Project Citizen: Students practice democratic principles while conducting community projects

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Project Citizen students practice their presentation in school before school administrators and their peers.

On a Sunday morning, students and their teachers from rural and provincial Bolivian schools arrived in La Paz, the capital city of Bolivia, to showcase their Project Citizen portfolios to local residents, international delegations, and members of nonprofit organizations and government officials from the city. Most of the projects investigated socioeconomic and environmental problems afflicting students' communities. For example, a group of six eighth-grade students from a low-income public school in El Alto, the sister city of La Paz, presented a solution to the problem of garbage disposal in their community. The goal of their project was to craft a public policy statement in hopes of getting the needed support from local government to solve this issue. These students accepted citizenship responsibility, worked collaboratively, and learned to monitor public policy in their community.

What is Project Citizen?

Project Citizen is a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's congressionally funded Center for Civic Education, which sponsors both domestic and international programs. The Center for Civic Education's Civitas International Programs pair U.S. states with countries around the world based on a variety of factors, including geographic similarities. In 2005, Wyoming and Bolivia were paired with one another as the Wyoming–Bolivia Partnership. Since then, both partners have shared cultural exchanges centered around the civic education program. Project Citizen encourages students to work collaboratively to identify what they believe to be a community problem. Through research and interviewing members of the community, students determine the scope of the problem and whether others share their concerns. Considering the problem from multiple perspectives allows students to formulate solutions. Students then select one or a combination of these solutions to present as their public policy proposal and action plan before a panel of evaluators, policy makers, and members of Educators for Democracy, a local nonprofit organization, and on some occasions, to students from public schools in Wyoming via digital videoconference. They conclude with an oral and graphic presentation to educators, local authorities, and other interested parties through a four-panel display (a panel for each step of the process, see Figure 1) and an accompanying portfolio notebook.

Schools from across the globe use Project Citizen as a curriculum promoting the acquisition of academic and life skills such as citizenship, problem solving, oral and written communication, and research. In the United States, the Project Citizen program has expanded to include schools in every state as well as American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Teachers interested in learning about Project Citizen could visit the Center for Civic Education's website to learn about its implementation in U.S. classrooms and around the world (*www.civiced.org/index.php?page=program_information*). In this approach, students use their own life experiences to construct their learning, exercise their democratic rights, interact with government, and make contributions to the well-being of their communities. Because of the cross-curricular nature of this curriculum, students work under the guidance of Project Citizen–trained social studies teachers and their colleagues from other subjects such as science and math. The project described in this article, allowed the social studies and science teachers to partner in light of the content being addressed (civic engagement and environmental issues). The project taps into envi-

ronmental education (e.g., types of pollution) and typical physical and Earth science content (e.g., water cycle). In this case, the science teacher welcomed the garbage-disposal project as a means to teach content, such as the water cycle, and build real-life understanding about the effects of solid waste on air and water quality. The theme of the project integrated well with enviromental education, one of the four core components of Bolivia's national curriculum.

Step 1: Identifying the problem

To start, the group of students involved in the project discussed different issues affecting their community. They brainstormed about problems like drugs, gangs, racism, alcoholism, and garbage. As students voiced their opinions and discussed each problem, the teachers introduced key Project Citizen concepts (e.g., public versus private problems, policy, alternative solutions) that would be used to analyze each issue. Students asked questions such as the following to arrive at consensus on a problem to investigate: Is the issue of public concern? Does the problem affect the local community? Does the problem support citizen participation? During this phase they agreed that a negative response to any of those questions would eliminate that issue as a potential investigation, but that a second criterion, personal vote, would be used if there was disagreement. The next task was to classify each problem as being of a public or private nature. For instance, family violence was "private" and lack of drinking water in the community was "public." Once they identified the nature of each problem, students discussed citizen participation and government agencies involved. Focusing on the problems that fell into the public category, students understood that their proposed solution would be possible only if new public policy were enacted and enforced by local government decision makers.

