

ES, CRLS, EA, and PC – Alphabet Soup Required for Graduates

Implementing Essential Skills, Career Related Learning Standards, and Extended Application using Project Citizen

by Marilyn Cover and Barbara Rost, 2011

A “fat tax.” That is what Miranda, Josh, Daniel, and Taylor came up with as this team of students from South Medford High School set out to grapple with a problem in their community. Team Fat Tax identified obesity as an area that public policy could and should address more forcefully.

Seniors in teacher Andrea Jaime’s Contemporary Issues classes have a rare opportunity. They are able to demonstrate much of Oregon’s alphabet soup requirements for graduation in one scoop. Jaime uses a curriculum called Project Citizen to meet many of the requirements. Students follow the PC curriculum to demonstrate Essential Skills (ES), Career-Related Learning Standards (CRLS), and Extended Application (EA).

Project Citizen is a curriculum designed to engage learners in their community through the careful examination of a local issue involving public policy. While examining an issue they genuinely care about, they learn how public policies are found in laws, rules, or regulations, or agreed upon procedures used by government to fulfill its responsibilities to protect the rights of the people and to promote the general welfare.¹ Students work in groups to identify a government policy that concerns them, research several ways to deal with it, and develop an action plan for the solution they think is best. Their findings are presented in both writing and orally in a portfolio and hearing. Pioneered by the Center for Civic Education and administered in Oregon by Classroom Law Project, Project Citizen aims to build citizenship skills while delving into core content.

The Project Citizen curriculum culminates with a portfolio and hearings by students presenting what they learned. The portfolio has two parts: a notebook that contains organized documentation of their research, and a pictorial display. The pictorial may come in many forms. Typically, students create four posters displaying the four key features Project Citizen – (1) problem statement, (2) alternative solutions to the problem, (3) proposed solution, and (4) action plan. Sometimes students choose to display the same four key parts in a power point, video, website or other suitable mechanism. The speaking component of the culminating activity is the hearing where students present their work. Presentations can range from mock hearings in the classroom to the real thing before the local city council, legislature, etc.

Using the format laid out in the Project Citizen curriculum, Miranda and her team first had to decide what issue in their community they wanted to study. They knew it had to involve public policy and they all had to agree. Too many teens are overweight, they observed, and it was getting worse. They set out to research the problem and learned a lot about obesity – about how widespread and growing it is, and its causes, treatments, prevention. These findings were displayed in the first of part of their power point Project Citizen portfolio. For example, one of several slides showed that 60% of

American adults and 30% of children are overweight with the trend going upward. Their slides included maps of the US showing more and more states with heavy citizens and facts about fats and sugars, all punctuated with unattractive images.

Part two of the Project Citizen portfolio panel displayed alternative ways to deal with the problem identified in the first section. Here, the team carefully considered pros and cons of various governmental actions that deal with obesity. Their power point informed how different states and countries approach the problem with various laws. In Australia, where childhood obesity is climbing at a faster rate than in the US, it subsidized healthy foods. In the US, many states ban vending machines in schools.

In part three, Miranda and her team showed that, since soft drinks are labeled as being a chief culprit in packing on unwanted pounds, some states have or are considering taxing soft drinks. Based on all their research, the team advocated a one-cent per gram state sales tax on sugar, saturated and trans fats. Their persuasive rationale compared tobacco and alcohol taxes, both enacted for the twofold purpose of reducing usage and raising revenue for health and prevention, to the current problem with sugars, fats and their relationship to obesity. They proposed a fat tax as a solution.

Finally, the fourth part of the portfolio presented a plan of action. The team knew they needed to contact a legislator. The legislator would sponsor a bill and its passage would influence other states to follow suit. More detail on how they would make this happen would have enriched their portfolio but they were headed in the right direction.

Together, this team of students dove into a problem of public policy in their own backyard. They researched alternative ways to deal with it. Based on their findings, they proposed a solution to the problem and developed an action plan to implement it. Their work was recorded in a portfolio comprised of a power point plus a notebook with supporting evidence.

The four parts of the Project Citizen portfolio align with several standards and skills in our alphabet soup. For example, specific standards in the CRLS include: personal management, problem solving, communication, teamwork, employment foundations, and career development. All of these standards are put to use in the Project Citizen curriculum. The spotlight shines most brightly on the problem solving standard.

Components of the problem solving standard are:

- identifying problems and locate information that may lead to solutions;
- identify alternatives to solve problems.
- assess the consequences of the alternatives;
- select and explain a proposed solution and course of action;
- develop a plan to implement the selected course of action; and
- assess results and take corrective action.

These components describe the Project Citizen curriculum. This is what students do when they create a portfolio on a public policy issue in their community.

