million of which are children) will experience homelessness in a given year.

Single men comprise 44% of the homeless, single women 13%, families with children 36%, and unaccompanied minors 7%.

The homeless population is about 50% African-American, 35% white, 12% Hispanic, 2% Native American and 1% Asian.

Veterans are 40% of the homeless pop.

1 in every 5 homeless persons has a severe or persistent mental illness.

42% of homeless children are under the age of five.

Poverty and lack of affordable housing are the principal causes of homelessness.

STOP CRIMINALIZING, start sympathizing



The main causes of homelessness are poverty and a lack of affordable housing yet society often pegs the homeless individuals as criminals. More often than not, homeless people are victims of circumstance. Victims of disease or mental illness. Victims of HIV and AIDS. Victims of unemployment. Instead of criminalizing them, we must rise up and organize to help these unfortunate victims.



HOW TO HELP

Americans everywhere must ensure that homelessness does not become a family tradition. Use the facts and statistics provided to make a difference in your community.

- *Volunteer for local homeless organizations.* HOUSING WORKS is a New York City based organization that provides housing, medical, prevention & support services for the homeless in NYC. Go to www.housingworks.org for more info on how to get involved.

- *Advocate for community-based treatment and support services* for families which enable them to find homes, receive appropriate physical and mental health treatment, and rebuild their lives in the community.

- *Inform your local and state governments* that if these services are not funded and successfully implemented, the social and economical costs to society will have a devastating impact on everyone's future.

This "Stop Criminalizing" pamphlet was created by 12th grade students in Brooklyn, New York. The students used the pamphlet as a platform to share key statistics, address and change misperceptions about homelessness, and offer information on how to help the homeless population.

LEARNING THROUGH DOING

from page 36

messages to mobilize activists and coordinate protests, and the television news coverage of the Children's Crusade in Birmingham. New York City students, in their integrated classroom in one of the most diverse cities in the world, watched with wide eyes as they came to understand the role that adolescents played in this movement. Our students came to see that the successes of the civil rights movement were the result of the effort and commitment of entire communities and that everyone, irrespective of age, can have a voice in a movement.

Students wrestled with important questions such as: Were the masses as important as the leaders in the civil rights movement? Why might some historians focus on the leaders of the movement over the contributions of the masses? And to what extent was the success of these protests dependent upon the massive organizations that supported them? Students debated these and other questions in small groups, creating civil rights newspapers and covering and analyzing what they learned. As their understandings grew of what movements need to succeed, they next turned to an examination of their own communities and the ways in which they themselves might become advocates for change.

Students are often experts at identifying problems and injustices in their own environments but can lack the know-how and sense of possibility to take on positive change. For this project, it was essential that they understood the need to target issues bigger than themselves—issues that impacted their community or the world in which they lived in a significant way. Within these parameters, students brainstormed a wide range of problems that they believed necessitated action: animal testing; the high cost of college; police brutality; the lack of healthy food choices in low-income areas; the lack of access to services for Muslim immigrant women; and the lack of appropriate playground facilities in underprivileged

neighborhoods, to name a few. Groups could choose their own topics, and, once the topic was selected and approved by the teacher, they created a planning document to explain their issue, why they believed the issue was important, some key background information, what community concerns were, what its causes and impacts were, and possible ways of addressing it. Students used this planning document to build an information board that they posted in school, and created pamphlets that they handed out in their own neighborhoods and around the school. This second phase took time and planning, but as they became more immersed in researching and learning about their issues and pondering how to ameliorate them, many became the activists they had earlier learned about. Students engaged the community outside of subway stations and on street corners around important issues such as the need for local grocery stores. They educated their fellow students about animal testing and shared information about companies that eschewed the use of animals. While their efforts may not have created fundamental or immediate change, they did set the stage for understanding of the work involved in transforming society. Indeed, studying the civil rights movement and seeing that one of the most important social movements in U.S. history happened at the most foundational level because people came together to make it happen, keep it going, and build on its progress, opened our students' eyes not just to history, but to their own power and responsibility to make positive change.

How PBL Engages Students in the Learning Process

Over the years we have taught versions of this unit, we have found student engagement to be extremely high, with especially strong “sticking power.” Students have performed well on questions related to the civil rights movement on the New York State Regents Exam and on the Advanced Placement U.S. History exams, and further, they have expressed

confidence in their mastery of the historical content and their ability to relate the events in history to their own lives and concerns. More importantly, years after they have studied the unit, our students still attest to their engagement with the topic and how much they enjoyed the unit. For education to be truly transformational it has to be meaningful and lasting—and students themselves are the best judges of what matters and means most. Remembering the unit years after having studied it and finding continued connection to and relevance in the work they did, to us affirm students' strong sense of connection to the civil rights movement and its legacies that this project-based unit inspired. 🌍

Notes

1. Walter C. Parker, Jane Lo, Angeline J. Yeo, Sheila W. Valencia, Diem Nguyen, Robert D. Abbott, Susan B. Nolen, John D. Bransford, Nancy J. Vye, “Beyond Breadth-Speed-Test: Toward Deeper Knowing and Engagement in an Advanced Placement Course,” *American Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 6 (2013): 1424–1459; Diana Turk and Stacie Brensilver Berman, *Learning U.S. History through Doing U.S. History* (New York and London: Routledge, forthcoming).
2. Turk and Berman, *Learning U.S. History through Doing U.S. History*.
3. Amy Reising and Katherine Carter, “English Language Learners and Project-Based Learning,” *Education Week*, last modified October 15, 2014, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_deeply/2014/10/english_learners_and_project-based_learning.html?cmp=ENL-EU-NEWS3.
4. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 2nd ed (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).
5. Glenda B. Crawford, *Differentiation for the Adolescent Learner: Accommodating Brain Development, Language, Literacy, and Special Needs* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008).

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