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Can a Modified Model UN Support Civic Empowerment?

Jen Leger, Leora Mincer, and Lucy Wilson

Introduction

The data seems clear: Americans do not trust their institutions or each other.

In recent years, extreme partisan polarization and rising wealth and income inequality¹ have created deep divisions in our society and a crisis of confidence in its ability to improve or care for all its members. One paper noted that “in January 2017, 35% of Millennials said they were losing faith in American democracy, and just 25% were confident in the democratic system.”²

These political and socio-economic divides have fed into a rising inequality in civic participation, which has in turn exacerbated socio-economic inequality. As one taskforce declared: “Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed.”³

One of the primary purposes of the American public education system is to equip young people to become active citizens in our democracy.⁴ As such, many scholars believe schools have the responsibility to empower low and middle income young Americans to engage with those civic institutions which seem designed to shut them out. After all, these institutions can only change with their active participation. Many experts are calling for experiential civics education, in which students practice democratic processes, rather than simply passively learning about them.⁵

¹Jessica Semega and Melissa Kollar, “Increase in Income Inequality Driven by Real Declines in Income at the Bottom,” U.S. Census Bureau online, September 13, 2022,

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/09/income-inequality-increased.html>

Fatema Z. Sumar, “Why inequality is growing in the US and around the world,” *The Conversation*, published November 1, 2022, last updated January 2, 2023,

<https://theconversation.com/why-inequality-is-growing-in-the-us-and-around-the-world-191642>.

² Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “The Republic is (Still) at Risk—and Civics is Part of the Solution,” (Medford, MA: Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, 2017), 1.

³ 2004 report from The American Political Science Association’s Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, quoted in Meira Levinson, Levinson, “The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions,” in *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement*, ed. Lonnie Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta, and Constance A. Flanagan (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 316.

⁴ Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 9.

⁵ See Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 4-6; Levinson 335.

We will use this article to explore one example of low and middle income students engaging in a simulation of democratic processes: in spring 2023, ninth graders at Farragut Career Academy in Chicago participated in a six week interdisciplinary unit that culminated with an all-day Model UN conference. We worked with these students as part of a service-learning component of an undergraduate/graduate course on teaching civics literacy.

We believe our experiences working with Farragut students point towards useful information for educators on the following topics/questions:

- How can teachers encourage civic engagement in students in urban schools in disinvested communities?
- How effective are large-scale projects like a Model UN conference in encouraging critical civic empathy⁶ in students in underserved urban schools?

Overview of Project

As part of our class, History 419: Teaching Civics Literacy, taught synchronously/asynchronously in the spring semester of 2023 at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), we—Jen, Leora, and Lucy— and our twelve classmates participated in a service-learning project with the first-year students at Farragut Career Academy in the Little Village neighborhood of Chicago. Our service-learning project focused on helping Farragut students prepare for a Model UN conference on the topic of climate change held at UIC on March 30th, which we helped facilitate. After the conference concluded, Farragut students were given a guided tour of the UIC campus.

We (the writers) each visited Farragut multiple times before the day of the Model UN conference at UIC, although for varying amounts of time. We were the only graduate students in the course and we authored this paper for graduate level credit. We are all white, cis-women, with varying degrees of experience working with youth. None of us speaks Spanish fluently.

As future secondary social studies and civics educators, we learned about how to meet Illinois state civics mandates while engendering in students an appreciation for their agency in the world, as well as their development of “critical civic empathy,” a term Nicole Mirra uses to describe both the foundation for a democratic society, and the means by which we can see its systemic problems.⁷ Service-learning projects are a mandated part of Illinois high schoolers’ civic education, and we learned about how to implement them as future educators by

⁶ This term is defined later in our article.

⁷ Nicole Mirra, “Introduction,” in *Educating for empathy: Literacy learning and civic engagement* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2018), 1-14.

doing the Model UN project with Farragut students as a service-learning project in our own class.

Context of Project: Flaws and Inequities in Civics Education

In recent years, scholars have pointed to deficiencies in civic education in American public schools and, in particular, the inequities in civic education across different schools and student demographics.

