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Teaching Against Idiocy, Redux

Mark Baildon & Brady Baildon

This article outlines a 7th grade social studies lesson designed to help students practice the norms necessary for public deliberation and develop strategies to critically interrogate political and media messages during a campaign. It outlines ways to engage students in the critical analysis of candidates' websites to understand their positions on public issues, such as health care, climate change, affordable college, and immigration, in order to "develop the habits of thinking and caring necessary for public life" (Parker, 2005, p. 348).

Democratic societies face several challenges in developing public minded citizens capable of self-governance. One particular challenge is the scourge of "idiocy" – the self-centered focus on private matters and narrow individualistic pursuits (Parker, 2005). For Parker (2005), "idiots" have not made the transition from "puberty" to public life and are oblivious to the conditions necessary for informed and productive participation in civic life and governance.

Given the incivility of the current campaign season, which has featured public insults, name-calling, outlandish statements lacking evidentiary warrant, candidates talking over each other, and facial expressions of contempt – all forms of behavior considered inappropriate in classrooms – it is necessary to emphasize the important role that social studies education plays to "develop the habits of thinking and caring that are necessary for public life" (Parker, 2005, p. 348). Social studies classrooms can be sites where students learn reasonable and reasoned forms of participation in public life.

In this article, we outline a beginning teacher's efforts to allow students to share their own political views about candidates and civic issues while helping them develop dispositions of respect, open-mindedness, reflection, and deliberation in considering candidates' positions on public issues, such as health care, climate change, college costs, and immigration. In particular, we feature Brady's classroom practice in response to growing concerns about the polarization and toxicity in public life that is often amplified in news outlets and social media, as well as the negative and occasionally hostile comments that sometimes creep into classroom discussions about candidates and issues. As a 7th grade social studies educator, Brady wanted to address these concerns by helping students:

- Learn how to engage in productive, civil discussion about the candidates and issues;
- Develop understanding about the candidates and the issues;
- Understand where peoples' political views come from (including their own) and become more reflective about their own positions and views; and
- Uncover the role of media and political advertising in shaping people's views.

In other words, he wanted to help students think more carefully and critically about the media, candidates and issues, and the range of views they and others have about these. We outline Brady's efforts to accomplish these goals in his classroom.

“All Democrats are Stupid!” “Donald Trump sucks!”

Brady found himself dealing with more and more comments like these as he sought to engage students in discussions about issues being debated by candidates during the primaries. Despite his efforts to develop a classroom culture respectful of different views with norms for turn-taking, the use of appropriate language, and the need to provide reasons and evidence for one’s views, students would sometimes lapse into name-calling or other forms of disrespectful behavior. Of course, this behavior has also been displayed by some candidates during the campaign season so it may come as no surprise that even 7th graders might exhibit similar forms of behavior in classrooms. As one parent interviewed in a *New York Times* article noted, “Quite frankly, it’s been quite embarrassing when I have an 11-year old who is better behaved and more polite than some people who are the potential next leaders of our country... This name-calling and making fun of people is basically the opposite of what he’s been taught at home and at school” (Lyll, 2016, n.p.).

These examples of talk and behavior by candidates running for political office serve as poor models of civil and productive public discourse. They have been highlighted as symptomatic of a coarsening public sphere driven by frustration and resentment. Nevertheless, these forms of behavior in politics serve an educative function signaling that this is how debate about issues is conducted, that partisanship trumps compromise, and that passions and prejudice need not be tempered in the public arena. Given the partisanship, polarization, and growing animosity across party lines that characterize American politics (Pew Research, 2014), it is little wonder that young people might display similar tendencies. Adding to this volatile mix is the way the “money and media election complex” (Nichols & McChesney, 2010) picks up and amplifies candidates’ statements through an ad nauseam news cycle of repetition often lacking in critical analysis.

In fact, political science research suggests that political and media elites tend to encourage citizens to be misinformed and that the “incentives to keep people misinformed but active tend to be much more powerful than (other) politicians’ incentives to try to move people away from using falsehoods into using facts” (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015, p. 599). There are several examples of politicians deliberately disseminating misinformation through media outlets (and media outlets being more than happy to carry it), such as the rumors of “death panels” to discredit the Affordable Care Act and the birther campaign to raise doubts about President Obama’s birthplace and birth certificate. This can pose several challenges for social studies educators wanting to dispel these campaigns of misinformation.

