

**CLASSROOM LAW PROJECT**  
**Jaimie Roderick**  
**Obsidian Middle School, Redmond, Oregon**

This unit was designed around the themes of industrialization and immigration, addressing the specific question of “How does social justice lead to reform?” To me, it seemed like an apt question for this particular community in which I have a high percentage of jobless families in poverty and numerous immigrant families. This includes a student who came to the US from Mexico in February and has no English skills. I looked forward to making connections to the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century issues and contemporary ones. The Nativist Movement of the 1800’s in which immigrants were blamed for increasing crime, unemployment and other problems, seems at times to be resurrected in Central Oregon.

However, when I informed my morning block of students that they’d be “guinea pigs” in this objective, I met with some resistance. Several were disappointed that their involuntary participation meant that we’d not be ending the year as originally planned, i.e. reading The Diary of Anne Frank and studying World War II. Their comments were further exacerbated when they realized that I would be teaching the latter content with the afternoon block, due to my inability to obtain enough immigration novels for each student to have their own copy. I told them there would be no negative comments allowed until they were fifty pages into their novels, at which time they could switch if they wanted. Happily, after fifty pages, no one wanted to switch and they were all diligent readers! Numerous times I overheard comments along the lines of “This is the best book I’ve read all year,” “I love this book,” and even “Can I read yours when I’m done with mine?” And so we began.

Students were responsible for three final assessments, one of which was an addition to the original grant plan. As proposed, each student had to complete three activities from a Tic Tac Toe grid, representing their ability to incorporate Bloom’s Taxonomy. In small groups, they had to participate in a congressional hearing. Finally, I added a book report.

The book report, “From Book to Blockbuster,” appealed to their appreciation of film. Students were asked to take on the role of a movie director and make decisions related to scenes, casting and even trailers promoting their films. My inspiration and example was to discuss the Stephanie Meyer bestseller, Twilight, which many in my class had devoured. They knew I was a huge fan of the book series, attended a premier of the movie, met director Catherine Hardwicke, and hang her autograph in my classroom! So, I brought in her memoir of the filming and shared her perspective in how she drew on her experience as an architect in organizing and designing step by step what she wanted the audience to see. Students were hooked. They enjoyed drawing the different scenes after researching what the costumes would look like and what props would be anachronistic. We discussed film and photography terminology. Further, they liked going beyond the usual explanation of literary elements by including specific points of the novel such as immigrants’ idealization of the new world, the reality of it, and their ability to cope with the discrepancies between the two. An added bonus was that during the drawing and writing process, students automatically sat with others who had chosen the same title and created impromptu literature circles. (See student section for the actual assignment task and sample of completed work. One sample is completely in Spanish, having been produced by

immigrant student after reading a translation of Esperanza Rising, a novel about a 1930's Mexican family who emigrates to southern California.)

The Tic Tac Toe grid was far simpler than I had anticipated. (Again, see student section for the actual assignment task and sample of completed work.) I will redesign this before using it again to find one more appealing choice at each level. At the lowest level of difficulty, most students chose to describe the events of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. No one took the option of creating a cause and effect diagram and I blame myself for not nudging anyone in that direction. At the middle level of the taxonomy, most students were split between the application of literary elements to their novels or drawing a graphic comparison of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and 911. At the most difficult level, only two made jackdaws for evidence, one wrote a script and the rest made posters. Perhaps that is because the recipe metaphor had the most explicit directions, or perhaps the herd mentality was at work. Whatever the reason, the work they produced did convince me that they had read and researched with integrity so I suppose it is irrelevant how many chose particular activities. The script, "Maureen Snaps", was produced and presented for the enjoyment of the remaining class members.

Our final assessment was the Congressional Hearing. (See attached research questions.) I was the most apprehensive about its potential success for several reasons. First, I was asking them to learn a new skill with only a week left of school. Second, it was a very serious venture as opposed to the "fun" rocket launching they were doing in science classes, etc.! I was requiring research of them, when they would have been happier if I'd simply spoonfed them. Last, I was selecting their group members so that I could insure a mix of ability levels. Egads! Not the way to win a popularity contest!

However, all my fears were unfounded. They accepted the groupings as I sincerely reminded them they worked well with a variety of classmates. I reassured them that they'd have control in establishing who said and wrote responses to individual questions as long as each student participated orally. While they were somewhat frustrated with only one and a half periods to individually investigate, they realized that collectively they had enough information considering the presentation time restraints. I also reassured them that we were not working at a competition level, but an awareness level. "This is what the process feels like," and "yes, youth really can and should testify on issues."

On the day of presentations, I was blown away. No one was absent. I allowed ten minutes to warm up and while the noise level increased, it was obvious they were relishing the process of timing each other. More importantly, they worked as cohesive units; instead of berating one another, they encouraged their peers. I had contacted a state representative, friend Judy Stiegler, and another lawyer to judge, but neither were available; consequently, the students settled for our special education assistant and myself. We were both delighted with the outcomes. Their responses were heartfelt and well-researched. Several students surprised me in the stance they took as to whether citizenship was a right or privilege. No matter, they were thinking!

While I regret not videotaping their presentations, I have attached the group questions and I did collect reflections from them which are summarized below:

- They loved the group dynamics.

- Shyer members felt supported. (One boy presented publically for the first time. In two years as my student, he typically skipped school on public speaking days. When I found him hiding in the bathroom last year, we agreed that he could present one-on-one at lunch until his confidence built up. This was the day that he wanted to speak in front of his peers. Wow!)
- They felt they did have enough preparation time, but would have liked more if I'd asked difficult follow-up questions.
- The questions were hard, but doable if I gave them one-on-one coaching.
- The majority liked the time constraint of presenting in two minutes. (One theatrical girl though, wanted more time to improve her delivery!)
- They would recommend that future classes do this activity.
- They would recommend that future classes also do more than one congressional hearing, and suggested inserting one with the Manifest Destiny Unit.

Overall, I am very pleased with the quality of their contributions, their ability to take this seriously at the end of the school year, and their willingness to be my guinea pigs. These students were a constant reminder of why I love my job even during times of great economic upheaval and distress in our school district. I am very grateful to Classroom Law Project for affording me the opportunity to get innovative. Thank you!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jaimie Roderick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jaimie Roderick