

Civics Education: Problem-Based Learning



Students and teachers in adult basic education (ABE) programs in Minnesota expressed concern about lower enrollments, legislation affecting ABE funding, and legislation affecting refugee resettlement (Minnesota has among the highest number of refugees per capita in the United States) (#IamABE, 2017). Legislative changes were leading to closures or class reductions in small community-based programs. ABE students and teachers felt that one important problem was that many community members outside their classrooms did not understand how legislation was affecting the students. In particular, there were no outlets for the students to share their ideas, needs, and complex identities without these being overshadowed by the teachers' political leanings. ABE students and teachers thus set out to create an appropriate space: #IamABE. The purpose of the project is to:

- Amplify students' voices about issues that concern them.
- Create more awareness around who is served by ABE and what it does.
- Educate students about ways they can communicate with the government.
- Educate the general public about how legislation affects people's lives.

By the end of this activity, students will be able to:

- Understand how to raise awareness about issues that concern them.
- Identify at least two ways that they can communicate with the government.
- Communicate effectively about how legislation affects people's lives.

Ideal class: This activity is suitable for ESL, ABE, or ASE

Ideal level: High Intermediate to Advanced ESL, Low Intermediate ABE to High ASE

Process for Students	Role of the Teacher	Activity/Task Descriptions and Possible Materials	The Skills That Matter Addressed or Evident
<p>Build understanding of problem-based learning.</p> <p>Warm up to the topic or issue at hand.</p>	<p>Preteach.</p> <p>Make sure the students understand the goals and benefits of a problem-based approach for language. If this is an English language acquisition class, emphasize the areas of English that are developed in problem-solving activities.</p>	<p>The teacher shares a problem s/he has encountered with the utility company that led to frustration; s/he was double-billed for phone and internet. S/he shares the problem and asks:</p> <p><i>What steps would you take to solve a problem like this one?</i></p> <p>Think-Stand-Share</p> <p>Teacher: <i>Think of a similar problem you have encountered. When you are ready, stand and share with two different people. Share steps you took to solve the problem, or if the problem is unresolved, ask your partners for suggestions on steps you could take.</i></p> <p>The teacher elicits one or two examples from the class and asks the students to reflect briefly on how sharing problems with others can be helpful.</p> <p>Teacher: <i>Some of these issues were personal, some related to family and to your communities. We will use this same problem-based approach to look at a broader community issue that is affecting our school. We will practice reading, writing, and speaking skills. You will learn how to communicate effectively with legislators.</i></p>	<p>Communication</p> <p>Interpersonal skills</p>
<p>Meet the problem.</p>	<p>Introduce problem and vocabulary.</p> <p>Introduce the students to the problem using pictures, video, or texts. Ask the students about previous personal experiences with the problem. Introduce vocabulary related to the problem. Provide prereading/previewing exercises about the problem.</p>	<p><i>Let's explore how adult basic education works in our state. Where does funding come from? How is it the same or different from the K-12 system? What are the benefits of ABE?</i></p> <p>Think-Pair-Share</p> <p>The teachers poses these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How do you think our ABE program is funded?</i> • <i>How much funding per student do you think we get compared to K-12 schools?</i> • <i>What do you think happens to program funding when enrollments go down?</i> <p>Possible responses would relate to per capita funding addressed; differences between K-12 and adult education; the fact that many teachers work part time; and the fact that students move in and out of programs a lot due to life circumstances. The teacher records the reasons on the board.</p>	<p>Processing and analyzing information</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Critical thinking</p> <p>Navigating systems</p>



Process for Students	Role of the Teacher	Activity/Task Descriptions and Possible Materials	The Skills That Matter Addressed or Evident
	<p>These can be preselected problems chosen by the teacher based on learner needs; alternatively, facilitate a process of learner-chosen problems.</p>	<p>Learning About Setting the Public Agenda</p> <p>Teacher: <i>This is an issue of concern to us, right? How do we make others aware of this issue? Why should they care?</i></p> <p>The jigsaw reading activity can help students learn about setting the public agenda (Appendix A).</p> <p>The teacher assigns teams to read one section of a text, in this case Setting the Public Agenda:</p> <p>https://crfcap.org/images/pdf/CAPTtoolKit_PublicAgenda.pdf</p> <p>The teacher has the students do the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read and complete the Jigsaw Reading Activity handout (Appendix A) with assistance from other students. • Respond to a poll on their personal comfort with each of the strategies proposed in the reading. <p>The teacher then projects the results of the poll, and the class summarizes the group trends.</p> <p>The next task is to formally state the problem to help the students seek a solution.</p> <p>Teacher: <i>You need to decide on the best course of action for informing the public and legislators about the outcomes and successes of our school. You and your classmates will weigh in on what is most realistic.</i></p>	