In particular, the “spin cycle” has never been faster and more furious. Through a 24/7 media blitz, the public is exposed to a range of claims about candidates’ records and character, their positions on public and foreign policy, and a range of significant issues (e.g., climate change, immigration, health care, gun control, etc.) that must be carefully considered to make informed civic decisions. Compounding this information overload is the sophisticated use of media designed to persuade, entertain, inform, and misinform the public about candidates and their positions on important issues.

As a result, students will have a range of views about the candidates and the issues being discussed in the media. For many students, these views will echo the views of their parents. However, the majority of teens tend to adopt more moderate views than adults in ways that suggest a “wait-and-see” attitude in terms of developing their political positions

(Lyons, 2005). Students are also heavily exposed to media, and several studies point to the impact media can have on the political choices of citizens (e.g., Della Vigna & Kaplan, 2007; Happer & Philo, 2013). Media especially plays a role in shaping public views in areas in which people have little direct experience or background knowledge (Happer & Philo, 2013). Students, like citizens, often lack the background knowledge about issues to adequately evaluate or process new information about these issues (Baildon & Damico, 2009). This may make them especially susceptible to misinformation.

Given increasing concerns about the corrosive effects of these tendencies in public life and in his classroom, Brady designed a lesson that he hoped would engage students in critical analysis of the candidates' positions and media techniques as well as shift classroom discourse toward more civil and productive forms of talk.

The Lesson Plan

The rationale for the lesson focused on the importance of deliberating about the Presidential candidates and their positions on four key issues: health care policy; climate change policy; plans for affordable college costs; and immigration policy. Students would be required to analyze the positions of one Republican candidate and one Democratic candidate on two of the four issues. The lesson plan also had students analyze different media and political campaign techniques designed to influence readers that were used on the candidates' official websites. A key goal was for students to be more informed about candidates and the issues, while also being more aware of the ways the candidates and media try to influence people's views during an election.

Using Google Classroom to organize and track students' responses, Brady created a five-part lesson over three 50-minute class periods that would:

1. Conduct an initial mock election using PollEv (for more information on PollEv, see <https://www.polleverywhere.com/pollev/>);
2. Have students reflect on their own political views and what may have shaped these views;
3. Identify and analyze media and political campaign techniques;
4. Analyze Democratic and Republican candidates' positions on selected issues; and
5. Conduct an exit poll (using PollEv) and a reflection on whether views changed or not and why.

Throughout the lesson plan, Brady periodically reinforced the importance of civil discussion and deliberation, the need for students and citizens to be well-informed in order to make good decisions about candidates and issues, and that it was important to be more aware of the role media plays in shaping political views. Similar to Parker (2006), Brady stressed the importance of the classroom being a site where informed productive civic discourse can be practiced.

Teaching the Lesson

Using PollEv

Brady started the lesson by talking about the importance of civil debate and discussion, where people can freely share opinions and ideas without letting emotions get the upper hand. While emotions are important to acknowledge, he also wanted students to consider why people might have particular feelings, the role emotions play in shaping how they view

candidates and issues, and how these emotions can be managed so that people can listen respectfully to understand each other. He highlighted the need to talk about politics from a perspective of wanting to learn more about how we think and how those around us think. Because discussion can get heated and emotional when differences in opinion are involved, he stressed the need for a few norms for talking about politics and issues respectfully. Some ground rules were set that included: raising hands to share ideas or express opinions, speaking respectfully about the candidates, and making statements backed by reasons and evidence.

He asked students to first identify and examine their own preexisting political views and knowledge, and to try to better understand where these views come from. He asked students to pick a candidate that they would support in an election and then reflect on their choices as well as provide reasoning for their decision. Students could cast a vote for one candidate out of a pool of the presidential hopefuls at the time or select a “none of the above or I haven’t followed the election” option in an online poll setup using PollEv. He used Google Classroom every day as a way to organize and track student responses to questions and student assignments. He posted links to polls, reflection questions, and assignment questions in Google Classroom. Students worked on their laptops during the lesson.