In *What Kind of Citizen?* Joel Westheimer argues that civic education programs in American schools too often focus on teaching young people to have good character, rather than teaching them to be active participants in democratic civic life. Such programs thus strip students of the agency to become active in shaping our democratic society. Indeed Westheimer asserts that programs that tout the model of the citizen who focuses solely on being kind to others and respecting laws would be just as appropriate in a totalitarian state as a democratic one. As Westheimer puts it, “Citizenship in a democratic society requires more than kindness and decency.”⁸

This tendency in civic education programs is particularly concerning when we consider the “civic empowerment gap,” as Meira Levinson defined it. Studies have shown that low-income students score lower on tests of civic knowledge, participate in civic life at lower rates, and are less likely to believe in their self-efficacy to impact society and public policy. Because people of color are disproportionately low-income in the United States, young people from these historically marginalized communities are particularly shut out from participation in our democratic civic life.

Increasingly in recent decades, the wealthiest Americans are far more likely to vote, meet with politicians, join civic organizations, and donate to political campaigns, all actions that impact a person’s access to civic and political power.

These trends are “viciously self-reinforcing”: people who believe they cannot effect change in society are less likely to engage in civic life, which in turn reduces the possibility of their needs and interests being represented in public life.⁹

These trends are not inevitable. Civic engagement in the United States was more robust earlier in the twentieth century, and various European and Central American countries have far higher rates of political and civic participation by poor and middle-class people. Many scholars argue that civics education can play a role in shifting the “civic empowerment gap.” Schools can help students to develop an appetite for civic engagement that will last beyond their school years.

⁸ Joel Westheimer, *What Kind of Citizen: Education Our Children for the Common Good* (New York & London: Teachers College Press), 44-46.

⁹ Levinson, 325.

Scholars have argued for schools to integrate civic learning throughout the K-12 years, utilizing culturally responsive curricula that account for students' beliefs and experiences, and providing students with hands-on opportunities to practice civic engagement, both in classroom simulations and out in the community.¹⁰

Mirra argues that hands-on civics opportunities can help students to develop “critical civic empathy,” strengthening their understanding of the dynamics of societal power and privilege, as well as their commitment to considering the interests of others when acting civically.¹¹

Experts and organizations are also increasingly emphasizing the importance of teaching students news literacy so that they can critically analyze and evaluate the information that they consume on the internet.¹²

Such civics education focuses on cultivating “social justice-oriented citizens” who seek to act on the root causes of our social problems.¹³ Teachers must aim to empower students to focus on “solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out.”¹⁴ When citizens from historically disenfranchised communities engage in civic life, the government is more likely to become responsive to their needs, promoting justice and equality in society.

Background of Project

Farragut Career Academy and Little Village Neighborhood: Demographics and Asset Map

Farragut Career Academy is located in the Little Village neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, also known as South Lawndale. As of 2020, Little Village had a population of 71,399. The majority of the population—almost eighty one percent—is Hispanic or Latino; thirteen percent is African American; and five percent is White. Seventy five percent of the population is Spanish speaking, and around thirty six percent of the neighborhood is foreign born.¹⁵ Seventy five percent of the population identifies as Mexican American. Its per capita income is \$14,234—about one third the Chicago average in Chicago as a whole—and twenty

¹⁰ Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 4-6.

¹¹ Mirra, 1-14.

¹² Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 5.

¹³ Westheimer, 40-41.

¹⁴ Levinson, 337.

¹⁵ “South Lawndale,” Community Data Snapshot: Chicago Community Area Series, Chicago Metropolitan Planning Agency, released July 2022, <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/documents/10180/126764/South+Lawndale.pdf>

four percent of its population lives below the poverty level.¹⁶ Its population is young, with over half of its residents under the age of thirty four.¹⁷

Little Village's 26th Street business district generates a huge amount of tax revenue in the city, second only to the Magnificent Mile, the famed downtown shopping district.¹⁸ It is home to the largest Mexican community in the Midwest, and hosts the city's Mexican Independence Day parade.¹⁹ Little Village artists also host several annual grassroots music and arts events involving local musicians, artists, and food vendors.²⁰

Farragut Career Academy is a Chicago Public School (CPS) with 454 students. The majority, 86.3 percent, are Hispanic; 11.9 percent are Black; 0.2% are Asian; 0.9% are White; and the remaining 0.7% of students do not identify as any of these categories. The majority of its students, 95.6%, are classified as low-income, and experience "chronic truancy" (80.3%). Nearly thirty six percent of its students have limited English skills, 26.4% are diverse learners, and its students' mobility rate is 20.6%.²¹ Its college enrollment rate is 53.7%, and its five year cohort graduation rate is 70.7%, both of which are below the CPS average.

