

Teaching Civics in a Multilevel ESL Class

by Deborah Detzel

ABSTRACT

Describing the process of writing a curriculum for teaching ESL Civics along with an example of how it was used in a multi-level class, this article illustrates a practical approach to curriculum development and the value of it.

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Galileo said it first: “Appearances are notoriously deceptive.” We all know things are not always as they appear. Accordingly, when my colleague and I found ourselves attending the ESL Civics Institute at the Pennsylvania Department of Education in August 2000, we were not entirely surprised to learn that the workshop was about more than teaching civics to ESL students. Driving home from the two-day institute, we felt that our mission (should we choose to accept it!) was going to be an education for us, too. The charge given to each of the 12 agencies present at the Civics Institute was to develop a “Curriculum Framework” for teaching civics in Adult ESL programs. “What is a Curriculum Framework?” we asked each other. It was our job to find out.

At the Lincoln Intermediate Unit # 12 York Adult Learning Center, we offer daily weekday morning classes to about 225 students each year. This open-entry program has an average daily attendance of about 25 students; some are immigrants or refugees while others are American citizens, Puerto Rican, or naturalized. Questions of how to deliver civics content instruction to an extremely varied, multilingual, multicultural, multilevel, fluctuating student population shaped the first steps we took in meeting the assignment.

Building the curriculum

What guidelines or measures should an Adult Ed ESL Civics curriculum meet? For us, the answer to this question was threefold. First, the content of the Civics course had to be of interest and useful to the students—as language learners, as members of a learning community, and as participants in American society. Secondly, we decided since many of our students were or would be seeking citizenship, that the content of the course should relate directly to the INS Citizenship Exam questions. The final measure we incorporated was to shape the curriculum with an eye toward preparing students to show educational gains on the CASAS test.

To accomplish this three-pronged approach, we divided our task into manageable, measurable parts. Our first question, “What do Adult ESL stu-

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dents need to know about civics?” led us to the question: “What do native speakers know about civics?” Most adult students have children who are enrolled in school, hold jobs where they receive paychecks that are subject to taxes, and have rented homes that involve some kind of legal obligation—all experiences that involve the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The CASAS assesses upper-level students’ ability to understand some common legal documents (e.g., contracts, leases, subpoenas), more examples of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In this way, we were able to connect citizenship education with real-life and language needs of adult ESL students. We found that the questions and answers from the practice INS citizenship test corresponded directly to the five categories required in the ESL Civics Curriculum Framework: *the governmental system of the U.S., the U.S. Constitution, the civic values of democracy, the rights of citizenship, and the responsibilities of citizenship*. We then referenced textbooks and resources we had on hand in The Learning Center for materials to use in presenting this information to students.

The real work of writing the Curriculum Framework came while choosing and preparing activities that would promote the students’ language acquisition in the course of civics content instruction. The additional challenge of teaching multiple levels guided the planning. How this process came together and the value of the approach became clear to us as we taught our first unit, the U.S. Constitution. We announced our plan to the students one week in advance: We would offer a weeklong special project of study of the U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, and the Amendments for those interested. Their interest and enthusiasm encouraged us as we prepared and compiled the lessons and materials in preparation.

The first run

To introduce the subject, students were grouped by ability levels in a jigsaw reading activity. Each group then presented their information to the class to record on prepared note-taking guides. In this way, every student ended up with all of the necessary information and facts relevant to the topic. Throughout the week, we employed as many modes of teaching and learning as we could to keep all of the students actively involved and interested. For example, after learning about the Bill of Rights, a clip from the video series “Sidewalk Café” showed a group of tenants exercising the rights of free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press—and students easily made the association and were able to articulate it.

Daily comprehension checks at the end of each lesson and carefully planned



warm-up activities each morning kept the momentum of the project and the students' enthusiasm growing throughout the week. The students' competence with the content material and their ability to produce the language necessary to demonstrate that competence grew—beginning from answering yes/no questions and word/picture matching exercises, through vocabulary work and class discussions, to individual student writings at their individual ability levels. The culmination of the week was a very large freestanding collage of pictures, photos, and student-produced writings illustrating the meaning and importance of the Constitution and Bill of Rights in the lives of the students.

The Constitution Project received high evaluations by the students and teachers alike. Students voiced interest in being involved in future projects—a good thing in light of the ambitious curriculum we have laid out for them! The teachers enjoyed the dynamic, interactive approach and the high level of involvement and interest it generated in the students. Not only did my colleague and I accomplish our assignment of designing a civics curriculum useful to ESL teachers in our tri-county agency, we also learned how to approach the task of curriculum planning and design in a practical and manageable way. The mission we choose to accept when we attempt to incorporate curriculum into adult education can lead to a win-win situation.