

Fred Barton

Walking the Talk: Creating Engaged Citizens in English Class

Fred Barton describes his use of an advocacy project for writing instruction. He contends that such projects meet the instructor's pedagogical goals while helping students recognize their place in a democratic society with the ability to influence institutional change.

My first experience with advocacy as an academic subject was almost my last. I was a young, naive secondary English teacher in a small-town high school teaching a course called Techniques of Composition. I had been looking for ways to get my class to care about the assignments. One day, I overheard the students complaining about the cafeteria, and I was struck by what I considered to be an idea of pure genius.

I suggested to the students that we make the cafeteria a project. We could research other schools and see how our cafeteria stacked up, we could interview people and get an idea of why things happened the way they did, and we could write up a report to present our recommendations to the school board. The students thought this was a great idea, and we set about organizing teams, making assignments, and setting deadlines.

A week or two later, while I was still congratulating myself on my pedagogical brilliance, I received a note to come to the principal's office. I was about to learn the first rule of teaching about advocacy in schools: Always tell the principal what you are doing. Some of my students had the tact of a hand grenade, and the principal first heard of my project when the union representative informed him he was about to get a boatload of grievances.

After explaining to me in his most patient voice that my project was on the verge of creating a labor dispute, he asked for my side of the story. Luckily, he was used to dealing with unions, school boards, parents, students, and clueless teachers.

Under his guidance we were able to salvage the project and even make it a limited success. The students learned they could make a difference, the workers didn't strike, and I didn't get fired. I did, however, discover one of the essential ironies of advocacy in the classroom: You must plan for surprises. Mixing together people—particularly young people—and issues requires a clear and well-developed context in which chaos can erupt.

Advocacy as Community Participation

Aside from that complication, advocacy itself would seem to be a no-brainer for producing engaged students at the secondary and college levels. After all, aren't these the rebellious years? It should be a simple matter to convince students to engage in civic activity. Not so. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert D. Putnam details the disintegration of our shared sense of community. He takes us all to task, but when he looks at young people he finds several specific obstacles to community participation. Young people believe that an individual can't make a difference. They see themselves as customers of government with no real responsibilities other than to consume the services offered. Thoughts about career are central in their lives. Finally, they believe that politics is fundamentally irrelevant, and they have little interest beyond casting the occasional vote or signing a petition. In the classroom these positions often manifest themselves as an initial reluctance, a "what's this got to do with English?" mindset that must be addressed.

To meet and overcome the students' surprising initial reluctance to advocacy issues, it is best to choose a topic that is easy for the students to identify with—or that can be made so. On the surface, it would seem the easiest approach would be to let the students choose a topic. However, students unused to thinking of themselves as active participants in the democratic process often lack the means to discover

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a context in which advocacy can occur. Providing them with an initial structure helps them to find a place where they can begin to develop their own sense of agency. I choose the project so the students can immediately begin thinking about the mechanism of advocacy. Because I don't know what issues they will face after

they leave my class, I want them to understand advocacy as a process that can be applied across a range of issues from who will be the president to if we should have a stoplight on the corner.

There are also practical advantages to having an issue ready for the class. Students, who possibly have never actively participated in their education before, may take weeks to settle on a topic. While the discussion, thinking, and writing that lead to that decision may be valuable, selecting a topic reduces the already limited time that can be spent on actually doing a project and often negatively impacts the quality of the result. In addition, I find it helpful to meet with prospective groups ahead of time to see what kind of a project might develop. Non-profits, which are mostly volunteer groups, are always in need of help, but sometimes that help is clerical and answering phones, not the type of experience I want for my students.

I recently completed a project with a racing greyhound rescue group. Such groups advocate for the end of greyhound racing and act as rescue and adoption agencies for injured dogs and others whose racing careers are over. Each year upwards of twenty thousand greyhounds are killed because they are not fast enough to earn money for their owners. The students were not familiar with the racing industry's treatment of dogs, nor did they initially see much reason to be since it did not affect them directly. The first job of advocacy is always education, which makes it inherently suitable for

the classroom. My approach is consciously rhetorical in that I start with identifying elements in the students' lives that connect to advocacy.

In this case it was pretty easy since most of the students had pets at home and had been exposed to issues of animal cruelty in various forms throughout their lives. We discussed the animal-human bond and shared stories. Because we were close to a college of veterinary medicine that had done a lot of work in the area of human-animal relations, we were able to have one of the veterinarians come to class and talk about research that has been done on the value of companion animals in human recovery from illness. We also read excerpts from Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Matthew Scully's *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*.

Involving community members in the initial phases of projects has the added value of helping students to see connections between the often disparate elements of their educational and social lives. The initial phase of research and discussion made it easier for the students to transfer the positive feelings they had about their pets and what they were learning about the value of the human-animal bond in general to the specific issue of greyhound racing. It gave the students a context for the project where there had not necessarily been one before. Having a context is important because it helps the students see beyond the academic elements of the project to the larger ramifications for advocacy in a democratic society. Students see that "[c]ollective resistance becomes meaningful and effective to the degree that it takes place across a variety of public spaces and spheres" (Giroux 152).

