

Student Engagement: Powering the History Classroom with Interactive Boards

Marlys Davidson

If social science is the examination of “human society and social relationships,” then it is incumbent upon educators to incorporate this study across the disciplines in a way that allows students to make critical connections as they come to know the world. Universal concepts applied across the curriculum can aid tremendously in this endeavor. To understand their application, we will focus upon POWER. As a universal concept in eighth grade at McAuliffe Middle School, students find that it encompasses studies not only in history but across the disciplines in science, math, and, most definitely, in physical education. Within the most significant pieces of literature, stories of the struggle for power drive characters and communities, as power fuels the development of deeply significant revelations that are at the heart of the author’s purpose for writing. Common Core calls for critical thinking, discussing, and writing in every classroom so that we develop skills that discourage learning in isolation and encourage more global connections. Building these skills so that making connections becomes common practice requires a concerted effort by educators to constantly provide opportunities to exercise and to encourage this purposeful thinking in our students.

Teachers rely on such signature practices as the creation of essential questions for each unit of study, the use of thinking maps, and Dr. Sandra Kaplan’s strategies for “Thinking with Depth and Complexity.” All of these are woven into modeled instruction, group work, and individual research. Their practical applications can be reflected in the use of interactive bulletin boards throughout the classroom. The teachers frame the structure of the boards. However, the content is constructed through the work of the students, and it is in continuous flux as students advance together through more complex questioning, research, and response.

Interactive Bulletin Boards as Tools for Differentiation

McAuliffe eighth graders begin the school year by being introduced to the universal concept of POWER based upon four tenets:

- POWER is always present in some form.
- POWER can shift or change.
- POWER has the ability to influence.
- POWER can be used effectively or it can be abused.

American history and language arts teachers work collaboratively to further develop this concept and its tenets by adopting the BIG IDEA that “POWER has a voice.” Students begin their exploration of this theme through exposure to carefully selected works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art. History students build three interactive boards. Use of these boards

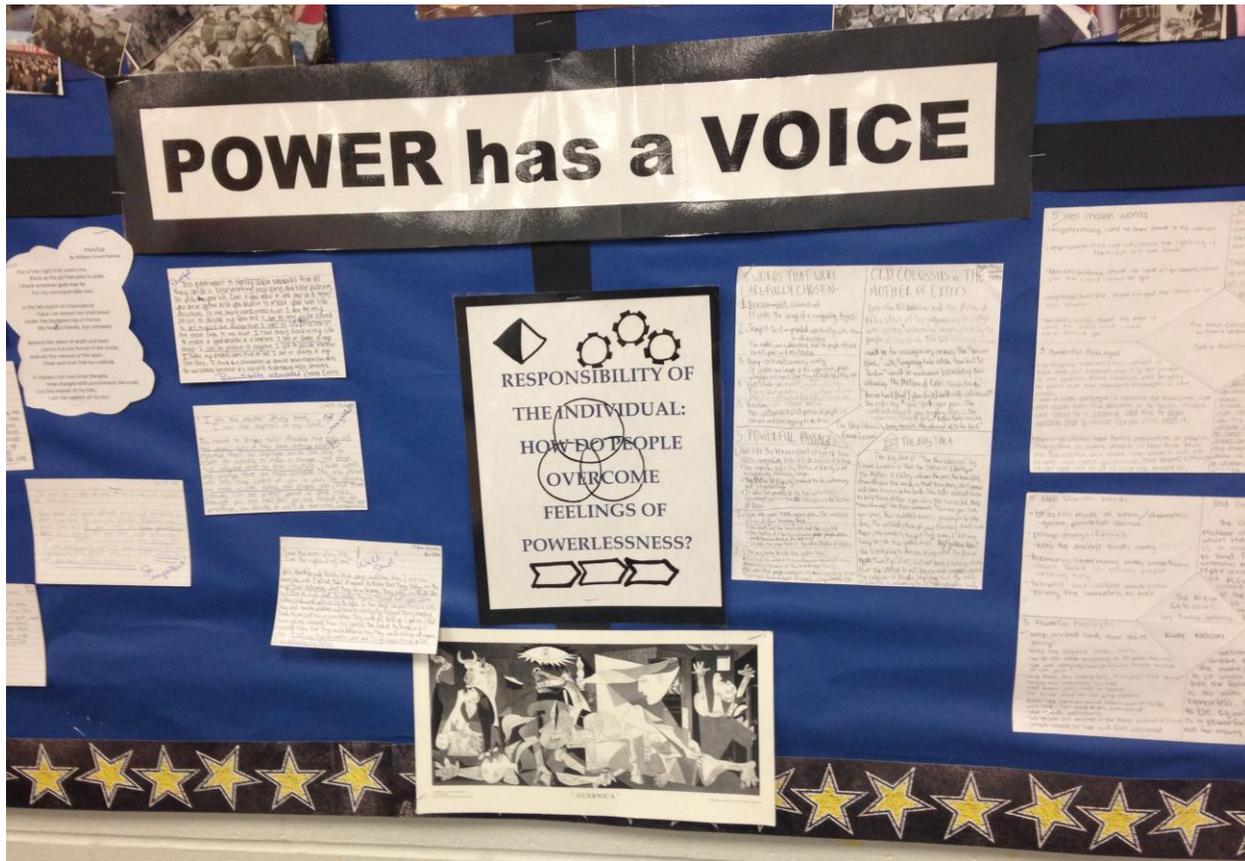
in McAuliffe's classrooms is an outcome of professional development led by Dr. Kaplan and Dr. Jessica Manzone. The first board introduces "POWER has a Voice." The second is titled "The Voice of Power in Government." For the 2015-1016 school year, this interactive board begins by traveling the path to the 2016 Presidential Election. The third is built on Dr. Kaplan's "Think Like a Disciplinarian," titled the "The POWER of Knowledge" with an opening focus on the roles and contributions of the philosopher in society.

