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Engaging Students and Teaching Life Skills through Community Collaboration

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Cover Page Footnote

Mr. Roger Hill and Mr. Nicholas Hill, for their enthusiastic engagement in my classroom and their immeasurable positive impact on my students and myself. Steven C. Stein, for his unwavering support and unconditional love.

PRACTICE

Engaging Students and Teaching Life Skills Through Community Collaboration

Kim Stein

Sometimes, no matter how much teachers scaffold and painstakingly connect their content to the real world, they still fail to engage students. I started my twelfth year as a teacher with dozens of new ideas to engage students and to make older texts interesting, and to create bonds among the students to foster a culture of learning. However, my students had different ideas about what is engaging, and grew bored soon after the start of the school year. The reading materials included in the opening unit of Bridgeport High School's curriculum resource, Savvas myPerspectives *American Literature* (2015), consist of United States government documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble and Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution, and other writings that were composed over 200 years ago. I planned activities to demonstrate how these documents function in our world: I incorporated poetry by Langston Hughes and clips of the television series *The West Wing*. I designed an activity in which students compared the United States Constitution to other nations' constitutions to illustrate similarities and differences between values around the world and through time, and to help students develop the skills of writing from sources and integrating multiple sources of information. To me, these activities were engaging. I thought that students would be curious about the texts and engage in reading and writing to satisfy their wonderings.

Instead, the students could not connect with the stories told by these documents, even though I worked to bring the content out of the textbook and demonstrate how their daily lives are impacted by the ideals established in the texts. It was obvious to me that the students would not learn the skills necessary to meet content standards, succeed on assessments, or navigate the world beyond high school unless I tailored my instruction to their definition of engagement. This article chronicles my quest to engage my students, which led me outside of my classroom and into the community. It is my hope

that other educators might find ideas here which aid them in engaging their students and discovering hidden gems in their communities.

My first step to adapting my lessons was to incorporate a novel—or, as my students requested, “an actual story”—to illustrate the importance of learning about old documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America. I chose *Animal Farm*, a satirical novella by George Orwell which was first published in 1945, because it was recommended by Savvas to complement the textbook, it was available in my school's book depot, and I had previously developed what I thought were engaging activities to accompany the text. I thought using the novella to draw parallels to the historical documents would be more engaging for the students. Although written to satirize the Russian Revolution and subsequent Communist regime in Russia and its satellites, the events of the opening chapters of *Animal Farm* mirror the political culture which led to the American Revolution and the formation of American democracy. Additionally, I planned to use the novella to demonstrate how one concept, in this case, self-determination or freedom, can lead to different outcomes depending upon context and leadership. The characters and Orwell's writing style also added elements of levity which were missing from other course readings. The students disagreed; to them, *Animal Farm* was ancient and ridiculous.

Community Connections to Beat the Boredom and Build Relationships

While I was considering how to better engage my students, Bridgeport High School Principal Flinnoia Hall III asked me to consider allowing the Hill brothers from the Youth First Program of Saginaw to join my classroom twice per week. Youth First is directed by Dr. Samona Perry and is

affiliated with the Saginaw Community Foundation. Its purpose is to reinforce foundational skills learned in the classroom in fun and creative ways. Mr. Nicholas Hill is a motivational speaker, fashion designer, investor, respected local musician, and a father to four children. His older brother, Mr. Roger Hill, is an independent contractor for a variety of services, including audio and visual recording, maintenance, insurance, and cryptocurrency. He is also a musician and a father to seven children. The Hill brothers became involved in the Youth First program through Dr. Perry. They relish opportunities to teach leadership skills, life skills, and emotional intelligence to students who come from similar cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic environments to themselves. For Nicholas Hill, the most important aspect of his work with Bridgeport High School is connecting with the students. He relishes moments when he sees the “fruit of planting the right word of inspiration in a developing child’s life.” For Roger Hill, working with Bridgeport students is “organic;” he enjoys teaching students skills that “enhance their educational experiences and social competencies” and which could be used to support their hobbies or future careers.

