

Unlocking the Civic Potential of Current Events with an Open Classroom Climate

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Current events and citizenship intersect in students' classrooms in ways both problematic and full of potential. Teachers take a range of approaches, from the passive, weekly regurgitation of news stories to the empowered use of current events to explore broader issues and inform civic engagement. Creating an open classroom climate can help teachers unlock the civic potential of current events, which aids students in building civic knowledge, internal political efficacy, and civic self-efficacy. This article begins by introducing teachers to research on open classroom climates using data from the International Civic and Citizenship Survey (ICCS). We then provide examples of the components of an open classroom climate and a survey created from ICCS items for teachers to assess their own classroom's climate. Elements of an open classroom climate are applied to current events pedagogy with a lesson plan for young children that explores civic responses to water scarcity and features *All the Water in the World*, a picture book by George Ella Lyon and Katherine Tillotson.

Keywords: current events, citizenship, classroom climate, water scarcity, civic knowledge, internal political efficacy, civic self-efficacy, pedagogy, lesson plan

Introduction

Teaching with current events provides opportunities for students to develop political opinions and consider diverse perspectives. Despite this potential, current events and citizenship can intersect in students' classrooms in problematic ways. Teachers, for example, take a range of approaches, from the passive, weekly regurgitation of news stories to the empowered use of current events to explore broader issues and inform civic engagement. Accomplishing the latter requires intention and is essential for the development of skills citizens need, as research demonstrates students are more likely to hold more active and participatory notions of civic engagement than their parents' and grandparents' generations (Dalton, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Confronting major issues requires teachers to engage students in conversations around active and critical citizenship skills supporting social change.

An open classroom climate provides a strong context for engaging students in current events. Within such a climate, teachers encourage students to bring up relevant issues in the class, express their opinions, and explore diverse opinions that may differ from their own. Thus, an open classroom creates a democratic ethos modeling civic behavior in the classroom (Hess & Avery, 2008). Research consistently demonstrates that open classroom climates contribute to support for human rights, increased civic knowledge, and greater political participation (Campbell, 2008; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2005; Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008; Zhang, Torney-Purta, & Barber, 2012). While building an open classroom climate takes work, teachers can create the components through their daily pedagogical decisions.

One of the greatest challenges of current events pedagogy includes complicating news narratives so we can convert current events into authentic, civic education pedagogy. By creating an open classroom climate, teachers can transform classrooms into democratic spaces where students move beyond the barriers of thin news narratives in their exploration of current events.

The Power of an Open Classroom Climate

Data from the 2009 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) offers rich opportunities for researchers to explore civic identities within and across nations, regions, cultures, and political systems. We would argue that these survey items are equally valuable for classroom teachers because they can also help us think about our individual students' behaviors and perspectives and the young citizens they are becoming. The item sets we explored helped us think about how we want our students to feel about their civic skills and knowledge when they leave our classrooms.

Lessons from the International Civic and Citizenship Survey

The first IEA Civic Education Study was conducted in 1971 and included measures of content knowledge, attitudes towards anti-authoritarianism, trust in government, support of women's political rights, and participatory behavior such as discussion of political issues (Torney et al., 1975). Its key findings indicated that an open classroom climate for discussions was a key predictor of civic knowledge and engagement. Despite this landmark work, interest in international and comparative citizenship waned for nearly two decades until the collapse of the Berlin Wall brought forth new questions regarding citizenship within a democracy (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2013). Accordingly, the IEA launched the 1999 Civic Education (CIVED) study, which collected data from approximately 90,000 14-year-olds from 28 countries (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). The subsequent year, over 50,000 upper secondary school students from 16 countries received a similar test (Amadeo et al., 2002). The framework for the two CIVED studies considered the nested nature of young people who develop their civic identities within interactions at home, with peers, and at school. Later scholarship applied the *developmental niche* model to explore civic identities (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). Most recently, IEA launched the 2009 ICCS study, collecting data from students, teachers, and administrators in 38 countries, and elaborating on preceding studies by including "civic society and systems," "civic principles," "civic participation," and "civic identities" (Schulz et al., 2010). For information on more research using these data sources refer to Knowles and Di Stefano (2016), who conducted an exhaustive review of research using secondary analysis of the CIVED and ICCS studies. The newest wave, IEA ICCS 2016, will become available in the fall of 2017.

