

Whittier Building Bridges Report

Overview *(from City of Boulder website)*

Building Bridges is a city-community collaboration to envision and enact a more productive atmosphere of civic communication in Boulder. Inspired by the work of the Public Participation Working Group, the city partnered with community members and the University of Colorado's Center for Communication and Democratic Engagement to co-create a vision for what we want our communication landscape to look like and a plan for how to get there.

More than 300 people have been part of the conversation so far, through public workshops, interviews, online forums and a working committee. Participants have said that changing Boulder's culture of public engagement is rooted in two ideas: community members want to be heard and respected in public processes, and all opinions matter to decision-making. Attendees have focused on issues of power, trust, transparency, listening, and improving communication structures.

A core group of participants explored the collective input and developed a vision for civic communication, isolated enduring issues that make engagement difficult, and developed proposals as part of a framework for change. Throughout 2020, the city will be hosting and supporting opportunities to discuss the enduring issues and enact the vision.

Project Description:

Whittier International Elementary School's 4th grade emerging bilingual students and their teachers did an inquiry into the Building Bridges work as part of their IB civics unit entitled How We Organize Ourselves:

Central Idea: Civic debate is a democratic process through which citizens can influence each other and government. (Simplified for emerging bilingual students: Engagement encourages democracy, Engagement promotes equality)

Key Concepts: Responsibility and Perspective

Teacher Questions that drove the inquiry

- What rights and responsibilities do we have as citizens? (Responsibility)
- How can people influence government? (Responsibility)
- How can kids express their ideas for government without "voting"? (Responsibility)
- Why is it important to research issues and engage in civil debates? (Perspective)
- How do diverse opinions enrich a community? (Perspective)
- How does an individual's experiences and background influence their perception of an issue? (Perspective)

By the Numbers:

Teachers: 2

Students: 9

Home Countries: 6 (Mexico, Brazil, Spain, Russia, China, Bosnia)

Hours spent on learning: 15

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Dates of inquiry: February 10, 2020 - March 6, 2020

[See planning doc.](#)

Learning Progression Summaries:

Day 1-2 We started with Socratic Seminar because we wanted students to have the opportunity to engage in an authentic discussion about a controversial topic that would allow them to express different viewpoints. After the seminar, we debriefed what the students noticed about how the communication and participation went in the seminar. This lesson naturally led to a conversation about norms for discussion and how to include everyone. One idea students came up with is that no one should dominate and we could try to include others by using pictures or visuals for students who do not read, write, or speak as much English as other students in the group. As a result, we followed this lesson with a seminar that included photos from *Material World*. A student who knows very little English was able to participate more in this seminar because of the pictures. Also, in this seminar many students invited each other to participate and monitored their own participation. At this point, we started to make a chart of the discussion protocols we were using in class, such as Socratic Seminar, whip-around, and talking chips. We did this collaboratively with the students in order to keep track of the different talking structures and the norms.

Day 3 Following Socratic Seminar, we wanted to introduce students to Consensus because we wanted them to see the difference between a discussion to explore ideas and a discussion where there is more formal turn-taking and where a final agreement must be reached. After this lesson, a student expressed how he felt peer pressure to agree with others in class (even after the lesson was over when he was out on the playground). We added this new talk structure to our chart and discussed how students learned the importance of finding a middle ground, or compromise, where everyone could agree on.

Day 4 Following this lesson, we asked students to engage in a debate about what makes a better pet: a cat or a dog. Students met in two separate teams and developed their arguments, came together as a large group to take turns stating arguments, and then met as a small group to develop a counter argument. After this lesson, we talked about how one of the major differences between debate and consensus is that no decisions were reached by the end of the debate. We continued to add the new talk structures to our chart along with student input.

Day 5 We then connected all of this work to the students' fourth grade unit of inquiry: How We Organize Ourselves. Their central ideas for this unit is: Civic debate is a democratic process through which citizens can influence each other and government. Students also broke off into pairs and made a tree map with the pros and cons of each talk structure. They presented to the group and we input their ideas into the chart.

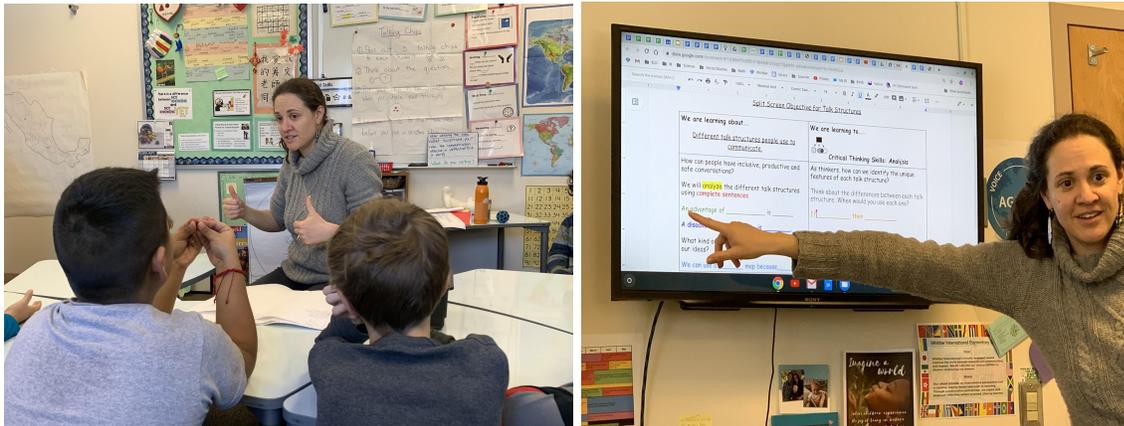
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Day 6-10 We used the talking chips protocol to structure our next class discussion. Students watched a video of a man throwing a shoe at George Bush and we talked about whether the communication was effective or ineffective and why. Students also discussed a photo of Vice President Pence and a group of men making decisions about health care for women and children. One student remarked that women might not be able to go to the meeting because some women have to stay home to take care of children. This led to a discussion about possible barriers that could keep people from coming to meetings. The following day, we made a circle map defining all the possible barriers the students could think of that would prevent people from showing up at meetings. We also read the book Just Ask by Sonia Sotomayor and added more possible barriers to the circle map.

Following the discussion of barriers, students came up with [questions](#) they asked guest speakers (Sarah Oswick, Ari Gerzon-Kessler, Wanda Pelegrina, and Brenda Ritenour). Students took notes and then synthesized the information into a slide show for the final presentation on March 6, 2020.

Day 11-14 Synthesis and presentation preparation

Day 15 Final presentation



Summary of Findings

What We Learned:

Each talking structure has advantages and disadvantages (see [chart](#) for more details). Also, each talking structure has a different purpose. It is important to think carefully about both the purpose and advantages/disadvantages of each structure before deciding which one to implement. There are many barriers that can prevent people from participating in meetings. However, there are many creative solutions to these barriers (see [chart](#)). Everyone should be included.

Themes/Unit Vocabulary:

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Safe, inclusive/included, productive, barrier, solution, advantage, disadvantage, common

Final Recommendations:

We recommend that city staff consider which talk structure/s to use for the type of meeting they are having, as well as finding solutions to potential barriers. Meetings should be inclusive, safe and productive. Everyone should be and feel included.

See students' [powerpoint](#) from their final share-out (please let us know if you have any questions).