Student connection isn't the only consideration, though. I thought the greyhound topic was fairly risk-free as Michigan, the state where I teach, is not a racing state, but when a local newspaper did a story on our class, the breeder's association found out about us and started bombarding my administrators with emails and phone calls. I learned that even safe topics can be not so safe in this age of instant Internet access. Yes, another trip to the principal's office for me, only this time it was my dean at the university where I currently teach who wanted to know why irate citizens from other states were calling him to complain about "the nutty professor."

I learned that a primary consideration in determining the temperature of any particular issue is

thinks and does was me. My commitment to advocacy and participatory democracy had to be real and go beyond simply using the concepts as a vehicle to create writing assignments, which is another reason for the importance of finding a project ahead of time that would put students in a “real life” advocacy situation.

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If students are going to take advocacy seriously and see it as something that is part of their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society, we all have to take it seriously and it has to be a part of our lives. I believe that animals do have rights as living creatures, and too often people whose only motive is profit trample those rights. I believe what Saint Francis of Assisi said: “Not to hurt our humble brethren [the animals] is our first duty to them, but to

stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission: to be of service to them whenever they require it. . . . If you have men who will exclude any of God’s creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men.”

Advocacy and Education

Students spent the first segment of the class researching the greyhound racing industry. Abuse of the dogs by breeders is well documented, so the students were ready to demonize all those associated with racing. They were somewhat surprised to hear that the rescue people had a good relationship with many of the owners and breeders and, in fact, like all other organizations, there were both good and bad people involved.

This is when the students learned an important lesson about advocacy. It is about institutional change. As the rescue people pointed out, the industry is dying. Greyhound racing has not been able to compete with casino gambling for the consumer’s dollar and, as a result of the mounting economic pressures, breeders have been forced to turn the dogs over faster and faster while looking for that elusive winner.

New information caused the students to re-think their positions. They had been ready to personalize the issue, but they realized that institutional change requires a more sophisticated approach. Education must be the first step—for the students and for the public.

Cognitive psychologists say that learning begins with organization of new information, and that is certainly true with advocacy teaching. Researching the history, structure, and impact of the racing industry gave students the foundation they needed to move beyond their first emotional response to the treatment of the dogs. After the visit from the rescue group, they realized where they needed to start their advocacy, and the second segment of the class revolved around rhetorical issues answering the question, “Now that we know what’s going on, how do we teach it to other people so they can see the issue as we do?”

The classroom connection is obvious. Formal and informal research develop the students’ academic skills, but dealing with individuals who were less than cooperative or who had a definite agenda to put forward also sharpened their evaluative skills. In addition, since letters sometimes went unanswered and requests for information were turned down, they had to exercise their problem-solving abilities.

The students had to educate themselves through research about the issue; they had to decide how to disseminate what they had learned to specifically identified publics; they had to create and publish the documents that best accomplished their goals. In Michigan, we have a large population of “snowbirds” or senior citizens who live here in the summer but flee to Florida (the largest racing state in the country) in the winter. With that in mind, the students created a script and PowerPoint presentation designed specifically for them. They created a press packet that was mailed to newspaper and television stations in the capital cities of racing states. They put together a database of chairs of agricultural committees in racing states who oversee the legal description of the dogs and a list of state veterinarians, all of which was uploaded to the rescue group’s Web site (<http://www.rescuedgreyhounds.com>) and has since become a reference for those in racing states who wish to contact government officials about the plight of the dogs. Finally, they developed an essay contest/scholarship program designed to educate high school students by

rewarding them for essays about greyhounds and their lives on the track.

Benefits

From a strictly academic perspective, advocacy in the classroom has several benefits. It provides opportunities for students to do primary and secondary research; engages them in a process of discovery; and enables them to select, develop, and publish electronic and textual documents for specific audiences in an authentic rhetorical context. This fits almost perfectly with my pedagogical goals as their writing teacher. Because they buy into the project, I am able to focus the students' attention on elements of style, structure, and impact. As a side note, we almost never talk about grammar and spelling. The students know their writing has to be free of surface error and take care of the great majority of these difficulties in their task groups.

Of course, not everyone agrees that these types of classes are appropriate for students. There is a valid argument to be made for the teaching of English where students study their own and model texts. Others argue that projects such as the one I've described here carry a politically liberal agenda and as such have no place in a school setting. I think we need to move away from the either/or frame of mind.

Students can engage in rich learning environments both in and out of the classroom, and since advocacy is fundamentally about change, there is no reason to assume that it is de facto about one side of the political spectrum or the other. A quick glance through the newspaper or at the evening news will show that advocates live all over the political spectrum. Because students have to work to make a living *and* make a life in communities, counties, states, this country, and the ever-shrinking world, it is in their best interests to have an education that is well-rounded, flexible, and comprehensive. Years of feedback, both personal and professional, have convinced me that my students become better writers as a result of my class. I hope that they become better citizens as well.

Works Cited

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The Humanities Show Us Our Culture

To grasp American or any other nation's literature, students must be exposed to the internal and external influences that helped create it. Even though we English teachers find ourselves locked into almost inflexible schedules and buried beneath administrative paperwork, we must find more time to devote to the humanities, for we may just be providing our students with their last chance to view a culture.

Elizabeth A. Kessler. "Humanities and the American Literature Teacher." *EJ* 74.7 (1985): 53–55.