

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Engaging with the complex relationship between the individual and the group

What's the idea...

We are always interconnected—that is, we act as both individuals and as members of a group. We are both independent and interdependent, unique individuals and members of a community, responsible to ourselves and the world in which we live, actors and acted upon. Interconnectedness is the ever-present context for our efforts to investigate, imagine, and influence the world around us. The quality of civic life in our classrooms, schools, and society depends on how we understand and act on who we are as individuals and as members of a community.

In almost every aspect of our lives, there is the potential for four civic tensions to arise:

- **Independence & Interdependence:** We have autonomy in our beliefs and actions, *and* we depend on each other.
- **Distinctiveness & Belonging:** We are unique individuals, *and* we desire a sense of belonging and shared identity.
- **Self-care & Stewardship:** We are responsible for our own well-being, *and* we have a responsibility to care for others and the world around us.
- **Agency & Equity:** We are able to influence and act on behalf of ourselves and others, *and* we value justice and fairness in the way people are treated.

Understand that we are always both individuals *and* part of intersecting communities and systems

Navigate the tensions inherent in the complexities of being an individual and members of a community

Be mindful of the wellbeing of oneself and the community

Why it matters...

Civic tensions regularly emerge in our classrooms, schools, and society. To participate in any one of these communities, individuals need to be prepared to navigate these tensions. Rather than “good or bad,” these tensions provide opportunities to understand and negotiate competing needs and desires. By naming and discussing these and other tensions, teachers can help students accept them as part of life and engage in critical and creative thinking to make sense of their experiences as part of something larger than themselves.



Aminah Robinson's art often combines histories of unique individuals in her family and neighborhood with histories of the African diaspora. Such works honor specific people while also illuminating the body of history about Black Americans.

Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, *Dad's Journey* (detail), 1972–2006, button beaded fabric, music box, mixed media book, Gift of the Artist, 2011.006.001a&b

Questions for educators and students...

Why does this topic matter to me and why might it matter to others?

Where and how do I see civic tensions showing up in this situation?

What would different perspectives on this civic issue look or sound like?

INVESTIGATION

Slowing down to better understand civic challenges and their complexities

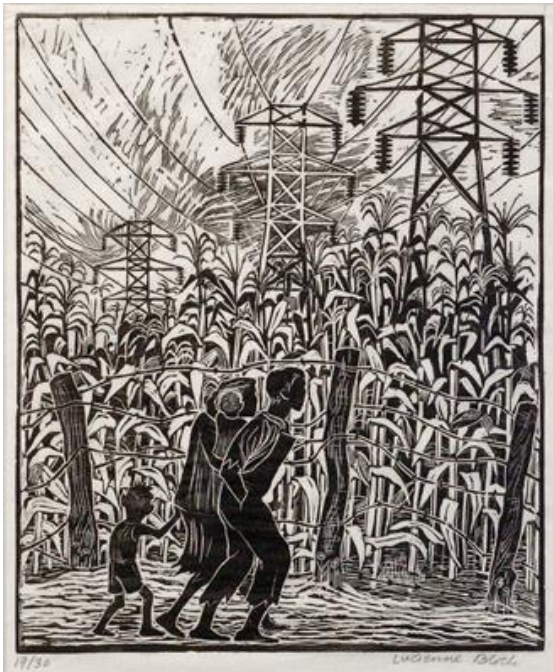
What's the idea...

All humans have biases related to our tribal nature and a cognitive inclination toward simple ways of viewing the world. Although adaptive long ago, these biases often become limiting frames for understanding and acting in today's complex world. Investigation refers to regularly inviting young people and ourselves to slow down when civic problems arise, in order to better understand them before moving on to seek a solution. Stepping out of our limiting mindsets to understand the problem space more clearly can ultimately lead to different and more effective ways to address the problem.

Slow down to better understand civic challenges

Step out of limiting mindsets to understand complexity

Seek reliable sources and relevant expertise



Slowing down can help complexify our initial impressions. Even when a work seems to have a “clear” message, a closer look presents opportunities for connections and curiosity.

Lucienne Bloch, *Land of Plenty*, 1935. Woodcut. Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J. and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art, 1930–1970 2005.013.046

Why it matters...

When we encounter problems, we often rush to figure out how to solve them. However, when we jump to generating solutions too quickly, we are likely to miss complexities that need to be unearthed in order to make meaningful progress. In a polarizing environment, sorting out evidence is tricky; seeking out reliable sources and relevant expertise are key parts of the process. Creativity involves questioning “the way things are” and reaching beyond the ordinary, leading to more insightful ways of understanding what is going on for individuals and the community.

Questions for educators and students...

How do our identities shape the way we see things?

How might we recognize and challenge our assumptions when experiencing something new or familiar?

