

Redefining Civics Education Through Problem Posing

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In December 2001, LaGuardia's Center for Immigrant Education and Training (CIET) opened its doors to low-income immigrant adults in need of free education in English for Specific Purposes. Housed in the Division of Adult and Continuing Education and the brainchild of its director, Suma Kurien, CIET's programs offer students the opportunity to study English in combination with civics, family literacy, or vocational themes. I joined CIET the following spring, in April 2002, at the start of its English and Civics program, and began my transformation into an ESOL/Civics teacher. In Barcelona, I had taught English grammar; in Iowa, I had taught poetry. At one point, I tutored immigrants who worked in one of Iowa's meat-packing cooperatives. What would make teaching a civics class different from these experiences?

For many of us, "civics" relates to instruction in the obligations of citizenship, but the English and Civics Program does not focus exclusively upon preparation for the citizenship exam. In fact, many students who come to us are already naturalized citizens, while others are not yet eligible for citizenship because of residency and other requirements. Funded by a three-year federal grant under the Workforce Investment Act, our program has the advantage of offering free classes in English to any immigrant of eighteen or older. As a result, the civics program is our most crowded, with a waiting list of up to 2000 students, some of whom must wait for more than a year to enter our classes.

Once admitted, students work towards four main objectives, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education English and Civics initiative. The first of these is to improve speaking and listening skills as measured by scores on a standardized oral test. A second goal is to obtain citizenship skills, and a third is to use their English to get involved in community activities. A final task is to identify and achieve their goals. Here success is measured by whether learners obtain new jobs or enter training, retain or

improve their jobs, or involve themselves in the education of their children. Our staff tracks all of this information through interviews with individual students both before and up to nine months after they exit our program.

Faculty in the program must be prepared to address these goals in each of our classes. Teachers making a transition into English and Civics must explore concepts of "citizenship skills" and "community activities" and how to integrate these skills into theme-based classes.

From the Fall of 2002 to Spring of 2003, I attended the seminar "Participatory Approaches to Civics Education" at the Literacy Assistance Center. In the LAC workshop, we examined and critiqued the long and diverse history of civics education in the U.S., as outlined in part by Lynda Terrill in her article "Civics Education for Adult Language Learners." For me, the most powerful aspect of the seminar was its introduction to the problem-posing approach in civics education based on the writing of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. His approach is now central to my classroom, where it has been applied to a variety of activities, always with success.

Freirean problem posing revolves around a set of questions directed toward real life situations familiar to learners. In the LAC workshop, we started with samples of real-world artifacts that students examine, including pictures cut from newspapers, bar graphs, poems, news articles, or dialogues. Five steps of problem posing structured our discussion:

- What do you see?
- What problem do you see?
- What do you think are some causes of this problem?
- Does this problem relate to your life?
- What are some possible solutions for this problem?

The first time I used this technique in class, groups of students examined six different writ-

ings by Native Americans as part of a unit on the origins of Thanksgiving. Although I don't always break students into groups by level, in this case I gave each group a reading that best corresponded to their skill level. For example, students with better reading skills worked on Joy Harjo's long poem "She Had Some Horses." Students with more limited reading skills worked on shorter pieces, for example, an excerpt of a speech made by a member of the Wampanoag tribe on the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrims' arrival in America.

One advantage of this approach is student exposure to authentic texts and practice in reading real-world material meant for native speakers, a skill important to students who must confront challenging second language texts in their daily lives, in job applications, for example, or in the forms they need to fill out in the doctor's office. For me, a second advantage of this technique is that it imparted to the activity a sense of both purpose and mystery. Because each group was responsible for presenting their artifacts to the other class groups, their work had purpose. And because each group had a different artifact about the same problem, their summaries were always new and surprising to their classmates.

The activity also presented challenges. How well the students summarize a problem, for example, could affect the relevance of the other questions. I sometimes find I have to intervene to offer possible summaries of the problem – or, in the case of a poem, "problem" was another way to say "theme." In the problem-posing discussion of Native American poetry, some students connected the loss of land to their own lives as immigrants, while others remained intimidated by the new vocabulary and perhaps were reluctant to address issues in their own words.

