The Puerto Rican Statehood Debate

With the intention of providing a more participatory learning experience for students, we have developed a curriculum, which we have called “The Puerto Rican Statehood Debate”, that will allow students to address the question of whether Puerto Rico ought to be made a state within the United States of America. This curriculum – predicated on the assumption that students work and learn better in situations that require them to not only interact in meaningful ways with their fellow classmates, but also to engage with interesting and relevant material – has been designed to integrate various elements of ‘cooperative learning’ strategies and critical academic engagement in substantial and – hopefully – effective ways.

Our curriculum has been designed to take place over the course of one week, with five consecutive seventy-five minute periods, wherein students in a ninth grade social-studies class – in one of Hartford’s public high-schools – will be required to explore and confront the various issues that relate to Puerto Rican statehood. The emphasis of the curriculum will be on a final class-wide debate, to be held on the final seventy-five minute class period at the end of the week, wherein students will demonstrate the work that they will have done throughout the week.

The subject of Puerto Rican statehood is both contemporary and relatable; whether students are actually from Puerto Rico is not of primary importance – as so many of the issues that relate to Puerto Rican statehood are relevant to anyone who has come from a different

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culture. The subject brings forth questions concerning cultural assimilation, linguistic differences, economic disparities, political representation, and geopolitical history that are uniquely relevant to students in the Hartford school system – many of whom have cultural roots that are distinct from the mainstream American cultural heritage.

All students, regardless of their group, will hear an introductory lecture about Puerto Rico’s history dating back to its foundation as a colony from Luis Figueroa, a Trinity College Associate Professor of History with a specialization in Puerto Rican affairs. The unit will be designed to incorporate a variety of learning techniques, which include research skills, group dialogue, debate strategy, and effective communication skills.

The students in the class will be divided into three groups; the first group will argue for Puerto Rican statehood, the second will argue for the continuation of its status as a commonwealth territory of the United States, and the third will be a significantly smaller group of student judges that will consider the position of full Puerto Rican independence, and who will, in addition, come up with thoughtful questions and strategies for moderating the final debate. At weeks end, the judges will guide the final debate with thoughtful questions, and hear the separate groups’ arguments before coming to an educated judgment over whether or not – given the facts presented by the class – Puerto Rico ought to become a state.

The group arguing for statehood and the group arguing for the continuation of its status as a commonwealth territory will each be divided further into three subgroups that will each have a separate focus on either the cultural, economic, or political justifications for or against statehood. We believe that by subdividing the groups and placing the students into even smaller subgroups with more specific research goals, the larger groups will benefit, and a higher degree
of accountability will inevitably exist with respect to the more particularized subgroup responsibilities.

This curriculum was specifically designed to incorporate four major learning objectives. These objectives outline the necessary skills and proficiencies that will be acquired and utilized by students throughout this unit. The following objectives originate in large part from The Connecticut Framework of Curricular Goals and Standards, which provides teachers and administrators with a basic foundation upon which to design age appropriate classroom curriculums from grades kindergarten through twelfth. The learning objectives specific to this unit follow hereunder.

Students will learn the historical context of Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States of America, and its current political status. This understanding is essential to the success of the unit, and is – more importantly – valuable knowledge for many students who may have some uncertainty as to their culture’s relationship with the United States, regardless of whether or not their families originally came from Puerto Rico. This objective addresses similar objectives outlined in the Connecticut Framework, specifically students’ ability to “describe how the United States influences other governments and international organizations and how the United States, in turn, is influenced by them” and to “identify and analyze the various domestic, political, economic and social interests which play roles in the development of foreign policy”. Students’ ability to contextualize these concepts will allow them to understand global and domestic inequalities in ways that go beyond what they witness in their own lives, and will therefore begin to evaluate such issues with a newfound consideration for their historical roots.

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3 Connecticut Framework, Social Studies, 148.
Students will hone interpersonal intelligence by collaborating with their peers. This learning objective recognizes the importance of addressing students’ ‘multiple intelligences’ as they are understood through Howard Gardner’s ‘Theory of Multiple Intelligences’.\textsuperscript{4} Cultivating this intelligence is crucial to a student’s capacity to “thrive on small-group work” and “notice and react to the moods of their friends and classmates”.\textsuperscript{5} Without interpersonal skills, students will struggle to succeed in more than just their social lives. Our curriculum is designed to hone these skills, and develop in students the ability to work \textit{with} their classmates to achieve a common goal, not \textit{against} or \textit{in spite} of them.

