

The Constitution by Cell

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What do you get when you take 90 seventh graders to a popular 9,000-square-foot exhibit, in Washington, D.C., that averages a million visitors a year, on a busy spring day and allow them to use their cell phones? Now, you may be tempted to answer “chaos,” but in fact the correct answer is an engaging learning experience centered on the U.S. Constitution.

On a recent visit to the National Archives Experience in Washington, D.C., students in Jenni Ashley and Gay Brock’s U.S. history classes at the Potomac School in McLean, Virginia, participated in a pilot program we call “The Constitution by Cell.” Armed with their cell phones, a basic understanding of the Constitution, and a willingness to participate in an undisclosed learning experience, they arrived with a sense of curiosity and excitement. Unbeknownst to them, they would leave with resources and ideas that they would later use to develop a digital story about the Constitution and their experience at the National Archives.

Preparing for the Activity

Prior to their arrival, we explained to the teachers the goals of the on-site activity. Students would

1. analyze documents on display in the Public Vaults exhibit at the National Archives;
2. determine how the documents illustrate the Constitution “in action”;
3. synthesize what they discovered into a digital story for an audience using their cell phones and web tools.

Ashley and Brock were excited about what their students would be doing and

more than willing to help make it a successful experience. They were enthusiastic about the content their students would learn, the skills they would use, and the role technology would play. They agreed to prepare in the following ways:

1. introducing students to the Constitution’s Preamble;
2. dividing the classes into smaller teams;
3. assigning each team a section of the Constitution with which to become familiar;
4. setting up accounts for student use on a web service provider that turns telephone messages into audio files or podcasts;
5. reminding students to bring cell phones on the field trip.

The Experience

On the day of the students’ field trip, we welcomed the entire group at the William G. McGowan Theater in the National Archives Building. We then provided instructions for the day, explaining that they had one hour to locate documents in the Public Vaults that illustrate content in the section of the Constitution that they had been previously assigned in class. Next, we gave them prompts to help describe their findings, and we demonstrated how they would use their cell phones to make recordings. We also asked them to

respect the other visitors with whom they would be sharing the exhibit space. Finally, we guided the students to the Public Vaults and turned them loose to make their own discoveries.

As we walked through the exhibits, we watched the students carefully reading, strategizing, and delegating responsibilities. Soon, students began recording their findings in quiet corners of the exhibit space and taking pictures with their phones to later incorporate into their final projects.

One group found a letter from a child to President Gerald Ford about his pardon of Richard Nixon. The group would later use this in its digital story as evidence of the president’s power to issue pardons as included in Article 2 of the Constitution. To illustrate the enumeration of the population as outlined in Article 1, another group located and planned to include the 1850 Federal Population Census Schedule, recording Abraham Lincoln and his family in their digital story. Time passed quickly for the students.

When the students finished their recordings, we gathered in the Boeing Learning Center and showed them how to retrieve the images, photographs, and sound recordings they referenced in their voicemails. We demonstrated the Archival Research Catalog (ARC), available on the National Archives website at www.archives.gov/research/arc/, where digital images of the documents featured in the exhibit and thousands more are available. The students left the National Archives with enthusiasm, knowing that when they returned to school their recordings and pictures would take on a new life.

Six Steps to Creating Digital Stories with Cell Phones

The “Constitution by Cell” activity can be easily adapted to a classroom setting.

Step One

Introduce students to the structure of the Constitution, beginning with the Preamble. Divide the class into teams of three to five students, and assign each team a particular section of the Constitution with which to become familiar. (Below are suggested teams.)

Divide the class into teams:

- Team 1 – Article I, Sections 1–3
- Team 2 – Article I, Sections 4–7
- Team 3 – Article I, Section 8
- Team 4 – Article I, Sections 9–10
- Team 5 – Article II, Sections 1–2
- Team 6 – Article II, Sections 3–4
- Team 7 – Article III
- Team 8 – Article IV
- Team 9 – Articles V, VI, VII

Step Two

For each team, set up an account on any of the several web services currently available that turn telephone messages into digital audio files or podcasts. [Students who came to the National Archives arrived with a telephone number to call to record “voicemails,” after their teacher had followed our suggestion and set up **drop.io** website accounts. Similar web services include *PhoneCasting*, *Gabcast*, *Gcast*, *VoiceThread*, and others.]

