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Lewis Hine as a Change Agent: Discussing the Fight against Child Labor as a Model for Taking Civic Action

Rebecca Macon Bidwell

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract

In this article, the author describes a lesson in which students examine public issues of the Gilded Age using the lens of taking civic action. The *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (C3 Framework) challenges social studies teachers to incorporate opportunities for students to take civic action (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). The lesson described in this article focuses on the taking informed action part of the C3 Framework. Designed for use in a high school history course, the lesson introduces Lewis Hine as an example of a historical figure taking civic action to address a public issue of his time, child labor. Students start with a brief review of the Gilded Age. An important concept of the lesson is that the absence of government oversight during the Gilded Age not only helped the United States industrialize, but it also allowed corruption and exploitation to flourish. In this context, students see how people in the Gilded Age responded to problems caused by industrialization. The different types of writing assignments in the lesson help students synthesize information from the Gilded Age. In another activity, students write a letter from the perspective of Lewis Hine about the conditions of child labor across the country. In the final activity of the lesson, students write a Ted Talk script on Lewis Hines's fight against child labor during the Gilded Age.

Keywords: taking civic action, public issues, child labor, C3 Framework

The novel corona virus (COVID-19) that struck the United States in the spring and summer of 2020 laid bare many unresolved issues in the U.S. economy. COVID-19 has revealed income inequality among Americans on a scale similar to the Gilded Age of the late 19th century in the United States (Boushey & Park, 2020). Even more unsettling was the revelation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020) that income inequality played a significant role in the higher rates of infection and death for African Americans and Latinx populations. Bartels (2016) cited evidence that the New Gilded Age started in the 1970s, and then continued into the 21st century. He argued that real income growth for Americans in the 95th percentile grew at a rate more than ten times the real income rate of Americans in the 20th percentile. In the face of such inequality, social studies teachers must develop lessons that help students learn how to take an active role in the U.S. democracy to address income inequality. One topic that can be used to address income inequality are the issues that led to the creation of child labor laws.

Using the discussion of public issues followed by writing prompts on taking civic action provides opportunities for teachers to connect perennial public issues to models of individuals taking civic action. In this article, the author reviews the literature on the use of public issues before describing a high school U.S. history lesson in which students analyze and discuss the public issue of child labor during the Gilded Age. Copies of the primary sources, the handouts,

and the writing prompts for implementing the lesson in the social studies classroom have been provided throughout the article.

Literature Review on Discussing Public Issues

Shirley Engle (1960) argued that effective social studies instruction should prepare students for active participation in U.S. democracy. Furthermore, he stated that for students to become good citizens, they must be able to take information from a variety of sources and perspectives, weigh the evidence, and make the best decision based on the findings. The Harvard Social Studies Project, created by Donald Oliver, Fred Newmann, and James Shaver, developed out of an experimental curriculum project using the jurisprudential approach to teaching social studies (Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Oliver and Shaver (1966) defined jurisprudential teaching as a hodge-podge of contemporary and historical factual questions from a range of areas like law, ethics, and government surrounding perennial public policy issues in U.S. society. Students moved into definitional, legal, and factual questions as they started comparing legitimate solutions to problems caused by public policy issues (Oliver and Shaver, 1966).

The jurisprudential framework usually began with the teacher presenting an evocative story or account in a historical or contemporary context. In the story, the characters usually faced a controversial decision. The struggle of the characters in the story led students into discourse about the controversial issues of the story. Oliver and Shaver (1966) acknowledged that the content was not as important as was the difficult discourse created by answering ethical, legal, and definitional questions at the heart of the controversy. According to the authors, the most important focus was on the dialogue, whether it be between teacher and students or between student and student.

Oliver and colleagues (1967) published a series of pamphlets adapted from the Harvard Social Studies Project which stressed the use of case studies and student discourse. The authors presented the case study highlighting the characters' struggle with a difficult choice. As students discussed the choices available to the characters, questions about the characters' roles in the dilemma, as well as what they should or should not do, emerged (Oliver et al., 1967). The authors called these disputes from these perennial public policy issues persisting problems or dilemmas (Oliver et al., 1967). Discussing these perennial public issues, according to the authors, was the key to more lively discussions in the social studies classroom. Defined as questions "involving a choice or a decision for action by citizens or officials in affairs that concern a government or community," public issues help the community unite around common causes (Oliver et al., 1967, p. 29).