What happens when we “zoom out” to frame a subject more expansively or try on different perspectives?

How might we understand this problem in relation to other peoples, times, and places?

IMAGINATION

Creating bold visions for how the world can and should be changed

What's the idea...

Creating bold visions of how our world might be otherwise is an important civic move toward a more just and sustainable future. Bold imagination entails inviting multiple perspectives and voices, especially those different from our own. This collective envisioning unfolds over time through dialogue, where different interests and competing commitments are clarified and negotiated across varied contexts. This back-and-forth considers and engages one another's needs, wants, and values, and supports the collective drive toward positive change.

Imagining a hopeful future collectively can feel daunting, especially when one's reality is challenged by racial and gender inequalities, economic disparities, food insecurity, etc. To the individual, collective imagination can feel unfamiliar and threatening, especially when one has never had a seat at the decision table. For communities, imagining a collective future can be messy and disquieting when different participants have to find solidarity and commonality across differences, both real and imagined.

Yet, when current realities feel unfair, unhealthy, or unsustainable, it's important that we create opportunities to not only articulate strongly-held feelings about the world, but also boldly and collectively imagine how things could be otherwise. When we fold our personal aspirations into our shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices, we build a foundation for emergent visions for living and thriving as individuals and communities. When we collectively imagine, we do more than adapt towards the future — we shape it.

Articulate what's unfair, unhealthy, or unsustainable in the world

Invite multiple and diverse voices to collectively imagine the future

Collectively craft a shared vision for thriving as a community that incorporates diverse perspectives



When imagining how things could be otherwise, we often bring what's unfair, unhealthy, and unsustainable into conversation with emergent visions of a more hopeful future.

Adolf Dehn (USA, 1895-1968) *Tomorrow's Sunrise*, 1945 Lithograph on Arches France paper. Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J. Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary Art, 1930-1970 2005.013.090

Why it matters...

Schooling rarely invites students to identify what is less than ideal about their current realities, *and* to use their imagination to engage the complexities of diverse worldviews, priorities, and aspirations toward a better world. When young people are given opportunities to consider diverse viewpoints and needs in imagining a kinder, fairer and more sustainable world, they take a step closer to rejecting the notion that the way things are is the way they must and will always be.

Questions for educators and students...

What kind of a world do we want to live in and why?

How do issues of power operate when we bring together the visions of diverse individuals toward a more just and sustainable world?

What do we need to let go of in order to engage with multiple, often dissenting, viewpoints about our collective future?

What conditions will allow our individual and collective visions to thrive? How do we create those conditions?

INFLUENCE

Transforming ideas into meaningful civic actions

What's the idea...

Influence refers to our capacity to effect change by transforming an idea into a meaningful civic action, engaging both our creativity and civic-mindedness to consider how and where we might make an impact. Impact is not necessarily a matter of scale – small actions can have a worthwhile impact.

Influence is bidirectional, meaning that it requires us to consider both those whom we seek to influence *and* those who influence us. Our ideas do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are influenced by our contexts and history. Therefore, acknowledging our own influences can help us refine our ideas and move toward impact. Additionally, making ideas impactful on any scale requires attention to audience – to the sphere of influence we hope to address. This includes not only considering how an action will be strategic or compelling for a given audience, but also being aware of possible unintended consequences.

Seek to understand how we influence and are influenced by others

Consider the change we want to see and what is actionable and promising in different spheres of influence

Transform a vision into meaningful civic action



Upheavals of the early 20th century inspired many artists to draw attention to issues they cared about. Morris Huberland, a Jewish-Polish immigrant, used his camera to illuminate the circumstances of immigrant slums in large US cities and to humanize the people living in them.

Morris Huberland, *City Kids in Back Alleys by Bridge*, 1945. Gelatin silver print. Photo League Collection, Museum Purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth M. Ross, the Derby Fund, John S. and Catherine Chapin Kobacker, and the Friends of the Photo League 2001.020.065

Why it matters...

Making meaningful civic change can feel like a daunting task. Additionally, learning in school is often treated as separate from the “real world.” Yet, children are influenced by their contexts and by the civic conditions they live in *and* they possess the imagination and agency to help shape their world. Creating opportunities for learners to grapple with how they are influenced by others and to transform their ideas into meaningful actions supports them in developing their critical and creative thinking skills in service of a larger goal.

Questions for educators and students...

How can the work we do in the classroom have a meaningful impact on ourselves and others, now or later, and not just be “for a grade”?

Which sphere of influence are we seeking to affect through our actions? Our inner circle? Our community? The world?

How might we reach our intended audience? Who else do we need to consider? How will our action be received?

Who or what has influenced our ideas? What can we learn from those examples?