Step Three

Provide students with access to a variety of primary sources to explore, and ask them to keep an eye out for the best example of a document or artifact that illustrates their section of the Constitution at work. On field trip day at the National Archives, students explored the Public Vaults exhibit and evaluated several documents on display. In the classroom, explore an online exhibit with students, showcase primary sources around the classroom, or encourage students to make their own discoveries in the National Archives Archival Research Catalog (ARC) (www.archives.gov/research/arc/).

Step Four

After each team has found and discussed a document to highlight, direct students to call their team’s telephone number and record five separate messages in response to prompts (see inset at right). [In the Public Vaults, students also photographed their document and their presence in the exhibit using camera phones and sent the images to their web accounts.]

Step Five

The steps involved in the creation of the finished product—the digital stories—include retrieving audio files from web accounts, finding even more digital primary sources, and putting it all together

using moviemaking or storytelling software. The web services we mentioned specialize in providing file conversion and uncomplicated retrieval of digital files, eliminating the need to convert file formats. Students can simply visit their accounts and download the files. Students can also conduct further web research, using such sites as ARC, to find more digital documents and artifacts for their final stories. Lastly, student teams can collaboratively select, edit, and arrange audio and image files into finished digital stories that reflect their interpretations of the U.S. Constitution and the primary sources they have reviewed. Students who visited the National Archives used *Windows Movie Maker* or *iMovie* to create their stories.

Step Six

A last step in the project is for students to share their work with a real and broad audience. Because they have created and saved their stories digitally, possibilities may include posting student work to a school website, wiki, or other online site through a sharing platform. Students can view one another’s work, post comments and feedback, and send links to relatives, friends and even pen pals around the globe.

Prompts

Describe the content of the document. What is its name? What is it about?

Describe the physical features of the document. What does it look like? How is it displayed? What date was it created? Is there any other information about its history that could help explain its condition?

Describe the physical environment of the room you’re in. What is the room like? What is around you? What other documents are near this one? Why do you think this document is included in this particular room?

Describe why this document is a good example of the section of the Constitution your team was assigned. How does this demonstrate that section of the Constitution at work?

Find and read the words from your section of the Constitution that relate to this document. For example, “Article IV says...” (Quote from the Constitution and/or put it in your own words.)

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Reflection and Analysis

As soon as the Potomac School students left the National Archives that day, we began to reflect on the design of this new activity—even before we had seen their digital stories. *Had we accomplished our goal? Did we create an authentic learning experience wherein students would both learn about the Constitution and its enduring relevance, and insert themselves into the experience to create a final product to share with others? Should we make changes to this activity to better meet the needs of future visitors?*

When we designed the Constitution by Cell activity, we knew it would provide a novel experience for students on a field trip because they could use—rather than hide—their cell phones; and it was a departure from the more typical scavenger hunt-type museum activity. While this was true, we found that students became very engaged in their task beyond the novelty of using of their phones. They debated the meaning of the words in the Constitution and worked hard to find documents that could best illustrate the historical application of their assigned sections. We saw an integration of museum exploration with higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation that together made the activity an engaging investigation.

We were delighted. And when we saw the students' final projects, it was clear that after using national historical thinking standards (<http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12.htm>) and Bloom's taxonomy to guide us as we structured the activity and developed the voicemail prompts, the activity worked as we had hoped. Students had melded their audio recordings, personal photographs, and images found in ARC, into digital stories that revealed not only their experiences at the National Archives, but their understanding of the Constitution.

In general, we were pleased with the experience that we had set up for this group of students. But another ques-



Photo: Stephanie Greenhut

A student records a voicemail for her digital story at the National Archives.

tion entered our minds: *How could we adapt this activity to other audiences with different learning objectives, yet retain the documentary and technology components?*

We recognized the need for flexibility and concluded that new prompts could be written for specific historical eras or thematic units of study. For a group visiting the National Archives as part of a unit on conflict resolution, for example, we could provide prompts for records in the exhibit relating to wars and diplomacy. Or the prompts could be general enough to cover virtually any topic, with flexibility for the students themselves to identify a theme on which to focus. In a classroom setting, teachers could incorporate this approach and assign

students a project in which they choose a theme and record related podcasts.

As we came up with more and more alternatives, we became aware that there are limitless possibilities for an activity structured in this way. It is the basic structure that leads students to combine critical and historical thinking skills with their own sense of exploration. That the activity was engaging was apparent in the actions of the Potomac School students while at the National Archives. That the activity was an authentic learning experience was apparent in the students' eagerness to share their finished products and in their continued discussions about the Constitution and the National Archives as reported to us by their teachers. 🌐