Each board:

- encourages students to make connections and find parallels from the past to the present as they reflect upon and discuss works of fiction and nonfiction that relate to the BIG IDEA studied in language arts and history classes
- addresses Common Core Standards
- relies heavily upon the prompts of "Depth and Complexity" as catalysts for higher level thinking, writing, and discussion
- raises "essential questions"
- requires continuous interaction from all students over a structured period of time
- demands research, reflection, questioning, discussion, writing, and collaboration

As we develop units of study, the boards become tools for reflection and for expansion of questioning and research. They are daily reminders that as scholars we never stop probing and diving more deeply into our fields of study.

Board One: POWER has a Voice



To begin the year, this particular board introduces the BIG IDEA or universal theme. It will be used throughout the year as essential questions are raised. Whether studying the path to war in 8th grade history or reading about the struggle for individual freedom in *The Crucible* in language arts, students are continually questioning “Power”, its voice, and the plight of the voiceless through an ever-evolving exchange of ideas represented on the interactive board.

Physical set-up for the first board:

1. Top center title – POWER HAS A VOICE
2. Divide the board into quadrants.
 - a. Top left title – The Voiceless
 - To visually familiarize themselves with the concept, students build a collage of pictures, headlines, and symbols that represent the voiceless in the world
 - Each student provides a visual of the voiceless for the collage that may be of individuals, groups, communities, the environment, or animal life. Students are prepared to discuss the story behind the image with the class or in small groups.
 - b. Top right title – Those with Voice

- Structured like quadrant one, this section focuses on positive and negative images of the voices of power that may include anything or anyone from symbols to political figures to forces of nature.
- c. Bottom left title – Finding Voice
- As students read and discuss works related to essential questions linked to the BIG IDEA, they are invited to use this quadrant to write reflections and pose questions. Close reading, discussing, and writing about such poems as *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley and *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus tap into deeper levels of reflection on powers of self-determination and compassion. Pieces of nonfiction are also an effective tools. For example, after reading an interview with Congressman John Lewis about his role as a civil rights activist in the 1960s, students wrote and posted responses to the question, “Is non-violent civil disobedience an effective tool for the voiceless in society?”
- d. Bottom right title - Finding Connections
- This quadrant is reserved for students to find examples of “Voice” in art, poetry, music, and literature. They are encouraged to share creations of their own.
 - The stories behind such powerful works of art as *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso and lyrics as *Blowin’ in the Wind* by Bob Dylan are shared and discussed.

