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Can We Get Democracy on the Set? HUAC, Hollywood Ten, and First Amendment

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Abstract

In this article, a unit plan is provided to teach about the Hollywood Ten during the Second Red Scare for the high school civics classroom. Excerpts from *Blacklisted! Hollywood, The Cold War, and the First Amendment* (Brimner, 2018) are used in this article to explore the violation of Hollywood Ten's First Amendment rights. First, I discuss best teaching practices in civic education advocated for in the C3 Framework. Then, the focus of the article shifts to the role of free speech in a democracy. This discussion of free speech sets students up to examine the agency that democratic citizens possess by taking civic action to impact and shape public discourses on issues and events. Finally, an activity is given to examine how the Hollywood Ten's First Amendment rights were violated through HUAC's investigations into potential communist spies in the Hollywood film industry. The steps and resources needed to implement this unit plan are provided.

Keywords: Hollywood Ten; HUAC; civic education; C3 Framework; First Amendment

Americans have not always honored and respected their democratic values and traditions. For example, internment camps for Japanese Americans were created within the United States during World War II out of fear of their potential acts of sabotage (Brugar & Clabough, 2017). Examples like this are why the United States has been a democracy in theory as opposed to reality. Often, U.S. politicians let their fears and personal biases drive public policies. When this occurs, oft-marginalized groups' rights and civil liberties are violated (Hubbard, 2019). One example of this can clearly be seen with how the Hollywood Ten were treated during the Second Red Scare with the investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

The aftermath of World War II saw a Second Red Scare in the U.S. with the communist Soviet Union emerging as a global threat. The United States was in a state of hysteria with the potential threat of Soviet spies infiltrating American society, especially in the wake of the Soviet Union acquiring atomic weapons. These events led to witch hunts for communists in the United States (McCullough, 1992). One group targeted was Hollywood actors, producers, and directors (Blackerby, 2016). HUAC called members from Hollywood to testify. Ten screenwriters and directors refused to cooperate with HUAC and objected to the violations of their rights protected under the U.S. Constitution. These individuals included

Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo. They were dubbed the Hollywood Ten that were blacklisted from working in the film industry and in some cases also served jail sentences for their actions before HUAC (Doherty, 2019).

In this article, a unit plan is provided to teach about the Hollywood Ten during the Second Red Scare for the high school civics classroom. I utilize excerpts from *Blacklisted! Hollywood, The Cold War, and the First Amendment* (Brimner, 2018) throughout the steps of the unit plan. First, a brief literature review is provided about best practices in civic education advocated for in the C3 Framework. Then, a discussion with the role of free speech in a democracy is given. This discussion of free speech sets students up to examine the agency that democratic citizens have through taking civic action to impact and shape public discourses on issues and events. Finally, a unit plan is provided to explore how the Hollywood Ten's rights were violated through HUAC's investigations. The steps and resources needed to implement this unit plan are given.

Civic Education Envisioned by the C3 Framework for the High School Classroom

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) created its C3 Framework to propose a different vision for the high school civics classroom. The C3 Framework stresses that civic educators should utilize classroom activities and assessments that strengthen their high school students' civic thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills (NCSS, 2013a). This type of teaching is accomplished by students researching open-ended questions and applying their findings to take civic action (Grant, 2013; Levinson & Levine, 2013). Civic thinking skills are designed to help students apply the disciplinary thought processes of political scientists. This means that civic thinking skills are different from historical thinking skills because political scientists ask different questions than historians to examine issues and events (Clabough, 2018; Journell, 2017; Journell, Beeson, & Ayers, 2015). There are many components that go into developing high school students' civic thinking skills. Some of these components are provided in the list below.

1. Researching an issue impacting your local community and constructing and implementing service-learning projects in order to attempt to address that topic.
2. Designing and articulating persuasive arguments in local settings to address the needs of your community.
3. Analyzing examples where people's rights were violated and designing effective strategies to protest these social injustices.

The list above is not exhaustive but is reflective with the type of civic education teaching advocated for in the C3 Framework. One key component of the C3 Framework is addressing social injustices where individuals and groups' rights were violated.

Democratic citizenship is not a passive process (Parker, 2015). The active role of democratic citizens in their government is one component that differentiates the U.S. system of government. Democratic citizens have the agency through their actions to impact and shape public discourses that can change economic, social, cultural, and political institutions (Barton, 2012). This is one of the main reasons that U.S. history is replete with examples of those in power trying to deny oft-marginalized groups their political voices (Meacham, 2018). For this reason, high school civics teachers need to design classroom activities that allow their students to examine these social injustices connected to free speech (Cohen, 2015; Gerstmann, 2018). These classroom activities provide learning opportunities to examine how historical figures have challenged systems of oppression and equip students with the knowledge to take civic action to confront social injustices (Levine, 2012; Levinson, 2012).