Farragut Career Academy is a CPS neighborhood school, which means that it has no application requirements, and offers admission to students based on geographic proximity to the school—the neighborhood in which they live. They generally accept all applicants, and though they serve students based on the community in which they reside, will also accept applicants that live outside of its community's borders if there is space.

Farragut runs multiple educational programs for students. It has three Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs—one in transportation, one in education and training, and one in law and public safety. It offers a Special Education Program, as well as a Military and Service Leadership Program. Finally, Farragut runs an International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme (IB Programme). Freshman and sophomores are enrolled automatically in the IB Middle Year Programme as part of their Middle Year Programme (MYP), but whereas older students must choose whether to opt in to the subsequent, more rigorous IB Programmes in their junior and senior years.

¹⁶ "Little Village Today," Enlace Chicago, accessed June 1, 2023, data from 2016-2020, <https://www.enlacechicago.org/little-village-today>.

See also: John R. Schmidt, "South Lawndale, aka Little Village," *WBEZ* online, March 20th, 2013, <https://www.wbez.org/stories/south-lawndale-aka-little-village/08cd0f0a-248a-464d-84ec-75995bc6bec4>

¹⁷ "South Lawndale," Chicago Metropolitan Planning Agency.

¹⁸ "Little Village Today."

¹⁹ Schmidt, "South Lawndale, aka Little Village."

²⁰ "About Us," Villapalooza, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.villapalooza.org/about-us> .

²¹ "Farragut High School," Chicago Public Schools, accessed April 15th, 2023, <https://www.cps.edu/gocps/gocps-school-search/?id=609704> .

Origins of UIC & Farragut Collaboration

Cary Bolnick is the Department Chair of Farragut's history program. He teaches world studies to all freshmen there, and coaches baseball and sixteen inch softball. He is a graduate of UIC's Master of the Arts in the Teaching of History (MAT) program, the same program in which the authors of this paper are enrolled.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Bolnick ran a Model UN conference at Farragut with his students. Farragut does not participate in an inter-school Model UN competition, rather Mr. Bolnick designed a grade-wide structure in which Farragut freshmen from different classes would meet together to simulate international debate on a global issue.

During lockdown, Mr. Bolnick became inspired by a book called *Power of the Moments* that spoke about "how we can create...some sort of academic project that's as memorable as prom or as a dance or as a sport," and he reached out to the directors of UIC's MAT program to see if he and his students could use UIC's facilities for their next Model UN conference. Julie Peters, the professor of Teaching Civics Literacy/ History 419 and the Associate Director of the Teaching of History program, jumped on the idea as a service-learning project for her own students in History 419. Together she and Mr. Bolnick crafted this project as a way to support Farragut high schoolers with a large social studies simulation unit *and* educate future teachers about how to execute such activities.

The Model UN conference at Farragut was not designed to meet the Illinois civics mandate²² (Farragut students take a civics class in their junior year), but the Model UN conference nevertheless provided a useful experience for students in History 419, because it met many of the goals of the state-wide civics education mandate. Specifically, the conference simulated the democratic process of UN policy negotiations, was centered around the discussion of two current and controversial issues (the global drug problem and climate change), and focused on the policy responses and recommendations of domestic and international government institutions.²³

In Six-Week Model UN Unit, Farragut Students Prepare for *Two* Conferences

Farragut freshmen's participation in the Model UN project was mandatory and part of their first year world studies course. The Model UN project was also one of three

²² Since the passing of House Bill 4025 (Public Act 99-0434) and Public Act 099-0485 in 2015, Illinois has mandated that high school students receive at least one semester of civics education.

²³ "Illinois Civics Education Laws," Illinois Civics, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://www.illinoiscivics.org/about/laws-and-standards/>

interdisciplinary projects that Farragut runs for its students each year for the IB program. Three Farragut teachers were involved in the Model UN project: a biology teacher, an English teacher, and world studies teacher Mr. Bolnick.

Mr. Bolnick introduced his students to Model UN by holding a preliminary Model UN conference at Farragut on the global drug problem before the main Model UN conference at UIC on climate change. The class spent approximately twice as long building up to the main conference as to the preliminary conference, and for both iterations, that in-class time was approximately evenly split between learning generally about the topic and preparing for the Model UN conference (everything from country assignments to conference day).

- The entire unit, including learning and preparation for both conferences across disciplines, lasted from February 9th to March 28th.
- Students spent about a week learning about the global drug problem, a week preparing for the preliminary Model UN conference, two weeks learning about climate change, and two weeks preparing for the main Model UN conference.

