

5-2006

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Recommended Citation

Abilock, Debbie, "So Close and So Small: Six Promising Approaches to Civic Education, Equity, and Social Justice" (2006). *Civic Engagement*. Paper 18.

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So Close and So Small: Six Promising Approaches to Civic Education, Equity, and Social Justice

Debbie Abilock, KQ Editor

"Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."—*attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the first chair of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Commission* <www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3a686231.html>

Introduction

Perhaps you feel, as I did when I worked in a school, that while teachers develop service projects with the best intentions, they make no effort to build on what is known about effective service learning, nor do they align their work with other service in the school. As a result, my school was full of feel-good, superficial activities and little curricular coherence.

For example, twice a year, at the end of the semester, the middle school students were scheduled for a habitat restoration project at Fort Funston in San Francisco, while their teachers remained on campus to write evaluations. Students returned, hot and tired, complaining that pulling ice plants had been "boring." Also at the term's end, third graders raised funds for the rain forest through a week-long bake sale. How these budding entrepreneurs loved selling cookies to their peers! That same year, a second-grade class studied bread as part of a year-long theme called "Threads through Cultures." Students defined bread ("Are crackers a bread?") and discussed whether having bread was a human right (United Nations 1948). They examined traditions and read stories, researched the impact of geography and technology on different breads, learned about nutrition and digestion, and donated their Friday afternoon delivering baked goods to a local shelter. These students, now in high school, continue to refer to that satisfying investigation of chemistry, math, culture, and service.

We know that assigned volunteerism unconnected to everyday learning and reflection is likely to be superficial ("This is fun!" "This is boring!"). Yet teaching social responsibility goes far beyond favoring service learning over community service projects. If we understand social responsibility broadly (Oakes and Lipton 1999) and position it within the context of our information literacy standards (Standards 6–9 and the proposed Standard 10), we can lead our schools toward curricular coherence and academic achievement.

The last issue of *Knowledge Quest* (March/April 2006) examined civic aspects of social responsibility. In this issue we focus on another aspect—justice and equity: Why do we seek socially responsible outcomes? More specifically, how can we use information for the betterment of society? What instructional strategies, curricular models, instructional resources, and partnerships outside our schools can we draw upon to support a more just and humane world?

Civic education develops the capacity of people, united by common ideals of personal liberty and respect for diversity, to govern themselves. **Social justice education** supports the collective and individual work needed to achieve equity for every person: "how resources, respect and opportunities can be justly distributed and social patterns of exploitation, domination and denigration eradicated" (Woods 2005, 17). Beyond knowledge of how a bill becomes a law, when to cite a source, or how to identify bias, profound learning occurs when we can walk in the shoes of the other. When students understand inequity from within, they develop the desire to act, to seek justice for all. To broaden our approach to teaching social responsibility, let's extend the six approaches to civic education identified in *The Civic Mission of Schools* report (Carnegie Corporation of New York 2003), which were described in the last issue of *Knowledge Quest* (Levine 2006). Let's consider, close and small, how we might educate for equity and justice.



1. Classroom Instruction in Government, History, Law, and Democracy

When students learn about civics in school, not only do they perform better than other students on tests of political and civic knowledge, they also show evidence of civic attitudes and skills.

Most librarians will systematically build resources to support civics, history, and government classes and social justice (Dudley 2005, Frantzich 2005, Weibgen 2005), and all of us can become more aware of how our daily discipline and classroom management teach the library's hidden curriculum about democracy (Koshewa 1999). Co-curricular planning with the teachers responsible for or interested in these subjects will help an instructional team identify the common goals among their content areas and our *Information Power's* Social Responsibility Standards 7–9 (AASL and AECT 1998) as well as "Standard 10," which Gail Bush is proposing in this issue (page 19). By mapping both the collection and the curriculum, librarians find they are able to align information literacy goals with content area goals to develop a coherent schoolwide civics program.

A Civic Engagement Snapshot . . .

