



Module 3: The Many Participants in Local Government

For most Americans, local government is where interactions with government are personal, face-to-face and frequent. Consequently, local government allows us to have many more opportunities to get involved with and take part in local governance. Local governments have elections for officeholders, of course, but they also may require votes to authorize the spending of money or new projects. Controversial or difficult decisions may require public hearings where opposing sides of issues are debated.

This module focuses on the many participants in local government. Sometimes the participation is at the individual level; sometimes organized groups of people sharing a common view may get together to try to influence public policy. Accordingly, in the next series of lessons students strive to understand the roles and the levels of influence that various participants have.

Lesson 1: The Local Media and Local Government

Understanding Goals: Who can influence the laws and policies of local government?

Introduction:

Time Span: 3-5 days

Resources Needed:

- Handout: *Bentley Boyd, "Local Political Journalism"*
- Handout: *Reporting on Local Government*
- Access to local newspapers. Most papers now have online editions in addition to the traditional print version.
- Access to computer software that allows students to design and create a newsletter. Examples include word processing software (Microsoft Word, Google Docs, Zoho) or desktop publishing software (Apple Pages, Adobe InDesign, Microsoft Publisher or Scribus—a free, open-source program available at <http://www.scribus.net/>).
- A free blog obtained from Edublogs, <http://edublogs.org/>; Blogger, Google's free blogging service, www.blogger.com; LiveJournal, <http://www.livejournal.com/>; WordPress, <http://wordpress.com/>; or another blogging service.

Skill sets: Analysis, interpretation, research, writing for public consumption

Performance of Understanding:

Students conduct research on the ways that newspapers cover local government and local politics and create their own community newsletter or blog.

Procedures:

Begin this three-part lesson by distributing to students the essay by newspaper reporter Bentley Boyd, *Local Political Journalism*. Conduct a follow-up class discussion on the themes of the essay. Possible questions for students are:

- When Bentley Boyd was in middle school and high school, he found the coverage of school issues lacking in his small town. Are there any issues in the students' community that, similarly, are not getting adequate attention?

- Evaluate Bentley’s first big story, the campaign for mayor in Mansfield. What do you think about the approach he took to the campaign? What is the best way to cover an election campaign?
- Reflecting on your own Youth Issues Agenda campaign, what issues or stories would you like to see further developed in the local press?

Begin the second part of the lesson by providing students with a copy of the handout, *Reporting on Local Government*. Students should also have access to local newspapers. These can be hard copies collected in advance and distributed to students or, if necessary, students can access the online version of their local newspaper. Students should use the prompts of the handout to research coverage of local government by the local press. Eventually, students reach a conclusion about the purpose of the coverage and the depth and quality of reporting.

In the final part of the lesson, call for volunteers to work on developing a classroom newsletter or blog that covers community issues. The initial task of the group is to decide on the scope of the publication. The volunteer group will also decide if this should be an online blog or a weekly or biweekly newsletter.

Once the preliminary decisions are made, the group should develop a list of ideas for the first publication and create a deadline for the completion of stories. They should also seek out contributors from among their classmates and/or take on a writing role themselves. The student reporters then write a couple of paragraphs for inclusion in the newsletter or blog.

If the newsletter option is selected, students should use word processing or desktop publishing software to develop the layout and publication of the newsletter. If the blog option is selected, students should get a free account from Blogger, WordPress, LiveJournal or another blog hosting service.

After the newsletter is published, distribute copies around the community and post a copy on the class wiki. When the blog is operational, distribute via email a link to the website to community members who might find the news and insights of interest.

Assessments:

Informal assessments of class discussions. Formal assessment of newspaper research. Evaluation of class newsletter or blog.

Complementary Materials/Other Pathways/Other Activities:

Newspapers in Education (NIE). About 700 publishing companies currently deliver newspapers and other services to schools within their circulation areas. Since its inception at *The New York Times* in the 1930s, the NIE program has spread to all 50 states, U.S. territories and some 40 other nations. According to the Newspaper Association of America, "virtually all newspapers with more than 50K circulation and most with 15K to 50K circulation, have NIE programs."

Contact your local newspaper to see what services they may offer. It is worth checking

to see if you can get a classroom set of newspapers for the days of this lesson or for the period of the entire curriculum. No two programs are identical in educational emphasis or services and materials offered. Inquire with the local newspaper's NIE contact to see what is available for you. Frequently, the information is accessible online on the newspaper's Web site. Otherwise, call the newspaper and ask to talk with the Newspapers in Education representative.

Correlation to *National Standards for Civics and Government*:

Standard III.E. How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

Standard V.A. What is citizenship?

Standard V.B. What are the rights of citizens?

Lesson 2: The Influence of Interest Groups

Understanding Goals: Who can influence the laws and policies of local government?