Civic action is one of the most powerful tools available to democratic citizens to fight social injustices. Democratic citizens have the ability through their actions to shine light on oppressive systems that attempt to deny them their rights and civil liberties (LeCompte & Blevins, 2015; Levinson, 2014). Through democratic citizens' actions, they can raise awareness to an issue and inspire their fellow citizens to advocate for social change. It is this level of activism required to bring about change in society (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013; Teitelbaum, 2011). When social injustices are not challenged, people's rights and civil liberties are violated and a system of repression is established that can negatively impact generations of citizens (Hubbard, 2019).

In the next sections, a unit plan is described for how the Hollywood Ten's rights were violated during the Second Red Scare. The activities in the unit plan discussed in the next sections reflect the type of civic education teaching advocated for in the C3 Framework.

Analyzing the Violations of the Hollywood Ten's Rights Protected by the First Amendment

My unit plan to explore the violation of the Hollywood Ten's rights during the Second Red Scare is driven by *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018). *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) is a trade book that examines the Hollywood Ten's story as well as how the hysteria and fears about communism led to the violation of people's rights protected under the First Amendment. This trade book contains a lot of rich primary sources about the Hollywood Ten's case in a narrative that is engaging and easy for high school students to follow (Clabough & Wooten, 2016). The narrative of this trade book allows students to contextualize the fear, paranoia, and hysteria within the U.S. during the Second Red Scare about potential communist spies (Clabough & Wooten, 2016). Trade books are meaningful reading assignments that high school civic education teachers can utilize to examine a topic in depth. The teacher starts by

having students read the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which is provided below.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

After students read the First Amendment, they work in pairs to answer the following analysis prompt. “What was the Founding Fathers’ goal in creating the First Amendment?”

After students answer this analysis prompt, the teacher brings the class back together for a class discussion. Pairs share their responses through a whole class discussion and add onto their answers based on peers’ comments. Whole class discussions like this allow students to learn from their peers and for the teacher to clarify any student misconceptions about the content material being examined. The teacher asks the following question to extend the class discussion. What activities for democratic citizens are covered under the First Amendment connected to freedom speech? This extension question helps students see the different rights that U.S. citizens have because of the First Amendment. The different amendments in the U.S. Constitution are designed to spell out the freedoms and liberties that democratic citizens can exercise in their daily lives.

After this discussion of the First Amendment, the teacher needs to provide students with background knowledge about why HUAC investigated the Hollywood Ten. To contextualize U.S. society in the Second Red Scare, students in the same pairs as earlier read pages 16 and 17 from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018). These two pages of this trade book do a great job of contextualizing the fear and paranoia during the Second Red Scare. After pairs read these two pages of this trade book, they answer the following two analysis prompts.

1. What was it about communism in the Soviet Union that scared so many Americans? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.
2. What was the mission of HUAC? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.

These two analysis prompts help students grasp the reasons why HUAC was formed in the aftermath of World War II.

After students read these two pages from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) and answer the two analysis prompts, there is another whole class discussion. Again, whole class discussions foster critical and in-depth discussions of the content material. Students share their responses and add onto their answers based on peers’ comments. This class discussion helps students articulate why HUAC was considered an important government mechanism by some to deal

with potential communist spies. This step will end the first day of the unit focusing on the Hollywood Ten.

During the second day of this unit, the teacher focuses on why HUAC thought that it was important to investigate Hollywood for potential communist spies. Pairs read pages 22 and 23 of *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) for the justification during the time period of investigating Hollywood for potential communist spies. After reading these two pages, they answer the following two analysis prompts.

1. Why does Chairman Thomas argue that Hollywood has a big impact on Americans' lives? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.
2. What evidence is provided for why these figures in Hollywood were justified to be subpoenaed by HUAC? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.

The first analysis prompt helps students grasp why HUAC targeted figures in Hollywood for investigation. The second analysis prompt shows that HUAC did not provide evidence for why people were called to testify before the committee.

After pairs read these two pages and answer the two analysis prompts, there is another class discussion as a whole group. The teacher poses the following extension question. What does the differentiating of witnesses on page 22 of those being “friendly” and “hostile” to HUAC mean? This extension question helps students grasp how HUAC was violating people's rights by accusing individuals of charges with limited to no evidence. The class discussion as a whole group lets students unpack the nuances and layers posed by controversies with the case of the Hollywood Ten.

