

CURRICULAR INQUIRY

Presidential Debates

—Elizabeth Clain & Caren Lee, Mamaroneck High School, Mamaroneck, New York

The presidential election that captured the attention of the country in the fall of 2008 also opened the opportunity for a compelling social studies project. The challenge for the students: to develop a deep understanding of the issues at the heart of the election and the positions of each of the candidates. Elizabeth Clain, chair of the high school social studies department, and her colleague Caren Lee built students' interest and background knowledge in their government classes by offering a timely choice for summer reading: either Barack Obama's *Audacity of Hope* or John McCain's memoir (written with Mark Salter), *Faith of My Fathers*.

Elizabeth and Caren also encouraged students to follow the campaigns over the summer by watching the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions and following media coverage. Students were steered to the *New York Times*, CNN, National Public Radio, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Over the summer, they were asked to print or clip at least four articles about the election that they found interesting; they were also encouraged to clip articles that were confusing, so misconceptions could be clarified in subsequent class discussions.

In September, the government students argued the merits of the presidential candidates and their memoirs with passion and specificity in literature circle discussions of the candidates' books. Throughout the fall, Elizabeth noted with delight several indicators of students' mounting and genuine interest in the upcoming election. Many students opted to read *both* candidates' memoirs, citing a need to understand rival positions. A sizable throng of students showed up at school on a Friday night with pizza, popcorn, and cupcakes to watch the final Obama/McCain debate together.

Finally, to maximize students' involvement in the election, Elizabeth and her colleagues in the department scheduled student debates, to be held in schoolwide assemblies. Four teams (two for each candidate) were created. Each team had a campaign manager, and a staff who researched and prepped the candidates. To research the issues and the candidates' positions, the teams read articles online and scoured the candidates' websites. To develop their debate skills, they watched debate footage online. The teams met regularly with faculty to deepen their understanding of the issues, refine their arguments, and develop their presentation skills.

As the project developed, so did the students' excitement and commitment. As the debates neared, the students' efforts broadened into a more all-encompassing campaign experience; the teams prepared posters and posted them around the school. They also studied the features of political ads and produced their own ads for each candidate. The school's video teacher saw the students' devotion to this project and began documenting the work, ultimately producing a short documentary video that was aired at the school debates, then again later at a teachers' conference day and on the local cable TV station.

The students, several of whom were approaching voting age, keenly felt the relevance and purpose of the project. As Elizabeth put it, "The kids took it and ran with it. We provided the framework, a debate presented to the whole school. The kids showed tremendous initiative and dedication, arguing strongly for what in some cases went against their personal beliefs."

The heart of this project was developing a rich understanding of the issues and positions surrounding the election. At each step technology and online resources supported this goal by providing access to information and opportunities for student expression. Elizabeth felt that the ability to share the latest media offerings with her class as part of their research (the district technology coordinator helped her access speeches and download YouTube videos) made the project incredibly topical and relevant for her students. She also felt that the commercials and short documentary set the stage at the assemblies, communicating to the school as a whole the importance of the project and of the students' work.