

Show Me! A Strategy for Building Creativity, Confidence, and Competence

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“Show me.” These two little words generate incredible possibilities for young social studies learners. “I want you to show me what you know about this type of government. I don’t want you simply to tell me.” These are the words that teacher Beth Corrigan used to explain her students’ upcoming government project. The request “show me” challenges students to unleash dormant creativity and confidence that can eventually lead to increased understanding and competence. Beth’s lesson, described here, provides a good example of one teacher’s commitment to personalizing complex social studies concepts for all learners through a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach.

There is general consensus that all students should have access to social studies education that promotes civic skills and values through active learning. The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards and the Common Core both call for self-efficacy in learning and focus on inquiry and application.¹ However, ensuring that all students can engage in this “powerful learning” can be challenging for teachers who face a wide range of abilities and language competencies in their classrooms. Using a UDL approach, teachers focus on “the attainment of learning goals for individuals with wide differences in their abilities to see, hear, move, read, write, understand English, sustain attention, organize, engage, and remember.”² UDL includes three core principles: multiple means of representation, multiple means for engagement, and multiple means for action and expression.³ Using the “Show Me!” lesson design, Beth was able to engage all learners, including those who tended to be less engaged with more traditional instructional approaches. Building on UDL’s core principles, students were able to demonstrate what they knew and understood in multiple ways.

Research on study skills shows that if students explain their knowledge to another person, deeper understanding can occur.⁴ In addition, students are more likely to retain a concept if they can mentally connect it in some way to a physical object, a work of art, a body movement, or a personal memory. The “show me” activity can achieve these objectives, and it also addresses

Common Core standards such as the practice of presentation of knowledge and ideas (SL.5.4). It addresses the objectives of the C3 Framework to (a) enhance the rigor of the social studies disciplines; (b) build critical thinking, problem solving, and participatory skills to become engaged citizens; and (c) align academic programs to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies. The Common Core advocates “developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful.”⁵ Lessons like “Show Me!” have promise for meeting these objectives by focusing on student agency and potential.

“Show Me!” Assignment

While the “Show Me!” lesson plan can be adapted for a wide variety of content areas, the lesson plan and examples presented here were used to assess knowledge of the government of the Ancient Roman Republic. Young social studies students need to understand how their government functions, and this can be a daunting task. To complicate this task, the Ohio State Standards require young students to learn about government through the study of ancient civilizations, for example, to understand how “Greek democracy and the Roman Republic were radical departures from monarchy and theocracy, influencing the structure and function of modern democratic governments.”⁶ Her target for this lesson was to build students’ knowledge and understanding of the structure of government in the ancient republic of Rome.

Beth started the lesson by asking students to find random items in their household or locker to represent different aspects of early forms of government. The key was that each item had to relate to a different job title within the government. The student would then have to justify the use of the item and how it connected to various roles of ancient government officials. Once students had identified their objects and what they represented, they signed up for five-minute conferences with the teacher before and after school or during breaks throughout the week. They privately presented their projects, explaining each item and what it represented. Beth developed a simple



rubric by compiling the content knowledge that the students had to know about this type of government. The results from the rubric replaced a quiz grade, providing an opportunity for students to be evaluated using a performance-based assessment.

“Show Me!” in Action

Because this was a new type of activity, students were unsure at first of the types of items that could connect to the structure of government. However, once they started, the variety of items was endless! Students chose stuffed animals, figurines, shoes, puzzle pieces, and even fingernail polish. A shy student, Chloe, explained her experience with finding items. “At first it was hard trying to find which items would help me remember the content the most. Then I decided on the cat figurines because of the different colors and looks of the cats. I could make different groupings with them.” Aylia described choosing objects with different sizes. “If you picked something smaller, you know that it would go to the lower class, and if you picked something bigger, you knew that it would go to the upper class. But then it was also the colors, and everything mattered.” Students were forced to think outside the box: to pick items that had a significant connection to their lives and imagine that these items could represent something else.

Once the students had chosen their items, the next step was to connect the items in some way to content knowledge. How did this thing (a modern, material object) represent a concept (an aspect of an ancient government)? Students were given a graphic organizer chart to aid in the development of their projects. The

charts were used as a formative assessment for the teacher and also helped to identify the students who were struggling with understanding the content and forming a connection to items.

Two days before the presentations, Beth allowed her students to share the preliminary stages of their projects in small groups. The students gave each other feedback on clarity of content and accurate representation. Students were able to strengthen and solidify their projects through group sharing. The students were responsible for memorizing and retaining the content for their presentations and were not permitted to use notes.

As the time to present grew closer, student excitement and anticipation grew. The conversations in the hallway were buzzing with excitement as the students gained more confidence with their projects. A sense of pride for the items and the content associated with them developed in the students. When presentation day arrived, students entered the classroom one by one at their assigned time slot (before or after school or during their study hall) with their project in hand. The items were displayed on an open desk and Beth sat opposite of the student with a clipboard and rubric in hand for assessment.