Students will learn to think critically about their personal viewpoints, their assessment of opposing arguments, and how to defend their own positions. It is absolutely critical that this ability to analyze issues from multiple perspectives be acquired by ninth-grade students wishing to attend college. No essay or analysis is adequate without a thorough recognition and assessment of conflicting facts or ideas. This objective is outlined by a number of guidelines in the \textit{Connecticut Framework} for public schools, among these are the need for students to understand how to “formulate historical questions and hypotheses from multiple perspectives”, to “analyze the ways different groups in society view places and religions differently”, and to “describe and analyze, using historical data and understandings, the options which are available to parties involved in contemporary conflicts or decision making”.\textsuperscript{6} By engaging with the various issues and conflicting opinions that are associated with Puerto Rican statehood, students will be behooved to reassess their own views even within their own groups as they begin to understand the complexities compromise.

\textsuperscript{5} Gardner, 3.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Connecticut Framework}, Social Studies, 148.
Students will develop the research skills necessary to produce an informed argument. Requiring students to debate their positions using the factual evidence and support that they found in their debate preparation will enable students to grasp the importance of grounding their arguments in facts, not beliefs. The *Connecticut Framework* places a high importance on the ninth grade social-studies student’s ability to “describe the multiple intersecting causes of events; and use primary source documents to analyze multiple perspectives.”7 Students will, in addition, improve their research skills, and learn to identify credible sources in their efforts to craft persuasive arguments.

We believe that our curriculum is uniquely suited to achieve these meaningful objectives, and we have provided below a detailed description of how these objectives will be fulfilled in the course of one week.

The curriculum extends over five consecutive days. Day one serves primarily as an introduction to the unit, and gives students the opportunity to apply their own thoughts on the topic before delving into research. The first thing students do will be to write a short (1-2 page) initial reaction to the question, should Puerto Rico become a U.S. state, remain a territory, or become independent, and why? This will give some students, particularly those of Puerto Rican descent, to apply knowledge they may have learned from their parents at home. One thing to note here is that some students may not have much background information on the topic; this is not a problem. As we explain under Day two, groups will be formed based on prior knowledge of the debate subject. After students have written reactions, Luis Figueroa, Associate Professor of History at Trinity College, will present on Puerto Rico’s history. His focus will be on its relationship with the U.S. throughout its development from a colony to a commonwealth. This will “fill in” students who may not know much about Puerto Rico, and hopefully clarify

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misconceptions about its history. Following his presentation, the instructor will explain the structure of the unit day by day, and explain what exactly a debate is. For this unit’s purposes, the debate goes as follows; Group One makes an opening statement, the judges prompt responses with questions while the instructor moderates, then the same process is repeated for Group Two. After both sides make closing statements, the judges and instructor come together to decide which side was more convincing. After explaining this process, the instructor will show a short clip on a debate (of their choosing) to give students a scope of what to prepare for. The instructor will also hand the students a rubric for the unit, which outlines the criteria for evaluation.

On day two, the instructor will divide the class into their debate groups, two large groups and a smaller third group. These groups will be as heterogeneous as possible in terms of ethnicity and student ability, but will be formed primarily based on information provided in the initial reactions. Group One will argue for Puerto Rican statehood. Group Two will argue for it’s continued status as a commonwealth and a territory of the United States. The third smaller group, the judges, will explore the idea of an independent Puerto Rican nation as well as develop several questions to prompt both sides during the actual debate. Within the two larger groups, students will have the chance to focus on economic, political, or cultural arguments based on their preferences. This will help ensure that every student is able to participate in a meaningful way in the research. After the groups are formed, students will access the computer lab where the instructor will make a short presentation about how to do research for an argument (search engines, citations, etc.) and hand out a list of suggested sources. Then, students will have the rest of the period to begin research. The instructor will begin working with judges to develop prudent debate questions.
On day three, students will do the bulk of the research for the debate. In the beginning of class, the instructor will show a 10 minute Youtube clip: *Puert Rico Referendum Approves U.S. Statehood for 1st Time...*, which will give students further inside into the current Puerto Rican statehood debate. The clip explains that while there is widespread support for making Puerto Rico a state, even on the island itself, there is also a strong movement to maintain its status as a territory, and yet another movement for its independence. Students will continue small group research and build their arguments while the instructor finalizes the prompt questions with the judges.