During election years, the school librarian always helped seventh-grade social studies classes investigate political issues. As the 2000 presidential election approached, she suggested to the social studies department that they might enrich students' learning by involving the middle school math and language arts teachers in the planning. Several meetings later, the librarian and the math, language arts, and social studies teachers felt ready to test an assignment called "You Are Shocked" (Abilock 2000) in which students did Web research, analyzed census data, and wrote a persuasive letter. So, during October, students examined U.S. census figures to expose the traditionally low voter turnout among college freshmen. Then each student developed a plan to increase college students' political awareness and encourage them to vote. After identifying and learning about an issue that was likely to interest these first-time voters, each seventh grader composed

a persuasive letter addressed to a particular student group leader on the campus of a specific college or university located in a crucial swing state. In the "You Are Shocked" letter to this college leader, the student explained the candidates' positions on this issue, emphasized the importance of voting in a swing state, and suggested a plan to increase voter turnout that fit that group's goals and was likely to be implemented on that campus.

. . . with Equity and Justice

As they were doing Web research, several students learned that voter turnout had been shown to correlate with a combination of three factors—life expectancy, adult literacy rate, and standard of living—referred to as the United Nations Human Development Index (International IDEA 2004). At the end of October, during the class evaluation of the "Shocked" project, students questioned the significance of this correlation. During the teachers' wrap-up meeting later that day, the school librarian, referring to the students' questions about the index, showed teachers the U.S. Census Bureau's (2006) voting and registration data and contended that students, while they now understood the importance of voting, did not appreciate the connection between voting and equity. The librarian had been reading about writing from the point of view and in the voice of someone outside the dominant culture—called writing in the "contact zone" (Pratt 1990, Wolff 2002)—and wondered if students would have developed both empathy and understanding if they had been asked to assume the position of the other in their letters. The team decided to read more about contact zone writing. Over the course of the non-election year, the librarian provided teachers with readings on critical literacy (Edelsky 1999, Johnson and Freedman 2005, Shor 1999; see also the May 2002 issue of *Language Arts* on critical literacy), inquiry as action (Berndt and Muse 2004), and social justice (Bomer and Bomer 2001, Oakes and Lipton 1999), and the team began to discuss ways of revising the assignment.

The school librarian's role: The librarian is a collaborating peer teacher, a team

facilitator, and a professional development leader in a successful civic project that is evolving to include social justice.

2. Discussion of Current Issues

Moderated discussions of issues in school increase students' critical thinking, communication skills, interest in politics, and even their discussion of current events outside school.

When fixed library schedules inhibit collaboration, realistic librarians design a parallel library curriculum that integrates classroom content, often with minimal teacher cooperation. Because fixed schedules predictably result in stretches of time when the library's activities cannot match the classroom curriculum, school librarians use these unencumbered periods to devise their own units or lessons to address such social responsibility issues as intellectual property and plagiarism, copyright and fair use, the First Amendment, media consolidation, information access, and global human rights. To guide planning, librarians look to other professionals and search these terms on the ALA Web site and in professional publications from ALA Editions (Office of Intellectual Freedom 2005, Russell 2004). Newspapers, magazines, fiction, poetry, and other genres can be a source of readings that will provoke student discussions. Fixed-schedule librarians learn to seek collaborative peers, professional growth, and mentors beyond their schools so that they can develop their own understanding of conflict in our country's history (Percoco 2001), "invite discomfort" (Jacobson 2003), find common ground (Search for Common Ground n.d.), initiate deliberative discussions (Gastil and Levine 2005) and learn from peers and experts (Deliberative Democracy Consortium 2005).

A Civic Engagement Snapshot . . .

A high-school librarian regularly followed developments in such civil liberties issues as terrorism and citizens' rights, racial profiling and immigration policies, abortion and same-sex marriage, privacy and surveillance technologies. Although he knew that his teachers didn't feel they had the time to participate in the

2005–2006 U.S. National Debate on civil liberties, he proposed to his principal that he could organize a year-long series of student-led public discussions to which parents would be invited. He planned to modify Bruce Ladewig's (n.d.) Socratic Seminars and Carla Beard's (2006) debate resources to create a discussion format for the program.