Students had to bring their items to life by “showing” relationships between branches of government. Beth encouraged them to begin by presenting the branch of government they felt most confident about. Chloe stated, “This cat represents the two consuls of Ancient Rome. There are two colors in the cat’s fur; one does not overpower the other, so the colors are equal.” She then explained how her all-white cat looked rich and wise because of its white fur, so it represented the senators because



they were rich, wise, and served in office for life. Chloe used her critical thinking and creative skills to connect the historical content to the items that she had chosen. If students did not adequately explain the content listed on the rubric, Beth would prompt them to explain more fully, using their items. “I see this dinosaur that represents the senate is larger than the other dinosaurs. What about this dinosaur reminds you of the senate?” Aylia admitted to liking this type of presentation, because it was “more like a conversation than an actual presentation in front of the whole class.” At the end of the presentation, Beth gave each student immediate feedback on his or her project by using the rubric to outline areas where the student excelled, as well as to explain facts or concepts that were misunderstood.

After all presentations were finished, Beth recapped the lesson. “What was the purpose of multiple branches of government in Ancient Rome? Why does the United States have multiple branches of government today?” Through her questioning, she challenged the students to make connections between the ancient government of the Roman Republic and the balance of powers in the United States today. This skill of understanding different historical perspectives and applying knowledge to one’s life is a key component for young social studies learners.

“Show Me!” Results

Through this project, students were exposed to critical concepts about government. Students learned from each other about the importance of the democratic process, such as how the Ancient Romans voted individuals into office, as well as how a veto could block unpopular legislation. They explained the concept of balance of power when they shared how each branch of government was responsible for its own duties and how its performance influenced that of the other branches. This idea of checks and balances is important because it provides the scaffolding for exploring other forms of government.

Collectively, because of the Universal Design of this assessment, some students performed better on this project than they likely would have on a regular section quiz. Ashley was one such student. It was common for her to second-guess herself with multiple-choice questions, a habit that often resulted in her receiving a low test score. On this “Show Me” project, she earned a 22/24, and then earned an 82 percent on the chapter

test. (The average of her earlier test scores was 78 percent.) Beth found that, in many instances, students who performed well on the project also did well on the final unit test covering the same material.

After the students reviewed their test scores, Beth administered a short survey to gather feedback about the learning objectives they had experienced through this project. They were asked about their likes and challenges with this assignment as well as how this assignment impacted their learning. “I like that you had to use your imagination and it was a fun activity and project. I had to be really creative and use some things that are not just involved in History. I had to use my critical thinking and imagination to show my knowledge,” states Maggie after the completion of this project. Beth’s students felt that the Roman Government portion of the test was not as difficult as the other sections because of their participation in this activity. “This project allows you to remember the subject easier. It kept it on your mind, and if you worked on the project, you would be prepared for the test just by thinking of those objects in your head,” Aylia stated.

Why “Show Me!” Works

While Aylia may not have been able to articulate why the “Show Me!” project made it “easier” to remember the subject, it is helpful for teachers to understand how using the principles of UDL provided equal opportunities for all students to learn. The “Show Me!” lesson provided all students with opportunities to present information in different ways (Multiple Means of Representation), differentiate the ways they expressed what they knew (Multiple Means of Action and Expression), and stimulate their interest and motivation for learning (Multiple Means of Engagement).⁷

This activity also is grounded in project-based learning, whereby students are involved in “completing complex tasks that typically result in a realistic product, event, or presentation to an audience.”⁸ By linking knowledge with common items, students were challenged to make connections with content and everyday life. Chloe shared, “It helps connects school with home because school and home are interconnected because you are both learning, but in different environments and if you can intertwine them, then it evolves into better learning.”

Project-based learning should be centered on constructing investigations, inquiry into deeper knowledge, and student driven.⁹ Students first have to understand the content to know what they must represent. Second, students have to pick certain items to justify the item’s connection to the content. This requires inquiry and critical thinking to associate an everyday object to a historical concept. However, by allowing students to connect abstract with physical things (such as a childhood stuffed animal representing the Tribune branch of government), they can experience more authentic and higher-level learning. Finally, students’ own perceptions were that this project helped them succeed on final assessments, because it helped them retain knowledge.

Try “Show Me!” in Your Own Classroom

This activity can be adapted for any grade level content where historical facts or concepts are compared and contrasted. All you need to get started are a simple rubric or outline of requisite knowledge and a discussion of guidelines for what sorts of things are appropriate to bring to school. Additionally, the creative aspects of this activity make it more accessible for students with limited English proficiency, as well as those with special needs.

Students are asked to do many things in school each day. Too frequently, these requests are text-driven and require only rote memory. However, the world requires young people to think creatively, abstractly, and to make connections that are not always clear or obvious. Students need opportunities to practice these skills and develop strategies for this more complex level of thinking. Two simple words, “Show me,” can help push students toward a more powerful way to think and learn in social studies. ●

Notes

1. NCSS, “The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History” (2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3framework; Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org.
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3. UDL Center, “What is UDL?” National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2012, www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/whatisudl.
4. LeAnn Nickelsen, “Smart Student Study Strategies” *Brainbasedlearning*, 2015.
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8. Brigid Barron and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Teaching for Meaningful Learning,” *Edutopia* (The George Lucas Educational Foundation, 2008): 1–15.
9. John W. Thomas, “A Review of Project Based Learning,” (Buck Institute for Education, 2000), bie.org/object/document/a_review_of_research_on_project_based_learning.

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