

## **IN SUPPORT OF CIVIC LEARNING: CITIZEN U LESSONS & THE TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES CIVICS EDUCATOR MICRO-CREDENTIAL PROGRAM**

**By Donna Kiel and Sheila Smith**

Teachers play a pivotal role in helping students develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for responsible and active citizenship. Teachers need support in the endeavor to advance civic education. Under a Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) grant from the Library of Congress, TPS Consortium member Barat Education Foundation (BEF) partnered with Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF) and the Office of Innovative Professional Learning (OIPL) within the College of Education at DePaul University to provide teachers with ready-made resources that easily integrate civics across grades and disciplines. These Citizen U lessons were supplemented with the TPS Civics Educator Micro-Credential Program, an innovative model of professional development that focused on using primary sources from the Library of Congress in inquiry-driven instruction that highlights civics.

The goal of the Citizen U lessons is to provide teachers with immediate access to high-quality curricular materials that integrate civics within the core disciplines of ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies in elementary, middle, and high school grades. Once lessons were drafted, the BEF partnership engaged teachers in a lesson pilot to implement the lessons with and without teacher training. Data from the pilot was used to revise and refine the lessons and informed the BEF partnership about the value of high-quality, free teaching resources, particularly in the area of civics, as well as the potential impact of providing more comprehensive professional development using primary sources in inquiry-based instruction with a civics focus.

BEF drew on the successful experiences DePaul University had in creating online micro-credential courses. Micro-credentialing offers an innovative approach to professional learning that is competency-based and provides teachers practical application of learning within their current teaching role. Teachers then are provided feedback from experts in the field and eventually earn recognition for mastery in the form of a

digital badge.

BEF and DePaul's OIPL engaged teachers in a pilot of the micro-credential to assist in the further development of course content and design, as well as to inform how this unique type of professional learning affected teacher practices within civics-focused, inquiry-based instruction using primary sources from the Library of Congress. While the pilot is ongoing, having been extended at teacher request, preliminary survey data has revealed the positive impact on teacher civic mindset and openness and readiness to use Library of Congress primary sources in ways that represent best practices in inquiry learning.

### **TEACHERS AND CIVIC EDUCATION**

Historically, teachers have been the driving force for providing successive generations of students with the habits and mindsets to become responsible citizens in a democracy (Youniss, 2011). According to Youniss (2011), "schools are not the only source of [civic] renewal, but they are essential because they cultivate the next generation of citizens and civic leaders on whom sustaining democracy depends" (p. 98). Teachers in every discipline play an essential role in preparing students to become citizens. However, educators are often placed in positions that lack the resources, time, and policy needed to integrate civic education into the curriculum effectively.

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation resulted in the significant removal of social studies and civic education from the curriculum as resources were shifted to focus on literacy and mathematics education (Au, 2007; McMurrer, 2007). For more than a decade, curriculum mandates related to NCLB diminished student access to social studies and civics content in elementary, middle, and high schools across the country. A particularly important consideration is the impact NCLB had on younger

teachers, as many of these teachers may have had little exposure to social studies and little to no exposure to civics.

Often, teachers are not fully equipped to teach social studies or civics, given their own K-12 experience. Also, standards and mandates continue to shift the focus of K-12 education to other content areas. The result is that teachers find themselves unprepared – even perhaps unaware of the value of integrating social studies and civics into their planning and implementation. The combination of preparation and policy has left teachers with a significant disadvantage in effectively preparing the next generation of citizens who will have the civic skills and mindsets to make informed decisions in a complex democracy (Gibson & Levine, 2003).

The need for civics education is clear (Levine, 2004). The 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress, released by the National Center for Education Statistics, attests to the gap in current civic education. Data indicate that only 23 percent of eighth-grade students scored at or above proficient in civics and only 18 percent scored at or above proficient in the knowledge of U.S. history (a scant change from 1990 data).

The impact of civic education is equally clear (Youniss, 2011). In a 2018 *Washington Monthly* digital article, Frank Islam and Ed Crego offer reasons for the unusually powerful and widespread civic activism of the students from Parkland, Florida, who survived the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018. In their research, Islam and Crego discovered that the students were among the first in the state to benefit from 2010 legislation that mandated the incorporation of civic education content into the K-12 reading language arts curriculum. In Florida, a civics course is suggested in seventh grade culminating in a comprehensive state civics test. Additionally, the Sandra Day O'Connor Civic Education Act “takes advantage of decades of effort by education researchers to figure out what does and does not work to build the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for good citizenship” (Islam & Crego, 2018).