Reflection Questions

After using PollEv to vote, students were asked to reflect on their political views in a series of questions in an exit poll set up on Google Classroom. These questions asked students to reflect on their own political views and how these views may have been shaped. The reflection questions were as follows:

1. Why would you vote for this candidate?
2. Where do you get your political views?
3. Where do you get your information about the candidates and issues?

Brady’s class was able to view the election results, displayed in bar graph form, in real time as students cast their votes. The results of the election significantly varied from class to class, but for the most part seemed to mirror the results of national polls and primary elections at the time.

Brady started with students’ ideas about the candidates and their views on key campaign issues for three reasons:

1. Students come into classrooms with preconceived ideas based on their life experiences of how the world works and how people are likely to behave. This will also be the case with the political ideas they have and their views on political issues.
2. To build new knowledge, it is important to *activate and engage these prior ideas* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). It is important to leverage existing knowledge to develop more sophisticated understandings of political issues as well as address misconceptions students may have about issues.
3. To learn about students’ pre-existing ideas will enable the teacher to ask questions about why they have these ideas and raise opposing views, alternative claims, and different forms of evidence for students to consider.

Students will come into classrooms with preconceived ideas about politics, politicians, and the media that need to be activated and engaged. A key starting point is to explore their political ideas and views in some depth. The first part of the lesson was designed with these purposes in mind.

Class Discussion

Brady then facilitated a class discussion about where their political views came from and how those views were shaped. Many students acknowledged that their political views came from their family and friends and were shaped by the things they heard on a daily basis.

The discussion transitioned into talking about how candidates try to shape people's political views and the methods candidates use to try to gain supporters and influence people's votes. Because students encounter so many different forms of media on a daily basis, it is important for them to be able understand how media can be used to influence and affect the way people think, believe, or act. To illustrate this, he chose to focus on candidates' online presences and, as a class, they focused on picking out specific persuasive media techniques on candidates' individual websites. Students were guided to critically analyze different candidates' websites, taking a close look at the language, videos, and pictures a candidate and his or her "team" had carefully selected. They were asked to think about why they might have selected particular language, videos, and images. In looking at these forms of media, the class was asked to figure out how these techniques could be purposely used to sway voters' opinions about that particular candidate and his or her positions on the issues.

Analysis of Media Techniques and Candidates' Positions

Before students began analyzing these websites, however, Brady facilitated a discussion on examples of media techniques that might influence voters. The techniques the class discussed included:

- Playing to emotions – for example, using images of families, patriotic symbols, or evocative words, etc. to encourage certain emotional responses by viewers;
- Fear tactics – for example, language and images about imminent attacks or potential job loss would create a sense of danger or fear among viewers;
- Playing on anger – for example, language and images about things that are unfair or unjust to stir up anger among viewers;
- Common people techniques – using images of common folk rather than politicians, celebrities or CEOs might allow the candidates to create a more personal connection with viewers;
- Mudslinging – representing other candidates in a negative light or criticizing the other candidates would make that candidate appear far superior in comparison. These might include put downs, insults or ad hominem attacks.

These and other techniques that aim to influence viewers are important for students to be aware of in considering different candidates' positions on issues. The Center for Media Literacy (2016) notes that political advertising has three stages, each drawing on different advertising techniques: the first stage focuses on personal biography to put the candidate's best face forward; the second stage aims to introduce viewers to the candidate's position on issues and policies; the third stage, when they trail in the polls, is to attack opponents. All of these techniques can be easily observed in most campaigns and, if time permits, students can practice identifying and discussing different techniques by analyzing past political advertising at the Museum of the Living Image's *The Living Room Candidate*, which has presidential campaign commercials from 1952-2012 (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org>). As part of these lessons, it is also useful to introduce students to the concept of demagoguery or the appeal to emotions

and prejudices rather than reasons that some politicians resort to. The emotional content and appeal of political campaign messages must be critically examined.