I welcomed the Hill brothers into my classroom and assigned them some homework: reading *Animal Farm*. Together, we decided to focus on one aspect of the novella to bring into the real world: the debates conducted by the pigs which were centered around policies that would impact all members of the farm. This decision was made because my students were very vocal in class—though not about course content—and because the Hill brothers’ skills in teaching students to speak were unparalleled. We thought that organizing a debate would capitalize on the students’ proclivities for socialization while teaching them the skills of the writing process and argumentation. Additionally, participating in a debate would aid the students in drawing connections between the United States’ founding documents and *Animal Farm* while extending their learning from reading and writing into the realm of speaking and listening.

Before diving head-first into the debate assignment, the Hill brothers took time to bond with the students. They organized class discussions about high-interest topics, such as basketball and social media influencers, and related them to *Animal Farm*. While I bonded with the students in the opening weeks of the school year and worked consistently to maintain those relationships, I was not able to enter the students’ worlds the way the Hill brothers were. Most of my students are African American like the Hill brothers, and because the Hill

brothers grew up in a community which is analogous to that of my students, they share experiences and perspectives of the world that are different from my own experiences as a white teacher who grew up outside of this community. I felt like my passion and intentionality for the course were not enough, and I wondered if my students understood how much I cared about them and their learning.

Refining the Pedagogy: Connecting Course Content to the Students’ Lives

My primary goal in implementing the debate project was to increase student engagement. If I could entice the students to show interest in course content, they would more readily gain needed skills. Kagan and Kagan (2017) contend that engaging students depends upon maintaining a balance between novelty and predictability in the classroom (p. 2.12). Predictability ensures that students feel comfortable and safe to take risks, while novelty provides students with cognitive stimulation. In my classroom, predictability originates from the three days of lessons each week that consisted of using a variety of literacy strategies

to access the text of *Animal Farm*, and from the Hill brothers’ regular presence in my classroom. The novelty springs from the way the Hill brothers con-

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connected course content to the students’ lives and from the debate project itself. Incorporating novelty alongside predictability created balance in my classroom, which helped to increase student engagement.

I also considered another idea from Kagan and Kagan (2017) when designing the debate project: the importance of balanced student groups. Their definition of balanced is twofold: it refers to ensuring that each group contains students with a range of strengths and to ensuring that each student in the group plays a specific, important role so the workload is fair. To this end, I structured the students’ teams so the members’ skill sets complemented each other, which meant I sometimes assigned a student against their preferred stance. I also created roles such as organizer, wordsmith, secret agent (responsible for predicting and countering the opposing teams’ arguments), and climate manager. All students were respon-

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sible for research and argument formulation.

Further, students engage with course content more readily if they are granted a measure of control over their learning. This concept is supported by John Dewey (1902), who asserted that students flourish when they are active participants in their own learning. With this in mind, the Hill brothers and I facilitated a class discussion to allow students to generate ideas for debate topics. Students posed a plethora of ideas, from better selections of elective classes to what to do with unused public land. The classes ultimately voted to debate the pros and cons of an open-campus lunch policy. Many students expressed that they were “excited to talk about good stuff for once.” Such eagerness would not have surfaced without giving students agency over their learning.

Additionally, the debate project aligns with Dr. Ghodly Muhammad’s (2020) historically and culturally responsive framework for literacy. She contends that knowledge is “developed in a socially constructed environment,” therefore, educators should create “highly collaborative” experiences wherein students “share knowledge gained from acts of literacy” (p. 26). In other words, learning is social and should be shared. The debate project provided students with highly collaborative experiences which allowed them to share their learning with others on their teams. Muhammad (2023) further asserts that students do not absorb skills when they are taught out of context, or in the absence of any link to the real world. The debate provided a context within which students could learn the skills of argumentation and apply the democratic principles presented in *Animal Farm* and the United States founding documents.

While open-campus lunch is not a topic in *Animal Farm* or in the textbook, debate—regardless of the topic—is a tool

to build connections between the founding documents, the novel, and the students’ interests. The concepts of free speech and expression could be explored, as could the idea of balancing the rights of all parties in a democratic system. Additionally, the research, planning, reasoning, and writing required to execute a debate encouraged the development of academic and real-world skills as articulated in the Common Core

State Standards (11-12.W.1a-e; 11-12.W.4-5; 11-12.W.7). The fact that this project seemed, to students, to be remote from ordinary classroom work functioned to increase their engagement; therefore, this project was well worth the amount of work required.

The Students Engage!