Introduction: Groups of non-elected individuals with a shared concern in a topic or an issue may organize and work as a group to seek the political outcome they favor. These organizations are called interest groups. Sometimes these groups are referred to as special interest groups. This latter term often has a negative connotation and assumes that the “special interest” is separate from, and perhaps worse than, one’s own “public” interest.

Time Span: 3-4 days

Resources Needed:

- Access to the Internet

Skill sets: Analysis, interpretation, research

Performance of Understanding:

Students select an interest group to join and analyze the resources and tactics of the interest group to bring about a desired public policy.

Procedures:

With student input, compile a list of interest groups that student research teams can join. Community-based organizations can be compiled by interviewing community leaders and reading the local newspaper. Listed below are several online indexes of advocacy or interest groups:

- Center for Policy Alternatives, Progressive Directory, <http://www.stateaction.org/directory/> -- Links to over 700 organizations.
- Idealist, <http://www.idealists.org/> -- A searchable directory of over 68,000 non-profit Web sites all over the world provided by Action Without Borders.
- Project VoteSmart’s Issue Organizations, http://www.vote-smart.org/issue_group.php -- A compilation of organizations. Lists can be generated by subject or by state.
- Political Advocacy Groups, <http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/fac/kfountain/> -- Maintained by Kathleen Carlisle Fountain, Washington State University Vancouver Library, this site provides both a subject guide and an alphabetical

list to a variety of special interest groups.

Based on the Youth Issues Agenda topic, each student research team should select an interest group to research and possibly join. Students should conduct research on the interest group and either write a 250-word summary of the organization or develop a brief presentation of the organization to be shared with the class. PowerPoint, Keynote or Zoho Show software may be used for the presentation. Research questions should be decided in class. Possibilities include:

- What is the mission statement or purpose of the organization?
- Who are the primary financial supporters of the organization?
- How many members does the organization have?
- What types of issues are addressed by the organization?
- Is it concerned with local, state or national policy?
- How effective has the organization been in influencing decisions by policy-makers?
- Does the research team support the goals of the interest group?

If a paper is written, the findings should be posted to the class wiki or blog. If a slide show is developed, post a Web-accessible version of the presentation to the class wiki or blog.

Assessments:

Evaluation of the group paper or group presentation.

Correlation to *National Standards for Civics and Government*:

Standard I.A. What is civic life? What is politics? What is government? Why are government and politics necessary? What purposes should government serve?

Standard III.C. How are state and local governments organized and what do they do?

Standard III.E. How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

Lesson 3: Creating a Grassroots Movement

Understanding Goals: Who can influence the laws and policies of local government?

Introduction:

Time Span: 3-5 days

Resources Needed:

Handout: *Leadership Roles Within an Advocacy Movement*

Handout: *Nine Questions*

Handout: *Tips For Making a Coalition Work*

Skill sets: Analysis, interpretation

Performance of Understanding:

In this simulation, students create a grassroots organization that is supportive of the Youth Issues Agenda project.

Procedures:

This lesson is a simulation game for all students. Begin the lesson by providing students with the handouts, *Leadership Roles Within an Advocacy Movement*, *Nine Questions*, and *Tips for Making a Coalition Work*. Students working together will plan and create a community grassroots organization.

The first task for students is to read the handout, *Leadership Roles Within an Advocacy Movement*. As a whole class, discuss the 11 leadership roles described and why an advocacy organization may find these roles valuable. Then ask students to think about the list and choose the role that best suits their skills and personality. Have students write a paragraph or two on why they selected the role that they did. Students should share their choices with their research team or with the entire class. What roles were most popular? Were any roles not selected? Why? How might these roles be used in an advocacy organization?

The second task is for students to craft an action plan for their organization. The handout *Nine Questions* provides a framework for planning and strategizing. Working in their research teams, students develop a viable plan for their community organization and post their plans to the class wiki or blog.

The third task is for students to think about coalition building. Using the points made in the handout *Tips for Making a Coalition Work*, students should think about how they

could help their organization grow. Have students write a paragraph and/or have a class discussion on how they would try to grow their grassroots organization in their community. Students should also think about the type of person most likely to support their efforts.

With this work completed, students will be ready to talk with a community activist, the task of the following lesson.

Assessments:

Informal assessments by teacher

Subsequent assessment is completed by teachers and classmates on 1) accuracy and clarity of the information presented, and 2) degree to which the completed task persuades others.

Complementary Materials/Other Pathways/Other Activities:

Anya Kamenetz, “The Network Unbound,” *Fast Company.com* (June 2006), http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/106/open_social-networks.html. This online article provides an overview of how TagWorld, Facebook and other next-generation social networks can affect both business and politics. The article notes, “Activists adopted these new technologies early on because the tools mesh perfectly with the goal of connecting and empowering individuals.”