Mr. Bolnick's Model UN unit incorporated several deliberate modifications from the structure of a traditional year-long voluntary extracurricular high school Model UN program.

- Each conference focused on a single topic, for discussion among only nine countries. Countries were chosen by the teacher Mr. Bolnick, except for the Honors class which had the leeway to choose its own countries, and country assignments changed between the two iterations.
- Instead of the traditional delegation size of one or two students, seven to ten students from within the same world studies class period collaborated to represent each country.
- Furthermore, while students did learn about the topic as a class and research their countries' actual policies, this policy research was just deep enough to provide some opportunity for deliberation, as illustrated by the central product of a brief opening statement speech rather than a more comprehensive position paper.

During the preparation time before each conference, students worked on these assigned items:

- First, a graphic organizer asking students to craft a thesis asserting their assigned country's policy on the topic, and back it up with evidence, research, and analysis. A big focus of this work was digital literacy. Mr. Bolnick spent extensive time working with students to help them understand how to analyze an internet source's biases and reliability. Students

completed the graphic organizer as individuals, pairs, or trios, not as whole country groups.

- Second, a collectively-written opening statement for delivery at the Model UN conference, which doubled as the group's primary statement of policy. Mr. Bolnick intended for students to combine their thesis graphic organizers to create their groups' opening statements, but this depended on which students were present on a given day, how much individual work they had completed, and the degree to which they felt comfortable sharing their individual work with the group. Mr. Bolnick provided sentence starters for the opening statements:
 - "The topic of climate change is important to address because..."
 - "We would like to recommend the following solutions..."
- Third, for the conference on climate change (for which there was more preparation time) a graphic organizer for use in the rebuttal session. The graphic organizer asked students to anticipate how other countries might question or challenge their policies and to brainstorm how they might respond.
- With any remaining available preparation time, students were asked to draft questions or challenges they might levy against other countries, but without a corresponding assignment.

Role of UIC Civics Students in Unit

Including ourselves, there were fifteen students in History 419: Teaching Civics Literacy, three graduate students and twelve undergraduates. Participation in the Farragut service-learning project was mandatory in our class, but there were multiple ways to engage, and students in our class could choose how they wanted to participate.

Due to the nature of the university schedule, UIC students began engaging with Farragut after Mr. Bolnick had already begun the unit with his students. Mr. Bolnick designed the unit and its objectives and our stated role was to assist Farragut students in their day-to-day engagement with the project in class and on the final day at UIC.

About six UIC students (including all the authors of this paper) made recurring in-person visits to Farragut to work with students in Mr. Bolnick's World Studies classes. During each visit, we helped Farragut students, individually or in groups, with the tasks underway that day.

UIC students supported the high schoolers in the following ways, with Spanish-speaking UIC students working with ELL students, when available:

- Running bellringer activities

- Assisting students in staying on task throughout the many steps of the Model UN unit
- Helping Farragut students with their internet research, including identifying credible sources.
- Leading small group discussions as students worked together to understand their research and write thesis statements, opening statements, and rebuttal responses.
- Supporting students in drafting materials that were rooted in the research they had conducted.

Teachers and UIC civics students worked to move the high schoolers toward statements of policy, and to move them past their tendency to conflate policies with discrete facts ([country]’s annual death toll from drugs is [number]”) and/or with vague assertions of goals (“drugs are bad”). UIC civics students encouraged the high schoolers’ informed analysis, such as latching onto a specific, relevant, successful domestic policy and speculating that the country would want to project that internationally. Landing a notch or two above “drugs are bad” was a success, while thoroughness and accuracy in capturing national policies was mostly out of reach. And perhaps, beside the point.

A Big Day on a Small Schedule: Model UN... in Three to Four Hours!

Both iterations of the Model UN conference day were a simplified version of a traditional high school Model UN conference. This streamlining was necessary to fit a semblance of what would normally be a three to four day conference into three to four hours, and to allow the focus to be on public speaking, whole-conference discussion, and small-group deliberation, rather than on learning the formal mechanics of Model UN.

- The conference focused on delivery of opening statements and rebuttals, did not use parliamentary procedure, and was not a competition.
- Pre-planned structured sessions approximated the experience of caucuses. That is, a loosely-facilitated rebuttals session replaced moderated caucuses, and a session where students drafted proposals in assigned mixed-by-country jigsaw groups replaced the unmoderated caucus settings where resolution drafting might otherwise occur organically.
- Students continued working in the same large delegations, allowing individuals to specialize in different conference-day roles (opening statement speakers, rebuttal speakers, notetakers, researchers, and timekeepers) to suit their strengths, preferences, and interest level.

