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ASSIGNMENT - Power Literacy Project/Activity

Daneen Bergland

Portland State University

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ACTIVITY

Testing the Citizenship Test

TIME

60 minutes

FORMAT

Individual freewrite, large group whiteboard, small group discussion

PURPOSE

To introduce students to the concept of citizenship, provide a brief (if traditional) American civics lesson, and cocreate/reimagine citizenship in action.

OVERVIEW

Students will consider the concept of citizenship and citizen power, in small groups take the US Citizenship written test, then discuss who is left out in narrow definitions of “citizen”; what a broader definition of citizen might be; what citizens should know or be able to do for a healthy, inclusive democracy to exist.

The hope is that by understanding that the legal categories (and the rights they confer) continue to change may dispel some discomfort in looking at the specific experiences and status of individuals or groups (some of your students or their family members, for instance, may not be eligible for US citizenship).

By considering a broader definition of what it means to be a citizen, and the power that collectives hold in a democracy, students can understand that reimagining and redefining citizenship is not just fantasizing—these definitions can and do change—but a potential step toward locating themselves within a democracy as valuable contributor.

MATERIALS

Writing materials or devices for freewrite, whiteboard or Google doc (if teaching online), handouts of blank citizenship tests (or make flashcards—see note below).

KEYWORDS

Activity, in-class, asynchronous, civic learning, general education, introductory course.

Steps

1. PRE-ACTIVITY: HISTORY OF US CITIZENSHIP VIDEO AND BRIEF DISCUSSION

During or prior to class, students watch this [six-minute interview](#) with historian Dr. Mai Ngai about the history of citizenship in the US which reminds us of the fabricated nature of legal classifications and the fact that they are constantly changing; they are categories and labels that were created by elite men, and are not natural or fixed. (US citizenship wasn't even defined until 1868, and US borders used to be essentially open!) You might remind students that borders, themselves, are political creations that often do not reflect demographic or geographic realities. For instance, the US-Mexico border: all that land used to belong to Mexico. Only after the US invaded Mexico and took that land by force (and then massacred the Indigenous Americans) did it become "US" land and Mexicans were designated "foreigners."

Take a few minutes to discuss what students learned from the video. Based on the first official definition of citizenship, note what percentage of the class population would have qualified?

2. PRE-ACTIVITY: FREEWRITE AND DISCUSSION

Ask students to freewrite for a few minutes on the following prompt:

What comes to mind when you think of the following terms?

- Citizen
- Citizenship
- Citizen power

As a class, listen to this interview from [Laura Tavares's Facing History, Facing Ourselves*](#) with Eric Liu founder of Citizen University (11:16)

*requires a free membership to Facing History, Facing Ourselves. Alternatively, [watch this speech by Eric Liu](#) on Citizen Power (5:31)

Student Prompts: As you listen, jot down ideas or terms that strike you or that you don't understand.

After the video, students write their ideas and questions on the board, followed by class discussion. Encourage students to think about their own family's story around citizenship, both its narrow, legal definition, but also in the broader sense as Liu describes it.

3. TESTING THE TEST

Start in small groups of 5 or 6 (depending on size of class, [split up the blank US Citizenship and Naturalization Test](#) into sections and assign a section to each group to complete. Alternatively, create flashcards of the questions and quiz the class as a whole (or have them quiz each other in smaller groups).

As a class (or in small groups) use the [answer key](#) to see how each group did, and discuss what they thought of the questions. Were any of them surprising? Why do you think these questions were asked? What's missing or unnecessary?

4. CO-CREATE A CITIZENSHIP LIST

Based on all we've learned/discussed today:

(Instructor or students write on board answers to the following questions)

- What knowledge or skills do people need in order to be citizens?
- What should be the rights of citizens?
- What should be the responsibilities of citizens?

If doing this as an asynchronous discussion activity:

Have students complete the test on their own and then check their answers.

Ask students to then post comments, addressing one or more of the following prompts:

- How well did you do on the test? Were you surprised? Why or why not?
- What questions seem important (or not)?
- What questions do you think are missing?
- What do you think people should know in order to be active, engaged, informed members of society?
- What would you need to know/understand/be able to do in order to be an active participant in your own community/state/country?

ADDITIONAL READING TO CONSIDER ASSIGNING PRIOR TO ACTIVITY:

Richardson, H. C. 2024. "Letters from an American." February 19, 2024.

<https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com>.

POSTACTIVITY REFLECTION

This can be assigned as an exit ticket or journal entry.

Student Prompt: What were your initial ideas about the concepts of the following terms: citizen, citizenship, or citizen power? How have those ideas changed after today's lesson? What knowledge, skills, or abilities do you have that you think are important for being a citizen or having citizen power in a democracy?