Process for Students	Role of the Teacher	Activity/Task Descriptions and Possible Materials	The Skills That Matter Addressed or Evident
<p>Explore knowns and unknowns.</p>	<p>Group students and provide resources.</p> <p>Make sure that the students understand the problem and what is expected of them. Emphasize that there is no single answer or solution and that they need to choose what appears to be the most viable solution to them and be prepared to explain why they chose that solution. Group the students according to their strengths. As with project-based learning, learners can take on different roles based on their strengths.</p>	<p>Suppose the students decide they first want to learn about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how funds are allocated and • the impact adult education has on the lives of adult students. <p>The students then self-select into groups each focused on one of these two topics. Members of each group assume roles such as team manager, administrative assistant, or technical assistant and take on responsibilities such as time management, presentation of ideas, and leadership.</p> <p>The details of the exercise should be based on the state where the students reside. Here are possible resources for student research in Minnesota.</p> <p>This website has information about per-student contact hour rates (pp. 55–56): https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/fiscal/files/16fined.pdf</p> <p>The teacher could ask the students to consider what funding would be available for their class and how open enrollment might affect this funding. Here is a relevant site describing ABE program types in Minnesota: https://mn-mcea.org/adult-basic-education-abe/</p> <p>Regarding the issue of impact on student lives, the following website contains student writings on work and education (pp. 165–192), along with information on local job trends and types of available training: https://mnliteracy.org/sites/default/files/journeys_2016_pdf.pdf</p> <p>The teacher could develop reading tasks similar to the jigsaw reading activity or use paired reading to develop reading strategies that might aid learners in finding pertinent information, including evidence to support their claims.</p>	<p>Interpersonal skills</p> <p>Processing and analyzing information</p> <p>Critical thinking</p>



Process for Students	Role of the Teacher	Activity/Task Descriptions and Possible Materials	The Skills That Matter Addressed or Evident
<p>Explore knowns and unknowns. (continued)</p>	<p>Group students and provide resources. (continued)</p> <p>Provide access to resources such as the internet, books, magazines, brochures, newspapers, television, and community experts. Make sure that the students are aware of the range of resources available and know how to use them. Encourage the students to draw on materials in their first language and materials that present different viewpoints.</p>		
<p>Provide language supports for the students.</p>	<p>Provide language frames the students may need (e.g., frames for stating a problem or proposing a solution). Provide planning tools (e.g., graphic organizers) for working through the problem and coming up with solutions.</p>	<p>The teacher should provide scaffolds for planning and supports for language and should have the students consider the levels of politeness (or register) appropriate for speaking to legislators:</p> <p>Problem: _____</p> <p>We've identified a policy that is impacting our school.</p> <p>This is a problem because _____</p> <p>There is evidence to suggest that _____</p> <p>We found that _____</p> <p>Data suggest that _____</p> <p>Possible solutions include _____</p> <p>One thing we could do is _____</p> <p>This would allow our program to _____</p>	<p>Communication</p>



Process for Students	Role of the Teacher	Activity/Task Descriptions and Possible Materials	The Skills That Matter Addressed or Evident
<p>Generate possible solutions</p> <p>Consider consequences and choose the most viable solution</p>	<p>Observe and support.</p> <p>Observe the students and provide support as needed, but do not attempt to direct their efforts or control their activity in solving the problem. Observe, take notes, and provide feedback on student participation in the activity and on language used during the activity.</p>	<p>The students then determine the best course of action based on the options they learned about as well as others they think might be appropriate.</p> <p>In the Minnesota project, the students worked with teachers to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meet with legislators to inform them about the benefits of ABE in Minnesota, • start a postcard campaign directed at legislators, and • launch a movement: #IamABE <p>#IamABE organized a day at the Minnesota capitol building to ask legislators to support ABE programs across the state. Teachers and students converged on the building to meet with representatives and senators and rally in the rotunda.</p> <p>In projects such as this, the teacher typically</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • observes while the students develop plans and reminds them of the language supports provided, • assists with finding resources, as needed, and • takes notes, including in the categories for an assessment rubric (see Appendix B). 	<p>Processing and analyzing information</p> <p>Critical thinking</p> <p>Self-awareness (awareness of the impact someone can have on others)</p>