The concept of an open classroom climate did not begin with international and comparative citizenship research. Indeed, The Bureau of Educational Experiments (BEE) facilitated such environments as far back as 1916 (Antler, 1981; Cremin, 1961; Mitchell, 1950). However, studies using large, international datasets, such as ICCS, demonstrate that open classroom climates *consistently* contribute to positive civic outcomes. Such climates demonstrate a clear, positive relationship to civic knowledge (Alivernini & Manganeli, 2011; Manganeli, Alivernini, Lucidi & Di Leo, 2012; Torney-Purta, 2002), civic participation at school (Cosgrove & Gilleece, 2012), and the potential to improve learning for students with low socioeconomic status (Campbell, 2008). As this research indicates, an open classroom climate represents a strong method of increasing civic competencies of students. Given these findings,

we echo Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald, and Schulz's (2001) assertion that the argument for the effectiveness of open classroom climates has been won. As a result, social studies scholars should continue to explore how teachers can implement open classroom climates to facilitate civic learning.

To measure an open classroom climate, the ICCS study asks students to rate how often they were encouraged to make up their own minds, freely express their opinions, use current political events for discussion, express diverse opinions, engage in discussions across differences in opinion, and deliberate several sides of issues. To better understand the context of an open classroom climate within schools, Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt, and Torney-Purta (2010) identified four key principles rooted in developmental theories of civic engagement, which include:

1. Adolescents are active participants in their own development.
2. Development is bidirectional such that adolescents influence their environment just as the environment is having an influence on them; socialization is reciprocal.
3. Development is both continuous and discontinuous, is influenced by both learning and maturation, and occurs in a variety of settings.
4. Opportunities for development differ across the life span and for individuals growing up in different contexts.

When leveraging these principles, teachers create an environment allowing students to practice democratic engagement, which contributes to greater awareness of their own civic capabilities. In short, teachers create a powerful classroom climate essential for students to develop their opinions, address dissenting views, and ultimately engage in civic behavior.

Our Study: Connecting an open classroom climate to political efficacy and active citizenship

Regardless of the value of open classroom climates, social studies research consistently demonstrates that most classrooms fail to promote such environments (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Cuban, 1991; Harber & Mncube, 2012; Henke, Chen, & Goldman 1999; Levstik, 2008; Ross, 2000; Russell, 2010; Russell & Pellegrino, 2008; Schmidt, 2013). Moreover, research on citizenship calls for active, civically-engaged people to make democracy a reality (Avery, 2003; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008; Welzel, 2007). Considering this research, our study sought to trace connections between classroom climates, as experienced and reported by students, and levels of civic knowledge, confidence in citizenship skills, and support for civic behaviors that produce social change. To do so, we focused our attention on ICCS data from 8th graders in 14 European countries. We found that having a specific kind of classroom climate, an open classroom climate, can lead to students developing confidence in skills, such as civic self-efficacy and internal political efficacy, necessary for civic behaviors that support social change (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015) (see Figure 1).

This data demonstrates that when it comes to the future civic behavior of students, teachers matter. Particularly, how they teach matters. The environments they create in their classrooms matter. By exploring what each of these measures (Open Classroom Climate, Civic Knowledge, Internal Political Efficacy, and Civic Self-Efficacy) entails, we can create a picture of the relationships between them and how they intersect with current events pedagogy.

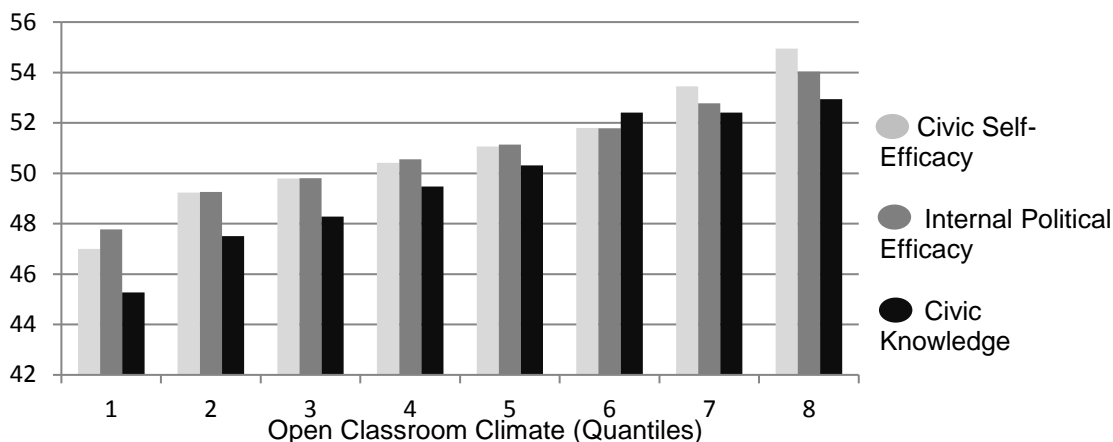


Figure 1. The relationship of an open classroom climate on civic knowledge and political efficacy.