After compiling this list of influential media techniques on the board, students were tasked with critically examining and evaluating two candidates' websites – one Democratic hopeful and one Republican hopeful. They reviewed the content on each candidate's website, their stances on issues, and any persuasive media techniques used. First, students simply looked over and clicked through the candidate's website, carefully noting the setup of the site, language used, pictures, videos, and any other features that they noticed. Students had to make inferences about how the candidate was using media to influence potential voters. Next, students selected two of four major election issues (health care, climate change, college costs, and immigration) and had to examine how the candidate expressed his or her views on each issue. In order to directly compare the media techniques and coverage of these issues, students analyzed the other candidate's views on the same two issues. They completed the table in the following handout (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Taking a Critical Look at the Candidates (handout)

Candidate's name:	My Notes:
<p>What do you notice about the candidate's website?</p> <p><i>What images are used? What type of language is used? What kind of message is this candidate trying to send about himself or herself?</i></p>	

Pick two of the following issues to look and look at how this candidate's views on the issue are presented:

- Healthcare
- Climate change
- College
- Immigration

Which issue did you pick? Why did you pick this issue?	
Summarize this candidate's views on the issue.	
What reasons and evidence are used to support this candidate's views?	

<p><i>Discuss any research studies, graphs, charts, and information mentioned.</i></p>	
<p>What techniques are used to by the candidate to get his or her message across?</p> <p><i>What do you notice about the language used? What pictures are used? What other forms of media are used? Why would the candidate use these techniques?</i></p>	

Brady went around to students as they worked on this activity. The candidates’ websites were extremely media-dense, teeming with personal statements and positions that were difficult for students to read. They also included a host of video clips and various links for students to click on and follow for more detailed explanations. Students needed quite a bit of time to process all of the images, language, videos, and content they were encountering on these sites. They also needed time to comprehend the election issues and figure out each candidate’s view on a particular issue before looking for media techniques.

Students called Brady over to their desks as they noticed certain things on candidates’ websites. For example, one student wanted to know if the popup urging voters to take a stand against Trump and other Republicans on Hilary Clinton’s website was an example of mudslinging. Another student commented on the fact that Donald Trump’s website primarily had videos in his issues section. Students agreed that most people might prefer watching a video to having to read large sections of text and that it was a smart move. Some students talked about how one of Donald Trump’s strengths is his public speaking and his ability to get people fired up, so videos would be a more effective than paragraphs of text for getting his ideas across. Another student noticed that Bernie Sanders’ website had an option to translate text into Spanish, while Donald Trump’s did not. The student commented on how that might go along with both of the candidate’s views on “immigrants and Mexicans.” Students also noticed that at the bottom of Bernie Sanders’ website it said, “Paid for by the people. Not the billionaires.” To these students, this was an example of mudslinging or bashing the other candidates by saying that they were supported by billionaires.

In cases like these, Brady had to talk about whether or not these statements were supported by facts and sufficient evidence or whether they might be a form of mudslinging or some other technique. While talking with students he highlighted the importance of understanding that all media messages are “constructed” with specific purposes in mind. This is especially the case with media used for political purposes, such as campaign websites. In the case of campaigns, media messages will represent political interests and embed particular viewpoints and agendas. This requires viewers to critically interrogate the “construction” of the messages by questioning who authored or created the messages and for what purposes.

Small Group Discussion

Students finished working on the assignment and then had a chance to discuss their ideas and thoughts about the candidates' websites in groups of three. Group Discussion Questions included the following:

1. What did we notice about the candidates' websites?
2. Which issues did we pick? Why?
3. What were the candidates' stances on these issues?
4. Discuss specific examples of persuasive media techniques that you noticed.

For the most part, group discussions were very focused. Brady overheard groups talking about the fact that Trump might use more videos on his website in an attempt to persuade people with his speaking abilities. Another group talked about candidates' plans to make college more affordable and wondered who would be paying for this and how people who don't want to go to college might feel about paying for those who do.

Final Exit Poll and Whole Class Discussion

After the group discussions, students voted for candidates again, so that the class could see whether or not students' votes had changed after gathering more information about the candidates and issues. Students voted in another poll on PollEv and then reflected on their vote in another set of exit poll questions on Google Classroom. The Exit Poll Questions included:

1. Did your vote change or stay the same?
2. If your views changed, why did they change? If they stayed the same, why did they stay the same?
3. What is one thing you will take away from this lesson?