In the fall he invited teachers to suggest topics from their classroom curriculum that related to civics so that students would connect their classroom learning with his planned events. While waiting for their suggestions, he developed an assignment in which sixth graders would interview librarians in neighboring schools and public libraries to determine the level of access to information that students of their age had in the community. Based upon ideas from the action guide for Banned Books Week (ALA 2006), he worked with students to design a survey about selection and acceptable use policies, including questions about the rules for Internet access for sixth-grade patrons, the policy for purchasing commonly banned books, and the procedure for handling resource challenges. At the school's first evening seminar during Banned Books Week <www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bannedbooksweek.htm>, he focused the student discussion on how the First Amendment (Haynes et al. 2003) is lived in their community—specifically, what information access students of their age had through their public schools and libraries. The lively evening event was well-attended. Later teachers remarked on how deliberative techniques were appearing in their class discussions; they saw students seeking clarification rather than just defending an opinion, analyzing issues thoughtfully and considering diverse ideas respectfully.

... with Equity and Justice

Although the school librarian was pleased with his initial success, he recognized that students were continuing to think in safe and predictable ways. To challenge their assumptions and extend the originality of their thinking, he began reading "Little Red Riding Hood" aloud, encouraging students to identify the moral or ethical lessons in the story. Then he suggested that students position themselves outside the

text's stance to ask resistant questions that challenge those moral and social assumptions. For example, students might ask, "Why *should* Little Red Riding Hood be blamed for her actions? Isn't it really wolves that should be held responsible for making the woods so dangerous?" or "Why should we fault a wolf for instinctive behavior?" or "Why do girls have to stay on the path while the huntsman can go anywhere?" When they had practiced asking resistant questions about several traditional tales, he returned to their discussion of information access in the public libraries. "What resistant questions might we ask about our local schools and libraries?" which led into "How could we work to create equitable access to information in our community?" Thus, students reanalyzed their findings through the lens of equity.

The school librarian's role: While the librarian invites coordination with his faculty, he has become a curriculum developer and independent teacher of information literacy. To avoid professional isolation and advance his goal of teaching social responsibility, he seeks information from his profession and identifies experts and organizations outside librarianship who can help him learn to teach social justice and equity.

3. Service Learning

When student volunteering for local community groups and organizations is integrated with school-organized service and core curriculum, students' civic attitudes and skills develop broadly.

To position their libraries as important players in service learning, librarians make it a priority to be aware of districtwide partnerships with local community organizations and seek to align their library curriculum with voluntary service opportunities outside the school using the Learn and Serve America National Service-Learning Clearinghouse <www.servicelearning.org> and other organizations identified by Clara Sitter in this issue (page 23).

Because quality service-learning asks students to address a real need (Thomsen 2006),

school librarians can bring volunteerism into the daily life of the library by identifying emerging library problems, even among the youngest students, and providing time to discuss them. Perhaps students cannot locate sources they need when heavily used materials are in disarray. Or students complain that they are barred from the library when it is unsupervised during lunch period. When librarians can help students recognize that their community has conflicting but legitimate needs, they see a real need to use information literacy to investigate their problem from multiple perspectives and work to solve it through their own actions. By inviting what Parker Palmer (1998, 107) calls "creative conflict," school librarians teach students to build consensus and develop solutions that involve their own initiative. Finally, when students are asked to reflect on their actions, they will consolidate their service learning.

A Civic Engagement Snapshot . . .

When a middle-school librarian read about a partnership between a school and the League of Women Voters of Oakland in which high school student volunteers test the process of obtaining information from their local city government, she e-mailed the retired librarian and local teacher for more information. She learned that the students' survey results reveal that city officials delivered answers on 70 percent of the overall requests, but only 43 percent of the students' requests (three out of seven) were answered. While their sample size was small, local reporter Chip Johnson (2005) put this limited investigation into the context of the general erosion of the public's right to know through "violations and outright refusals from some public employees who didn't seem to know the difference between a public and a protected document—and others who didn't seem to care." Barbara Newcombe, the retired librarian, generously offered to forward a copy of the report form as well as her theory about how to conduct this audit to her or other school librarians who might be interested in organizing similar projects with their League chapters (write <bnewcombe@igc.org>). She hopes to help other school librarians work with their students to raise awareness among city government employees about unconstitutionally limiting

public information. At the same time, she says, their students will learn to see themselves as instrumental in building community support for better access.

