

Interview with Christine Valenti Eighth Grade History Teacher Bill of Rights

1. Introduction (1:39)

My class is approximately thirty students and it's a class of mixed level abilities. I have probably six or seven students that have IEPs, which are **Individualized Educational Plans**, and they need extra supports in class and there is actually another teacher in the class that assists with those students.

And then I also have very motivated, high achieving, gifted and talented students in that class. So it's a really, it's a mixture of everybody.

As a document, I think the Bill of Rights not only embraces the rights and freedoms that we have as Americans, but one of the things that I think my students got the most from the lesson, now that I've delivered it, is that they see that the Bill of Rights is still very much active and alive in our, in our daily lives. And, I really felt as though this topic of the Bill of Rights captures the whole essence of freedom and independence as the history of the United States evolves. So, it's sort of that common thread that I can carry from the beginning of the class to the end of class.

[Classroom interaction visual]

2. Reading Strategies (2:59)

I think one of the hardest things for my students, was trying to understand vocabulary. Because, when you look at a document such as the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, there's wording or phrases that maybe most students in 2008 wouldn't understand. I think in teacher-speak we call it "front loading vocabulary", in which you pre-expose the students to words that you know will be more challenging. And I really took, like, almost a day and a half just doing vocabulary words. And especially when we started looking at Supreme Court cases, they really had no idea of what the word affirm means or what does it mean when opinions concur or a dissenting opinion. So, that was the key to unlocking their knowledge and making sure that they understood the vocabulary first.

[Classroom interaction visual]

Once we got the actual Bill of Rights, my students and I, we highlighted words that they could actually relate to when they were reading the Bill of Rights, and I try to use a strategy that hopefully, they can use in other classes. It's the idea that if you read something that's difficult, you try to look at the words that you know and try to make sense out of the words that you don't know and maybe replace it with another word that makes more sense to you.

I also had a sheet that summarized each of the ten amendments and they were to match up the summaries that I provided, with what they got from their first read of the Bill of Rights. And then another part of the lesson was to apply the summary and their understanding of the

amendments to an actual current event article that would sort of highlight or embrace what that article was—or that amendment was about.

[Classroom interaction visual]

3. Primary Sources (1:34)

They come up with really good questions. Like, you know, “Why did they only choose four years for the president, but six years for the senate?” And, “Why do you need to be older to be a senator, than a member of the House of Representatives?”

So, I think before a teacher takes on any of these primary resources, like the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, they have to be very knowledgeable of it—yourself. Because if you don't know it, it's, it's going to make it really, I think, more challenging for the kids to understand it, if you don't have a grasp yourself.

[Classroom interaction visual]

Primary resources can challenge sort of a more generalized view of history as written in the book. Not only does it make you question history, but it gives you perhaps another point of view of history that you didn't have before, or maybe even question more than what the book stated.

4. Connecting with Current Events (1:48)

It was really refreshing to see that they took something from class and brought it outside of their—outside the classroom, to knowledge that they saw on television or on the Internet.

[Classroom interaction visual]

And this ties back to the whole purpose of the Teaching American History, is that you want your kids to think critically, historically critically. History is not just the passage of time or something you read in a book, it's something that's happening now and we're a part of, and we can learn from what's happened in the past and we can also apply it to what's going on today.

5. Supreme Court Cases (0:57)

And then also there were student drug testing for extra curricular activities. So I tried to choose Supreme Court cases that were not only current, but really would have been a high interest level to them.

And then they answered, like, a de-briefing after that. Like, what did you find the most interesting about these cases? Were you surprised that there are so many cases that involve students? And pretty much we wrapped it up from there. And, I know that—I feel like they're much more aware of their rights and also how these rights are just evolving in front of them, every day with news events.