Discussions such as the ones described in the pamphlets by Oliver and colleagues (1967) help students make sense of the persisting problems, or issues of a community. Students begin by analyzing a case study in which a person must make a crucial decision. Then, they must clarify the issue by resolving disputes over definition, facts, explanation, and broader concerns about legal issues and disagreements over frames of reference. This process of clarification helps

students reach conclusions on the persisting issue by evaluating its different perspectives. Oliver and colleagues (1967) asserted that when students go through this discussion process, they think on two different levels. On one level, they must take a stand on the persisting issue. On the other level, students must exercise a type of active listening in which they ask themselves whether they are being sensitive to what the other people in the discussion are saying, or whether they are jumping from issue to issue. This duality in thinking helps students make sense between the differing perspectives about a persisting issue. Practicing the discussion and analysis of public issues better prepares students for participation in a democratic society (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks, 2008; Oliver et al., 1967).

A decade later, Barr and colleagues (1977) analyzed rationales for teaching social studies including the jurisprudential model. They concluded that the common purpose of the social studies was to prepare students to be good citizens. Oliver and Newmann (1992) explained that analyzing and discussing public issues provides opportunities to gain a better understanding of the U.S. political system and public policies created in response to community needs. They defined public issues as problems or value dilemmas persisting throughout history and across cultures. Differences in how people define problems or dilemmas caused by differences in values frequently repeat in a democratic society (Oliver & Newmann, 1992; Hess, 2009). This was a prominent reason for using the discussion of public issues across the different disciplines of the social studies (Oliver & Newmann, 1992). In more recent history, public issues like universal healthcare, civil rights, and gun control have been hotly contested in the United States.

Oliver and Shaver (1966) were among the first to use discussions of public issues to engage students in learning social studies. Several authors also wrote about using discussions of public issues in the social studies classroom. Oliver and Newmann (1992) advocated using public issues to teach social studies in secondary schools. The authors stressed that discussing public issues could be applied across the social studies disciplines. Hess and McAvoy (2015) argued that teachers can use the discussion of controversial public issues as a model for students to utilize when they enter the “highly divisive political discourse” of a democratic society (p. 43). McAvoy (2016) highlighted the importance of teaching students to see how other people use reason when discussing controversial public issues. Even when individuals agree to disagree, participants have a better understanding of the different perspectives of the issues under discussion (Journell, 2017). Clabough (2018) argued that students must have opportunities to analyze and examine issues in depth which also allows for students to experience the complexity of contemporary issues and public policies.

The series of pamphlets written by Oliver and colleagues (1967) focused on several issues found throughout U.S. history. In the pamphlet “The Rise of Organized Labor,” the lesson provided a case study of different workers in different industries during the Gilded Age. In the pamphlet focused on the crisis of law and change, the persisting questions were embedded into the content for the American Revolution. Other pamphlets included issues related to immigration, business competition, and the legacy of oppression.

In his book about the megalopolis of the northeastern United States, Short (2007) noted that almost 20 percent of the population under 18 fell below the national poverty line. The author also provided examples of public issues for different groups in the megalopolis. Issues of poverty, racial inequality, public health, and others continue to plague the megalopolis. Bartels (2016) echoed similar issues like economic inequality, racial inequality, and political inequality across the U.S. since the early 1900s. Tindall and Shi (2013) described the poverty of the Gilded Age: “After the Civil War . . . millions of children took up work outside the home, operating machines, sorting coal, stitching clothes, shucking oysters . . . and tending looms. Parents desperate for income believed that they had no choice but to put their children to work” (p. 770). Examples such as these illustrated the perennial nature of public policy issues.

The goal of this article is to illustrate how teachers can integrate the civic thinking involved in the discussion of public issues with taking civic action called for in the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013). Civic thinking refers to the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that students must possess as democratic citizens to work at the national, state, and local levels of governments as change agents (NCSS, 2013; Clabough, 2018). To achieve this goal, the author describes activities for a high school U.S. history class about the issue of child labor during the Gilded Age. The author selected this time period because students can see how public policies in the Gilded Age were slow to develop in the face of such rapid industrialization.

