Human Rights and the Constitution


Introduction
The United States Constitution gives citizens certain rights without regard to an individual’s race, creed, or religion. What are these social and political rights established in the Constitution and how do those rights play out for certain groups of individuals? This service-learning project will enable students to gain an historical understanding of how certain groups have or have not been able to exercise their constitutional rights. In particular this project will ask students to look at members of society who have had to fight to have their constitutional rights recognized; women, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, and immigrants. Students will engage in activities to help them develop empathy towards groups that might be different from them. They will also come to understand that there are members of society in the United States who are still overlooked by social and political interpretations of the Constitution. Who was the Constitution written for? What does democracy really mean when “all men are created equal” and still some people are denied rights that everyone else has? These are some of the key questions that will be explored in this service-learning project.

Project Goals
- Students will learn about the Bill of Rights and the social rights that are constitutionally guaranteed.
- Students will examine different groups of individuals that seem to have been left out of the Constitution and why, furthermore they will develop an opinion about this oversight.
- Students will develop an understanding of the different groups working to reclaim their rights and research the issues these groups currently face in the U.S.
- Students will examine civil rights issues facing gay Americans.
- Students will reflect on their service experiences.

Procedures/Project Sequence
1. Students will analyze the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. For whom was the Constitution written? Why did they need to add a Bill of Rights? For whom was the Bill of Rights written? Frame a classroom discussion on these and related questions.
2. Students will brainstorm groups of people that seem to be excluded from the Constitution. This list may include women, African Americans, youth, non-citizens, gays. Why were/are these groups excluded from many civil rights over the course of American history? Inform students that they the class will participate in activities to examine how one of these groups have been denied their civil rights in the U.S.
3. Students will analyze paintings, poems, and photos of U.S. cultural icons and develop an appreciation for these great representations of American culture. Possible artists to include: Andy Warhol, Walt Whitman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Truman Capote, Allen Ginsberg. After reviewing the works of these artists, inform the students that these individuals were all Gay Americans. Questions to frame discussion and reflection; How are they different from ordinary people? Do they contribute just as much as ordinary people? Why are they not being treated like other citizens? Why is that unfair?
4. Students will write a reflection describing their reaction when they realized that these all-American artists were gay. A guiding question for the reflection could be: Does sexual orientation make a difference in one’s work or contributions to society?
5. Students will then watch clips from film “The Birdcage” or “Priscilla Queen of the Dessert” clip, many are available on YouTube. After the clip, have the class use evidence from clips to analyze stereotypes of gays: What are some stereotypes? What might be the sources of these stereotypes? How are these kinds of stereotypes perpetuated? What are some steps individuals can take to overcome these stereotypes?
6. Ask your students to conduct research to learn about the number of gays living among them, past and current civil rights issues in the Gay community Possible websites / articles to use for research
   • http://www.gallup.com/poll/160517/lgbt-percentage-highest-lowest-north-dakota.aspx -site has interactive map of US
7. Invite gay rights advocates and gay rights organizations to speak to your classroom. The Center on Halsted and ACLU (see below for contact information) are possible organizations.
8. Work with your students to identify an appropriate service project that is based on their knowledge gained. Below are three possibilities:
   o Join an advocacy campaign headed by a gay or other civil rights organization. Students can educate their peers, write advocacy letters, circulate a petition, meet with legislative leaders,
   o Start a chapter of Gay Straight Alliance at your school. Go to http://glsen.org/gsa for more information.
   o Organize and Participate in the National Day of Silence at your school. For resources go to http://www.dayofsilence.org/
   o Students can set up a booth to educate their peers about issues facing Gay Americans.
   o Students can educate their peers about respecting diverse people, including skits, power point presentations, song and dance to pay tribute to Gay America and their contributions to American culture and society.
9. Reflection: Use the KWL process to create a scrapbook about students who are becoming citizens involved in social and political change. Lead a discussion with your students examining their thoughts about participating as civic leaders and working to make a difference for others.
10. Evaluation: Students scrapbook filled with photos, materials they used, and reflections of their experiences.

Community Partners/Resources
American Civil Liberties Union
180 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 2300
Chicago, Illinois 60601
312/201-9740
www.aclu.org
E-mail: acluofillinois@aclu-il.org (See www.aclu.org/faqs before emailing the ACLU)
Center on Halsted
3656 North Halsted
Chicago, Illinois 60613
773/472-6569
http://www.centeronhalsted.org/cohoverview.html
http://www.centeronhalsted.org/contact.html

Websites
Human Rights Campaign
www.hrc.org
http://www.hrcchicago.org/

Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network
http://glsen.org/

ACLU LGBT Youth and Schools
https://www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights/lgbt-youth-schools

Addendum
Duration
Preparation: Research/Discussion/Essay – 2-4 hours
Action: Advocacy/Educational presentations – 3-5 hours
Reflection: Writing/Discussion/Scrapbook – 2-4 hours

Cross Curricular Connections
Connections with English, Technology and Art courses could be made during this project.