What Can Students Learn From an Open Classroom Climate?

We focused on three sets of ICCS items related to civic skills and knowledge: Civic Knowledge, Internal Political Efficacy, and Civic Self-Efficacy. Together, these items can provide a road map or checklist for the civic skills and knowledge we want our own students to gain from the study of current events in our classrooms.

1. **Civic Knowledge** items, a focus of the ICCS, include 79 questions related to civic society and systems, civic principles, civic participation, and civic identities. There are too many items to list here, but they include the kinds of concepts students would study in a typical government class.

2. **Internal Political Efficacy** items measure students' communicated ability to understand and take part in politics. These six items ask students if they:

- Know more about politics than most people their age
- Have something to contribute when political issues or problems are being discussed
- Are able to understand most political issues easily
- Have political opinions worth listening to
- Will be able to take part in politics as an adult
- Have a good understanding of the political issues facing their country

3. **Civic Self-Efficacy** items measure students' communicated confidence in their ability to accomplish certain tasks related to civic engagement with current events and issues. These seven survey items ask students how well they believe they can:

- Discuss a newspaper article about a conflict between countries
- Argue their point of view about a controversial political or social issue
- Stand as a candidate in a school election
- Organize a group of students in order to achieve changes at school
- Follow a television debate about a controversial issue
- Write a letter to a newspaper giving their view on a current issue
- Speak in front of their class about a social or political issue

Students who regularly engage with current events in an open classroom climate have the potential to develop all of these skills and knowledge sets. Teachers working to develop more open classroom climates should know that every degree to which a classroom climate becomes more open, can have a positive impact on students’ civic knowledge, internal political efficacy, and civic self-efficacy.

What is an Open Classroom Climate, and Do You Have One?

An open classroom climate is an educational environment where students can encounter, develop, and engage with diverse perspectives. Approaching current events and issues through an open classroom climate promotes a democratic atmosphere allowing students to be active agents in the construction of knowledge and skills, to develop personal opinions on specific issues, and to acquire the efficacy necessary for future civic engagement. Levy’s (2011) mixed methods study of two U.S. high school classes illustrates how an open classroom climate can help students develop political efficacy. In a course focused on civic advocacy, the teacher used an open classroom climate to develop skills centered on acquiring knowledge about specific issues, communication, evaluating sources, vision-building, and active reflection. The course also featured one-on-one guidance, group feedback, and a great deal of student autonomy. Levy’s analysis confirmed increased student interest and civic skill development, as well as higher levels of political efficacy and persistence amongst students in the more open classroom climate than those in a regular government course.

As we will demonstrate with a lesson plan for young children, teachers may use all six of the ICCS’s items for Open Classroom Climate components to approach civic education through current events pedagogy for Kindergarten through 12th grade students. We used the ICCS items for Open Classroom Climates to create a checklist for teachers wishing to examine their own classroom environments. To do so, 1) consider how often the behaviors in Figure 2 occur in your classroom and 2) consider the examples that demonstrate ways to further develop specific components of an open classroom climate.

How Open is Your Classroom Climate?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. Teachers/I encourage students to make up their own minds. Example: A teacher provides time for students to respond to a painting individually through written reflection before soliciting interpretations in class discussion, and then asks students if they agree or disagree with specific perspectives already offered.				
2. Teachers/I encourage students to express their opinions. Example: After reading more than one book aloud, the teacher asks students to talk about which was their favorite and why.				
3. Students bring up current political events for discussion in class. Example: Students know that their teacher will respond with sincere interest if they talk about specific political events.				

<p>4. Students express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from those of most of the other students. Example: A teacher helps a student feel comfortable expressing an opinion outside of the norm by providing examples of historic persons or current leaders with divergent perspectives on specific policies or issues.</p>				
<p>5. Teachers/I encourage students to discuss issues with people who have different opinions. Example: A teacher asks a group of students to propose guidelines for a new activity center, gives the group time to present their reasons for the proposed guidelines, and then encourages the rest of class to ask the group questions and recommend additions or changes.</p>				
<p>6. Teachers/I present several sides of the issues when explaining them in class. Example: When discussing an environmental issue like deforestation, the teacher solicits lists of how woodland animals use trees and land as well as how people use trees and land.</p>				

Figure 2. Components of an open classroom climate.

