

Developing Civic Power

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We are living in a time of uncertainty and deep divisions across the globe. While this is cause for concern, at the same time, young people's voices are being raised prominently in our national civic discourse, demonstrating that we are in a moment of great opportunity to foster the civic actors and leaders of tomorrow. Teachers and schools must be prepared to help students delve into complex issues safely and effectively, to honor their voices and identities, and to foster skills that position them for engaged citizenship and academic success.

Facing History and Ourselves works with educators to help students investigate difficult histories and relate what they learn to the issues we face today. Through a pedagogy that combines intellectual rigor, emotional engagement, and ethical reflection, we hope that Facing History students will believe that their choices do matter and will feel compelled to think carefully about the decisions they make, realizing that their choices will ultimately shape the world.

The articles in this special section were chosen to share a range of different approaches to uncovering and developing students' understanding of civic power.

As the founder and CEO of Citizen University, an organization geared toward increasing civic engagement, and author of *You're More Powerful than You Think: A Citizen's Guide to Making Change Happen*, Eric Liu is dedicated to helping citizens, young and old, recognize and exercise their civic power. He sees a resurgence in civic engagement across the country and believes teachers play a vital role in supporting this trend. By viewing civic power as a form of literacy and helping students understand the sources of power in civic life, educators are preparing their students to be thoughtful, engaged, and effective citizens.

Of course, young people have often been at the forefront of social change, exercising their civic power with passion, creativity, and dedication. In some cases, they may have a better grasp than adults of how to activate certain levers of power (e.g., organizing through social media). The Memphis office of Facing History has been working with a city-wide student leadership group for many years. In the past, this work had focused on helping students develop their voice, civic agency, and commitment to participating in their communities. But after seeing what students could achieve when they were supported in accomplishing a specific social action campaign, the staff decided they had an opportunity to help students learn more about the democratic process by connecting the history of youth leadership in the past to participating in democracy

today. The result is a youth-led voting initiative, described by Marti Tippens Murphy, the executive director of that office.

A fundamental goal of education is citizenship, developing young people who are ethical and inclusive citizens with a sense of a common good. And while civic education and participation can be seen as a local issue, the democratic decline that we are experiencing in the United States is part of a larger global trend. What can American teachers learn from the experiences of educators in other countries that can inform, inspire, and enlarge our own approach to civic education? Laura Tavares examines the unique experiences of educators in South Africa and Northern Ireland. Both countries went through critical transitions in the 1990s, providing a set of challenges that are different from those in the United States. However, their work suggests that intentionally cultivating community across social divisions and teaching a country's own difficult history nurture habits of mind and heart that are essential to democracies everywhere.

And while we often think about citizenship and civic participation as a matter of politics, activism, and voting, these are not the only ways of choosing to participate. Urban educator and author Jessica Lander has focused her civics classes on helping her students—many of whom are recent immigrants and refugees—become engaged citizens through action civics. Through their experiences, she hopes students come away understanding that “if they are willing to do the work, they have the power to shape the world.”

The final entry in this special section is a lesson in the power of persistence. As President Barack Obama said in a 2016 commencement address, “...You have to go through life with more than just passion for change; you need a strategy... Change is the effort of committed citizens who hitch their wagons to something bigger than themselves and fight for it every single day...”¹ Congressman John Lewis, a child of Alabama sharecroppers, certainly knows a thing or two about persistence, engagement, and civic power. Through an excerpt from Lewis's memoir, *Walking with the Wind*, students reflect on Lewis's vision of how we can all face profound challenges and make a better world. 🌍

Note

1. White House Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President at Howard University Commencement Ceremony,” speech delivered by Barack Obama at Howard University, Washington, D.C., May 7, 2016.

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