The day's events proceeded as follows:

- Delivery of opening statements to conference
- Working time in country groups to prepare for rebuttal session
- Rebuttal session and deliberation among whole conference
- Catered lunch for students
- Jigsaw session, where students collaborated to draft compromise proposals
- Conference-wide vote for best proposal

As with in-class engagement at Farragut, each UIC classmate chose how to support the conference day, based on availability, skill sets, prior experiences, and access to campus resources and networks.

Every UIC student in History 419 participated in the conference day, in some fashion:

- Most UIC classmates served as country group facilitators, paired with a group for the duration of the day. Facilitators advised students, helped them stay on task, and generally supported their efforts, with Spanish-speaking UIC students working with ELL students.
- Other UIC classmates managed the audio-visual equipment and the awards process.

In addition, many classmates collaborated over the preceding weeks to organize logistics and resources for the conference by:

- preparing information sheets for facilitators on the day's mechanics and country policies
- printing, organizing, and distributing documents and crafting other tangible materials
- acquiring practical supplies and university-branded gifts like pens and drawstring bags
- planning for student recognition, including a selection process and award certificates
- coordinating these efforts via meetings, e-mails, a shared online folder, and a text group

Reflections

Our identities & experiences

Before describing our reflections on the Model UN conference, we feel it is important to describe our identities and experiences, which clearly shaped our perspectives. As noted above, we are all white, cis-women, with varying degrees of

experience working with youth. None of us speak Spanish fluently, which limited our interactions with some ELL students.

Jen visited Farragut six times for three class periods each time. Jen's efforts focused on preparation for each conference, drawing on her high school and collegiate experience with Model UN, rather than on the content of the global drug problem or climate change.

Lucy visited Farragut two times for two class periods at a time. She worked with small groups of students in Mr. Bolnick's 6th and 7th period world studies classes and assisted them in their discussion of topics related to climate change and world politics.

Leora visited Farragut four times for 2-3 class periods each time, working with small groups of students (not always the same students) on research, writing, and preparation for both the preliminary conference at Farragut and the conference at UIC.

Jen and Leora both provided support during the preliminary conference at Farragut and all three of us were present for the entire conference at UIC.

We decided to interview Mr. Bolnick and survey Farragut students once the project had been completed (i.e. after the conference day at UIC) because we wanted to include their perspectives as much as we could in this paper.

Therefore we conducted a 60 minute interview with Mr. Bolnick over Zoom. We also created a short survey in Google Forms, designed to take no more than ten minutes, which Mr. Bolnick and some other Farragut teachers distributed to their students to complete in class. We received 14 total responses to the student survey.

Differentiation & Student Engagement

In this project, we found it was crucial to engage with students where they were and push for growth commensurate with each student's comfort and engagement level. This meant that for some students, growth in their public speaking and academic deliberation skills meant finding the courage to speak in their small group. For others, it meant taking the podium and facing the larger group.

Because this project involved the entire Farragut freshman class, there were many different skills, abilities, and engagement levels among the students, and growth looked different for each student. Rather than requiring each student to engage in the same way, this project offered an opportunity for students to participate in different ways, and we supported students on this individual basis. This approach allowed for us to see more growth among students than if we had applied a one-size-fits-all model, and was in line with Mirra, who argues for the importance of civic empathy models that emphasize multiple and varied approaches to engagement, "because it acknowledges and validates the various ways that young

people experience life in the United States and offers them multiple avenues for developing liberating political efficacy rather than a single narrative.”²⁴

Mr. Bolnick taught world studies in four different class periods throughout the day at Farragut to three different groups of students: periods one and six were Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) world studies classes, period five was an English Learner (EL) world studies class, and period seven was an Honors world studies class. Depending on the class period that we chose to visit Mr. Bolnick’s classes, we were able to engage with different groups of students with different needs and engagement levels.

For some Farragut students, staying focused on the task at hand was a primary goal. UIC students supported these students by refocusing their attention on small group work, and encouraging students to expand on their ideas. On the day of the conference at UIC, supporting these students required encouraging them to think about policy responses, and to share their ideas with their small group, and with the larger conference as a whole.

Other students were interested in the topic and the questions being discussed, but didn’t want to speak in public or with their small group members to a great degree. On the day of the conference, UIC volunteers supported these students by helping them with their research, persuasive writing, listening, and critical thinking and reading skills.

