**Lessons in American Values and History from Zelenskyy,**

**President of Ukraine. Using his words and actions to inspire students as social justice advocating global citizens**

By Dr. Rose Reissman

As teachers, whatever our content or grade level, we all want to inculcate our students in basic American constitutional and democratic principles along with academic skills. Often these lessons, focused on past primary source documents which authentically communicate these tenets of what it is to be American, do not emotionally resonate with our 21st century diverse students still emerging from the pandemic remote learning with more limited social skills and empathy skills than they would normally have acquired. How can we “get” to them? What tools can we use to motivate them to feel proud to be Americans united in democratic principles and constitutional values (precisely because of their diverse experiences)? How about by having them read, listen, view and analyze the words of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy?

As we have learned before, “outside” guests reiterate principles and themes we the classroom teachers stress – such as a visiting children’s author providing same insights into writing structure, emphasized by us – but enthusiastically “accepted” by students only after hearing the outside expert endorse them. In the same ironic way Zelenskyy, a Ukrainian politician, comedian and actor, provides through his words and deeds a potent lesson for our students about the values and history that can make all of us “proud to be American.” Many adults who have tuned in to hear Mr. Zelenskyy speak to Congress and with American officials would agree, but how to bring him into classrooms of students who use Tiktok or play video games and certainly do not follow political stories by choice.

After almost a year of tapping Mr. Zelenskyy’s expertise in inspiring United States citizenship, here are some of the classroom free tools and strategies for using his words and actions.

First, start by having students think about the initial irony of learning about American citizenship from a foreigner.

Ask them:

Based on your own family and experiences, can persons who are not born in the United States teach you about what it means to be an American? Think about this and persons in your family or neighbors or friends, explain why yes or why not. If you have any specific examples or actions or comments, list or draw them for class discussion sharing.

Divide the students into groups and give them chart board paper to write down or illustrate the comments.

After 5 minutes, let each group share what the group has discussed. Among the comments from very diverse Title one Ditmas middle school students in Brooklyn were: mentions of how parents stressed their coming to the United States so that their children could have access to free education, seniors emphasizing that the United States was a place where they could get information freely about events in their own native countries they would never learn in school there, adults expressing pride in attending an American citizenship ceremony or getting a green card, and even pleasure in being able to complain if they were being harassed at work for wearing native dress or following native food customs and ability take off holidays such as Eid and Chinese New Year. While many students admitted these remarks did not “really” matter much to them, as a consequence of the question, almost any group came up with examples. One of the teachers shared the story of how her Polish born great aunt screamed at her sons about the need to get an American free education literally once chased them with a baseball bat “into” their high school. She also called them when they became adults to remind them every year about voting on Election Day. Students shared the pride some of their family members felt as they displayed their voting stickers, even forcing the students to go with them to vote.

After having the students share the ways they personally learned about being American from family or friends who were not born in the United States, start with three to five quotes from Zelenskyy.

Here are some from <https://listcaboodle.com/inspirational-volodymyr-zelensky-quotes/>

1. “Let’s build a country of opportunities, where everybody is equal before the law.”
2. “We are fighting just for our land and for our freedom.”
3. “All of us are here protecting our independence of our country.”
4. “If your patriots stop the rise in terror against our cities, it will let Ukrainian patriots work to defend our freedom.”

The Hill coverage of Zelenskyy’s address to Congress: <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3784579-five-biggest-moments-from-zelenskys-address-to-congress/>

1. “Just like the Battle of Saratoga, the fight for Bakhmut will change the trajectory of our war for independence and for freedom.”
2. “Just like the brave American soldiers which held their lines and fought back Hitler’s forces during the Christmas of 1944, brave Ukrainian soldiers are during the same to Putin’s forces this Christmas.”
3. “We stand, we fight and we will win because we are united-Ukraine, America and the entire free world.”

March 16, 2022, virtual address to Congress. Official Website of the President of Ukraine: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-prezidenta-ukrayini-volodimira-zelenskogo-pered-kong-73609>

1. “I remember your Rushmore National Memorial . . . faces of your prominent presidents . . . foundations of America . . . Democracy, independence, freedom and care for everyone.”
2. “I have a dream”-these words are known to each of you. Today I can say: I have a necessity. The necessity to protect our sky.”
3. “Strong is brave and ready to fight . . . for human rights, for freedom, for the right to live decently and to die when your time comes, not when it is wanted by someone else, your neighbor.”
4. “American people are helping . . . the world to keep the planet alive, to keep justice in history.”
5. “Being the Leader of the world means to be the Leader of Peace.”

Challenge the students in their groups to select 3 or 4 quotes which really excite or interest them. Ask them to explain each of these quotes chosen in their own words. Then have them detail how each of the quotes from Zelenskyy’s comments makes a connection between American democracy and values. Finally ask them to illustrate the quotes if they like or find online public domain photos or graphic art which fit the quotes.

If there is a student newsletter or availability of a page on a school website for this project, students can author editorial comments about how as students in the United States, they are learning lessons in American democracy and freedoms from Mr. Zelenskyy including how Mr. Zelenskyy is a student of American history with direct comparisons to American battles, emblems and persons.

A final arts embedded student group project from this project could be a student created/designed intersection of the Ukrainian flag and the American Flag–which both figured visually in Zelenskyy’s speech. Students could include some of the leader’s quotes as well as American historical figure or document quotes on freedom, sovereignty and justice.

At the end of the day, if you as educators have your own expert American primary and secondary source lessons on American values, why tap a foreigner like the Ukrainian President for a project? Because he, without being a social studies educator, immediately connects Ukraine and current world events present to American battles and values current and past. Because growing numbers of our students (and for some of us the majority of our students) are from diverse non-English speaking homes but ironically have family members who came here precisely because of American democracy and values; this unit validates their background life experience. This unit allows all students to step back from their Social Studies or literacy American values as authored and uttered by Americans lessons to the larger picture of how US democracy and values can and do shine brightly in the global vision of national sovereignty and self-determination. For us as educators, the research and resonance Zelenskyy and other global personalities draw between American character and history, can only serve to authenticate and validate our ongoing nurturing of today’s young citizens. So, Mr. Zelenskyy, please continue with your lessons in American values. We as educators and our students are all the richer for your contribution to our 21st century global and United States citizens.

**Further resources:**

The teacher can curate select excerpts from the Zelenskyy address to US Congress -12/21/22 for students to experience him as a charismatic and accented English speaker.

<https://youtu.be/ZUSPV-Kydks>

They might also want to watch teacher curated excerpts from the press conference he held with the President Biden

<https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/volodymyr-zelenskyy-biden-press-conference-watch-live-stream-today-12-21-2022/>