

# The Fannie Lou Hamer National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy: Engaging a Curriculum and Pedagogy

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THE FANNIE LOU HAMER National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy is a coalition of friends who share a vision of the potential of education. One of the concerns that united us initially was a belief that the college students we teach manifest an empty cynicism regarding American democracy, its history, and its potential for reform. We perceived that our students did not understand our national history as one of struggle and transformation. The Civil Rights Movement is a classic example of the ways in which coalitions of local citizens can hold America accountable to its promises. But we realized that by the time we meet our students as undergraduates, their perceptions of history and politics are fairly fixed. We knew we needed to influence students earlier in their intellectual lives and to do so meant that we must work with the teachers who instruct them.

Founded in 1997 at a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar for College Teachers, the Hamer Institute conducts seminars and workshops for K-12 teachers and students that feature the role

played by the Civil Rights Movement in expanding the meaning, scope, and practice of citizenship and democracy in America. We have several comprehensive objectives for this project. The first is to work in collaboration with teachers and students to fashion a new curriculum that reflects the achievements of ordinary Americans in expanding the meaning and scope of democracy. Second, we provide teachers with innovative pedagogy featuring primary documents and other educational resources they can utilize in the classroom. Our final goal is to develop a community of engaged learners who serve as purveyors of knowledge in future institutions and workshops, in communities throughout the nation, and in primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions.

The summer seminars are designed to introduce secondary school students and educators to the valuable and remarkable achievements of the Civil Rights Movement and the last twenty years of scholarship on citizenship and democracy. Rather than a single focus on national leaders, social scientists now highlight the dynamic roles played by ordinary citizens in creating our nation's legacy of democracy. In particular, the Civil Rights Movement has demonstrated the transformative potential of grassroots participation in redefining citizenship and democracy. Most K-12 teachers, and therefore their students, have never been exposed to the history of the Civil Rights Movement, having graduated from college before institutions of higher education began to teach this "new" history. The Hamer Institute is committed to transforming the curriculum of our primary and secondary schools to highlight the role played by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Students must learn that history is made in all places and by all kinds of people. We also strongly advocate the use of interactive teaching techniques and we maintain that the use of primary sources in teaching is essential for learning. As a result of these techniques, our participants are actively engaged in the construction of democracy while they simultaneously transform the ways they teach.

## **Curriculum**

The curriculum of the Hamer Institute is at the very heart of our mission. Closely integrated with an active learning pedagogy, examined below, the various lessons we have designed are effective with various audiences, different types of settings, and across generations. At the core of the Hamer curriculum is the belief that the latest scholarship on the development of citizenship and democracy must be integrated into the nation's K-12 curriculum. Our focus is consistently on those organized groups of people who have successfully demanded that the doors of

freedom be opened wider to include more Americans in the promise of democracy. We have found that teachers hunger to master this new knowledge and bring it to their classrooms.

Many educators who graduated from high school before the mid-1980s were taught a more traditional version of United States history. This history is a powerful political narrative that divides the nation's past into clear periods tied to major political, diplomatic, or economic crises. There is a profound logic to this traditional story that accounts for its staying power and continued use. The events highlighted in this narrative—the establishment of democratic institutions during the colonial period, the American Revolution, the Constitution, the emergence of formalized party systems, Westward expansion, the Civil War and Reconstruction, immigration and industrialization, Progressivism, “Big Stick” and Wilsonian diplomacy, The Great Depression and the New Deal, WWII and the Cold War, Ronald Reagan and the accompanying reemergence of conservatism, and the Post-Cold War world—have profoundly shaped both our national development and world events. In this traditional narrative, various heroes emerge and the nation's history unfolds with almost no discussion of the lives of ordinary citizens in shaping the course of events. Noticeably absent from this narrative is any mention of the liberating struggles of women, working people, or people of color, each of which substantially expanded the practice of democracy in the United States.

It seems clear now that the expansion of democracy in the United States, with the exception of the abolition of slavery, resulted from active citizens who seriously embraced the idea of inalienable rights and demanded them through sustained nonviolent struggle. Among other groups, this was true for propertyless male workers at the start of the nineteenth century, for women more formally after 1848, and for African Americans in their long freedom struggle after emancipation. Wherever democracy has been expanded it has been through the organized efforts of active people who wanted to become full citizens and partners in the life of the nation. This new interpretation—our interpretation—is clearly supported by the record of social science scholarship over the last forty years (Levine et al 1989, Nash 1991, Freeman et al 1992, Foner 1998).

