



STUDENT AS CITIZEN: TEACHING CIVILIAN IN THE

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TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING LITERACY SKILLS AT THE LIBRARY

CRITICAL CIVIC LITERACY REQUIRES STUDENTS TO ENGAGE ACTIVELY AND AUTHENTICALLY WITH BOTH MEDIA AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT.

As a school librarian, one of my goals is to teach students to become responsible citizens who recognize a sense of purpose and place in the larger community. Many schools, including my own, have core values that reflect a desire for our students to develop a broad community mission and purpose, often through programs with thoughtful curricula, including service-learning, identity work, and social justice. Students are pushed to “engage with community rather than perform a service on a community” (Argenal and Jacquez 2015). In this article, I’ll define civic literacy for educators, examine the need for such a literacy to be woven into the library curriculum, and describe an eleventh-grade service-learning research project that promotes critical civic literacy at the Urban School of San Francisco (Urban).

What Is Critical Civic Literacy?

A literacy can be described simply as an awareness or knowledge in a specific subject area. Literacies, especially critical civic literacy, are not typically inherent skills and must be taught and acquired. Having civic literacy “means being well-versed in social and political knowledge, understandings, dispositions, and skills” (Teitelbaum 2010), while having a *critical* civic literacy goes even further:

At the heart of critical civic literacy is the notion that students must be taught to question the constructs and categories offered in schools, the media, and dominant cultural groups. Critical civic literacy rejects the notion that knowledge can be directly transmitted from curriculum to teacher, from teacher to student in politically neutral,

encapsulated forms. Rather, a critical approach to civic literacy insists that students become active participants in constructing their own knowledge and worldviews and use education as a tool to interrogate and confront the forces that both shape and limit their lives. (Leahey 2011)

Critical civic literacy, a cornerstone of a democratic society, is the ability to name, analyze, and act on a social or political issue. Students who have developed critical civic literacy skills will understand how to be informed citizens, participate in and initiate societal change, as well as identify their own core values and connect them with the broader community. At Urban, the students are “driven by inquiry, action, and reflection, which ultimately promotes democratic participation” (Argenal and Jacquez 2015).

Critical civic literacy defies the clicktivism and slacktivism that have recently entered the nomenclature of politics and media. Critical civic literacy requires students to engage actively and authentically with both media and historical context. “A critical civic literacy perspective allows students to closely interrogate historical and current events, allowing them to focus on ways that they can participate in the process of creating positive changes toward the ultimate goal of promoting social justice” (Mayo 2011).

How Can Critical Civic Literacy Be Fostered?

Promoting social justice is at the core of the service-learning program at

Urban. Students begin their critical civic literacy work as freshmen with projects focused on aspects of their own identity. As sophomores they learn to recognize their own values and then apply those values to a civic issue. In eleventh grade students choose an issue to investigate and use library sources to conduct their research. The research is intended to support understanding of the topic from the student’s own viewpoint along with others’ viewpoints. Students use books and databases to find viewpoints and articles, but also find and manipulate government and NGO (non-governmental organization) statistics, conduct and seek out interviews, and use other primary sources to create a robust annotated bibliography. Since the research is not applied to a traditional paper or other written product-driven assignment, the work is focused on finding quality sources that have meaning for the student. Students demonstrate understanding by presenting the results of their research as mini-lessons to their classmates.

By the time students at Urban are in the eleventh grade, they’ve been challenged by a robust critical service-learning and social-justice curriculum. Students explore their own identities and values in ninth- and tenth-grade service-learning courses. In small groups they also work with a community organization. The eleventh-grade course, Service Learning Independent Internship and Seminar: Identity at Urban and Beyond, meets in two seminar classes each week, engaging students “to arrive at new understandings of identity, social constructs, and the influences they have on their experiences” (Argenal and Jacquez 2015).

During the rest of the week, students work independently off-campus with community organizations. The course culminates in student presentations of mini-lessons on social issues they've spent the term exploring through research and practice. This project, along with the entire four-year service-learning curriculum, enables students to put their critical civic literacy skills into action.

While civic literacy can be used in conjunction with a robust service-learning program such as the one at Urban, the principles of civic literacy can be woven into many disciplines. In Urban's statistics course, for instance, students are encouraged to use data that tackles a civic issue of interest to them. The students learn how to find datasets on the open Web and in library databases and then to interpret data. Visual art classes at Urban also scratch the surface of critical civic literacy by engaging students with art as activism as well as art as a social practice. Creative collaborations between school librarians and teachers in the sciences and world languages

could also incorporate critical civic literacy in a bigger research project.

The school library can also promote civic literacy through cocurricular means. At Urban we create pertinent book displays connecting our collection to local, national, and global current events (see figure 1). Displays sometimes reflect a micro-level of current events within our school, supporting assembly speakers and club events. The library also creates mobile checkout stations at school-wide events, most notably during Multi-Culti Week (a celebration of our multicultural affinity groups) and Month of Understanding (featuring speakers and events that promote diversity and cultural competency). This outreach connects our cocurricular and academic programs and encourages intrinsic curiosity. These library materials focused around topics of current interest directly draw in students and faculty.

School librarians can play a unique role in helping students develop the skills and motivation to seek out and engage in service-learning projects.

We can help students develop critical civic literacy skills—skills that help our citizen students recognize how to enhance service work and become agents of change in a democratic society. We can also integrate critical civic literacy skills throughout the curriculum to enhance our students' understanding of their place in the local and global communities.



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Figure 1. Example of a display tied to current events.