While the Problem Solving standard may be the brightest bulb in the CRLS bunch, the other standards are also well-lit. Consider Personal Management. It is all about working cooperatively, planning, organizing, taking responsibility, interacting appropriately

with others, and so on. The Communication standard refers to getting and giving information; reading technical papers and reporting on them; listening, and analyzing. The Teamwork standard encompasses understanding the roles team members play; negotiation, compromise, consensus building, and so on. Project Citizen: check, check, and check.

The extent to which Employment Foundations (academic, technical knowledge and skills) and Career Development (post-high school plans) standards are addressed in Project Citizen depends on the problem students choose. If Miranda, Josh, Daniel, or Taylor have designs on being a health care practitioner, medical researcher, or legislator, then this project provided check offs for these CRLS standards as well.

Beyond the CRLS, Project Citizen also dovetails with Essential Skills required for graduation. It is worth noting that ES and CRLS overlap a great deal. So extensive is their overlap that the Oregon Department of Education has announced that they will merge into one set of skills. The Essential Skills will absorb Career Related Learning Standards in this way:

- CRLS' Communication standard will merge with ES' Read, Write, Speak/Listen;
- CRLS' Personal Management and Teamwork standard will merge with ES' Personal Management and Teamwork; and
- CRLS' Problem Solving standard will merge into ES' Think Critically and Analytically.

“Apply mathematics in a variety of settings” is also an Essential Skill. When students thoroughly research their Project Citizen problems, they measure, evaluate, use statistics and the like, thus using math in meaningful ways.

“Demonstrate global literacy” is an Essential Skill that is not well aligned with Project Citizen. PC is most effective when local problems are addressed.

Another Essential Skill is “demonstrate civic and community engagement.” This is what Project Citizen is about. When examining public policy in one's own backyard, skills necessary for active citizenship are honed. While exploring an issue, students learn how local government functions, how to find individuals in authority, and consider applicable laws, rules and their constitutionality. They also experience compromise and consensus building, and listening and speaking both within their team and in government at large.

The Oregon Department of Education Essential Skills requirements are in effect beginning in 2012 for reading, 2013 for writing, 2014 for math. The remaining ES – including listen actively and speak clearly and coherently; think critically and analytically; use technology to learn, live, and work; demonstrate civic and community engagement; demonstrate global literacy; and demonstrate personal management and teamwork skills – will be phased in at dates to be determined.

The last letters in the soup are E and A for Extended Application. This standard requires students to apply and extend academic and career-related knowledge and skills to post-high school goals. Project Citizen is well situated to fill this need. If

members of the Fat Tax team from South Medford High seek careers in the areas mentioned previously, then they were able to demonstrate applicable evidence from their PC portfolio experience. If their post high-school goals did not include careers in these areas, but rather on to college to see what life unfolds, then PC still applies. The kind of knowledge and skills gained in the process of the project-based PC curriculum are widely used in college.

Perhaps Miranda, Josh, Daniel or Taylor's post high school plans did not include college or a career. Here, too, PC prevails. Whether one is career or college-minded, home bound or off to see the world, they all have something in common. Everyone performs the role of citizen. Project Citizen is designed as a civic education program that promotes competent and responsible participation in government. Project Citizen, therefore, is a viable means for all students to demonstrate the Extended Application standard.

The guidelines for a sufficient collection of evidence for the Extended Application has three main components all starting with R: Relevance, Rigor and Reflection. Project Citizen's work product – the portfolio and hearings – provide places to collect and document necessary evidence. Using the Fat Tax team as our example, the project was highly Relevant. They researched an issue important and applicable to individuals and society alike. The Rigor of their work was as deep as they chose to go. The Fat Tax team investigated legislation in other states and countries; they analyzed trends over time; and they gained knowledge about an important and widespread health issue. In so doing, they developed skills they can apply in myriad situations into and throughout their adult lives. The final EA component, Reflection, also has a friend in Project Citizen. A cornerstone of the PC curriculum is the reflection stage at the end. Students are asked to consider a range of questions from constitutional applicability, to responsibility of the citizen and government, to how the team functioned. The EA requires reflection and the opportunity for documentation with a PC project is rich.

Andrea Jaime's seniors at South Medford High School produced a wide range of portfolios. Teen homelessness was profiled, as were college readiness and high school dropouts. Several were about driving – and the perils of texting, calling, drinking, and potholes. Medical marijuana and the expansion of Mt. Ashland made the list. Students produced portfolios and presented on topics important not just to them but their entire community.

Finding the alphabet in their work A, B, C, D (surely there were no F's), or ES, CRLS, or EA, the connection with PC is clear. There were not too many cooks to spoil this broth.

More information about Project Citizen is available from Classroom Law Project, www.classroomlaw.org, or the Center for Civic Education, www.civiced.org.

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ⁱ Center for Civic Education, *Project Citizen*, 2010, page 15.