Unfortunately, state curricula and college-level instruction lag behind the cutting edge of scholarly work. There are several reasons for this. Many teachers graduated from college before the new history was widely taught at the university level. They have not been exposed professionally to the material and consequently feel unprepared to adjust their lessons accordingly. Many school districts and states feel uncomfortable with the new scholarship, preferring to continue to teach an older narrative that

features reform “from the top” rather than active citizenship “from the bottom” as the key to an expanding democracy. Furthermore, statewide testing, too often tied to the older narrative, makes it difficult for teachers familiar with the new narrative to teach what they know. To remedy this, the Hamer Institute works with teachers and students to introduce this new history and to transform it into successful lessons that are consistent with state standards and tests.

The Hamer Institute works closely with students and teachers to prepare them to see the power of citizenship within a democracy. We have successfully packaged our curriculum to work in various contexts in both the United States and the emerging democracy of Romania—single day in-service workshops; two-week seminars for teachers and students; one and five week seminars for teachers; a one-week workshop for community college faculty; and four-week pre-collegiate programs for middle and high school students. While the curriculum is adaptable to the needs of any group or circumstance, our preference is to run seminars that bring students and teachers into the same environment so that we all benefit from each other’s voices and perspectives. In what follows we will focus on the two-week seminar for students and teachers which we have run five times. Its curricular structure provides the basis of our programming. Our narrative stresses the achievements of Americans—mindful of race, class, and gender—as vehicles for understanding the dynamic role of democracy in the unfolding story of American freedom. Through all of this we are ever aware of the living documents of our nation’s democratic tradition, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

During the first week of the seminar, teachers are exposed to a graduate-level program of intensive readings, lectures, discussion, and group work centered on developing lesson plans which, while consistent with state standards, reflect the importance of active citizens. Our story begins in Africa as we explore the development of the North Atlantic slave trade and the rise of the plantation system, supplemented with a frank discussion of slavery as both a system of labor and one of racial construction and control. Here we critically examine the latest scholarship on the practice of slavery, but we also learn how African Americans endured and resisted slavery while preparing for freedom by building their own institutions (e.g., family, church, and community) (Levine 1978, Blassingame 1979, Creel 1988). We explore the schools, churches, businesses, farms, political clubs, abolitionist societies, the press, and countless other critically important institutions which free blacks sustained before emancipation. In this intensive full day, we explore slavery as a dynamic institution that changed over time and region in its racial and

gender impact (Kolchin 1993). Teachers are also exposed to the idea of the social construction of race and gender (Fields 1990, Collins 2000).

Our focus then shifts to Reconstruction, a period of dynamic change in the lives of African Americans and other working people. The mobilization of previously disenfranchised black Americans and the formation of coalitions with progressive whites resulted in significant changes to the Constitution and in state governments. We also feature the meaning of the Civil War by scrutinizing the demands for meaningful work in the south and north by both blacks and whites (Berlin et al 1986, Foner 1990, DuBois 1990 [1903]). Most important, we continue with our story of institution building. We chart the development of institutions built during slavery and transformed and strengthened in freedom. We demonstrate that these institutions emerged over time as the solid foundation for the Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The third day focuses upon the Great Migration and the New Deal. A critical examination of the dynamics of urban working class life, black and white, demonstrates that greater political participation and social/economic opportunities resulted from active citizenship. The long-term impact of the Great Migration on the politics and culture of the United States is difficult to overstate: the emergence of increasingly strict patterns of residential segregation in northern cities, a sizable black voting population, the global importance of a regional cultural renaissance, dynamic changes in the patterns of racial violence, and an explosion of new political, economic, and religious institutions (Tuttle 1970, Dubofsky 1985, Honey 1993). Similarly we discuss the impact of the New Deal which continues to shape the political landscape of our own era, as demonstrated by contemporary debates over the nature of Social Security, the rights of organized labor, and the size and scope of government.

The fourth and fifth days of the seminar are devoted to a study of the postwar Civil Rights Movement. Here the path to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954, 1955) and the impact of the *Brown* decisions are explored, as are the lynching of the Emmett Till in Mississippi and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Our focus on the 1950s is designed to demonstrate that the institutions built by blacks during slavery and freedom had matured to the point that African Americans could mobilize and confront both a national power structure committed to maintaining segregation and a white South committed to massive resistance to change (King 1963, Marable 1984). We continually emphasize that the explosion of Civil Rights activity following *Brown* is part of a longer struggle begun in 1619 when the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia.