Examining Current Events in Your Open Classroom Climate

Our 2015 study of the ICCS’s open classroom climate data suggests that if schools wish to provide their students with the skills necessary for an active civic life, they should focus on teaching students to implement their knowledge through activities such as participating in democratic deliberation, analyzing both their opinions and others’, acting on behalf of their own interests, and protecting the rights of others. Thoughtfully engaging with current events offers an authentic way to do all of these. Prior to discussing current events, make sure your classroom is a place for discourse that is respectful of different opinions and perspectives. Remind students such differences arise from diverse experiences and interpretations of those experiences. Rather than limit current events to time set aside for social studies, work to regularly incorporate current events throughout your curriculum: social studies, literature, science, math, health, and the arts. Finally, as your students explore current events, seize the opportunity to help them develop critical skills for questioning narratives and thoughtfully engaging with news coverage of current events.

Open classroom climates unlock the civic potential of studying current events. If citizenship and teaching for social justice are goals, then schools, administrators, teachers, and communities have the responsibility to create open classroom climates that empower students of all ages to engage with complex issues, stand up for their positions, and work to understand differing opinions. By creating a democratic ethos in our classrooms and moving beyond simply reading and summarizing the news, teaching current events has the tremendous potential to change how students respond to their world and to, ultimately, make the world a more equitable place.

We offer a sample lesson plan illustrating elements of an open classroom climate for even our youngest students while addressing current issues related to water use. This lesson draws from the inquiry arc of the Career, College and Civic Life (C3) Framework of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The C3 framework encourages classroom instruction that allows students to explore and ask questions about their world, investigate different perspectives and sources to resolve those questions, and consider various strategies and solutions to these issues.

All the Water in the World: Exploring Civic Responses to Water Scarcity

Level: Kindergarten through Second Grade

Overview: Issues related to water scarcity frequently appear in current events coverage. From droughts in North America to the impact of Syrian refugees on Jordanian water supplies, water use impacts lives around the world. Because it physically intersects with children's lives on a daily basis, water offers an authentic opportunity to explore current issues and events with students young and old. This lesson uses *All the Water in the World*, a picture book by George Ella Lyon and Katherine Tillotson, to introduce young children to water use and scarcity (Lyon & Tillotson, 2011).

Compelling Question: How can people create and respond to water scarcity?

C3 Learning Objectives:

Dimension 2. Civics 2. K-2. (D2.Civ.2.K-2.) Explain how all people, not just official leaders, play important roles in a community.

D2.Civ.3.K-2. Explain the need for and purposes of rules in various settings inside and outside of school.

D2.Civ.10.K-2. Compare their own point of view with others' perspectives.

Pre-Assessment:

To check students' understanding of how water intersects with their lives, consider asking broad questions:

- How do you use water?
- Where does water come from?

Component of an Open Classroom Climate: In areas experiencing water scarcity, students may bring up current political events for discussion in class. If so, responding with genuine interest facilitates an open classroom environment.

Part 1: Connecting with Water

After briefly exploring broad questions related to water, ask students to help create a list of all the ways people use water. Asking probing questions related to daily living, recreation, and farming can further develop the list. Teachers of very young children can illustrate their list with simple drawings or images prepared in advance.

Part 2: Introducing Water Consumption and Scarcity

After developing a list of ways people use water, read aloud *All the Water in the World* by George Ella Lyon and Katherine Tillotson. After reading, consider asking probing questions that highlight inequities in access to water. Spend extra time on different responses, encouraging students to interact with each other's ideas.

- Does everybody have the same amount of water?
- How might life be different for people with less water?

Components of an Open Classroom Climate: Teachers encourage students to express their opinions, even when their opinions are different from those of most of the other students. Teachers encourage students to discuss issues with people who have different opinions.

Part 3: Exploring Civic Solutions

Return to the list created in Part 1 and ask students to help identify activities where people can reduce their water use. Use probing questions to explore possible rules that could help people use less water.

- What can we do if we do not have enough water?
- What can we do if other people do not have enough water?
- Could we use less water?
- What should we do if people use too much water?

Components of an Open Classroom Climate: Teachers encourage students to make up their own minds. Students explore several sides of the issues in class and create possible action plans to resolve the problems.

Maintaining an open classroom climate and continuing to draw on the themes students developed during this lesson throughout the school year will help students cultivate a sustained mindfulness of environmental issues, equity, and civic solutions that can be applied to other current events and social issues, maximizing the civic potential of current events.

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