Soapbox 21st Century, Powerful Podium for Literate Citizenship

 Words, not weapons, Reason and Research, not rage, Passion, not punches

Across the United States, many school districts 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. Staging of this event enhance students’ grade level social studies and other content research and to tap students personal concerns as young citizens now. 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. How can this seemingly Social Studies Soapbox competition be a training ground for all students to be citizen now and forever communicators? Ditmas IS 62, under the leadership of its Principal Santiago, AP Buitrago and SS AP McIntosh, in partnership with I-civics in Brooklyn’s District 20, use the soapbox school wide forum project as a training ground for inculcating lifelong audience civic engagement skills. 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, teachers 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, teacher leader in this project, 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. Among the devices (see sample) are Opening with a line that asks the audience to engage with the speaker topic such as “Imagine a world.” This opening pulls the sitting audience into the speech.

3. The next audience involvement involves 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 as audience 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.

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 an ongoing winner in the field of engaged participatory social success.

Soapbox 2024 Live at Ditmas IS 62 had a full spectrum of over 30 student representatives from every grade including special needs and ESL students, who spoke on a range of topics they had selected for their soapbox research focus. Among those selected by the students were: homelessness, mental health, recidivism, gun violence, safety, black lives matter, immigrants treatment in the United States, wars, need for school trips, economic inequality,colorism, sexism, child abuse, drug abuse, lawyers, high rents, poverty, testing anxiety, and school budgets. Several topics, which were common to two or more grades, were: mental health issues, gun violence, school safety and economic issues. These students were 11 to 13 year olds from a Title 1 inner city school whose issues mirrored those expressed by their adult citizen peers. These students many of who were not natural public speakers in English or in their native languages, used the soapbox outline to research their issue and document statistics or quotes about the issue. They used some of the suggested audience pull in devices to involve their peers. As a first digital way of presenting their ideas minus the pressure of a live audience and plus the ability to self-edit to a digital presentation they each liked, they used flip (as mentored by Mr. Carideo) to record their speeches. With a recording of the flip speech in tow, the brave and self-nominated student speakers went to three lunchtime rehearsals and one dress performance in the auditorium.

At first the staging of the live event and stepping up to the podium and onto a soapbox emblem, was daunting for them, as young middle school students. After the mechanics and routine of ascending the steps and high fiving the previous speaker were practiced, the student speakers mic in hand, returned to the passion that had ignited their soapbox speech selection to start. They looked ahead to the audience and read with power their words. They uttered their suggested call to action for their issue or their selected constituency. The powers of free speech and expression transfused them. Beyond the applause they received, after they had successfully delivered their passion topic in a researched and effective live speech format, each speaker had completed a soapbox citizen presentation. They had used their own words, not weapons, reason and research, not rage and passion, not message to get their ideas across. For them and hopefully infinite others this is the accessible powerful podium to launch lifelong engaged first amendment free speech. Step up on your classroom soapbox for student citizens now!

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>