Blacklisted (Brimner, 2018) does a great job of capturing statements from members of the Hollywood Ten about how the HUAC hearings violated their rights protected under the First Amendment. Pairs can examine some of their statements by first reading the left-hand column of the graphic organizer (see Figure 1. on next page) and then answering the two analysis prompts in the right-hand column. These excerpts allow students to grasp the arguments from members of the Hollywood Ten of how their rights were violated by HUAC. Students are able to use evidence from the excerpts of the trade book to support their arguments (Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2013).

There is a whole class debriefing once students read these excerpts and answer the two analysis prompts in the graphic organizer. Students add onto their responses based on peers' comments. The sharing of students' responses to these two analysis prompts helps them grasp how the mechanisms of the U.S. government can be employed to violate its citizens' rights and civil liberties. The teacher builds on this idea by asking the following extension question. Why are the Hollywood Ten so critical of U.S. politicians' behavior that served on HUAC? This extension question helps students to see how American politicians

servicing on HUAC that were claiming to defend the U.S. Constitution were violating the various amendments in this seminal document in order to defend it (Blackerby, 2016). The class discussion as a whole group is important for the teacher to help students understand the abstract concept of how people's actions can lead to the violation of other individuals' rights. This step will end the second day of the unit.

Figure 1.

Excerpts from <i>Blacklisted</i> (Brimner, 2018)	Analysis Prompts
<p>“He (Lawson) then went on the attack, accusing the HUAC of attempting, through its questions, to gain control over the motion picture business and to invade the basic rights of American citizens” (p. 50).</p> <p>“ ‘Now at the age of 39, I am commanded to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. For a full week this committee has encouraged an assortment of well-rehearsed witnesses to testify that I and others are subversive and un-American. It has refused us the opportunity that any pickpocket receives in a magistrate’s court--- the right to cross-examine these witnesses, to refute their testimony, to reveal their motives, their history, and who, exactly, they are’ ” (p. 67).</p> <p>“Maltz once remarked that ‘writers... must be judged by their work and not by the committees they join.’ He maintained that if the HUAC found his work subversive, it wouldn’t be long before they found other work they objected to in newspapers and magazines” (p. 67 and 68).</p>	<p>1. Select one of the excerpts in the column on the left. What is the author’s argument against HUAC’s actions? Use evidence from the excerpt to support your arguments.</p> <p>2. How do HUAC’s actions violate the democratic norms and principles of the United States articulated in the First Amendment? Use evidence to support your arguments.</p>

During the third day of this unit, the economic toll of the violation of the Hollywood Ten’s rights and civil liberties will be explored. Members of the Hollywood Ten were blacklisted within the Hollywood film industry, which made it hard for them to eke out a living. Hollywood companies were hesitant to hire members of the Hollywood Ten out of fear with the negative publicity that this would generate along with further investigations by HUAC. As is often the case, people protesting social injustices often face economic retribution

by those in power to curb their protest efforts (Monreal & Weiser, 2019). The high school civics teacher can use excerpts from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) for his or her students to explore the negative economic ripple effects of the Hollywood Ten's actions before HUAC.

Students in pairs read the first paragraph on page 134 from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) to see how the hearings by HUAC impacted Lester Cole, one of the Hollywood Ten. After reading this paragraph, pairs answer the following analysis prompt.

How did being blacklisted as one of the Hollywood Ten negatively impact Lester Cole's economic earnings? Use evidence from the trade book to support your arguments.

This analysis prompt helps students see the ripple effects of the Hollywood Ten's political statements on their abilities to earn a living. In other words, students can grasp how the social studies disciplines are interconnected (Lintner, 2013).

After pairs read this paragraph of the trade book and answer the analysis prompt, there is another class discussion as a whole group. Pairs share their responses to this analysis prompt. The teacher asks the following extension question. "How could the Hollywood Ten take civic action for being blacklisted?" Students may respond that members of the Hollywood Ten could sue Hollywood studios that did not honor their contracts. At this point, the teacher can point out the Hollywood Ten did bring their cases to trials, but almost universally lost their cases in court because judges were hesitant to stand against the testimony in front of HUAC (Brimner, 2018; Doherty, 2019). This step of the activity shows how far the hysteria of being associated with alleged communist spies from the Hollywood Ten reached in American society. This step will end the third day of this unit.