Students in my classes supported and opposed open-campus lunch policies for a variety of reasons. Some students, like E’Mari, wanted to learn more about how to obtain an open-campus lunch policy because they do not like the school’s lunch options. Other students, like Kevin, were concerned that the cafeteria food did not accommodate students’ dietary needs. Kevin cited his own vegan diet—and how the cafeteria staff

treated him when he requested accommodation—as well as students who are Muslim or Jewish and cannot eat food that is prepared alongside pork products due to the risk of cross-contamination.

Other students opposed an open-campus lunch policy for a variety of reasons. Diana worried about students’ safety off campus, citing that the school would be liable if students were injured by moving vehicles. Jennae and Ray were concerned that some students might not behave responsibly in nearby restaurants if campus was opened, which could result in all students being banned from the establishments. Rah’Nae wondered what could happen to the school’s nutrition funding if too many students chose to eat off-campus, and how this might impact students who depend on school meals.

The student teams worked collaboratively to research

Class Debate Prep-Worksheet

Use this worksheet as a model from which to prepare your debate. Attach your article or research to this worksheet and bring it to class, either in paper or electronic form.

1. Write your resolution. In just a few words that you can write on the board to summarize the issue and your position, state your topic. (Example: “Resolved: the legal driving age in Michigan should be raised to 21 years.”)
2. What is the position your team will be taking on the topic and how will you support it?
3. Give the name and date of the sources from which you found your information. (Attach copy or notes.)
4. Briefly list several facts that your sources provide regarding your stance.
5. Who are the major stakeholders in the issue of open-campus lunch?
6. Place the issue into context. How are students currently affected by closed-campus policies? How might students be impacted by open-campus policies? How are other parties, such as teachers, administrators, and parents, impacted, or how would they be impacted?
7. Are there cultural, religious, or other social impacts of the issue? Explain.
8. What arguments, feelings, ideas, or information can you use to SUPPORT your position?
9. What are the arguments AGAINST your position and how will you refute them?

other Michigan schools that have open-campus lunch policies, state legislation about school nutrition and its funding, and the history of open-campus policies at Bridgeport High School. The Hill brothers and I also guided the students to consider the true audience for their arguments: the Bridgeport-Spaulding Community School District Board of Education, Superintendent Mark Whelton, and high school administrators Principal Flinnoia Hall III and Assistant Principal Andrew Betka. The students decided there was a need to research the school board members and the committees they participate in, such as finance or buildings and grounds, to anticipate which arguments might be most effectively tailored to specific stakeholders.

For the next six weeks, I taught classes using my typical structure—moving through the novel and providing literacy instruction based on students’ needs—for three days per week and incorporated the Hill brothers into my lessons for the remaining two days. Sometimes they simply joined us in reading and discussing *Animal Farm*; sometimes they led the classes to teach debate structure and the interpersonal skills necessary for civil discourse. The students spent a total of twelve class periods preparing and rehearsing their arguments, planning counterarguments, and revising their opening and closing statements for maximum impact. Nick Hill worked with the groups arguing in favor of open-campus lunch, while Roger Hill coached the groups arguing against open-campus lunch. I floated between the two groups to answer questions, assist groups in shoring up their arguments, and ensure the students met the assignment requirements.

To stage the live debate, the Hill brothers and I utilized Bridgeport High School’s state-of-the-art green room. This room is the size of a small classroom and is equipped with a green-screen area, a podcast-style set-up with a conference table, comfortable and “important-looking” chairs (according to the students), four table-top microphones, several wired microphones, an electronic keyboard, a hand-held video camera, four mounted video cameras, a control station, and the same sound board Dr. Dre uses. The Hill brothers were instrumental in creating this space.

The students decided that they wanted a real audience for

their debates. School Board President Robert L. Lange, who was first elected to the board in 1993, requested to attend the debates and the students gladly invited him. Invitations were also issued to Superintendent Whelton, Principal Hall, Assistant Principal Betka, and any teacher on their preparation period who wished to attend. Invitations could not be issued to parents or students outside of my classes due to the small size of the green room.