After engaging in the problem-identification process, students concluded that the accumulation of garbage and the presence of a dumping site in their neighborhood was the culprit for dogs, flies, and odors. Next, they decided to focus on the problem of solid-waste disposal. They used the information they had gathered to create the first panel of their Project Citizen display panel (see Figure 1). A Project Citizen display generally consists of four panels detailing the steps that students have taken in arriving at, analyzing, and suggesting a

| FIGURE 1 | Project Citizen display panel and documenting portfolio (Project Citizen 2008) |

policy and an action plan relevant to their issue. Panel one shows how students identified their problem using criteria such as that previously mentioned. Panel two presents alternative solutions to the problem. The third panel shows the public policy proposed by students, and panel four includes an action plan.

Students compiled background information focusing on the three Rs (recycle, reduce, reuse) and shared these ideas and findings during school assemblies and classroom visits with peers using posters, signs, displays, and drawings to gain support. Next, they consulted with their local office of environmental quality to learn about the legal aspects of waste management, gather printed materials, and receive training on how to select, sort, and dispose of recyclable materials. Meetings between the students involved in the project and their teachers took place at least twice weekly during recess or after school.

Step 2: Identifying solutions

By the end of the first semester of the school year, students identified three solutions to the problem of solid-waste disposal: (1) a community-awareness campaign, (2) the enforcement of an existing environmental law, or (3) a solid-waste-management program. They analyzed each of the solutions by identifying the following:

1. the existing policy or suggested policy,
2. the individual or group that was proposing the policy,
3. the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed policy, and

4. local individuals or groups that were likely to support or oppose the policy.

Students voted to select their third solution, the solid-waste-management program. To continue preparing for the final presentation, the group created a second panel for their display summarizing the alternative policies (community awareness and law enforcement) to demonstrate their in-depth knowledge of the issue. This panel was complete with written text and visuals (charts, graphs, photos, newspaper headlines, etc.) and resources used.

Step 3: Policy statement

Before drafting the public policy statement about the solid-waste-management program, students first checked the Bolivian constitution to assure their proposal was legal. Four aspects were considered in the students' policy statement (see Figure 2).

Students finalized this step by creating a third panel to support and present the public policy proposal with text, visuals, and references.

Step 4: Action plan

Next the students designed an action plan to carry out the proposed waste-management policy to be implemented by a government agency. This action plan addressed the following:

1. The main activities and potential agents of carrying out the plan.
2. How to win the favor of influential individuals and groups who would support or oppose the proposed policy.
3. How to win the favor of government officials who would support or oppose the proposed policy.

Finally, to complete the four-panel display, students produced the written and visual explanation of how to develop support for their waste-management public policy proposal among individuals and groups in the community and government. Again, they included text, visuals, and references in the action-plan panel.

Project presentation

After several months of dedication, the students presented their project before the city council of El Alto in the American Embassy in La Paz. In the audience were student presenters from other Bolivian schools, mentor teachers, and members of Educators for Democracy, who served as the evaluators of the project. This project was also shared with Wyoming middle school students who participated via a digital videoconference. The oral presentation was intended to inform the audience of the importance of the problem, to explain and evaluate alternative poli-

FIGURE 2	Proposing a public policy

Prompts	Proposed policy
The best public policy to deal with this problem is…	The city should start a pilot recycling program, the proceeds from which our school can purchase needed materials.
The advantages of this policy are…	Reduction of garbage accumulation and allocation of materials for the school.
The disadvantages of this policy are…	Paying for a marketing campaign and the lack of involvement on the part of local residents and public officials.
The government agency responsible for carrying out the proposed policy is…	The office of environmental quality.

Project Citizen students use these prompts in the analysis of the policy statement to be included in the final proposal. By addressing both advantages and disadvantages of their policy, students can anticipate potential pitfalls and strategize their plans to gain the support from all the agencies involved in the solution to the problem.

As you and your classmates complete your portfolio and prepare for the hearing, it is important to check your work to make sure you have included everything. This checklist will help you to determine whether you have met the criteria that evaluators will use to rate your work.