Integrating civics throughout the curriculum is essential for students to become engaged citizens who actively participate in a democracy. Many students themselves have begun to take notice. On November 28, 2018, a group of Rhode Island public school students and their parents filed a federal lawsuit alleging that the state “failed to carry out their responsibilities under the United States Constitution to provide all

students a meaningful opportunity to obtain an education adequate to prepare them to be capable citizens” (Cook (A.C.) v. Raimondo, 2018). Although there seems to be a marked increase in civic awareness and more state legislatures are coming around to the importance of civics education, there is little consensus on how to integrate civics into the curriculum effectively and a severe lack of professional learning opportunities to help prepare teachers to do so.

## VALUE OF PRIMARY SOURCE LEARNING

According to the Library of Congress, “Primary sources are the raw materials of history—original documents and objects which were created at the time under study.” Primary sources naturally engage students in inquiry, transforming “the learning process by provoking critical thinking: questioning; making inferences; interpreting different points of view; using critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate; drawing conclusions; and pulling together disparate pieces of evidence to think conceptually” (Stripling, 2009, p.2). They give voice to people across the ages, whether they come from the distant past of 100 years ago or the recent past of the last week. When learning with primary sources, students gain opportunities to analyze authentic viewpoints from multiple perspectives, grapple with varying accounts and opinions, and flex their critical thinking skills to create their own stories to stand alongside, or in contrast to, traditional textbook narratives. These are precisely the types of skills that an informed and active electorate needs (Stripling, 2009).

The mission of the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) program is to build awareness of the Library’s educational initiatives; promote the effective educational use of the Library’s resources; and offer access to and promote sustained use of the Library’s educational resources. The Library awards grants to a variety of educational organizations, which comprise the TPS Consortium and assist in the design and delivery of the TPS program in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. BEF has been a TPS Consortium member since 2004, providing a multitude of curricular resources and professional learning opportunities over the years, including, most recently, the Citizen U lessons and the TPS Civics Educator Micro-Credential Program.

## CITIZEN U LESSON PILOT

Realizing the significant role of the teacher in the forming of active citizens of a democracy,

the Citizen U lessons were designed to assist educators in teaching with civic perspective across disciplines. Moreover, Citizen U lessons were designed to foster a wide variety of skills students will need for success in the 21st century, including collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, information literacy, communication, leadership, social responsibility and, of course, civic literacy itself. All of the lessons use primary sources from the Library of Congress to engage students in inquiry that actively develops civics knowledge, skills, and dispositions. They were developed with consideration of TPS program best practices in primary source learning, the C3 Inquiry Arc, and the six proven practices for civic learning outlined in the *Guardian of Democracy* report (Gould et al., 2009).

Each Citizen U lesson contains essential questions, key civics standards, accessible primary sources from the Library of Congress, and ready-made supporting materials, including implementation guides, teacher presentation slides, primary source analysis tools, and student handouts. These materials require implementation times ranging from 1-2 class periods. All of the lessons focus on activating and deepening inquiry through source analysis and evaluation, and then making connections and taking action. To ensure the accessibility and usability of these multidisciplinary lessons, the BEF partnership tested them with 87 teachers of varying grade levels in urban, suburban, and rural districts across the nation. A sub-cohort of teachers received some training on teaching with primary sources before lesson implementation.

Teachers were asked to select and download a lesson, teach the lesson, and complete a survey containing both quantitative and qualitative responses. Teachers were asked to report school name and location, current grades and subjects, teaching endorsements, years of teaching experience (78 reported 5+ years of experience), and class size and composition. Teachers then rated the lesson they taught from “poor” to “excellent” on nine different categories. Next, teachers were asked to report on any lesson modifications they made, implementation time, and strengths and challenges of lesson design and implementation. Teachers were also allowed to provide additional suggestions.

Insights from the open-ended responses evaluating the content and quality of the lessons are listed below and were used to revise the lesson plans:

- » Refining implementation time suggestions
- » Refining access to the primary sources from

the Library

- » Minor changes to handouts and supporting documentation

Teacher feedback on the lessons garnered from the pilot as well as the website has been largely positive. Here are highlights:

- » *Graphing Bullying Data to Create Change*: “I found [the lesson] indirectly tied to what was previously taught. It was an effective way to gauge my students’ math skills while talking about an epidemic within our classroom (bullying). This lesson allowed students to be open enough to dialogue about bullying and tying it into math.”
- » *Journalists and a Free Press*: “The lesson plan is very well designed with interactive resources for students to learn about the topics: journalist, journalism, and free press. I liked the PowerPoint® and the graphic organizer to analyze the resources. The last part of the lesson and the best part was when students became journalists and created their own newspaper.”

The data from teachers was also coded into two groups: those who participated in pre-implementation training and those who did not. Teachers without prior training indicated the need for personalized professional development and coaching. While Citizen U lesson plans and resources provided easily accessible and useful materials, teachers expressed limitations presented by the unique characteristics of their classrooms. Teachers with significant numbers of students with limited English proficiency or large class sizes requested customization of learning tools from the Library of Congress to meet these needs. While lesson plans provided primary sources for the lesson, teachers in culturally diverse settings requested additional relevant primary sources to meet the cultural profile of their students. Teachers also expressed their own need for development in civics knowledge and skills. In particular, and most significantly, teachers expressed their needs for individualized coaching to help with issues of politics and conflict that would emerge outside of Citizen U lessons.