Applying the Public Issues Lesson

Staging the Inquiry

The first part of this lesson is an introduction to the activity. The teacher gives students a copy of the handout with the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution as they enter the classroom. A printable copy of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution can be found on the National archives website: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>. As students enter the room, make sure that the following questions are on display: 1. How would you define the phrase, *promote the general welfare*? 2. What do you think the authors of the preamble meant by *promote the general welfare*? Debrief by asking students how their own definitions compared to what they thought the framers of the U.S. Constitution meant. Discuss similarities and differences as a class. Ask students to keep definitions for use later in the lesson. Students are introduced to the ideas of public issues and taking civic action by breaking down what the authors of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution meant by promoting the general welfare.

In the next step of the activity, the teacher gives students a copy of the background text on the Gilded Age. Rich information on the Gilded Age can be found at the Digital History website (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/era.cfm?eraid=9&smtid=1>). While in pairs, students read and annotate the text. Annotating the text allows students to do a close reading of the details of the text and to put the text into their own words. Students highlight or underline important ideas that help them answer contextualization questions such as when and where the Gilded Age

took place, what were some of the problems associated with the Gilded Age, what public policies, if any, were in place to address the problems of the Gilded Age, and why this time period was significant. Once students have finished reading and annotating the background information, they answer the contextualization questions in the Gilded Age graphic organizer (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1.

When and where did the Gilded Age take place?	
What were some of the problems associated with the Gilded Age?	
What public policies, if any, were in place to address those problems of the Gilded Age?	
What is the historical significance of the Gilded Age?	

Once students have completed reading the background text and have finished the graphic organizer, ask them to provide examples of public issues they found in the readings. Before proceeding to the next step of the lesson, discuss students' responses to the prompts in the graphic organizer by allowing them to share out their responses. Ask students how business magnates from the Gilded Age viewed the lack of public policies.¹ Also, ask students why public policies were not needed prior to the late 1800s.² Debriefing allows the teacher to correct or clarify any misunderstandings from the text before proceeding to the next step of the lesson.

Next, students write a summary paragraph using the information from the background text. The purpose of summarizing the text is for the students to articulate in their own words difficult concepts from the background information on the Gilded Age. Students must respond to the following prompts in their summaries: 1. When did the Gilded Age take place? 2. What happened during this time period in history? 3. What is important about this time period in history? Include text evidence from the readings to support your answers. Students' paragraphs

¹ The absence of a policy was policy. Very few public policies existed at the time that the U.S. industrialized in the late 1800s. Leaders of industry viewed the lack of a policies as permission.

² Industrialization on this scale did not exist.

should not exceed five sentences. Limiting students' responses to five sentences causes students to carefully choose the wording and text evidence for their summaries (Clabough et al., 2017; Yancie & Clabough, 2017). Provide an example text like the one given here to help students write their summaries:

The Gilded Age that took place in the U.S. during the late 1800s was the result of massive industrialization. Large numbers of people moved to the cities for work in the factories. Innovative businessmen built corporations and companies using ruthless tactics to reduce competition and control their costs. During the Gilded Age, many inventions taken for granted today were invented like the telephone, the radio, and subway trains. People were also poor and less educated during this time period. For example, “only about two-and-a-half percent of the school-aged population graduated from high school.” This time period is important because it witnessed the building of great fortunes, unregulated by the government, to make the U.S. a major economic power by the turn of the 20th century.

When finished, ask one or two students to share their paragraphs with the class. Writing a summary of the background information helps students synthesize the information and make it their own (Clabough et al., 2017). It is also the best way for students to communicate their understanding of historical events (NCSS, 2013). Additionally, students benefit from the use of model texts by helping them replicate the writing process found in the model texts (Clabough et al., 2017).

Disciplinary Source Work

Child Labor during the Gilded Age

Display the following question for when students enter the classroom: How would your life be different if you had to stop going to school before fifth grade in order to get a job to help the family pay rent and buy food? Allow students to share out and discuss their answers. Once students have had a chance to share their answers, provide them a copy of the reading passages on the public issue of child labor in the Gilded Age. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics provides a wealth of information at the following website: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/history-of-child-labor-in-the-united-states-part-1.htm>. Inform students that they are going to read about a specific public issue—child labor. Students read and annotate the background information on child labor by underlining or highlighting important details from the text. Then, they respond to the prompts in the graphic organizer handout. The prompts in the graphic organizer helps students understand the public issue of child labor and the lack of a response to the public issue during the Gilded Age.