... with Equity and Justice

Beyond doing a survey with her middle schoolers, this librarian asked herself what larger goals she had for all her students. She concluded that access, democracy, and justice belonged throughout the program, and that students would use the information literacy process to understand them. To begin, she asked fourth-grade students whether the library catalog makes it difficult to find what they needed. One student remembered that he was looking for information about the flu but didn't know how to spell influenza; unlike Google, the library catalog didn't suggest the right spelling. Another said her computer was infected with a bug, but her results only referred her to sources about insects and disease viruses. The class concluded that the library catalog sometimes presented barriers to completing homework or getting the information they needed. One student suggested that she place pads of sticky notes throughout the library. Then, when she was working with others, students could write their questions, sign their name, and post them on her computer screen, so that she could help them later. Others asked her to add her e-mail address to all library Web pages—or even advertise “IM office hours”—so that they could ask for help on research problems from home.

After acknowledging their ideas and promising to consider them, the librarian described the results of the League of Women Voters project. She wondered if the city government's Web site also could inhibit a citizen's access to information. The class brainstormed questions that they might have about their city and, in pairs, tried to locate answers on the city's Web site, noting problems as they searched. When the students reported their findings to the class, the librarian used chart paper to record their ideas for improved access. Then she asked them to pretend to navigate the Web site in another persona, a person who might have special needs. For example, they could pretend to be an older person with

poor eyesight who needed to report a light that had burned out on the street, a young child with spelling difficulties who was looking for information on whether her dog needed to be on a leash, or a person looking for a city job whose primary language was not English. Again, after recording students' suggestions for improvements, she asked each student to look over both lists and compose an e-mail to the city webmaster describing one problem. Print copies of their e-mails, along with a description of the library's goals and her specific work with students, were sent to the city manager, town council, and her school administrator. Next, looking forward toward Constitution Day in the fall, she began to consider how to approach the social studies department about using this process to ask classes to examine access to federal government information.

The school librarian's role: The school librarian is a curriculum developer who identifies “access” as an “understanding goal” (Wiggins and McTighe 2005), an essential learning goal for her students. As program administrator, she employs advocacy and marketing techniques to raise her school's and community's awareness of her value and the significance of the library program.

4. Extracurricular Activities

Participation in extracurricular activities (such as the student newspaper or student government) builds a knowledge of the First Amendment and correlates with adult citizenship behaviors.

School librarians know that the extracurricular application of civic values can be as simple as helping students learn to resolve differences on the playground. During yard duty or lunch supervision, librarians can practice using the conflict resolution strategies from CRInfo <www.crimfo.org>, PBS TeacherSource <www.pbs.org/teachersource> or Costanzo (n.d.). Even very young children (grades one through four) are able to problem solve a list of agreements from which they can create a poster of shared rules they can refer to and follow.

Further, because budget cutbacks have eliminated student media programs in about one in five schools (Knight Foundation 2005), school librarians become club advisors for the student newspaper, drawing on the resources on the Journalism Education Association <www.jea.org> Web site, or they incorporate interactive publishing software (blogs, wikis, podcasts) into their library's Web site to provide a forum for student citizen-journalists. When diverse ideas are invited and respect is cultivated, students learn to cherish intellectual freedom and the marketplace of ideas, whether they write for traditional or new media.

A Civic Engagement Snapshot . . .

A library media specialist, Patrick Delaney, developed a robust online community called GalileoWeb <www.galileoweb.org> for his entire school. He used blog software to create a cluster of thematically and hierarchically linked, easy-to-update weblogs that are maintained by teachers, staff, and students. There are blogs for student clubs, parent organizations and services, individual teachers, curricular departments, and the library. Students learn to be Web editors, control the database, develop graphic designs for school events and individual blogs, and review and purchase DVDs and books for the library.