Students also had a reflection assignment as homework. This reflection asked the students about their own views on the issues they examined. There were also questions about why they think people hold onto their views so strongly and why it can be so hard for people to encounter information that goes against their beliefs. The following questions were used for reflection:

1. Where do you stand on the issue? Why? What reasons and evidence support your position? Which side (Republican or Democrat) do you agree with the most?
2. Why do you think this way? Are you willing to consider other perspectives? Why or why not?
3. Why do people hold onto their beliefs so strongly?
4. Why doesn't everyone feel this way about the issue? Why are there different views on issues?

Brady used these reflection questions and subsequent discussion to wrap up the lesson and to give students the opportunity to reflect on the entire process, the media techniques they identified, and their own beliefs. They also had to reflect on why people hold onto their political views so strongly and why there is such a wide range of views on certain issues (e.g., Why doesn't everyone hold the same beliefs?).

The most noticeable difference between the preliminary and final class votes was that almost all of the students who had selected the "none of the above or I haven't followed the election" option the first time around now felt more informed on the candidates and issues were able to vote for a specific candidate in the final poll. In fact, in most of the reflections students felt like they now had a better grasp on the candidates' views and were more

informed about election issues. A lot of students' votes for a particular candidate stayed the same and they felt that the information they came across in the lesson acted to further confirm their support for that candidate. Of the few students whose votes changed, they cited learning about a particular candidate's views or dispelling rumors as being responsible for these changes.

Reflection and Conclusion

For Brady, this was one of his favorite lessons of his first year of teaching. At the end of the school year he had students reflect on their entire year in 7th grade social studies and quite a few students mentioned that this was their favorite topic that the class covered during the year. His students felt that it was highly relevant and helped them be able to better make sense of the election and the issues. The challenges in this lesson stemmed from the complexity of the election issues and the campaign techniques used by candidates. Brady realized that middle school students either had never considered or didn't have much background information on issues like healthcare and immigration. A lot of students had difficulty trying to make sense of the issues and each candidate's stance on these issues. This made it especially challenging for them to even begin looking for persuasive media techniques on candidates' websites. For the upcoming November election, it might be better to split this lesson into two distinct parts – one focused on the candidates and the issues and the other focused on persuasive media techniques and how they are used on the campaign trail. This might help students better organize their thinking and focus on one specific task at a time.

As Walter Parker (2005) reminds us, engaged citizenship and the democratic dispositions of tolerance, respect, and reasonableness are difficult social, moral, and intellectual achievements. In fact, research in political psychology points to how it is much easier to remain misinformed than to change one's views. Group loyalties, perceptual filters, and other factors make it "easier to maintain one's beliefs than to question and then change them" (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015-16, p. 598). However, although difficult, it is possible to "unlearn long-held views and learn new ones" (ibid., p. 623). It is our belief that classrooms can be sites where young people from different backgrounds and with different views can learn to get along, hear each others' views, deliberate over matters of public concern, and "develop the habits of thinking and caring necessary for public life" (Parker, 2005, p. 348).

Towards the end of lesson outlined in this article, one student who had been very resistant to the lesson called Brady over to her desk and told him that she was having trouble with the reflection. The reflection asked students to share their own beliefs on the issues they examined and discuss how their beliefs lined up with the beliefs of the candidates they had examined. She was an avid Trump supporter, but she said her views on climate change were actually more aligned with Bernie Sanders' beliefs than Trump's. She was confused and didn't know what to make of this. Brady explained that it can be hard to find a candidate whose beliefs exactly match our own and that it's okay to have views that differ from those held by candidates we tend to support in general. The important thing is to find a candidate whose views align with your own views on the issues you feel are important. The fact that this student was considering other candidates' views, as well as her own views, is testament to the importance of doing this work with young people.

Social studies educators play an important role in helping students learn the norms of civil public discourse that are necessary to address significant public issues. Parker (2005) says

schools and classrooms can do this work “because of the collective problems and diversity contained within them” (p. 348). However, this can only happen if students learn to practice the norms necessary for public deliberation, learn to be reflective thinkers (to account for bias, check assumptions, and manage emotional responses), and develop strategies to critically interrogate political and media messages. As social studies educators we must remain hopeful of this educational project.

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