On day four, students will meet back in the regular classroom. The judge group will present a few general issues they believe are most relevant to the debate, to help students see if they are on the right track with their arguments. Half of the judges will be sent to sit in with each group for the day to assist them with applying their research. The point of this exercise is to learn about the counters to their argument, and prepare to rebut them.

Day five culminates with the debate itself. The instructor will set up two groups of desks facing each other, with desks for the judges facing both sides (a loose triangle.) The judges will open with a very brief statement of the debate question. Then, the pro-statehood side will make their opening statement and present their argument, while being prompted by the judges. When they conclude, the opposing side will undergo the same process. Afterwards, both sides will make closing statements, and the judges and instructor will exit the room to decide which side won the debate. The entire process should take 30-45 minutes. Afterwards, students will write another 1-2 page reaction on what they learned, how their opinions on the subject changed (if they changed at all) and why.
Students will be evaluated in five areas: participation, engagement in research, preparedness for debate, quality of oral presentation, and peer review. The definitions for each category as follows:

**Participation**: students actively contributed to group discussion and research efforts.

**Engagement in Research**: students used research time effectively and did not stray from the assignment.

**Preparedness for Debate**: students did not read entirely off of a card; they understood the material and presented in a professional manner.

**Quality of Oral Presentation**: students spoke clearly, directed speech towards judges and the opposing side, and maintained eye contact.

**Peer Review**: each student will score their group members’ effort on a scale of 1-5.

The rubric will explain criteria for top scores in each category. Ultimately the point scale is left to the instructor’s discretion, but the default set up is a 25-point scale, with a maximum of 5 points in each area. The grading criteria are as follows…1 insufficient; 2 needs attention; 3 satisfactory; 4 good; 5 outstanding. An example of a student who would score a 3 in preparedness for debate would be someone who takes lengthy pauses to remember the speech, reads the entire speech of a note card, or repeatedly turns to his group for assistance. An example of a 5 would be a clear, structured presentation of the argument, with minimal glances at a note card. The peer review element is included to make each member of the group accountable for the work. In other words, students will be scoring each other on participation and effort throughout the project. The instructor will clarify that prior knowledge is *not* part of this score; rather it is a measurement of how hard your fellow group members worked towards the group success. While there is no assigned homework for this unit, instructors will encourage students to continue research at home, including interview their parents. Any extra information brought to class will count towards their final grades in participation and engagement in research, as well as peer review.
The resources for this curriculum are designed to be accessible Hartford public schools. The list of resources includes...

- Louis Figueroa, Associate Professor of History at Trinity College
- School Computer Lab
- Youtube video: Puerto Rico Referendum Approves U.S. Statehood for 1st Time, But Results Show Divided Views
  - Overhead projector, or shown individually in computer lab
- Newspapers (online search: Puerto Rico Statehood; Annex Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico)
  - The Hartford Courant
  - The New York Times
  - The Boston Herald
  - Washington Post
- Websites
  - CNN Politics: http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/05/politics/puerto-rico-statehood
  - Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2010
  - http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hr2499#overview

As a professor at Trinity, Luis Figueroa would not have to commute farther than usual to speak at any Hartford public school. With the exception of Professor Figueroa, all resources can be accessed within school, provided the school has a computer lab and working Internet connection. The Youtube video (Puerto Rico Referendum Approves U.S. Statehood for 1st Time, but Results Show Divided Views) as well as the instructor’s choice clip on an oral debate can both be accessed online. And, the resource sheet provided to students for their research will include websites (mentioned above) on Puerto Rico’s history and relevant legislation, and links to websites of newspapers that have published articles on Puerto Rican statehood. These are recommended resources for students, but the instructor may add or detract from the list at his or her discretion.

The overall telos of the unit is to engage every student in a meaningful topic, and bring together students who may not otherwise interact with each other. Since many students in
Hartford public schools are of Puerto Rican descent, the Puerto Rican statehood debate, a heated current issue, is a fitting topic to get students passionate about research oriented oral debate.