Some students were less intimidated by public speaking and were more ready to engage in public deliberation about international policy. These students were eager to speak at the podium on the conference day and shared their ideas vocally in the classroom as well. We helped these students fine tune their research and deliberation skills.

Some students were English language learners. Two members of our UIC course were Spanish speakers and they were able to support these students in their native language.

Farragut students presented differing research and analysis abilities, and we found it important to apply a growth mindset with regard to these skills as well. In some instances, that meant assisting educated speculation, such as that a country might seek to internationally replicate a successful domestic policy. In preparation for the preliminary conference, we aimed to push students to develop policy ideas beyond the notion that “drugs are bad,” rather than expecting them to digest and articulate a comprehensive and accurate understanding of each country’s national policies.

This differentiated approach based on student needs and engagement levels resembled our professor’s approach to this project in our own class at UIC. Because we had a class of both undergraduate and graduate students, whose experience

²⁴ Mirra, 9.

levels working with students in classrooms varied greatly, and whose different responsibilities outside of our class varied greatly, we also participated in this project in diverse ways. Students in our class experienced growth in different areas from each other, and like the Farragut students we worked with, also had multiple engagement levels in this project that informed multiple outcomes and goals.

The Impact of Environment

In our discussions with Mr. Bolnick, he expressed that he wanted to host the conference outside of the school building so as to make the day feel “more real,” “more exciting,” and more memorable. Mr. Bolnick also emphasized the location to students in an effort to encourage them to feel that their hard work in class was preparing them for a big day out in the world. Taking students out of the school building can help them to begin developing a sense of the lives and perspectives of other people, a key piece of developing “critical civic empathy.” We believe that bringing Farragut students to UIC helped to achieve various goals of advancing equity and civic learning, though it was not without its challenges.

UIC represented an exciting university environment for this conference, because it serves many students who share the identities of Farragut students. UIC is a public, urban university; almost half of UIC undergraduates receive Pell grants,²⁵ one in three students speak a language other than English at home,²⁶ forty percent are CPS graduates, and eighty percent are commuters.²⁷ Conference organizers from both Farragut and UIC hoped that Farragut students, whose high school has a college enrollment rate of 53.7 percent, might begin to form a vision of themselves as future college students at a campus like UIC, a major four-year university only four miles from their neighborhood.

Bringing the students to UIC required a lot of effort from Farragut staff and students. Nine Farragut teachers and support staff guided the students on the bus trip to and from Farragut, and they also needed to supervise the students on a large, unfamiliar college campus. Operating in a new environment meant that Farragut teachers and students had to navigate obstacles like connecting to a new WiFi network and locating bathrooms. Some students also may have found it distracting to be in a new setting, making it harder for them to focus on academic content.

²⁵ “General Institutional Information,” UIC Student Financial Aid & Scholarships Office, last updated for 2020-2021 school year, <https://financialaid.uic.edu/consumer-information/general-institutional-information/>.

²⁶ “UIC Diversity at a Glance,” University of Illinois at Chicago online, last updated Fall 2022, <https://www.uic.edu/about/diversity-at-a-glance/>.

²⁷ “Office of Diversity, Equity, and Engagement: Data,” University of Illinois at Chicago. Accessed May 20th, 2023. <https://diversity.uic.edu/diversity-education/data/>.

Mr. Bolnick, Professor Peters, and members of our class also needed to coordinate extensively with UIC staff to secure a space and all the necessary supplies and equipment. Professor Peters secured funding from the UIC History Department, as well as from UIC's Institute for the Humanities in order to cover costs of the room rental and catered food. One of our undergraduate classmates works with the UIC orientation program and was thus able to arrange the campus tour, as well as to marshal university resources to secure UIC-branded bags, pens, and t-shirts.

Having the university's welcome mat unfurled for them – both with these university-branded gifts and a campus tour – combined to create a unique experience for Farragut students. In our interview with Mr. Bolnick after the conference,²⁸ he told us that the day “made some students interested in college that maybe weren't,” and that “they all said... that they really like UIC and want to go there.” Students' survey responses also conveyed these positive reactions about the campus visit, mentioning various factors, such as how big the campus was, the quality of facilities like the library and student center, and the number of students and majors. In thank you notes written after the conference, some Farragut students mentioned UIC students by name, including one lighthearted note thanking an individual UIC student “for being like a father to me.” Enjoying a good rapport with a college student clearly made an impact on this high schooler; more tellingly, the two students forged this connection solely during the hour-long campus tour, having not crossed paths earlier in the conference day.

