

## Focus 4: The Choices Program

# Students Wrestle with Substantive Content and Hold Leaders Accountable

by Sarah Lundy

Sixteen-year-old Monica leaned across the table in the high school library and asked Lieutenant Hayden, “Is there anything that you wish you knew more about before you went to Afghanistan?”

Lieutenant Hayden started to respond cheerfully at first: “I don’t think I could have found Afghanistan on a map before I knew I was going to be deployed there! There’s a lot I wish I had known about the country.”

Monica had been studying the last sixty years of United States policy in the Middle East over the last several weeks using the Choices curriculum. She pursued her question with determination, “What kind of things do you wish you knew. What’s the biggest thing?”

Lieutenant Hayden laughed and shook his head, “Are you some kind of hard-hitting journalist?” Monica waited for an answer. When the Lieutenant continued, his tone was measured and more serious, “The language is probably the biggest thing but the history too, for sure. There was a lot of history I didn’t know until I was there. I think most Americans still don’t know anything about Afghanistan. That’s one of the things that made it so hard when I came back here.” He paused, looked my high school junior straight in the eye and said, “It’s actually why we might lose the war there. Not enough people here know enough about people there.”

War expresses that for which a society values enough to ask its young men and women to sacrifice their lives. No decision challenges citizens to engage in their democracy more fully than the

resolution to go to war. Teaching high school social studies in 2009 demands that those students about to assume the responsibilities of citizenship are educated on the wars that the United States has been fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2002. For the past four years, I have used three Choices curriculum units – *Shifting Sands: Balancing U.S. Interests in the Middle East*, *Responding to Terrorism: Challenges for Democracy*, and *Conflict in Iraq: Searching for Solutions* – to teach my students about the history of the United States’ relationship with the Middle East and the challenges that Afghanistan, Iraq and the larger region pose for United States foreign policy. The experiential learning that the Choices simulations foster has made a profound impact on students’ understanding of the difficult foreign policy dilemmas the United States faces.

Choices is a program developed by the Watson Institute for International

Studies at Brown University and is designed to act as a bridge between the university and the high school classroom. The Watson Institute was established in 1986 as a center where scholars and practitioners would collaborate to analyze contemporary global problems and develop initiatives to address them. The Choices Program uses the expertise of the Institute’s faculty to create teaching resources that use the latest scholarship to make connections between historical events and contemporary international issues. Choices seeks to empower young people with the skills, knowledge, and participatory habits to become engaged citizens capable of addressing international issues through thoughtful public discourse and informed decision making.

The units on the Middle East, Iraq and terrorism give students the opportunity to examine the Arab-Israeli conflict, the role of oil in geopolitics,

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Students at the Illinois Capitol Forum discuss the Iraq war and other current foreign policy issues with peers from across the state. The Illinois Capitol Forum is run by the Illinois Humanities Council and the Office of the Secretary of State in collaboration with the Choices Program.

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the politicization of Islam, the significance of the Iranian Revolution, the history of Iraq, the United States' role in Iraq today, the issues arising from the September 11, 2001 attacks, the changing nature of terrorism, and the motivations of terrorists. Because Choices is committed to considering controversial issues from multiple perspectives, students gain an understanding of how different people in the United States and the Middle East view American interests in the region and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We spend approximately four weeks working with the Choices units' extensive background readings and activities that include mapping ethnic groups or oil resources and analyzing political cartoons, poetry, music lyrics and blog entries from the region that express diverse perspectives on the United States' presence. These activities encourage students to think critically and to apply their new knowledge.

Once the students have been thoroughly introduced to the complexities of United States' foreign policy in the region, I invite United States military personnel who have recently returned from Afghanistan or Iraq into the classroom to share their experiences and insights. Students ask questions that will help them compose policy recommendations to the United States Senate that they will soon simulate as a class. The veterans are often quite surprised by the depth and complexity of the students' knowledge. Several, like Lieutenant Hayden, have acknowledged that the students "know more than I did before I went to war" or have commented that they wish they had learned as much in their own high school education. For me, there is no

greater testament to the civic engagement that the Choices curriculum is making possible than this recognition by our armed forces.

Our capstone activity uses the role-play simulation format provided by the Choices Program to organize the students into Senate Foreign Relation Committees, charged with the weighty task of making well-informed policy recommendations for the "United States Senate" to vote on. Classroom debates on policy alternatives rage for days. Students have wished aloud that they could learn Arabic in high school and come in before class to ask questions such as: "What's the difference between being Arab and being Persian?" and "Are all Persians Shiite?" Often, parents email or call to tell me that their student has been coming home with impassioned opinions about how the United States should continue or change our policies in the Middle East or the War on Terror. Several parents have sheepishly admitted that their student knows much more about these issues than they do. When our Senate votes on the policies that the United States should pursue, the votes are almost always narrowly split, and students get to taste the challenge of creating effective foreign policy in a democracy where multiple perspectives flourish. A compelling tribute to the long-term impact of the Choices curriculum is that former students frequently return to my classroom to discuss unfolding circumstances in international politics or email me with questions months and even years after they've participated in the simulation.

In the United States, there is no greater indicator of democratic participation than level of education. The

Choices curriculum allows students to experience how education on an issue can transform their perspective. When they feel well-informed, they are inspired to engage in the policy debate with their peers. Many students choose to participate in the ballots and surveys that the Choices website provides as venues to express views on contested issues. This widens their scope of engagement and challenges them to consider the perspectives of high school students whom they have never met but will soon participate alongside in the democratic system. Some students have, on their own initiative, written articles for the school newspaper or letters to their United States Senators—activities that are vital avenues for civic engagement as adults.

While delivering in-depth, substantive content about specific foreign policy topics, the Choices curriculum more fundamentally teaches that an informed citizenry can shape the policy debate and hold their democratically elected leaders accountable. It has proven to be a powerful tool for teaching about the issues at the heart of two ongoing wars while conveying to students just how high the stakes will be for civic engagement as they enter adulthood. A healthy democracy requires no less.

For more about Choices' programs and materials, visit [www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu)

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