The Great Debaters

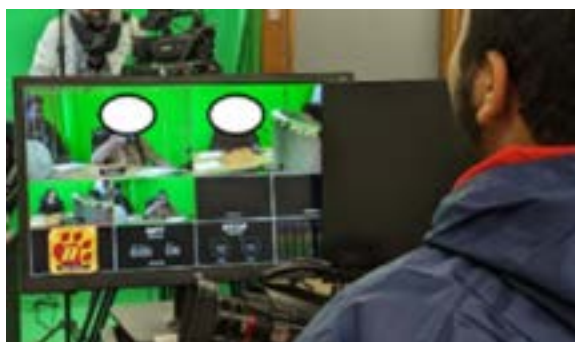
The live debate took place on Friday, January 13, 2023. Board President Lange, Superintendent Whelton, Principal Hall, and Assistant Principal Betka were in attendance, as were special education teachers Lindsay Diaz and Mary Weiss, and Spanish teacher Marie Anderson. The guests were seated at a special table and provided with feedback forms. The Hill brothers and I served as moderators.

Each student played a specific role during each debate. Six students were seated around the conference table to present their team’s arguments. Six more students were seated near the front, facing the conference table with a stand microphone, to offer support to the presenters and to ask questions. Jacoby learned how to operate the control panel, so he assumed leadership of the audio effects and camera angles. The remainder of the students made up the “cheering section” for their teams; these students contributed significant research and planning to their teams, but did not feel comfortable speaking publicly. At any time, students from the cheering section could switch places with those seated at the table or in the support section.

Students were also allowed to whisper their input to the support section or a moderator.

To begin the debate, the presenters introduced themselves and stated their position on the topic of open-campus lunch policy. Then, each team made strong opening arguments and defined what constituted an open-campus lunch policy:

“We believe that open-campus lunch is a privilege which can be earned by eleventh and twelfth grade students who are passing all of their classes, have no discipline referrals, and have been absent fewer than 5 times per semester,” declared Rah’Nae in the opening statement for



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the pro side of the debate.

“We believe that the risks associated with an open-campus lunch policy far outweigh the possible benefits,” announced Tomas in the opening statement for the con side of the debate. “Kids could get injured on their way to and from local restaurants, which is a liability for the school. Also, an open-campus policy would be unfair to kids who can’t afford to purchase fast food, and the school could lose part of its nutrition funding if too few students eat school lunch, which is bad for everyone in the long run.”

After introductions and opening statements, there was a coin toss to decide which team would speak first. Mr. Nicholas Hill announced that the opening topic would be safety. The con team, who won the coin toss, had two minutes to present their arguments and commentary as it pertained to safety. The pro team then had one minute to present counterarguments, and students in the support gallery and cheering sections were allowed to ask questions.

The con team was given one minute to respond to the pro team’s counterarguments. The adult guests were permitted to ask questions freely. I interjected as needed to clarify points

The students learned how to respond to opposing viewpoints thoughtfully and respectfully, and how to speak confidently in front of an audience.

and redirect the conversation when it occasionally strayed. Once all questions about the teams’ safety arguments had been posed and answered, Mr. Roger Hill moved the teams to the next topic. The debate continued in this fashion until time ran out.

While presenting their arguments about the potential unfairness of an open-campus lunch policy, the con side faltered. Moving synchronously, Jennae, Tyra, Alexandria, and Diana rose to their feet, grabbed their chairs, and moved themselves to the support gallery to bolster their team’s arguments. The girls, who were previously too shy to speak publicly, jumped into the debate to rescue their floundering teammates. Even Bernadette, who usually refused to engage in class at all, patted me on the arm and whispered an idea to share with the pro

side: crossing guards to ensure students’ safety while crossing Dixie Highway. I obtained Bernadette’s permission to share her statement with the group. When the con side countered that hiring a crossing guard would be costly, Bernadette stood up and used her own voice to assert that volunteers could be recruited because parents and grandparents who want to be more involved with the school might be willing to help with off-campus supervision during the lunch periods. These examples demonstrate elevated levels of engagement and civility among the students.

A bit later, Connor, who was previously vocal about his boredom, stepped from the cheering section to the support section microphone with “a scenario for the pro side: Pretend you just hosted a family reunion at your house. People make a huge mess. There are food wrappers all over the yard and drink bottles everywhere. Inside the house is a mess, too. The furniture’s all out of order and the bathroom is destroyed. The sink is full of dishes and there are pop cans on every surface. Now, imagine

it’s your job to clean it all up in the next 15 minutes.” Connor paused at the horrified looks on the faces of the pro side presenters. “That’s what it’ll be like for the restaurant workers who have to clean up after the students before the next wave of customers.”