UIC students benefited equally from participating in this experience and spending time in a different type of environment. All but one of the students in the UIC course are studying to become social studies teachers. Most graduates of UIC teacher preparation programs teach in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), yet we only spend limited time in middle or high school classrooms before our required student teaching. This partnership with Farragut gave some of us opportunities to work with students in an environment similar to one in which we may teach after graduating. Those students who did not visit Farragut but did work with students during the conference at UIC built experience supporting CPS students in an intensive, student-driven, experiential learning opportunity, of the kind that is often emphasized in our teacher preparation courses.

Scholars have pointed to the importance of dedicating significant time and energy towards civic learning, including “simulations of adult civic roles” like a Model UN conference. This can be particularly important for students from marginalized backgrounds, who might perceive their ability to impact society as minimal.²⁹ The major time and resource commitment involved in bringing Farragut

²⁹ Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 6-8.

students to UIC meant that: 1) students spent a consequential percentage of their school year building the civic skills (discussed further below) involved in participating in the conference and 2) students received a clear message from their teachers about the importance and centrality of civic engagement and deliberation in their education.

Furthermore, the UIC visit exposed students to a world beyond their immediate community, but one which is approachable enough to feel like a possible future. Such an experience may empower these students to pursue new settings, ideas, people, and possibilities beyond their everyday lives and therefore contribute to their future civic engagement.

Teasing Out the Civics in World Studies: Deliberation as a Civic Learning Objective

Practicing deliberation, in addition to driving students' content learning, was an explicit goal of Mr. Bolnick's Model UN unit and conference. On multiple occasions in class and at the start of both conference days, he focused students' attention on a Venn diagram showing "deliberation" as the constructive middle ground between argumentative "debate" and passive "dialogue." His emphasis on deliberation, communication skills, and a collective and collaborative approach is clear in his description of the activity's learning objectives:

we wanted students to understand a lot of the different issues and debates regarding climate change..., to work on their academic discourse, to be able to deliberate and not just debate, to be able to come up with a consensus and not just argue with each other, but also be able to learn from each other.

Education scholars and policymakers agree that instilling deliberative skills is a priority in fostering civic engagement. Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg and the Illinois civics curriculum requirements both include current issue deliberations and simulations on their short lists of key features in civics education.³⁰ Meira Levinson, specifically addressing how to civically empower youth in segregated urban public schools, similarly emphasizes experiential civic practices, both in the real world and through simulations and role playing, as one of her five complementary approaches.³¹

³⁰ Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 4.

³¹ Levinson, 332-336.

Learning about the Process of Change

Scholars and advocates focused on civics education have repeatedly highlighted the importance of simulations of civic processes and conversations about current, controversial issues. Such experiential learning can equip students to productively discuss and debate current events, analyze institutional and governmental power structures, and collaborate with others to effect change.³²

While the urgency of climate change continues to be a contentious topic in U.S. national debate, most teachers and students at an urban public school like Farragut tend to agree that climate change is driven by human actions and that human societies need to act to address global warming. This simulation thus provided an important experiential civics education for Farragut students about why social change on seemingly “obvious” issues does not just happen. As Mr Bolnick expressed in our interview, students learned why change does not occur “even [for] some of these things that feel like there should be some result or change.”

Students learned that they had to negotiate and accommodate “strong players on the other side” (in Mr. Bolnick’s words) in order to produce change. A striking feature of the Model UN Conference was that much of the debate centered on representatives of oil producing countries demanding financial compensation from other countries in order to reduce their oil drilling. As one student wrote in their survey response, “[I] learned about how Saudi Arabia is against climate change but [doesn’t] plan on not selling any more oil.” Students similarly grappled with the role of global wealth inequality, as students representing low-income countries argued that they needed financial support from wealthier countries to transition to green energy. Many students also mentioned these dynamics in the student survey when explaining what they had learned about climate change, noting that some countries either could not afford to or were unwilling to reduce their production and use of fossil fuels without external economic support.

In our course on Teaching Civics Literacy, we discussed at length the importance of teaching students about the process of social change in a manner that strikes a balance between hope and realism. Professor Peters emphasized avoiding “sugar rush activism,” in which students engage in exciting, one-time acts like attending a protest, which do not equip students to be continually involved citizens and often do not create lasting change. And yet, teachers also want to help cultivate in students a belief in their agency to impact society. As Meira Levinson writes:

³² Mirra, 1-14.