In this part of the activity, allow students to discuss the information from the reading passages on child labor in a whole discussion. Ask students to retrieve their definitions from

earlier in the lesson. Display or provide students a copy of the discussion prompts: 1. Did what you learned about child labor match your definition of promoting the general welfare? 2. Did it match the Founding Fathers' definition? Explain why or why not. After students have discussed the prompts, allow them to share their ideas with the whole class. Use this time to discuss inconsistencies between students' definitions of promoting the general welfare and the existence of child labor during the Gilded Age. Discussions help students make connections among different bits of information and process knowledge (Clabough et al., 2017).

Next, students write a first-person perspective piece on child labor. Perspective writing helps students develop historical empathy by exploring historical figures' thoughts, beliefs, and actions (Brooks, 2008). Students pretend that they are children working in a factory job during the Gilded Age. They write a journal entry telling about their life in the factory. Students use the reading passages on child labor, the information from the graphic organizer, and their responses to the discussion to write their journal entries. The journal entry should be written in first person, include a date, and be at least five sentences. Journal entries must show evidence of identification of the public issue (i.e., child labor), explain why it is a public issue, and why it was allowed for so long during the Gilded Age. Students must also use text evidence to support their answers. Once students have finished their paragraphs, ask a few students to share their paragraphs with the class. Writing first-person perspective pieces helps students explore the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people in the past which gives them the freedom to speculate and make inferences (Brooks, 2008).

Champion Against Child Labor: Lewis Hine

In this stage of the activity, students begin their examination of an historical figure who took informed civic action against child labor. Start by putting the following prompt on display for students to answer once they enter the classroom: What would you do if you saw that your neighbor's house was on fire? Explain. Give students approximately five minutes to answer the question. Debrief students by helping them understand that most people would take action. However, not all public issues are as clear as a house on fire. End the introductory discussion by telling students that they are going to learn about someone who took civic action against child labor during the Gilded Age.

Students examine the actions of a child labor reformer from the Gilded Age in the next part of the lesson. Give students a copy of the reading passages about Lewis Hine, a photographer who took pictures of children working in factories and other industries during the Gilded Age. The National Archives (<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/history-of-child-labor-in-the-united-states-part-1.htm>) provides information about Lewis Hine and access to primary sources he created. Place students in pairs to read and annotate the reading passages on Lewis Hine. The reading passages are comprised of both primary and secondary sources. Students write notes in the margins of the text to help them better understand the information. Students use a graphic organizer (see Figure 2.) to help them organize the details from the

readings. Students use their responses to the prompts in the graphic organizer to help them in the next step of the activity.

Figure 2.

What is the public issue?	
Which principle from the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution is connected to the public issue? Make a text-to-text connection between the two texts.	
How did Lewis Hine respond? Explain his actions.	
Did his actions lead to the creation of public policy regarding the public issue? Explain your answer.	

In this turn and talk activity, students turn to their neighbors and discuss the following prompts: 1. What is the relationship between public issues and taking civic action? Explain. 2. Do you think the author was a good citizen? Why or why not? Discuss students' responses to the questions on the graphic organizer before moving on to the next step of the lesson. The teacher should walk around the classroom and clarify any misunderstandings about Lewis Hine and his actions.

Students create their own original primary sources in this stage of the activity. Activities like creating their own original primary sources help students articulate their understanding of the text as well as build their own understanding of the past (Bickford, 2011; Yancie & Clabough, 2017). The purpose of this activity is to help students contextualize the actions taken by Lewis Hine. Students write a letter from the perspective of Lewis Hine. Use the following prompt for the faux primary source assignment:

Pretend that you are Lewis Hine. You have just finished another long day of taking pictures and scribbling notes in your pocket about child labor. Today was particularly troubling because you had to lie to the factory superintendent to get in and talk to the children who work in the factory. Every night, you sit down to write your wife a letter. In the letter, you describe the children who are working, their ages, their appearance, and the

conditions where the children are working. Also, in the letter tell your wife how it feels seeing the children in such conditions, and what you think should be done about it.