## TPS CIVICS EDUCATOR MICRO-CREDENTIAL PILOT

To meet the needs identified by the Citizen U lesson pilot, BEF and DOIPL worked together to create a micro-credential program. The hallmark of professional learning with a micro-credential is that learning is personalized and competency-based, so the learner actively applies the

new skills gained in job-embedded contexts. Learning outcomes are then endorsed with a micro-credential digital badge. The digital badge includes a portfolio, detailing outcomes and skills and providing evidence of learning.

The TPS Civics Educator Micro-Credential program consists of three stackable, or sequential, courses: 1) TPS Civics Master Teacher; 2) TPS Civics Curriculum Design Expert; 3) TPS Civics Coaching Expert. Any teacher who completes all three courses receives an additional badge and recognition as a TPS Civics Master Teacher and Coach. Content from TPS Consortium partners, in addition to content from the Library of Congress, was integrated into the curriculum.

In total, 45 teachers from 13 school districts across the state of Illinois registered for the pilot. While urban districts made up the majority of participating schools (69%), rural (24%) and suburban (7%) schools were also represented. Grade distribution of registered teachers is listed below:

- » 20 elementary (grades K-5) teachers
- » 12 middle school (grades 6-8) teachers
- » 5 elementary/middle (grades K-8) teachers
- » 8 secondary (grades 9-12) teachers

A pre-assessment was made available for all teachers in the micro-credential pilot, who were encouraged to complete it to measure the knowledge and skills that would be taught in the course. The pre-assessment provided an avenue for faculty experts to determine the current skill level of learners and then customize the learning to match the knowledge and skills of the individual teacher. The result of the pre-assessment also informed the individual coaching the teacher would receive throughout the learning process. Teachers in the micro-credential pilot were able to engage in focus group discussions weekly, which helped gain insights on the ongoing impact of the program. At the end of each course, teachers completed surveys, which were developed in conjunction with the Educational Development Center, a TPS Consortium partner. Teachers who completed the courses, along with all associated surveys, received modest stipends in addition to course badges.

The micro-credential pilot began June 10, 2019, with some teachers completing multiple courses by July 30, 2019. Survey results indicated the following trends:

- » Redundancy in some learning experiences

- » Change of civic mindset of teachers
- » A deeper understanding of primary sources and their impact in teaching
- » Growing ease of use of Library of Congress resources
- » Growth in skill and learning associated with this customized approach to professional learning

The data from the pilot demonstrates the positive impact of professional learning through micro-credentialing. Teachers stated motivation to complete the program to earn a digital badge that acknowledges their professional competencies. Teachers also consistently relayed positive statements about the opportunities to exchange ideas with colleagues that were a vital component of the micro-credential learning plan. Once the pilot completes, additional analysis and conclusions will be available.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The importance of civic learning cannot be understated. As so aptly conveyed in the report *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, “Our commitments to civic equality, democratic accountability, public deliberation, and a political culture based on shared values all depend on widespread civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions” (Gould et al., 2009, p. 15). Teachers should not be, cannot be, left on their own to carry out this mission (Youniss & Levine, 2009). Teachers need help in guiding students to engage in public discourse, cooperate, respect the rights of others, and solve problems with people from diverse backgrounds or with different beliefs (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2009).

Providing teachers with ongoing support that acknowledges and respects the demands placed on them requires innovative thinking. Traditional methods of professional development that involve workshops delivered during the school day provide a limited solution. This type of traditional professional development requires time and space and is typically delivered to groups of teachers who may have differing needs. In contrast, micro-credentialing provides an innovative model to train teachers in using inquiry-based learning with primary sources precisely because it offers a personalized, customizable method of learning that embeds learning directly into teacher practice.

While the findings of the Citizen U lesson pilot and preliminary results of the TPS Civics Educator Micro-Credential pilot offer a promising impact for both open-source resources and micro-credentialing, we recognize that there are limitations in measuring and understanding program impact. Yet the potential of easily accessible and usable, high-quality resources, combined with the promise of micro-credentialing to support teachers in the area of multidisciplinary civics instruction, holds great promise. Given the personal nature of using primary sources in learning that supports teachers in creating competent, capable citizens, it is logical to offer teachers a personalized form of professional development to support and enhance their knowledge and skills. Moreover, teachers deserve the affirmation and acknowledgment of their enhanced professional skill sets that micro-credentialing affords.

Citizen U Lesson Plans can be accessed at <https://citizen-u.org/lesson-plan/>.

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