... with Equity and Justice

After exploring GalileoWeb, a first-year school librarian was inspired to experiment with blog software for her first extracurricular activity. She wanted to offer a safe place for students to present their opinions and discuss what they were reading, but rejected the idea of grades or required postings because she believed that students would then think of the blog as a school exercise rather than their own space (Edelsky 1999). While searching the Web, she discovered a discussion blog called Guys Read <www.aptosjr.pvUSD.net/guysread> created by school librarian Megan Fuller at Aptos Junior High. She learned that this blog was developed as a localized version of Guys Read <www.guysread.com> to help boys find stuff they like to read. Fuller explained that boys consistently score lower on standardized reading tests, but like to participate in chat rooms, so blogging

was a good software match with the goal of encouraging reading and, perhaps, improving test scores. Because many boys don't have male role models for reading groups (relatively few men participate in book clubs), Megan had invited fathers and male teachers to join the online conversations about books. The new librarian was interested in bringing both loners and marginalized groups into her school library. After exploring Rethinking Schools Online <www.rethinkingschools.org> and reading about one teacher's strategies for pulling in fringe students (Busching and Slesinger 2002), the new librarian decided to introduce an oral history blog and asked her fellow teachers to participate along with students and parents. She hoped to invite the silent voices of her multi-ethnic community to the table and flatten the power hierarchy between school and home.

The school librarian's role: A librarian is an innovator who tests beta teaching ideas in the low-risk environment of an extracurricular program before making decisions about what to implement more fully in the library's core program.

5. Student Voice

When students feel that their opinions and ideas are heard in school (for example, through surveys, tasks forces, town meetings, class discussions), their investment in their school community extends beyond seeking good grades or peer approval.

No doubt many school librarians survey their student body about particular issues, or invite student groups to select books or give advice on library services and programs; every class presents an opportunity to provide choice and voice for students (Bishop and Pflaum 2005; see also the March/April 2005 issue of *Knowledge Quest* on student voices). Civically minded librarians who wish to teach for justice and equity often ask themselves about their assumptions: "Why do I impose limits on the number of check outs?" "How do I make decisions on what to change or eliminate after budget cutbacks?" "Do I subconsciously steer students toward certain sections of the library?" "Is the process for

suggesting new library materials transparent to my users?" "Whose voices are missing from my library collection?" In the last analysis we find our own voices as we give voice to our students.

A Civic Engagement Snapshot . . .

When a poet's visit electrified her students and school community, Janet Drafts Boltjes, a high school librarian whose only experience teaching writing had been as part of the research process, worked hand-in-hand with her students to create a club "to have fun with poetry." Leadership emerged and changed in the group. Advice from the mentoring poet was accepted and sometimes rejected or modified. The frequency and duration of meetings, as well as the content, evolved through the group's consensus decisions:

Only two "rules" were agreed upon. The first was to be courteous when others are talking [and] when we discussed the idea that poems were often written about sensitive issues, we agreed we wanted to share poems and ideas free from the fear of gossip . . . our second rule: "What is said in poetry club stays in poetry club" (Boltjes 2005, 39).

Describing herself as one member of a team of learners, this librarian openly invited students to guide the evolution of the club. We know that a safe environment in which students play a significant role in "planning how to study what gets studied," and in which students take care of each other, listen respectfully to each other, and help each other learn, is key to learning about justice, equity, and democracy (Edelsky 1999).

. . . with Equity and Justice

Boltjes' story is really about asking the question "What if . . .?": "What if I ask a visiting author . . .?" "What if I ask students . . .?" "What if I use this lesson . . .?" By reading beyond library literature, school librarians can find extraordinary lessons, such as one that uses a soccer ball and a Brecht poem to begin a conversation about social justice (Bigelow 1998). Through partnerships with writers who come to our