The letter should be at least six sentences long, including text evidence. If time permits, choose one or two students to share their letters with the class. Encourage students to read the letters as if they are Lewis Hine. The writing activity benefits students by allowing them to articulate their understanding about the actions of Lewis Hine during the Gilded Age (Yancie & Clabough, 2017).

Taking Civic Action

This stage of the lesson requires students to use the information they have learned about child labor in the Gilded Age to write a script for a Ted Talk. Ted Talks are short but powerful spoken presentations meant to encourage the free spread of ideas (<https://www.ted.com/talks>). Use the following prompt to allow students to articulate their understanding of child labor during the Gilded Age:

You have been invited by the local Tedx club to speak about child labor. You write a script for your Ted Talk that explains child labor during the Gilded Age. You also include information about how people viewed the public issue, the actions taken in response to child labor during the Gilded Age, and the public policies created in response to the public issue. You conclude your Ted Talk with a short discussion of why you think Lewis Hine took civic action and whether or not his actions made him a good citizen.

Answer students' questions about the writing prompt and clarify any confusion about the assignment before moving on to the next stage of the activity.

Next, students use a graphic organizer (see Figure 3.) to help them write their Ted Talk scripts. Provide students copies of the graphic organizer handout. Students use information from the graphic organizer to write their scripts. Using a graphic organizer helps students sort the information needed to complete the Ted Talk script assignment.

In this step, students write their Ted Talk scripts. Writing activities like the Ted Talk script gives students the opportunity to use what they have learned about child labor during the Gilded Age (Yancie & Clabough, 2017). Tell them to use the information in the graphic organizer and the readings from the earlier steps in the activity to help students complete the task. Remind students that they must have text evidence in their Ted Talk scripts to support their answers. The teacher should walk around the room to assist students and clarify any misunderstandings that may come up during the activity. The number of sentences used for this activity should vary, but students need at least eight sentences in the script to embody the spirit of the Ted Talk assignment. Bring the activity to a close by asking a few students to share their

Ted Talk scripts. Debrief students by asking them whether they think Lewis Hine’s actions made him a good citizen.

Figure 3.

What is child labor?	
Who supported and who opposed child labor? Why?	
What civic action did Lewis Hine take?	
Which public policies were put in place to protect children? Why?	

Conclusion

Now, more than ever, students must learn how to make decisions based on evidence and take informed action (NCSS, 2013). Designing lessons that include the discussion of public issues is an effective way to help students learn how to take an active role in a democratic society. In this article, the author described a lesson where students analyze and discuss the public issue of child labor during the Gilded Age. Then, they looked at an example of an historical figure taking civic action. Students also responded to a series of writing prompts to articulate their thoughts about the public issue.

In today’s contentious society, students need the skills to discuss public issues and public policies rationally with other members of our democratic society (Journell, 2017). Students benefit from discussing public issues because when they disagree constructively, they develop more tolerance for diverse views and question their own long-held beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence (Journell, 2017). Preparing students for civic engagement has become the primary focus for teaching social studies. Oliver and Shaver (1966) suggested that incorporating the discussion of public issues improves students’ ability to think critically. Parker (2008) emphasized that for students to become “democratically enlightened and democratically engaged” citizens, they must be engaged in the practice of learning and doing civics (p. 76). Discussing public issues as part of social studies instruction helps students get into the knowing and doing of civics. Hess (2008) noted that discussing controversial issues engaged students’ interest in the topic, increased their understanding of democratic principles and policies, and

improved critical thinking skills. She also remarked that discussing controversial issues increased students' motivation to take civic action as well as their interpersonal skills. Designing lessons using the strategies described in this article helps teachers build students' civic literacy, thinking, and argumentative skills across the social studies disciplines.

Rebecca Macon Bidwell is a National Board Certified Teacher at Clay-Chalkville Middle School in Alabama where she currently teaches 7th grade. Her teaching experiences include teaching all grade levels from sixth to twelfth grades and across different social studies disciplines. She anticipates the completion of her dissertation in the Spring of 2021 from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Her research interests include examining ways of using the discussion of public issues to implement the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) more effectively. She has written several practitioner articles where she describes ways to implement the C3 Framework into daily instruction.

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