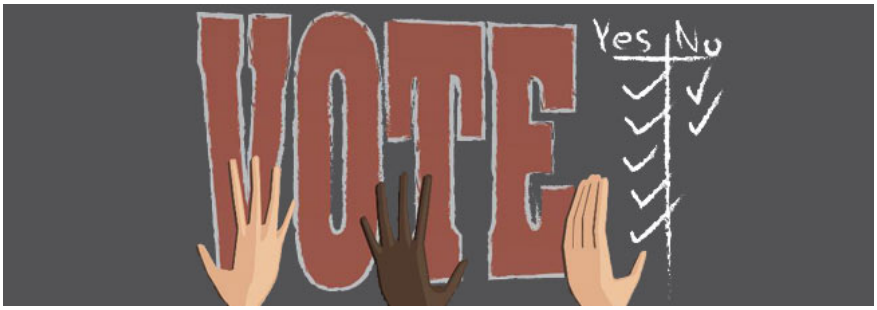
A Campaign Simulation for Authentic Learning

Feature



by David Olson with Robin Amado, August 2016

The school library is, at its best, an incubator of democratic values and a haven for inquiry. At James Madison Memorial High School in Madison, Wisconsin, where I teach social studies, our students utilize library resources, with the support of school librarians, in nearly all courses. Starting as first semester freshmen, our students approach the issues of immigration and migration by exploring their own families' journeys. Through modeling, think-alouds, and mini-lessons from the librarians, students use Ancestry.com (purchased by our library) to find primary resources relating to their families, learn proper citation and database search techniques, and connect their personal stories to broader themes using the ABC-CLIO *American History* database and a curated collection of print materials. Eleventh grade students use *Biography in Context* and *Gale Virtual Reference Library* to create fictional universities centered on the social and political protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. My upper-level students visit the library several times during the course of the semester to conduct research from books and databases, play iCivics games, explore webquests, and collaborate in small groups. All of these lessons are planned and instructed in collaboration with the school librarian.

A few years ago, when my department began offering AP U.S. Government and Politics, I was faced with a conundrum. In a second semester AP course in a state where school doesn't end until June, what do I do with the last three weeks of class? I found my answer with my school librarian, Robin Amado, who helped me craft a campaign simulation using library resources. In each class, my students divided into campaign teams to run for a U.S. Senate seat. Campaigns featured a candidate, campaign manager, website team, advertising team, social media team, and policy wonks (specialists in policy details). The project allows students to simulate the election process and put into practice everything they've learned about the political world.

The Process

I had plenty of ideas about what students needed to show. What I needed were resources to help students attain these objectives: build a website, create campaign commercials, establish a social media presence, develop clear policy statements, and collaborate to create a cohesive campaign message across all platforms. The school library was the only place I could turn to achieve this. My students needed a space to collaborate, access to technology and help with using tech tools, and access to print and digital resources. Robin taught mini-lessons in accessing databases to inform policy statements, website creation tools, and video-editing for campaign commercials. Instructional collaboration with her allowed me to teach the ad teams about rhetorical techniques while policy teams conducted research and crafted policy statements, and the candidate and campaign manager to practiced for their press conference.

The simulation helped my students understand advanced election strategy and envision themselves in the political sphere. They had to hone their political messages, create campaign finance reports, and learn how to allocate resources amongst statewide television markets.

The simulation lasted three weeks with several checkpoints along the way. By the end of the first week, candidates held a press conference where they introduced themselves and laid out their positions. At this point, the websites were up and running and the biographical campaign ad was due. At the press conference, attendees, both friend and foe, asked questions (and recorded for use later in attack ads). In the second week, teams had to report on fundraising using a combination of Facebook and Twitter likes and follows, and teams released attack and issue ads. The candidate debate has been a highlight in the project. Teams practice creating and answering questions, trying to guess what their fearless moderator/teacher will ask them. The debate often draws students who are so interested in a mock election, they beg their teachers to give them passes from other classes.

The Product

The campaign simulation wraps up with each team presenting their campaign materials and strategy to a group of outside analysts. Our evaluation panels thus far have

included political science professors, school administrators, and state legislative aides. They view all of the materials and vote for a winner.

What has impressed me most is the quality of my students' work and the tenacity with which second semester juniors and seniors (mere days from graduation) approach an entirely "fake" project. It is impressive to watch students explore creative ways to bring a political message to their friends and to the public. Students create good-natured attack ads and find ways to outflank their competition intellectually and rhetorically. Because our library has the resources necessary for the project, namely database subscriptions, computers, and video-editing software, access is not a barrier. This isn't a project I would be able to do without the availability of these resources.

The Lessons

The two key lessons that Robin and I took away from this project revolved around resources and hardware. About a week into the first simulation, once websites had been launched and campaigns were taking shape, it was clear that campaign teams still lacked policy knowledge. The position statements seemed poorly researched and even less clear than you would find in a real campaign—and that bar is pretty low. I wanted my students to develop positions supported by evidence and scholarly social, political, and economic research. Robin and I had to do some re-teaching of research skills. I brought the political expertise as the content teacher, and Robin brought the skills of a trained researcher, teaching the process and strategies for research. We focused on database search techniques and discerning and citing high quality sources, building on skills students learned in previous social studies classes.

The second big challenge was finding a way to help advertising teams create four broadcast-quality commercials in three weeks—each with a different focus, but maintaining the same feel and message. The library had purchased a handful of Flip Video Cameras in previous years. They are portable, user-friendly, and have a simple interface to transfer video to a computer for editing. The issue was the value and risk associated with lending the cameras out. To solve this problem, the library developed a check-out system for students that included a permission slip. This enabled ad teams to shoot video where and when they pleased. The result was an impressive array of location shots, testimonials from "voters," and cinematography that went far beyond a cell-phone video shot in the hallway. The willingness of librarians to find a way to work around the risks and support students' creative energy was amazing.

Democracy in Action

For my students, the library and librarians are not merely a resource to type up a paper, learn a citation style, or check out a book. The library is a place where they can engage with real problems and issues. Students find the spot where the battles of history meet the complexity of the present. As a social studies teacher, my job is to prepare students to be productive citizens who advance public discourse and address the needs of their communities. The skills taught by school librarians—rigorous research, evaluation of sources, and technological application—set students on the course to be first-class citizens, even if they lost the fake election.

MLA CITATION

Olson, David, with Robin Amado. "A Campaign Simulation for Authentic Learning." *School Library Connection*, August 2016, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2029157.

https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2029157?topicCenterId=2252404

Entry ID: 2029157

COPYRIGHT 2026 ABC-CLIO, LLC