A Culminating Joint Project between Language Arts and History:

Ultimately, after extensive and rigorous research, reading, and discussion, language arts students pursue issues that matter to them. In a formal writing, each demonstrates skills of argumentation by making a claim about his or her issue of choice, researching and providing evidence of the necessity for change, and analyzing what can be done. Common Core standards for an argumentative writing are addressed and required. In American history, students continue the work by writing formal letters to those who have power over the issue, presenting their concerns, briefly highlighting supporting evidence, and closing with a request that their solution be taken into consideration. Letters are mailed. Copies are posted on the board, and as answers are received, they too are posted and discussed. A section is saved for shared input on the next steps that could be taken.

The key for the educator is to not only teach and encourage strong skills of questioning, research, and analysis, but to also encourage students to make meaningful connections and applications of what is learned in the classroom with what can be accomplished in the world.

Board Two: The Road to the Presidency The 2016 Election



The 2016 election has certainly grabbed the interest of citizens at a very early point in the campaign. With so many candidates from uniquely different backgrounds, this could be the election that could capture the attention of middle school students. Since the media alerts us to daily changes in political life, an interactive board becomes an effective tool for student engagement as they study the workings of government.

Physical Set-up: Break your board or boards into sections.

1. Language of the Disciplines - political terms and their definitions
2. The Official Roles of the President - Working in small groups, students research and create a visual presentation of one of the constitutional roles of the president which include: Commander in Chief, Diplomat, Legislative Leader, and Leader of his/her Political Party. This presentation requires a definition of the job, an example of the President exercising this power, and a picture, graph, map, or illustration to reinforce understanding. Projects are displayed on the board and discussed as a class.
3. Qualities of leadership - Students are given a list of character traits. Each student determines the ten most essential to being a great president. For the board, a classroom survey is graphed determining which qualities were most desired. Ultimately, students must be prepared to justify in their choices in a classroom forum.

4. Candidates in the Polls - In an election that has begun with such a rich field of candidates, students do a weekly check on standings for both the Republican and Democratic parties. Each candidate will be represented by a picture of his or her face that can be moved to the proper spot for the week. Students watch news clips and read current news articles that provide evidence for why candidates move in the polls. To encourage research and debate about issues, points are given to table groups that post reasons for a rise or fall in the polls.

Board Three: Knowledge has POWER

Think Like a Disciplinarian

Eagerly waiting their turn to cast their votes for a second time at the interactive board, McAuliffe's student philosophers debate whether John Stuart Mill was correct when he stated, "The greatest good for the greatest number" as his Utilitarian guide for a free society.

Having voted the week before when they first studied *Utilitarianism* and read about how John Stuart Mill applied its tenets, they have since researched unanswered questions and concerns to expand their understanding. Taking into consideration the possible impact on those making up the minority, table groups chose individuals or groups from history or current events that would not be considered part of the "greatest number" to research. They were asked to consider the multiple perspectives from all sides of the issue.

In a Socratic Seminar, students brought informed views to the circle as they questioned whether this belief system protects the rights of the individual. Once the forum ended, students were sent to the board to vote again. A final discussion revolved around why students did or did not change their votes about the fairness of this principle. However, the conversation will continue as students probe the origins of ideas that became the foundation of thinking for *The Declaration of Independence*, *The Constitution of the United States*, and *The Bill of Rights*.

To "think like a disciplinarian" comes from the teachings of Dr. Sandra Kaplan. Creating an interactive board built around this interdisciplinary approach causes students to not only learn about such roles as those of historians, scientists, philosophers, and economists, but to also develop a broader perspective of the inner workings of society. In history classes at McAuliffe Middle School, students often find themselves taking a particular essential question, assuming an assigned role from one of these disciplines, researching the question from the particular perspective of that role, and finally participating on a panel of "disciplinarians" reflecting upon and debating that question.

Powerful Tools

Using interactive boards gives students the opportunity to extend the boundaries of their learning as they expand their quests. Functioning as visual reminders of what they are studying, these boards are tools for curious minds that can expand research, cause reflection, and stimulate discussion and debate. Whether students are determining the role of power in life or literature, thinking like a disciplinarian, or following the path of the 2016 presidential election, interactive boards get them up out of their seats and challenge them to deeply connect what they learn with their world.

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