Task	Criteria for evaluation	Yes	No	Needs work
1	**Understanding of the problem** States and explain the problem and its causes and present evidence that there is a problem.			
	Demonstrates an understanding of issues involved in the problem.			
	Demonstrates an understanding of existing or proposed public policies.			
	Explains disagreements about the problem that may exist in the community.			
	Explains why government should be involved in the solution.			
	Present mutually supporting information in the display and binder.			
2	**Analysis of alternative policies** Presents two of three alternative public policies to address the problem.			
	Explains advantages and disadvantages of each alternative policy presented.			
	Identifies controversies and conflicts that may need to be addressed for each alternative.			
	Presents mutually supporting information in the display and binder.			
3	**Public policy development and persuasiveness** States a public policy that addresses the problem and identifies the governmental branch or agency responsible for enacting the proposed public policy.			
	Supports the proposed public policy with reasoning and evidence.			
	Identifies and explains advantages and disadvantages of the proposed public policy.			
	Explains and supports the reasons why the proposed public policy is constitutional.			
	Presents mutually supporting information in the display and binder.			
4	**Implementation of an action plan** Identifies individuals and groups, both supporters and opponents, who will need to be influenced.			
	Identifies government officials, both supporters and opponents, who will need to be influenced.			
	Outlines and explains an action plan for getting the proposed public policy enacted.			
	Proposes action that builds and expands on evidence presented in previous panels.			
	Presents mutually supporting information in the display and binder.			
Overall	**Overall portfolio** • Presents material in the display and binder that is mutually supportive. • Constructs a clear and convincing sequence from one panel or section to the next. • Uses and documents research from multiple sources and provides appropriate notation for the sources and research evidence used. • Uses standards of good writing. • Uses relevant and appropriate graphics and written information. • Is visually appealing. • Includes evidence of student reflection that states what students have learned.			

cies, to discuss the group's policy idea, and to share how they would develop support. Both the oral presentation and project portfolio were assessed by the teachers and members of the Education for Democracy organization using the criteria in Figure 3. Students in the audience, from Bolivia and Wyoming, had the opportunity, with the help of interpreters, to ask the student presenters questions. Likewise, teachers and other members of the school communities provided feedback and recommendations for improvement. The most important aspect in the presentation was the involvement of the government agency responsible for addressing the garbage-disposal problem.

Conclusion

After the presentation, government officials promised to study and provide students with feedback regarding their proposal. Unfortunately, feedback never arrived. However, students continued their efforts by implementing a recycling program within their own school community. The students set up three colors of recycling boxes around the school for paper and cardboard, plastic materials, and organic compost materials. Similar efforts were made in the surrounding neighborhoods to help eradicate the dumping sites in front of the school. The monies earned through this program allowed students to remodel the basketball court and purchase several new library books for their school. They still hope to expand these efforts to other schools and market areas in their community.

The Bolivian students who participated in this example of Project Citizen demonstrate, through their own community-based project, that they can be part of policy making in their schools, neighborhoods, communities, and local governments. By publically defending their projects, they voiced previously unheard concerns, and took action to promote new community attitudes and change.

Because Project Citizen exists in every U.S. state, teachers wanting to use it can contact the Center for Civic Education to arrange, at no cost, for training (see Resources). Although initially Project Citizen was used primarily as part of the social studies curriculum, teachers in other subject areas find that it offers a variety of ways for them to address standards. Language arts and modern languages teachers find it a useful tool for practicing literacy skills. Science teachers appreci-

ate its inquiry and problem-solving potential. Project Citizen also has great potential as an interdisciplinary approach. It offers a means for teachers to help students focus on community-based problems that have implications beyond the classroom and community, such as environmental issues, and teaches students skills and methods for making their concerns and ideas heard by those in public office.

References

Center for Civic Education. 2008. *Project Citizen level 1.* Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education.

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). 1994. *Expectations of excellence: Curriculum standards for social studies*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS.

Resources

Center for Civic Education, Project Citizen program— *www.civiced.org/index.php?page=program_information*

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