

Why *Growing Voters* Matters: The Need for Engaging Civics

By Jo-Anne Hart

Students do not learn enough about civics, and a lack of civic knowledge can result in permanent political apathy. Political apathy undermines an American democracy predicated on the political participation of its citizens. Motivating and open-ended classroom lessons can substantially boost civic knowledge and engagement. Constructivist methods of teaching enliven student civics learning and are likely to contribute to a meaningful habit of citizenship. *Growing Voters*, a set of technology-enhanced, hands-on activities designed to engage students in the U.S. presidential election cycle, is an example of methods with meaning.

Project Background

I created the *Growing Voters* (<http://www.GrowingVoters.org>) curriculum project in 2004, which put student-centered learning activities using technology into primary and secondary classrooms in every U.S. state. These materials were initially generated through online collaboration among Lesley University Education Tech graduate students. The election lessons include national standards, essential questions, rubrics, and a vetted set of Internet sites. I worked with some selected individuals to develop the project further and to get the materials on a Lesley University Web site for national distribution. These materials are available for free on the Internet, and I am revising the project for 2008. Teachers around

the country are able to download the materials at no cost; I ask only that teachers complete a brief pop-up survey for professional demographic and counting purposes. It is on the basis of the survey that I know the materials were used in each state for the 2004 election, and that I have a number of teachers around the country who have indicated their willingness to follow up and to use similar lessons again.

It is worth noting that the initial Lesley graduate student online collaboration itself was very productive and highly rewarding. Using a range of electronic tools, students remotely coordinated to generate a shared product and were highly satisfied with the process itself.

Constructivist Activities

The kinds of learning activities in the *Growing Voters* materials promote constructivist understanding. The engaged classroom idea is designed to get students to roll up their sleeves to make election materials their own, and in doing so to take part in the electoral process even without casting an official ballot. Furthermore, these civics activities are not merely for social studies—they can be used in several different classes, including math, English, and art. Nor are they limited to individual classrooms. Many activities are built with options

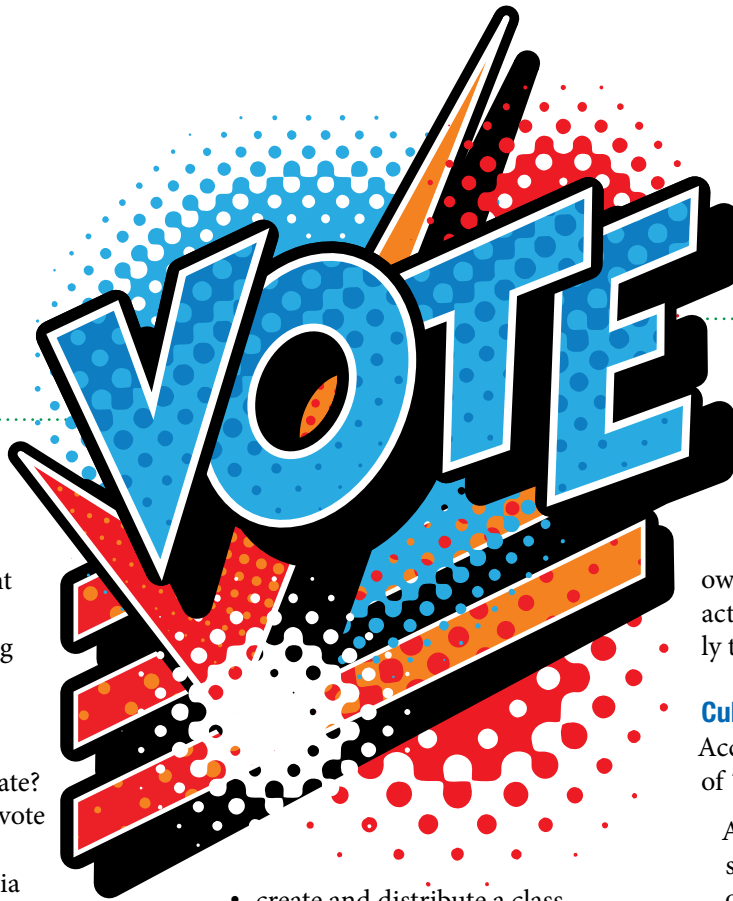
for collaboration within and between schools. There are innovative learning activities, for example, when students create their own voting materials to then bring to the public. Other activities have older students creating presentations to give to younger students—learning through teaching. Other lessons show young primary students how to be election reporters and teach them to see news as constructed. Embedded in the curricula are also new ways of using electronic means to collaborate among students and teachers.

The project includes a free Web-based list of Internet links that any teacher or student can use. Even if only this one part of the *Growing Voters* project were used, I believe it would benefit the classroom. This hot-list of election Web sites is vetted by Lesley faculty and graduate students, nearly all of whom are experienced teachers. With this pre-selected list of links, teachers may have more confidence using the Internet as a tool for student-centered exploration and research in their classrooms and feel safer in allowing students independent use of the Web knowing the sites have been screened by a reliable source.

The *Growing Voters* classroom activities are designed around a range of essential questions. For example:

Active hands-on and student-centered lessons ... work the necessary analytical skills and create personalized meaning to foster a disposition toward citizenship.

Instruction



Social Studies

- Why is it important to vote?
- What are you doing by voting?
- What criteria do people use to select their candidate?
- Does one person's vote make a difference?
- How do news media shape our views?

Answers to questions of this sort require inquiry and higher-order thinking.

The following are activities from *Growing Voters*. Students:

- present their own election PowerPoint presentation to students in lower grades
- construct a concept map of ideas such as the electoral college or superdelegates process
- make a campaign TV commercial
- design and produce a digital campaign poster
- video record a mock candidate debate
- audio or video record student interviews
- conduct an election debate via blog with other classes or schools
- perform a mock media spin room following a candidate debate
- create an electronic scrapbook or class Web site of a campaign
- participate in an online pen pal schools collaboration
- design and launch a free online elections survey

- create and distribute a class "Why Vote?" pamphlet
- hold a party convention to select a candidate

The Civic Lemonade Stand is an example of one activity. Students electronically produce a "Why Vote?" pamphlet of their own. Web sites with various resources are provided. The students come to some decisions about why someone eligible to vote should do so. For the pamphlet, some students will care about the material, some about layout, others about art work, and still others about production: It becomes their own. However, the effects go deeper.

The optional second part of the activity is for students in groups to take the pamphlet out into the public to a school event, a mall, or a sporting event. In lemonade-stand fashion, students distribute their pamphlet and engage in the civic process whether or not they conceive of it as such. When they say "Excuse me, are you going to vote in November?" and they have a dialogue with the person who stops, right then, it happens: They are part of the political process. I believe the

ownership and direct meaning in this activity may make learners more likely to vote when they come of age.

Cultivating Learners

According to Paul Blumberg, author of *The Predatory Society*,

America's embarrassing little secret ... is that vast numbers of Americans are ignorant, not merely of the specialized details of government which ordinary citizens cannot be expected to master, but of the most elementary political facts—information so basic as to challenge the central tenet of democratic government itself.

Active hands-on and student-centered lessons promote the knowledge basis of civics. The materials and technology work the necessary analytical skills and create personalized meaning to foster a disposition toward citizenship. I invite you to use and share our 2008 *Growing Voters* materials in your classrooms this year. The more we engage our learners on this issue, the better the chances that we also improve the functioning of American democracy.



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