Soapbox not just for Social Studies Alone, Podium for Lifelong Any Audience, Any Platform, Speaking Out Success

Across the United States, many school districts and systems are engaging social studies student learners from elementary to middle schools in taking the early 20th century tradition of Americans voicing their concerns by standing on soapboxes to 21st century students presenting soapbox speeches live at various venues. This competition has thus far been tapped by of course social studies educators and elementary teachers to enhance students’ grade level social studies and other content research and to tap students personal concerns as young citizens now. But beyond the competitions with their school, district and state/national recognition for the speaker winners, the soapbox strategy has untapped potential for extensive use in schools grades 4 and beyond as a boot camp for training successful entrepreneurs, corporate players, community leaders, successful socializers, marketers, politicians and family members to connect with diverse audiences in a highly effective way. But how can this seemingly Social Studies Soapbox competition be a training ground for all students to be citizen now and forever communicators?

Michael Downes and Angelo Carideo at Title 1 Ditmas IS 62 in Brooklyn’s District 20, use the soapbox school wide forum audience as a training ground for inculcating lifelong audience engagement skills, far beyond researching and writing an effective Social Studies or civics content speech. Dr. Reissman, dual qualified SS and Literacy educator helps with the rhetorical speech components, student delivery and literacy devices.

Here’s how:

1. First, as a training ground, the two pick a speech from the array of speeches by peers available for the students to view. They have the students watch the speech with a target prompt to discuss speaker: use of gestures, opening line, use of art/artifacts, and deliberate audience involvement by the speaker.

2. Students list and discuss these peer speaker techniques. They weigh in on which are applicable and adaptable for their individual personalities.

3. Next Mr. Downes hands out a format of an actual student speech upon which he has personally imposed an array of effective audience engaging devices which the students may opt to use as they develop their speeches for the school event or refine them for the upcoming district competition. Among the devices (see sample) are: Opening with a line that asks the audience to at least mentally envision or engage with the speaker topic such as: “Imagine a world.” This opening at least tacitly pulls the sitting audience in.

3. But as the Downes adapted peer speech continues, the next audience involvement is an actual peer interaction of turning to an audience partner and repeating a line such as “Your mental health matters.”

4. As the students continue to listen to the “live” reading of the adapted peer soapbox speech, they recognize, that as audience they again have to take the action of “raising their hands” if they support a workplace that cares about the topic. Besides hearing about “how to” engage the audience, the students are being engaged themselves as audience in a peer speech.

5. Through their own audience involvement, the students themselves identify how the speaker in asking them to pair up and generate acts of kindness they can do, is actually having them partner in the purpose of the speech.

6. Prompted by the initial explicit focus on the bolded works and devices added in by the Social Studies team, the students immediately identify that they have gone from being silent audience imagining a world to active voicing collaborators in brainstorming acts of kindness and finally co-speakers as they add their voices to the crusade for changing mental health.

7. After the boot camp experience of actually being shown the bolded hoops of involvement, the students generate a list of audience participation involvement devices, they may opt to use or not, depending on the type peer audience. They realize not every school auditorium audience can partner with person next seat or quietly pledge or chant, but show of hands can work or a repeat of a key phrase.

8. As the students refine their research and the format of their individual speeches, they can use some of these devices to get the audience to participate or maybe not in a specific venue.

But beyond a team of Social Studies teachers preparing students for a specific soapbox competition, this approach is one that students themselves recognize can be useful for many other school and lifelong communicating, conversing, negotiating and closing the deal opportunities. Students identified that religious leaders, political leaders, salespersons, students running for student government, some teachers, coaches, You Tube trainers, and commercials and beyond real life persons not training for soapbox speeches, actually used some of these devices in their daily lives. While by definition in all school and many life contests, there can only be single or counted winners in a soapbox program. Use by teachers of this teacher developed rhetoric approach and deliberate boot camp training, can make every student a citizen now and ongoing winner in the field of engaged participatory social success. Step up to soapbox and platform students for classroom and real life success. Imagine schools that actively train citizens to effectively converse and engage!

Soapbox Speech Resources:

Civics for All

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/subjects/civics-for-all>

Jason Snyder on Mental Health-Aurora Project Soapbox –Spring 2017

<https://youtu.be/_rCHL0pQmxQ?si=a3K5VEx8FOqN4ONQ>

Mikva Soapbox Challenge

<https://mikvachallenge.org/our-work/programs/project-soapbox/>

Soapbox Nation Youth Speeches

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?462320-1/soapbox-nation-youth-speeches>