On the last class of the first week, the seminar considers the dynamic events of the 1960s focusing on local people and the experience of Fannie

Lou Hamer in Mississippi (Lee 1999). We show that Mississippi had an established black leadership committed to Civil Rights in the 1950s, including Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, and Aaron Henry (Dittmer 1994, Payne 1995). We chart the arrival of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from its first outpost in McComb to the organization of the Mississippi Summer Project and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Here our focus is on the integral role played by local leaders like Mrs. Hamer in changing the practice of democracy in the United States while simultaneously blazing a trail of active citizenship.

During the first week we meet only the teachers but at the start of the second week, students join the seminar and we change our approach accordingly. Each session focuses on an individual whose life inspires active citizenship and illustrates the history illuminated the previous week. We have learned that students are drawn to biography, particularly the stories of people who come from circumstances similar to their own. We assert that if students see people like themselves working with others to create a free and democratic America, then the political alienation that afflicts our youth will be transformed into constructive civic engagement. To this end, we have prepared biographies that incorporate lecture and discussion, brief video clips when appropriate, and original essays we have written as well as primary documents suitable for high school students. We are in the process of turning the essays into a book for supplemental use in history, civics, and social studies classes. Among the biographies finished or in process are those of Wendell Phillips, Ida B. Wells, A. Philip Randolph, Septima Clark, Walter Reuther, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King. After a presentation and discussion of each biography, students and teachers share their understanding of how the featured individual advocated for democracy and helped transform America. In the seven years that we have been using biography, students and teachers have responded positively. They have noted that framing individual lives in a broader social and political context creates a compelling lesson on the power of citizenship.

In the afternoon sessions of the second week, we provide speakers who relate their personal engagement in the Civil Rights Movement. These oral history panels have consisted of such movement luminaries and "local people" as Bob Moses, Hollis Watkins, L.C. Dorsey, Joan Browning, Victoria Gray Adams, Jimmy Travis, Bob Mantz, and Frank Smith Jr. Nothing else we have done elicits a more positive responses from teachers and students. For our participants, meeting the people who are still living and making history provides an important perspective on how democracy works and of its potential for transformation. The oral histories reinforce the biographies taught in the morning session.

On the last day of the seminar students and teachers are able to synthesize the new history to which they have been exposed. Students present a paper on what they have learned or perform an artistic project linked to the week's themes. We have never failed to be amazed by the quality of the student projects. These have ranged from well-crafted essays to songs and poetry, interpretive dance and one-act plays. While this activity focuses on the students, the teachers use the occasion to present and pass out revised lesson plans on some topic relevant to their state standards but utilizing the materials, themes, and pedagogies learned over the previous two weeks. We have now on record an impressive collection of lesson plans, ranging from an elementary school unit on active citizenship to a full-blown play on the Mississippi freedom movement.

The Hamer Institute seminars also have included field trips to local and regional places of historic importance. We meet local leaders who guide us through their communities while discussing how local people acted to transform our history and political practices. In the past, we have toured the major Civil Rights sites in Jackson, Mississippi and have met with local people and toured such important places as Clarksdale, Greenwood, Itta Bena, Ruleville, Meridian, Philadelphia, and McComb in Mississippi and Memphis and Birmingham in the neighboring states. In 2004, the Hamer Institute featured its commitment to using place as a teaching tool by participating in the inaugural National Endowment Humanities Landmark Grant program. This program allowed us to take teachers on an intellectual and physical journey from Freedom Summer in Mississippi to the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Teachers returned to their home institutions committed to using local people and places in their own schools and classrooms—some are now helping their students to develop a local Civil Rights Movement tour or to collect local oral histories.

Regardless of the length of the seminar, we help participants perceive how active citizens have made a difference in expanding the meaning and practice of citizenship and democracy in the United States. The evidence is overwhelming, the story is compelling, and the message is positive and inclusive. The strength of the Hamer Institute curriculum is not only found in its historical narrative but also in its power to inspire young people to become active citizens.