I later began integrating problem posing into group readings of student-selected news articles, an activity that was immediately well received and helped me to see more clearly the capacity of problem posing to activate students' opinions. For the students, a three-hour class was suddenly not long enough to discuss their ideas. Class discussions and presentations

became engaging and heated, sometimes continuing during break in students' native languages. This activity helped me to recognize that these learners were already issue-fluent. Most are listening to and reading about current events in their native languages and simply lack the English necessary to explain them. Many students, intrigued by learning about these events in English, become active readers, checking and verifying their impressions of a text with each other. The problem-posing task does not ask them to focus on what they don't know – the meaning of new words – but on what they see and believe they know – the problems in their community and possible solutions.

Through problem posing, I became a listener and a guide; students began to lead the classes. Sharing individual identity and values in a language that was not their own, they recreated the complex dynamics of group communication. I observed that problem posing granted these learners autonomy and the confidence to attempt new grammar and vocabulary, and I remembered my struggles sitting at dinner in Barcelona trying to speak with my friend's family. In spite of an excellent education in Spanish, with extensive grammar practice and reading of literature, my fluency did not really develop until I was invited to my friend's table. Problem posing in English and Civics class lets me recreate that kind of "dinner table" sharing of ideas: ongoing, personal, and unpredictable.

Over time, students have expressed pleasure in problem posing, perhaps because Freire's approach prevents staleness and keeps classes varied: identical materials prompt students to identify different problems and different solutions. As a result, my teaching has remained fresh and meaningful, and problem posing has given me the courage to allow for the unexpected in my classroom. Additionally, I have learned problem posing allows me to effectively address many different kinds of materials, and I have used the approach to discuss events in short stories, real events in students' lives, the purpose of international aid organizations, and major issues in eras of U.S. history. Students

also show their appreciation for the camaraderie and collaborative nature of our classes; for my part, not knowing what problems students will discover teaches me to be open to what is important to them.

Upon leaving class, almost all of my students say they have gained greater confidence in speaking. Clearly, three months in a classroom is not enough to change the language habits developed over years of struggle to live and learn in the United States. And because of family, work, and health demands, many have to abandon their studies. Yet over the last three years, our targets for the English and Civics program have consistently met or far exceeded state standards. By addressing problems and locating the resources that can improve their lives, students put citizenship skills into practice. They learn to use the Internet to find the city agencies that can help them resolve pressing issues, and the Center has designed a resource manual for questions related to health, immigration, and education. Student leadership initiatives ask students to create projects that have positive effects in their communities, such as participating in rallies in support of increased adult education funding, organizing a community picnic, or serving as mentors and advisors for students just entering our program. CIET's community visitors program provides opportunities for our students to meet representatives from the New York City Human Rights Commission or the Attorney General's

WORKS CITED

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1970.

Spener, David. "The Freirean Approach to Adult Literacy Education." November 1992
<http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/FREIREQA.html>.

Terrill, Lynda. "Civics Education for Adult Language Learners." November 2000
<http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/civics.html>.

RESOURCES

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition <http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/elcivics.html>.

Center for Immigrant Education and Training <<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/ciet/>>.

CUNY Adult Literacy/GED Program <<http://www.literacy.cuny.edu/>>.

Literacy Assistance Center <<http://www.lacnyc.org/>>.

My website: <<http://faculty.lagcc.cuny.edu/hgardner/>>.

National Institute for Literacy <<http://www.nifl.gov/>>.

Office from whom they can learn how to report discrimination in housing or on the job.

Primarily, the problem-posing approach as conceived by Paulo Freire addresses civics education as much more than memorizing answers to the 100 fact-check questions on the current U.S. citizenship exam. Lynda Terrill categorizes it as *civics participation education*, "...instruction that has as its goal assisting learners to understand *how* and *why* to become informed participants in their communities" (italics mine). In Freire's view, the traditional methodologies of "banking education" will never create informed participants. Rather, Freire eloquently advocates for "the quest for mutual humanization":

But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them. (56)

For Freire, the humanist classroom is modeled on partnership, trust, critical thinking, creativity, and quest. Its outcomes are best measured not in standardized test results but through personal transformation and, ultimately, the impact on our community.