

The Real World: Community S

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Since I was a child, I have loved the study of history, but as a young teacher, I quickly discovered that not all of my students shared my passion. So I began experimenting with different methods to make the learning of history more inviting. One of the most successful methods has proven to be inviting guest speakers into the classroom: veterans, elected officials, business people, authors, and parents. Guest speakers can motivate students to think more critically about their lessons, challenge them with inquiring questions, and affirm the importance of citizenship and good character. Speakers from the community also provide stories and personal perspectives that make the curriculum more interesting and understandable.¹ In this article, I will explain how the Community-in-the-Classroom (CIC) program works and describe the positive effects of CIC on student learning and character development.

Experiential Learning

Real-world examples can make the study of science, math, and social studies more inviting. Experiential learning is gaining favor across a number of disciplines as an effective way to organize curriculum and instruct students. For example, a large teacher-training program was initiated in 1999 in the Durham, North Carolina Public Schools to help math teachers “bring numbers to life” using experiential instructional methods. “If we can tie the mathematical idea to their own experience, [students will be] more likely to remember it,” commented Durham math teacher Steve Unruhe.² He uses mea-

asures of cholesterol content of various fast-food meals as data when he teaches statistical concepts such as mean and median. The Scientist-in-the-Classroom Program, underway in several counties in North Carolina, promotes the use of scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and other professionals as guest speakers.³

Why not use experiential learning in social studies classes? For more than two decades, I have investigated the benefits of experiential learning in my American History classes. I have found that not only are experiential instructional methods more stimulating, but they also help students become better critical thinkers. Students are challenged to think critically about major historical themes through special readings, classroom discussions, enlightening videos, and team-based research projects. As they delve into their chosen topics, I stress the need to gather complete information and to let facts guide their thinking, not emotion or conjecture. The fruits of each student or group inquiry are shared by all in classroom presentations. Toward the end of a unit of study, community speakers will join each class to give their special insight into this historical period, event, or societal issue (See box).

Preparation

Before having someone speak in your class, do some preliminary screening. This is especially important when someone volunteers his or her services without having been trained or sponsored by an organization you know. Discuss the person’s background as it relates to the subject area and whether he or she has previously addressed

a school audience. If the person is unknown to you, it is appropriate to ask for a resume and a personal reference. Perhaps your school has a staff member, such as a career development coordinator, who can help you recruit effective guest speakers. Many civic organizations like the nonpartisan League of Women Voters have recommended guest speakers or could help lead you to them.⁴

Identify classroom objectives and inform a speaker about what students have been studying relating to this topic and how long the presentation should be, including at least fifteen minutes for questions and answers. Assure the speaker that students and teachers will have carefully prepared questions as well as spontaneous questions. If your school district is making special efforts to teach important character traits, let the speaker know which traits are being emphasized (for example, respect, responsibility, kindness, good judgment, courage, and perseverance).

If your principal is wary of having a guest speaker on a sensitive topic, explain how you have prepared the class for critical analysis and familiarized your speaker with the classroom policy. Point out that the speaker is only one element of the materials your class will consider. Mention your careful question-and-answer plans. Be ready to consider inviting a second speaker who can offer a different point of view. In some schools, an administrator will occasionally sit in on classes with guest speakers.⁵

Students can begin preparing for a guest speaker months in advance. Those who view history as useless may feel spurred to apply themselves when they know that a guest speaker will be featured

Speakers in the Classroom



Vietnam veteran Carl Bimbo discusses his experience of war.

near the end of the unit of study. If the students have some familiarity with the topic to be covered by the speaker, they will be prepared to ask intelligent questions—and to weigh the speaker’s answers against other sources of information.

As the day draws near, give students an outline of what will happen, and carefully explain how you would like the question-and-answer session to proceed. Give students a background sheet on the invited speaker, which could include a brief biography and source of expertise. Students should prepare questions that can be reviewed by the teacher and, possibly, forwarded to the speaker ahead of time. Return these questions to the students just before the visitor arrives. (This allows students to feel more comfortable asking questions in class. Spontaneous questions can also be encouraged.)

Good Morning, Vietnam

Students who view history as boring will be disarmed by the experience of having a Vietnam veteran, like Carl Bimbo, share pictures with the class of his lost buddies.⁶ The Vietnam Era is a bad memory for many Americans, but for this veteran and many others, there are important experiences that should not be forgotten. Although there may be disagreement over the “lessons to

be learned” from that war, a study of the era can encourage students to reflect on their own convictions and to become aware of the political and moral dimensions of foreign policy.⁷ In essence, Mr. Bimbo helps students better comprehend the true costs of war.

Brigadier General George B. Price has traveled all the way from Columbia, Maryland, to spend a full day with my students. He shows that we can discuss a controversial topic like the Vietnam Era with respect and with dignity, and he emphasizes how vital it is for each of us to participate in the democratic process. A veteran of the



General George B. Price emphasizes the responsibilities of citizenship.

Korean and Vietnam wars, General Price delivers the message that we live in a peaceful and prosperous land because of the ultimate sacrifice that so many American men and women made to preserve our liberty and freedom.

