Civic and citizenship education
Experiences from the classroom

ANDREW WILSON

Social studies is the learning area which deals most directly with the lives of all students; it is contemporary and historical and underpins the freedom, representation and participation people have in a society now and in the future. But before this can happen across the board in classrooms, we must be clear what “civic and citizenship education ought to involve and what means are effective in developing students’ citizenship outcomes” (Bolstad, 2012, p. 32).

In this article I argue that teaching civics in an engaging and informative manner (that is, participatory and student focused) may be of benefit in broadening the participation of the next generation of citizens in the democratic process. At the very least, we can make civics fun and accessible. While teaching the identity, culture, and organisation strand in social studies is challenging, we must also teach it as if our lives depended on it. Why? I argue, civics is the most important strand of the Social Science learning area.

In this article I outline my motivations as a social-studies classroom teacher for advocating for civics and citizenship education in schools and provide an example of a Year 9 topic—Order and Chaos—at Lindisfarne College as part of a deliberate strategy to improve awareness, engagement, and empowerment of students to be active political. As United States President Roosevelt (1938) aptly declared nearly 80 years ago, “Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education”.

In designing this topic, I sought to build on the strong citizenship focus already present at Lindisfarne College. Participation in sport is compulsory, while numbers in service programmes and cultural activities are also extremely high. Within the context of the school community and experiences of pupils, the civics citizenship learning echoes the ideas of a “social contract” approach to citizenship, by encouraging students to think about how we structure our societies to live together, and in relative peace and security. My Order and Chaos civics unit is framed by two central ideas: a) understanding how order can be sustained in society to avoid chaos, and b) comparing New Zealand’s democratic system as a means of maintaining social relationships and order, to others worldwide.

Students begin by examining what is meant by the concepts order and chaos. Once conceptual understandings are established, students are encouraged to think deeply about how fortunate, and significant our democracy is at a variety of levels. Comparisons are made with contemporary and historical contexts of extreme order—North Korea, the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany—in highlighting the significance, and fortune, of our democracy.

Within the unit, learning is centred on two spectrums. This first is forms of political order (situating extreme order, democracy, and chaos/anarchy), and the second is forms of political decision-making and power (to distinguish communism from fascism and where these ideas sit alongside other ideologies of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism). To enrich learning we use a number of case studies to examine how different life would be if they lived in another context or time period, or under a different form of political order. For example, the discussion might centre on why civil liberties are non-existent in some states and debates about North Korea or how the decisions made by military dictatorships are detrimental to millions of people in African countries. Meanwhile, the Syrian refugee crisis provides a tragic example of the lengths people will take to flee or fight tyranny and illustrates the varied political responses reactions of governments in their response to being confronted with waves of refugees on their doorstep.

Closer to home, students might discuss perspectives on the provision of welfare, education, or healthcare in New Zealand in thinking about the function/role of government, and the electoral processes in which parties and their MPs are elected, or not, to Parliament; how laws are made, and whether we wish to become a republic.

Students also complete research and compare countries where forms of democracy and decision-making differ, which highlights differences to the nature of freedom, representation, and justice in the democracy of New Zealand.

I assess this unit through inquiry assessments that aim to demonstrate conceptual knowledge and are
designed to encourage participation and collaborative involvement. In the first assessment, students work in pairs to design the political order and decision-making processes in a new island nation. From the geography of the island to the resources it possesses, students decide aspects of human rights and how society develops rules, law and order according to predetermined categories (such as democratic principles, religion, media, defense, the economy). Through this process, students consider values judgments, think critically, work collaboratively, demonstrate empathy and evaluate the nature of political decision-making and order/chaos represented in the imaginary island nation.

In a second assessment, students work in groups to create a political party with a defined political platform, and then launch a targeted election campaign which culminates in a class-wide election, followed by a reflection on the political process itself. The participation in this process, while difficult to assess individually, emphasises the dynamics of collaboration and encourages students to consider different values, empathy, and perspectives. Moreover, it necessitates active responses and personal decision-making and not just passive learning about citizenship.

Framing the Order and Chaos topic to be meaningful for students was a major consideration in fostering interest in civics and enhancing political literacy. The teaching of civics must remain a democratic choice for educators. Ramming politics down the throats of our students by compulsion would, in my view, be detrimental. It is essential to discuss more about what citizenship education should entail and how to support teachers to feel confident in creatively designing courses and topics that engage students we inspire the political citizens of today and tomorrow.

Note
1 Lindisfarne College is a state integrated, decile 9 boys’ school in Hastings, New Zealand.

References


Education through Parliament

MIR ANDA THOMSON

With the ever-increasing rate of social change, we need more than ever to provide a variety of opportunities for New Zealand students to ask questions about current social issues and consider the ways in which people respond to and make decisions about such issues.

Parliament and the political decision-making processes represented there can often appear to have no connection to students’ own lives.

By providing authentic experiences and understanding about how this democratic institution effects change we can empower students by exposing and involving them in its processes and in doing so giving them a sense of connection and voice.

Support for youth civic engagement and citizenship learning

Bringing students to Parliament allows them to be presented first hand with experiences that can, at the very least, change some perceptions about the purpose and processes of Parliament as an institution. At best it can create a sense of possibility about how students can engage and bring about change themselves. It enables them to become more confident in their understanding of the workings of our current system, to become more politically literate and to interact with that system in a real way.

It is an experience which is not to be done once and “ticked off the list”. Parliament invites multiple visits over
The purpose of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) is to investigate, in a range of countries, the ways in which young people are prepared and consequently ready and able to undertake their roles as citizens. In pursuit of this purpose, the study reports on student achievement in a test of conceptual understandings and competencies in civics and citizenship. It also collects and analyzes, as additional outcome variables, data about student activities, dispositions, and attitudes related to civic and citizenship education. The collection of contextual data will help navigate Civic Education PDF here. EXAMINATION SCHEME. There will be two papers, Paper 1 and Paper 2; both of which will be in a composite paper and will be taken at one sitting. Paper 1: This will be a 1-hour multiple-choice test consisting of fifty questions drawn from the entire syllabus and will carry 40 marks. Paper 2: This paper will be a 2-hour essay type test consisting of three sections: Sections A, B, C. Each section shall contain three questions. Meaning of citizenship; meaning of citizenship education; goals of citizenship education; duties and obligations of citizens; meaning of nationalism; ways of promoting national consciousness, integrity, and unity in the society; the nationalistic roles of individuals and groups; identification of local and world civic problems.