

# Workshop 2

## Electoral Politics

### Key Concepts

- To become lifelong participants in the political process, young people need to be engaged in the process and have their voices heard even if they are not old enough to vote.
- A constructivist classroom uses many teaching methodologies and many forms of assessment. This workshop focuses on issue identification, consensus building, and the use of cooperative learning groups.
- To identify the issues they want candidates to address, students begin with their own experiences and conduct research both to broaden their knowledge and assess the importance of their identified issues to others.
- Consensus means that all people in the group have reached agreement on the same point or idea. To reach consensus may mean altering an original idea to one that can be embraced by all.
- Cooperative learning groups create a student-centered classroom, in which students learn through their direct participation. Cooperative learning does not replace direct teaching; it enhances it and helps show what concepts students have incorporated into their own body of knowledge.
- Teaching in a constructivist classroom requires flexibility on the part of the teacher and a willingness to understand that students will exhibit both strengths and weaknesses and that lessons may take unexpected turns.
- Moving between small-group work and whole-class discussions provides time for groups to share what they have learned and for consensus to be developed.

# About the Lesson

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## Overview

This lesson culminates a 12-week unit developed by the national Student Voices Project to engage students in the civic life of their community. It was videotaped just prior to the 2002 mayoral election in Newark, New Jersey. Students divide into small groups to brainstorm and research specific community issues, prioritize the issues studied on the basis of what they have learned, present their findings to the class both orally and through a visual presentation, develop a whole-class consensus on a Student Voices agenda of issues that they think the incoming mayor should address, and study the candidates' positions on the issues they have chosen to track. The methodologies highlighted in this lesson include issue identification and consensus building.

## Context

**Teacher:** José E. Velázquez teaches in the social studies department at University High School of the Humanities in Newark, New Jersey. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in Harlem in New York City, Velázquez has worked for the Newark Public Schools since 1987. Since 1997, he has taught United States History, African-American Studies, Latino Studies, Sociology, and Law in Action at University High School. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Columbia University in New York, and has completed certification programs in bilingual education at Kern College, master teaching at the Princeton Center for Leadership Training, and critical thinking at Montclair State University. Velázquez also has been a cab driver, journalist, student organizer, actor, and neighborhood youth counselor.

**School:** The school is a small academic community, offering a strong curriculum in the humanities and the sciences. It was founded in 1969 as School Within a School to provide college preparatory classes to Newark students. In 1977—when it became a school rather than a program—it changed its name to University High School to indicate both its purpose and proximity to major universities. Students face a battery of standardized tests and must submit recommendations, including one from their elementary school guidance counselor. This process has produced a student body composed of young people who have demonstrated academic motivation, intellectual curiosity, and high achievement during their elementary school years. The humanities focus of the school stresses lifelong learning and teachers hope that students will return to the community after college and make a political, social, and cultural impact on the area.

**Course:** The students seen in the program are seniors in José Velázquez's Law in Action course. The lesson culminates a 12-week unit developed by the national Student Voices Project, which took place in all high schools in Newark, New Jersey, during the spring 2002 semester. Student Voices encourages the civic engagement of young people by bringing the study of a local political campaign into the classroom. Participating teachers typically devote one 42-minute class period per week to the project.

The national project is an initiative of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, with funding from the Annenberg Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Student Voices projects have been implemented in Los Angeles, San Antonio, Detroit, New York, Tulsa, and Seattle, in addition to Newark.

# Workshop Session

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## Before Viewing

Before viewing the video, spend 10-15 minutes considering the following scenario:

- This morning you received a memo stating that two major candidates for local office will visit your classroom next week. What goals would you establish for such a meeting and how would you use the next several days of class time to meet them? What procedures and strategies would you use to maximize the value of the candidates' visits?

**Facilitator's Note:** Prior to the workshop session, it would be useful for participants to have read *The Student Voices Project* located in Essential Readings on the workshop Web site.

Write your responses in your workshop journal and share your thoughts with other participants.

## Watch the Video

Watch the video, stopping at the end of each segment. Use the following questions as a basis for discussion and reflection. If you are not attending the workshop with other teachers, use your workshop journal to respond to at least two questions per lesson activity.

### Activity 1. Groups Finalize Research Findings

- Teachers sometimes worry that they will not be able to meet the various learning objectives for which they are responsible if they use cooperative learning groups rather than direct teaching. What skills do you think students garnered from this activity and what concepts do you think they learned? How well would these outcomes meet your curriculum goals?
- Compared to the lesson seen in Workshop 1: Freedom of Religion, the groups in this lesson were rather small. What did you observe about the functioning of the different groups? How would that affect your choice of strategies?
- How do students identify issues of importance to them in this lesson? How would you adapt this methodology to the students you teach?

### Activity 2. Groups Report on Research Findings

- What did you see in this lesson that you might be able to use in your classroom?
- What learning experiences would you want students to have before engaging in this type of project?
- What kinds of information would you want students to be able to access in their research and how could you make it available to them? Suppose, for example, that you had one Internet connection in your school rather than several in your classroom.
- How would you design the question-and-answer session that followed each presentation?
- What measures would you use to assess what students learned through this experience?

### Activity 3. Finalize Student Voices Agenda

- How does consensus emerge from this discussion? Where are places in your curriculum in which it would be desirable for students to reach a consensus either in small groups or as a whole class? How have you handled this issue in the past?
- Notice how Velázquez gives assignments and moves the class along from one task to another. (If necessary, review the portions of the tape where he is giving directions to the students.) Did any of these transition strategies seem particularly effective? What made them notable?

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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## **Activity 4. Represent the Candidates**

- On the basis of what you have seen, would you change the lesson plan you developed before viewing in any way, and if so, how and why?
- How does Velázquez accommodate the different learning styles and abilities of his students in his assignments?
- The activities seen in this video move back and forth between small-group and whole-class approaches. What do you see as the advantages of such a strategy? Are there any disadvantages?
- How would you respond to students requesting you to state your position on the candidates?

# Before Next Week

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## Assignments

- Select five students in your current (or a recent) class whom you think would work well together in a cooperative-learning group. Analyze their learning styles and abilities and consider what contributions they are likely to make to the group. Develop a specific assignment that takes student differences into account and enables all students to be involved and to direct their own learning.
- Divide your class into groups of five. Distribute the guide called *Building Consensus* (located in Essential Readings on the workshop Web site) to your students with the assignment that they use the strategies presented there to choose one issue of concern to youth that they would like to discuss with a local politician. Use a whole-class discussion to debrief this exercise.
- Think about how you would adapt this lesson to a local election or to focus on local political issues in a non-election year. What methodologies would you use? What assignments would you give students?
- Review those sections of the Web site that you have not yet read, e.g., Essential Readings, Other Lessons, Teacher Perspectives, and Student Perspectives.

**[www.learner.org/channel/workshops/civics](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/civics)**

# Notes

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