Process for Students	Role of the Teacher	Activity/Task Descriptions and Possible Materials	The Skills That Matter Addressed or Evident
	<p>Follow up and assess progress</p> <p>Provide the students with opportunities to present and share the results of their work. Provide follow-up activities based on your observations and possibly provide instruction on grammar, academic language, pronunciation, or pragmatic issues. Assess the students' participation in the activity and level of success and provide opportunities for peer assessment.</p>	<p>In the Minnesota project, the students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> hosted a forum at their ABE center to share their experiences at the state capitol, shared a flyer (Appendix C) that summarized their efforts, shared what they had learned about setting the public agenda, and distributed the #IamABE postcards (Appendix D) and a link for finding local representatives (https://www.gis.leg.mn/iMaps/districts/). <p>In addition, #IamABE has a Facebook page where students and teachers post updates, successes, and events: https://www.facebook.com/pg/MinnesotalamABE/photos/?ref=page_internal</p> <p>Finally, in similar projects, the teacher would typically provide feedback to the students using a rubric like the one in Appendix B, and the students would be able to use the same rubric to assess their own participation.</p>	

Recommended steps for problem posing adapted from Problem-Based Learning and Adult English Language Learners, by J. Mathews-Aydinli, 2007, Center for Adult English Language Acquisition, Washington, D.C.

Adjustments

Problem-based learning is heavily guided by learners and the level of materials they are able to access. This example is designed for learners proficient in English and with fairly strong literacy skills. The same process can be used for any problem that learners would like to explore. The teacher needs to select level-appropriate readings, preteach terms as needed, and explore websites as a class.



Appendix A. Jigsaw Reading Activity

Step 1: As you read your section of Setting the Public Agenda, take notes in the chart below.

	What is it and when may it best be used?	What are some important considerations?
Group A: Write to Officials		
Group B: Letter-Writing Campaign		
Group C: Petitioning		
Group D: E-mail and Telephone Campaign		
Group E: Demonstrations		

Step 2: Mingle with and interview classmates to complete the rest of your chart.

Step 3: Prepare to vote on which practice you personally would be most comfortable taking part in as a response to an issue of concern in your community.



Appendix B. Assessment Rubric

Name: _____	1- Emerging	2- Developing	3-Satisfactory	4-Exemplary
Student participated in large-group Think-Stand-Share and Think-Pair-Share.	S did not participate or quietly observed.	S contributed by speaking in their L1 to a classmate who translated &/or their contributions were off topic.	S contribute at least once to the whole-group discussion in L2 and their contributions were on topic.	S contributed multiple times to the discussion and encouraged others to participate.
Student participated in jigsaw reading task.	S did not participate or quietly observed.	S contributed by speaking in their L1 to a classmate who translated &/or their contributions were off topic.	S contribute at least once to the whole-group discussion in L2 and their contributions were on topic.	S contributed multiple times to the discussion and encouraged others to participate.
Student can state a problem and recommend solutions based on evidence from the resources.	S did not contribute to the discussions.	Contributed but their responses indicated they did not fully understand the issues.	S contributed and their responses reflected understanding. Did not always draw example from resources to support their arguments.	S contributed with many examples and evidence from the resources.
Student can produce clear and coherent language for problem posing and problem solving.	S cannot produce a response.	S produced clear suggestions/proposals but their response did use a formal register needed in the visits with legislators.	S articulated problem clearly and made clear proposals with appropriate register needed in the visits with legislators.	S articulated problem clearly and made clear proposals with well-developed arguments supported by evidence and with appropriate register needed in the visits with legislators.

Adapted from Kreil and Klas, #lamABE Curriculum.



Appendix C. Flyer

#IamABE Day on the Hill

Teachers and Students converged on the state capitol to lift our voices in support of Adult Basic Education.

Attendance

What did we ask for?

The contact hour rate is increasing far below inflation. We struggle to retain teachers and adjust to major update without proper funding.

Over 60,000 adults participate in ABE in the state of Minnesota

\$6.05

currently

Needs

Our Day By the Numbers

3 Representatives

2 Days

29

POSTCARDS WERE GIVEN TO LEGISLATORS WITH OUR REQUESTS ON THEM

Thank you to everyone who came out to represent ABE!



Appendix D. #IamABE Postcards

#IamABE

Who does Adult Basic Education serve?

~60,000 MN adults with a wide range of educational needs & abilities from preliterate to near college-level

- GED/Adult Diploma classes
- English language acquisition
- College/Postsecondary preparation
- Workplace skills preparation
- Family literacy/parenting instruction
- Citizenship/civics education

How can legislators help?

- Increase ABE's hourly reimbursement rate
 - currently \$6.05/contact hour (*far* below inflation)
- Include district-based ABE teachers in the same contract as their K-12 counterparts

 <https://www.facebook.com/MNIamABE>

From your constituent:



 (name)

Ask me more about ABE!

You can contact me at:

 (email/phone number)

#IamABE