book fairs or live in our communities, or by inviting volunteers from the 826 writing centers (now open in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, and Michigan), we learn new ways to teach. Recently I visited 826 Valencia <www.826valencia.org>, the original site of the nonprofit organization named for its location in San Francisco's Mission District. This writing center is supported in part by a pirate store (yes, seriously!) and is dedicated to helping students "with their creative and expository writing skills and to helping teachers get their students excited about writing." Founded by Dave Eggers, author of a best-selling memoir and editor of the literary journal *McSweeney's*, the site draws hundreds of volunteer tutors as well as such big-name authors as Michael Chabon, Amy Tan, Jon Scieszka, and Spike Lee to teach writing to students at no charge in their drop-in program, in evening and weekend workshops, and through *gratis* outreach programs for public schools. Order a copy of 826's *Waiting to Be Heard* published in conjunction with the Isabel Allende Foundation and read the amazing poems, essays with footnotes, and other forms of writing in response to a teacher's assignment to "explore the ways that we think about conflict, violence, and peace in our world" (Thurgood Marshall Academic High School 2004, back cover). Ask yourself, "What if I use reading and writing to teach more than skills?"

The school librarian's role: The librarian serves as an extracurricular advisor in order to advance students' reading and writing motivation, find multiple forums for student voices, and develop student governance skills in a climate of social responsibility. Librarians can become opportunists in the very best sense of that word, identifying ideas, programs, and resources that fuel their own teaching and their students' learning of justice and equity.

6. Simulations of Civic Structures and Processes

Mock trials, model United Nations, and other simulations related to core curricular topics

have great potential for increasing civic skills, attitudes and knowledge.

Instructional teams that include the media specialist bring disciplinary strength and information literacy skills to existing mock trial programs and simulations. The Constitutional Rights Foundation <www.crf-usa.org>, Model United Nations <www.nhsun.org>, and CongressLink <www.congresslink.org> provide how-to resources for trials, assemblies, house floor debates, and elections that librarians can tailor to their school and students. Elementary school librarians can adapt the "Local Government Simulation" created for students in grades three through six by a pair of Contra Costa County teachers (White and Sioui n.d.), while middle and high school librarians can search deep Web resources, such as PBS TeacherSource <www.pbs.org/teachersource> and First Amendment Schools <www.firstamendmentschools.org>, for lesson plans and simulations.

A Civic Engagement Snapshot . . .

Each year, third graders studied classic fairy tales, myths, folk tales, legends, and fables from around the world, then wrote fractured fairy tales in a writers' workshop. Before the school year began, the librarian met with their teachers and offered to teach the entire grade how to create a simple bibliography for their sources. As they coordinated the schedule, she added that she would be willing to work with them on two other performances of learning: fairy tale mock trials that she learned about on the American Bar Association (n.d.) Web site, and a comparison of folk tale variants based on lessons she located at EDSITEment <<http://edsitement.neh.gov>> by searching on the phrase "Cinderella folk tales." She reasoned that this differentiation would meet the needs, interests, and abilities of all their learners, and offer them choices in what and how they learn—an important aspect of civic education. Because all students would read traditional folk literature, create a bibliography, and write either a fractured fairy tale, a newspaper account of the trial, or a comparison of two tales, the revised unit would address

A Global Citizen (November/December 2006)

Editorial Focus: Students are enriched by differences and united by understanding when they can investigate problems and find solutions through interdependence and cooperation.

What does it mean to be a global citizen as well as a citizen of a particular country? How do we teach such concepts as interdependence, global cooperation, empathy, tolerance, and cross-cultural understanding, and how is learning measured? What are the controversies in global education? What can we learn from some of the best programs or models? What roles and programs have school librarians initiated or implemented to develop global values among their students?

classroom English language arts goals and the library's elementary-level research and social responsibility goals.

The school librarian's role: The school librarian develops a symbiotic partnership in which both sets of partners recognize that "each has something the other lacks or has little of but would benefit from getting . . . [and a] commitment to ensuring that the other party gains what it seeks from the partnership" (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad 2004, 157).

How would you revise this final snapshot to teach equity and justice?

If these snapshots tell us anything, they confirm that we are limited only by our own imaginations and the inspiration of others. What role do you take in civic and social justice education? E-mail our new associate editor for the KQWeb, Gayle Bogel <gbogel@gmail.com> or me <kq@abilock.net> with comments and descriptions of curricula, activities, or projects to be added to *Knowledge Quest's* "Social Responsibility" Web page. Or consider submitting an idea for our November/December 2006 issue *A Global Citizen*, another aspect of social responsibility. ●

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