In his presentation, General Price brings us into his world, explaining why he was willing to risk his life, and the lives of his soldiers, for his country. He challenges all of us to rethink generalizations we may believe relating to Vietnam. My students, visiting parents, and teachers were particularly moved when he stopped for a moment, looked at his audience, and said, “Your

challenge as Americans is to find the profits of peace.” One student wrote, “General Price inspired me to believe we can do anything we put our minds to by being an example of a person who grew up in a segregated Mississippi and rose to become one of the nation’s outstanding Brigadier Generals through a lot of hard work and perseverance. He is a man whom the entire world could benefit to hear.”

Law and Order

Few units of study are more difficult to teach, or more important for our students to understand, than the U.S. Constitution. Rather than relying totally on my own knowledge, I invite Assistant District Attorney Shelley Desvousges into my class to describe the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as they are applied today. By arrangement, Ms. Desvousges entertains questions that had been carefully and critically developed by each student. Exciting discussions evolve and, as a result, my students no longer view the Constitution as a document written for the 1790s, but rather one that is relevant for 2000 and beyond.



Assistant D.A. Shelley Desvousges with Millbrook High School students.

Aftermath

Having parents and community speakers come into the classroom is not only a powerful tool for bringing history to life, but it is also effective in affirming the importance of good character and good citizenship. Visits by guest speakers frequently lead to student involvement in a variety of civic-oriented and career development activities. After a recent visit by State Senator Eric Reeves, an eleventh grader wrote, "You have definitely made an impact on the way I feel about politics and law. I believe this may be my new direction as I enter college in the next couple of years." Another student commented, "You captured my interest when you discussed why you chose politics. I remember you stating it was something you always had an interest in, and you enjoyed getting involved through various projects in high school and college, such as the soup kitchen and being the Chaplain's assistant. You confirmed my thoughts that it was important to get involved."

After the guest speaker's presentation, I write a letter of thanks to the speaker. I assign students to write letters (which will be graded) that discuss what they learned from the experience. With students' permission, I will send copies of the letters to the classroom visitor. I also invite students to consider writing articles about the experience for submitting to the PTA newsletter, school paper, or local newspaper.

Community Enthusiasm

One of the major conclusions of the report *Knowledge for a Nation of Learners: A Framework for Education Research* is that "families and communities must be more involved in education. Public schools should become, in spirit and in practice, more public."⁸ Public education seems to always be in the news, and I have found a high level of community interest in supporting teachers. As Tom Oxholm, the chairperson of the

Wake County Business-Education Leadership Council (BELC) commented, "We are just waiting for the teachers to tell us what to do!"

I have been pleasantly surprised that busy professionals will devote half a day or more talking with students. Community members and parents are more than willing to support teachers with their time and other resources. For my popular elective course "The Lessons of Vietnam," parents, community members, and the Millbrook High School PTA have furnished books, video collections, and even funding that made it possible for me to participate in an educational study tour of Vietnam.

There is another benefit to getting the "community" in the classroom. By linking community members directly with students and teachers, they become more understanding of the problems educators face.⁹ They might see crowded classrooms and become more concerned about the real effects of limited school funds on the overall quality of educational resources and programs.

Conclusion

By bringing well-informed guest speakers from the community into the classroom, we can encourage our students to assess multiple points of view and to think more creatively and critically about their course work. The questions that they prepare in advance for each speaker, as well as the actual classroom discussions and follow-up reflective writings, promote higher-order critical thinking skills. And the social studies content students learn no longer seems like just "schooling"; it is part of the real world. 🌐

Notes

1. Stephen A. Janger, "Civic Apathy: Who Cares?" *Education Week* (March 18, 1998). (www.edweek.org/ew/1998/27janger.h17); Linda Torp and Sara Sage, *Problems as Possibilities* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision

and Curriculum Development, 1998), 81; Olivia Barker, "Vietnam's Echoes on the Home Front" *USA Today* (20 December, 1999): L2.

2. Jonathan Goldstein, "Math? No Problem! NSF Grant Helps Durham Teachers Bring Numbers to Life," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC: September 9, 1999): 1B.
3. Laura Myers, "Education Research Must Make Lifelong Learning Its Goal, Report Says," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC: December 17, 1996): 11A.
4. Find the League of Women Voters on the web at www.lwv.org, or call the LWV chapter in your state.
5. This section is adapted from Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, *Echoes from the Wall: History, Learning and Leadership Through the Lens of the Vietnam War Era* (1997): 77, which is available from VVME, 1023 Fifteenth St., NW, Second Floor, Washington, DC 20005.
6. Several organizations that provide speakers in many communities on the topic of the Vietnam War and can be found on page 82 of *Echoes from the Wall*.
7. Don Bakker, *The Limits of Power: The United States in Vietnam* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1993), ii.
8. U.S. Department of Education, *Knowledge for a Nation of Learners: A Framework for Education Research* (Washington, DC: USDOE, 1996).
9. I would like to thank the Wake Education Partnership, Raleigh, North Carolina, for providing financial resources to develop the Best Practices guide, and the Millbrook High School PTA for its sponsorship of my travel-study program in Vietnam, "The Bridge Back." I would also like to thank Wake County Public School System's Superintendent Dr. Jim Surratt, Associate Superintendent Dr. Bill McNeal, and my husband, Dr. Barclay Poling, for their ongoing support of the Community-in-the-Classroom program.

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"Best Practices in a Community-in-the-Classroom (CIC) Social Studies Program Guide," provides details on the CIC methodology and gives practical suggestions for developing a network of community guest speakers.

The guide is available free on the web at www.wcpss.net/community