“educators need to help students to construct more empowering civic narratives: ones that are truthful but not self-defeating.”³³

In this conference, students learned about why social change is hard, but they also learned to think creatively, within the confines of global political realities, about how countries with seemingly opposing interests might collaborate to address climate change. The final agreed upon compromise resolution indeed accounted for these complexities: it was agreed that wealthier countries would provide fossil fuel-dependent countries with funds to buy green energy technology from wealthier countries, reducing the costs of a green transition for some countries while spurring alternative energy industries in others.

Conclusion: suggested adjustments for future projects and addressing the civic empowerment gap with growth mindset approach

The conference succeeded in providing a space for deliberation, but adjustments could make that a more central feature in future iterations. Engaging with classmates as a community is a step toward critical civic empathy, and discussing with, brainstorming with, and responding to others are deliberative skills that will serve students in civic engagement beyond this simulation. But the students’ in-class preparation and the conference day emphasized opening statements and rebuttals, both public speaking with advance preparation, rather than real-time collaborative deliberation. And the order of events meant the core deliberative components – the jigsaw group session to draft proposals and their subsequent presentation and discussion among the whole group – came after lunch, as students tired and their attention faded. In retrospect, Mr. Bolnick appreciated the students’ exposure to “how to have a good academic conversation and how to speak differently in those types of environments and how to respectfully deliberate and debate” but lamented that “the key part is the deliberation but we didn’t really get to do that because of the timing.”

Even within the constraint of a school day conference with only three to four hours’ working time, the deliberative components could be better centered by:

- Creatively shifting some conference components to in-school time, like pre-recorded opening statements or post-conference awards.
- Adding in-class preparation related to the jigsaw group session, like preliminary drafting of clauses to include in proposals, similar to the preparation for the rebuttal session.

³³ Levinson, 334.

- Shortening the components preceding the jigsaw group session, perhaps by splitting the rebuttal into two brief sessions and using the latter one to discuss the draft proposals.
- Using the campus tour or a new meeting space as a mental re-set before the jigsaw group session.
- Providing a separate room for student collaboration, a literal and figurative “space” to foster that outside the jigsaw group session but without disrupting the main session.

Model UN is a fine method for teaching world studies content in an interactive way, but is it the best method for teaching deliberation? Simulating an institution in the real world may be an authentic approach, but also requires a choice to mimic reality in a fashion that’s collaborative or realistic but not both. Even with many UN-specific mechanics omitted, deliberating about policy may be too sophisticated a challenge in a unit barely long enough for students to master the topical content and their country’s perspective, much less comprehend what a policy is or what governments and international organizations can or can’t do. Furthermore, prioritizing deliberation echoes the theory but not the reality of either the UN or traditional Model UN competitions. Students can mimic a real-world institution or have a simplified, sanitized, collaborative deliberation, but trying to center the former within the latter requires some bending of reality.

While our experience is with Model UN, these same hurdles may present with other simulations. Instilling the skills of an ideal world by mimicking the institutions of a complicated one is a difficult balance to strike, so we encourage teachers planning a simulation to carefully and explicitly ponder which goals they prioritize, deliberation and skills or content and realism.

For either of these pedagogical goals, we recommend approaching simulation activities with an appreciation for the different ways students can participate. Levinson argues for nurturing and recognizing differentiated approaches to civic engagement in students of color from historically underserved communities to address the “civic empowerment gap.” Presenting civic engagement as a one size fits all model necessarily excludes some forms of civic participation from being meaningful, and this can lead to a misappreciation of community assets, as well as a failure to recognize certain civic needs within that community itself. (318) For these reasons, it was important both for Mr. Bolnick and for us to create a learning environment that encouraged multiple modes of participation in the deliberative process.

This willingness to adapt and look for or better ways to meet students’ needs and strengths is central to the growth mindset approach that Farragut staff and UIC students applied in our work with Farragut students. Differentiating this Model UN conference from those practiced at other schools met the academic skills and

resources of Farragut and allowed for grade-wide participation in the conference. Grade-wide participation also gave students greater exposure to working with different types of people, a key part of civic deliberation. A growth mindset measures success on an individual level, and contributes to students developing personal narratives with regard to their civic agency rather than measuring their agency against a singular, dominant civic participation narrative. Our hope is that this allows for students to better appreciate the agency they already possess and act upon, and that this will foster and sustain civic engagement in their futures.

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