The pro side referred to their opening statement that open campus would be a privilege, and extended their argument by asserting that clear expectations would be set before allowing students this privilege, as would consequences for failing to meet those expectations. At this point, the dismissal bell sounded, but the students remained in the green room to give their closing statements and shake hands with their guests.

As the students departed, a student at the back of the room raised his hand. Gregor is a twelfth grader who took English 11 with me last year. He—along with his fellow seniors, Yvette and Jada—snuck into the room to watch the debates. He informed the panel of guests that he is a senior who took my class last year and, “I want y’all to know she’s a great teacher, but we [last year’s classes] didn’t get to do anything like this. I want to know why. I would have paid attention better if I could have had opportunities like this.” Gregor’s actions (skipping class to attend a different class rather than skipping class



to do something nefarious) and statement indicate the impact of Bridgeport High School's partnership with the Youth First program and of implementing high-interest projects.

The Positive Outcomes of Community Collaboration

In debriefing with the guests after the debate, the Hill brothers and I found the overall impressions of the students' performances were positive. Assistant Principal Andrew Betka noted the students remained in class after the dismissal bell due to their commitment to finishing the debate properly and their high level of engagement in class. Superintendent Whelton stated that he "asked for engagement, and this is frickin' engagement! Their arguments were well thought out and I think every kid was involved in some way, even if they weren't on a mic."

Board President Robert Lange was similarly impressed. He stated that he was "shocked at how strict [the students] wanted to make the open-campus policy" and that it was obvious the students put a lot of effort into the project. The students' performance and willingness to engage made an impact on Mr. Lange: Six months after the debates, Mr. Lange mentioned that the conversations he had with my students after the debate were some of the most insightful he has experienced in his time on the school board.

While he is not inclined to enact an open-campus lunch policy at Bridgeport High School due to safety concerns, it was obvious to Mr. Lange that the high school "has a food service problem" which he was motivated to solve. Mr. Whelton committed to improving the quality of food and food service at Bridgeport High School.

The students were excited about their performance and proud of the work they did to prepare for it. Rah'Nae was pleasantly surprised that so many adults attended the debate and engaged with the class. Ad-die noted that she could tell the adults were listening because they asked questions. Several students, including Ray, expressed that Mr. Lange's attendance at the debate humanized the school board; the students felt that they could engage with Mr. Lange because they saw he is "just a regular person." Overall, the debate demonstrated the value of inviting community organizations to participate in Bridgeport High School.



Instructional Outcomes

The involvement of the Youth First program in my English 11 classroom—and Nicholas and Roger Hill in particular—brought the students' learning out of books and into the real world. The students learned how to respond to opposing viewpoints thoughtfully and respectfully, and how to speak confidently in front of an audience. These interpersonal skills spilled over into their interactions with each other in the classroom. I noted higher levels of civility among the students in my classroom than before the integration of the Youth First program. This might be attributed to increased interest in class activities and confidence to speak up without fearing ridicule. This outcome is consistent with McAvoy et al.'s (2020) findings in classrooms which implemented the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework.

Even though they still considered *Animal Farm* to be ancient, the students developed a deeper understanding of the democratic principles presented in the novella and in the United States founding documents. On their summative assessment of this unit, the students proficiently explained the parallels between the grievances presented in the Declaration of Independence and the plot points in *Animal Farm*, and then demonstrated the causal relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. On my quarterly class feedback form, many students reported that participation in the debate demonstrated how the democratic principles function in the real world; they asserted they could use the skills they gained by engaging in the debate to perform well in interviews, interact with local agencies or governing bodies, or advocate for themselves in a variety of situations. By engaging in the debate, the students met the Common Core State Standards for writing arguments, reading informational text, reading literary text, and speaking and listening. Most importantly, my students learned how to effectively use their voices to advocate for change in their world.

Most importantly, my students learned how to effectively use their voices to advocate for change in their world.

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Kim Stein is in her thirteenth year of teaching. She has taught in alternative education, middle school, high school, and collegiate settings. She is also a doctoral student at Oakland University. Kim lives in mid-Michigan with her husband, two children, three dogs, and four cats.



Beatriz D., 4th Grade



Ari Grossman, 4th Grade



Gabe K., 4th Grade