“Playlist” Engaged Citizenship, Press “play” to “tune” in to civic values one lyric at a time

When I went to NYC public school in the late 20th century, citizenship was explicitly taught in all grades and auditoriums featured not only the national anthem, but the entire auditorium student audience singing other patriotic songs. While the musical quality of these songs varied, I can still sing them from memory. Flash forward to current school years, where the combative and contentious public canvas has made explicit active citizenship, even voting, and a topic best to be avoided, lest it stir controversy. Certainly the times have and are “a changing” (1963) as balladeer Bob Dylan noted, there is still the rich joyous musical possibility of tapping song lyrics to thrust students into the flow of active citizen life now at school, before they are of legal age to vote.

How?

Start by asking them, if singers or musicians who top billboard charts, stream, or are broadcast, are in any way delivering messages about conditions social studies themed such as freedom, revolution, war, brotherhood, peace, wealth, education, and unity. Answers will not come immediately, but ask students to think of their current favorite artist and the selections will start flowing. If need be take a few seconds to play the Beatles’ We Don’t Need a Revolution or Beyoncé’s Freedom. As ideas are seeded, encourage students to state what the social studies or political “messaging” of these personal songs actually is. Have them explain why the songs’ popularity and numbers streamed validates how effective the musicians and performing artists are in getting that message across.

Suggest that given this new perspective, the students come in with at least one favorite song and a paragraph explaining how its lyrics are making a social studies or a political statement or advocating for a change in society. Caution students not to list any expletives used in the lyrics if they have them, but to rather note, “expletive deleted” (meaning left out).

Next share with students a song and singer, they may not be familiar, Willie Nelson’s “Vote them out” (2018). Share both the lyrics and the animated video that go with Nelson’s performance: <https://g.co./kgs/H68Qwom> and <https://youtu.be/7CjH7hOuq_Q?si=3s2qWzayVx32j6sE>

Before the students review the lyrics and the video, tell them that they should note down as they view and listen clues, which indicate if this song was written within the last four years or was written long ago. Say that after listening to the song, they will be asked for “proof” about whether it is recent or not . In addition, ask them to detail what Willie’s social studies or political message is as proven by specific lyrics in the message. If necessary, the short song can be played twice, so the students take down specific details to back up its strong argument for everyone to get out and exercise the right to vote. The right to vote and the need to do so on Election Day are non-controversial Social Studies curricula tenets. The students should also be able to correctly cite the presence of a very outdated “ballot box” as well as its mention in the lyrics signaling that this song was not composed recently. Students can opt to update the lyrics and perhaps the images in their own 21st century voices and might even translate it into a family foreign language to urge voters whose native language is not English to get out to vote. Their work can be uploaded to the school website, shared with a LWV- League of Women Voters <https://lwvnyc.org> or local community center. Whatever product students opt to create or perhaps record if there are singers and composers among them, they have focused on the idea of exercising their right to vote and as students getting their family members out to vote.

Teachers of American History, Humanities or ELA with mandates to actively engage students in making their voices heard can tap from their classrooms free, a rich digital collection of award winning Broadway musicals, which have focused on American History and the rights won for our citizens. These themes are all non-controversial and the award-winning lyricists of these memorable songs were explicitly teaching citizenship using persuasive and informational formats. Use of this playlist is addressing Social Studies and English Language arts goals, while also engaging digital natives in music listening which is different than “just the print or spoken” texts alone.

For the theme of the primacy of voting as a key aspect of American Democracy, 1776’s “Sit Down, John <https://youtu.be/YKEEOol9tpo?si=RFuXeTeLCsc34rAZ>

<https://genius.com/William-daniels-sit-down-john-lyrics>

Suffs (2024 Tony Winning) Let Mother Vote- Lyrics <https://www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/suffs/letmothervote.amp.htm-Video-https://youtu.be/goYdpYOD_Cl?si=Shy_80WQbAB3fDYK>

and the Mary Poppins classic favorite “Sister Suffragette” movie clip-

<https://youtu.be/L13bOt9aARY?si=2KEBXbV7wYY3sbS8>

Lyrics-

<https://g.co/kgs/3iAZEWv>

Using these three short songs, students were first challenged to determine which of these by virtue of the title alone, minus examining the lyrics or watching a performance, was not about a current within the last four years Social Studies reality. They of course selected Suffragettes and depending on their grade level, exposure to that time period had differing ideas about the meaning and the context of that term. Many also selected the “Let Mother Vote” title and a few noticed “Suffs” perhaps being a nickname for Suffragettes. None knew about the recent Tony for the show. Most importantly, several noted that the song title was offensive to women, particularly because not every adult woman was a mother and being a mother had nothing to do with a right to vote in the United States. Students then broke into small groups and had the chance listen within the groups on their devices to the three lyrics and get a list of details from the lyrics and the costumes about the historic geographical location, time period, and vote focus for each song. They took a full fifteen minutes and shared out group by group with chart notes, their ideas. Of course, the 1776 musical song is easily deciphered as being about the vote to declare independence, far ahead of today’s votes. The students did not really like the lyrics, but enjoyed the “open up the window” heat and actually wondered about the heat that summer-congrats, TV weather persons and liked the banter against Mr. Adams. These NYC natives and multilinguals were surprised that England had a suffragist movement and noted “stupid” could not be used in school. Despite its Tony, they felt the argument that women would simply echo their husbands’ and son’s votes was one that for sure would not fly today. Some of the ESL students did feel that their mothers would vote the “way” their male family members did, but because they shared their values.

Students were challenged to choose from several options: researching suffragettes movement in England and the unfamiliar names mentioned, finding out about the actual weather during Summer 1776 (suggested by two groups), rewording the two female vote songs so they were more in line with women’s rights today, trying to generate a rap or a poem lyric that could promote getting the female vote out in various communities and first time female voters, who might not have studied about how hard women had to fight to get the vote. It was interesting that while these middle school students were well aware of civil rights cases and African American and other cultural groups’ rights issues, their grasp of the historical background of the women’s rights movement was hazy at best.

In some high schools, there is explicit integration of the lyrics of various genres and music within history, humanities and other elective courses. While there is neither the curricula time nor the opportunity to do that in the middle school, there can easily be the one to three periods “tune” our digital native music listeners into some unexplored musical genres, which include lyricists who boldly go into the citizenship nurturing terrain of leading by lyric message example. This also alerts our young citizens to listen for messaging in their personal music favorites and analyze it as informed citizen decision makers. In their taking the time to look up from their set Social Studies, American History, and English Language Arts set curricula, to listen to the music, students can connect with undebated components of what it means to be an Americans, as public school students who sang patriotic songs in the late twentieth century did. Unlike those students past, they can perhaps rewrite the lyrics to make their own kind of music. Can’t teachers “vote yes” to that proposition, to “tune” digital natives into digital citizenship channels? Make your own kind of Citizenship Playlist and subscribe students, one book or history theme at a time. Press “play.”

Resources:

Beatles –Revolution Lyrics

<https://genius.com/The-beatles-revolution-lyrics>

Beyoncé Freedom Lyrics:

<https://g.co/kgbs/hP1T2yU>

25 Broadway Songs of Empowerment for Election Day

<https://playbill.com/article/25-broadway-songs-of-empowerment-for-election-day>