During the fourth day of this unit, students use evidence from primary and secondary sources explored about the Hollywood Ten to complete a writing prompt. Activities from the unit plan prepare students to individually complete one of the following writing activities.

1. There is a famous political cartoon about the ways in which HUAC violated people's rights on page 137 of *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018). Students create their own political cartoon about how HUAC violated the Hollywood Ten's rights under the First Amendment. They should also write a half page summary explaining how their political cartoon captures the ways in which the Hollywood Ten's rights under the First Amendment were violated.
2. Students assume the role of a lawyer for one of the Hollywood Ten. They deliver a statement to the press about how his client's First Amendment rights were violated through creating a video using iMovie. The students should draw on the statements from a member of the Hollywood Ten during the HUAC meetings to support their

arguments. The length of this statement to the press should be about a page in length.

3. Students assume the role of a member of the House of Representatives during 1947. They write a speech to be delivered in the House of Representatives to argue against the First Amendment violations that happened during testimony to HUAC. Their speech should be supported by statements during the HUAC testimony. The length of this speech should be about a page in length.

Regardless of the writing prompt selected, students apply knowledge from the steps of the three prior lesson plans in this unit to take civic action to address how the Hollywood Ten's rights protected under the First Amendment were violated. The ability to select from among the three writing prompts allows students to apply their learning strengths to this assignment (Dalton, 2015). Students can write, draw, or talk through these writing prompts, and each of these mediums allows students to demonstrate their content knowledge from this project (Bickford, 2011; Parker & Lo, 2019; VanSledright, 2013). These writing prompts give high school students experience combatting social injustices. The experience gained from this unit helps to prepare high school students to confront and address social injustices as future democratic citizens (NCSS, 2013b).

The days in this unit plan are designed for students to break down the complexities and layers of the Hollywood Ten's testimony before HUAC. On day one, students through whole group discussions articulate the rights that are protected by the First Amendment and examine the context of the Second Red Scare by reading excerpts from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018). Day two explores the reasons why HUAC was fixated on the Hollywood film industry with communist spies and how members of the Hollywood Ten articulated how their rights were violated by reading excerpts from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) and whole group class discussions. On day three, the economic toll of Hollywood Ten members being blacklisted is explored from reading excerpts from *Blacklisted* (Brimner, 2018) and answering the provided analysis prompt; there is a whole group class discussion where students share their answers to this analysis prompt. Students use all of the evidence from their graphic organizer and analysis prompts from the first three days of this unit to answer the summative assessment on day four. Individually, each student selects one of the three writing prompts and communicates how HUAC violated the First Amendment rights of the Hollywood Ten.

Conclusion

The unit plan in this article allows students to see how the Hollywood Ten's rights protected under the First Amendment were violated by HUAC. It also sets the stage for a follow-up unit on the rise of Joe McCarthy and his accusations against government officials as being communists that led to people's loss of employment and their rights being violated. Students are able to grasp the ripple effects of the Hollywood Ten being blacklisted based on

their testimony. The teacher can draw parallels to a contemporary example of how Collin Kaepernick was blacklisted in a similar manner by NFL teams after his protest of kneeling during the national anthem (Monreal & Weiser, 2019). Students need opportunities to explore issues where people's rights are violated in the high school civics classroom. These learning experiences prepare students for their future responsibilities as democratic citizens, especially since our civics classrooms are one of the few safe spaces that kids have to discuss such issues (Kawashima- Ginsberg & Junco, 2018).

Issues connected to the violation of people's rights are not issues confined to the past. Contemporary Americans and future generations of U.S. citizens will have to face similar issues connected to violations of people's rights. For example, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Arab Americans faced an increase in hostility and prejudices from some U.S. citizens that blamed them for the terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of almost three thousand Americans. In a similar vein, Asian Americans are currently facing an increase of racism and prejudice for the coronavirus that Donald Trump labeled as the "Chinese virus." These two examples show how fear, paranoia, and hysteria can inflame some people's dormant prejudices and biases (Stevens, 2020).

However, for the United States to truly represent the democratic norms and traditions that it is supposed to embody, these negative emotions and prejudices have to stay dormant. These negative emotions and prejudices are counter to the democratic norms and traditions of the United States. The democratic norms and values of this country are preserved by how we treat each other and in honoring and respecting the individual rights of our fellow citizens on a daily basis. Therefore, high school civics teachers must equip each generation of future democratic citizens with the analysis skills to research violations of groups' rights protected under the U.S. Constitution. This helps students to recognize the checkered record of the United States in the past of violating people's rights in order to address similar social injustices in the present.

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