Correlation to *National Standards for Civics and Government*:

Standard III.E. How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

Standard V.E. How can citizens take part in civic life?

Lesson 4: Interviewing a Community Activist

Introduction: Due to the personal, face-to-face nature of local government, many private citizens who become active in politics have done so at this level. In this lesson students again go through the process of inviting a speaker to their class. The goal of the lesson is to allow students to gain insight into the work of an activist and the events that motivated that individual to take on this role.

Time Span: 3-4 days

Resources Needed:

- Access to a community activist willing to be interviewed by students

Skill sets: Interviewing

Performance of Understanding:

Students interview a grassroots organizer or community activist about their work in order to better understand the motivations of the activist and the actions typically engaged in by activists.

Procedures:

Assist students in developing a list of individuals who are community activists and who would be good candidates to invite to meet with the class. Activists are of many types and are in many areas in community life. By merely asking people with long-term ties to the community if they can provide suggestions about potential candidates, you and the class should be able to develop a strong list. For example, ask your school principal about individuals who are active in educational concerns, ask students to talk with their families about individuals who are taking leadership roles in the community, survey the letters-to-the-editor section of local newspapers to see if anyone frequently writes on topics of local interest, or ask the local government official who spoke to the class earlier if she or he has knowledge of local organizers or activists.

Once the list has been created and the class reaches agreement about who should be invited, students should collectively craft an invitation to the potential guest or guests. Contact can be made and the invitation can be extended through a phone call, a personal meeting, by email or with a written invitation.

When an invitation has been accepted, students should undertake additional research on issues of interest and the invitee's role in local government. Students should develop a list of questions to be asked. The questions can cover areas such as why the invitee became an activist, policy issues of interest to the class, and insights about the best ways to get involved with and influence local government and the community. Students

should also develop the protocol for the meeting: Who will introduce the speaker? How will questions be asked? How do we ensure that everyone gets a chance to interact with the speaker?

Afterward, a class discussion should be held to debrief. Points that students should think about include:

- What was learned?
- How did the invited speaker come across to those in attendance?
- Are there any new questions that developed as a result of the meeting?
- Is there an additional point of view or individual that could provide further insight?

Assessments:

Informal assessment of class meeting with community leader.

Correlation to *National Standards for Civics and Government*:

Standard III.E. How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

Standard V.E. How can citizens take part in civic life?

Lesson 5: Analyzing Political Conflict

Understanding Goals: Who can influence the laws and policies of local government?

Introduction: In this culminating performance of understanding students rely on their recently gained insights and knowledge to analyze political conflict in their community and determine the supporters of the competing sides.

Time Span: 3-5 days

Resources Needed:

- Access to local newspapers, community newsletters or blogs that cover local politics.

Skill sets: Data analysis, interpretation

Performance for Understanding:

After analyzing a current or recent controversial issue in their local community, students determine both the competing positions and the supporters of each position.

Procedures:

Begin the lesson by having students select a controversial issue in their local community that is receiving considerable interest and media attention. If nothing controversial is on the table at present, a recent issue may be chosen. Possibilities are endless, of course, but they include such issues as school redistricting, an increase in property taxes and allowing development in a previously undeveloped green space. It is preferred to choose an issue that will require governing authorities to reach a decision in the near future.

Once the issue is agreed upon, students are to conduct research on the conflict using print or online versions of local newspapers, local political blogs, interviews and attendance at hearings and meetings. To lessen the research load, have different student research teams conduct research on different elements of the issue and the different areas listed below. Otherwise, each research team can conduct its own separate research with individuals within the team dividing up the workload.

- First, students should identify the opposing sides. How many views are there? What are the competing visions?
- Second, students need to determine the interest groups and powerful individuals who support different sides of the issue. These should be listed and described in the final report. Are financial concerns affecting the debate? Is money pouring

in to support advertising and other political efforts? If so, where is the money coming from? Is there a separate grassroots agenda and group of supporters? If so, do they have financial clout? If not, where and how can they influence the debate?

- Third, students should try to find out from press reports or blog reports if political ambitions of the decision-makers or advocates are coming into play. Is an election looming that is likely to influence a vote? Does someone aspire to higher office—and can they use their position on this issue to woo future voters or financial supporters?
- Fourth, do the local media hold a position? How are they making their views known?
- Finally, ask students to reveal their own position on the issue. Why did they reach that conclusion?

Write a 250-500 word collaborative paper that provides the research team's analysis of the issue. Post the report to the class blog or wiki.

Assessments:

Assess the clarity of writing and quality of the analysis depicted in the group paper.

Correlation to *National Standards for Civics and Government*:

Standard III.E. How does the American political system provide for choice and opportunities for participation?

Standard V.E. How can citizens take part in civic life?