### **Pedagogy**

Over the last twenty years, educational practice has changed drastically. One of the dominant pedagogical changes has been the transition from the focus on the educator as central to the learning process to an

emphasis on the student. This movement has been labeled “student-centered” education. A significant attribute of student-centered education has been the creation of an active-learning pedagogy. This pedagogical approach argues that the learning of students must be reemphasized through students either “doing” the very skills they are being taught or experiencing the lessons they are learning. Active-learning pedagogy may include such approaches and tools as off-campus practical experiences, travel abroad, service learning as experiential education, multimedia and technology emphases, multicultural education, civic education, classroom simulations, a focus on primary texts, case study method, and students conducting their own independent research.

While many of these approaches have been visible in education since the second half of the twentieth century, what has changed in education is the currency of these trends and the deliberateness with which they have been constructed. For example, Richard Paul and Linda Elder have written *A Miniature Guide on How to Improve Student Learning* that walks teachers and professors through thirty concrete steps designed to transform the way they teach, with an emphasis on critical thinking skills. Each of these steps focuses on students engaging in their own education. Paul and Elder argue that we are able to transform students from passive recipients of information to active participants in their own education when we model “important intellectual traits, such as intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance, and intellectual autonomy” (idea 17) and when we teach students to assess their own skills (ideas 19-23). It is this transformation that has been the goal of both the student-centered learning and the active learning movements. It is also the goal of the Hamer Institute.

A binding theme behind this pedagogy has been, at least in the disciplines of Political Science, History and Social Studies, an interest in civic literacy. The civic literacy movement recognizes that in a democracy citizens must be actively engaged in their own governments. If popular sovereignty requires the citizen to be the responsible ruler, citizens must be taught to understand government and to hold governmental officials accountable to national values and ideals. Chesney and Feinstein put it this way:

Civic literacy is the ability of citizens to decide what governments *should* be doing, understand what governments *are* doing, and have the skills required so that governments *will* respond appropriately. Resolving the contradiction between normative (what government should do) and empirical (what government does) is necessary in order to determine the role of government. Civic literacy refers to the skills necessary for functioning as a citizen in a modern democratic society (Chesney and Feinstein 12).

While there has been a great emphasis on the importance of civic literacy as a goal of our educational process, assessment of this literacy movement has demonstrated how unsuccessful we have been in creating an engaged citizenry. Contemporary research has shown that many traditional civic education programs influence political knowledge, but not necessarily political interest, political/social activity and efficacy, or social trust (John, Halpern, and Morris 2001). However, if citizens only possess civic knowledge and do not have a sense of political efficacy or the belief that they can influence the government to make changes, civic literacy cannot empower the electorate. Another scholar has hypothesized that a similar disconnect between the positive impact of service learning on community engagement and the lack of change in political participation could be explained by political fear on the part of citizens. William Ball, who finds this trend consistently reflected in the scholarly literature, both in terms of local and national participation, writes:

From the citizen's point of view, politics embodies many attributes about which to be fearful. It is something alien to daily life. The portrayal of which is conveyed to the public entirely through the mass media, is negative in the extreme. Our popular culture (and not a small part of our educational system) teaches us that politics consists of ruthless competition among advocacy groups pursuing dogmatic self-interest by vying for the attention of scandal-ridden power brokers. Political actors represent power and authority and political processes themselves are mysterious, yet their outcomes can have a major impact on individual lives (Ball 2001, 3).

As university professors, we have also recognized that disconnect between local engagement and political efficacy. In our classrooms we found students who believed that our current political and economic systems are unjust but who did not see political engagement as a means of transforming society. National studies have found that there is an increased political disengagement of high school and college students (Mann 1999, National Associate, 1999). They do not realize that our national history is one that demonstrates the significance of the relationship between political engagement and social change. It was this concern that led us to form the Hamer Institute. We believe that to transcend the fear that Ball recognizes and to challenge the disconnect documented by John, Halpern, and Morris we have to help students personally engage in learning. An active/engaged student can be transformed into an active, engaged citizen.

We have determined that to bridge this gap between the empty cynicism of students toward positive political change and the need for engaged citizenship, we need to reach students earlier than their university

years and teach them differently. Instead of focusing on different pedagogies as means of better teaching, we argue that the content of our curriculum requires an active pedagogy. We believe it is not possible to teach a curriculum of the history of civil rights and labor as transforming America without looking at an empowered grassroots and without empowering our own students.

Several years ago, the Hamer Institute was in Romania where we were lecturing at the University of Bucharest. During that time we interviewed several governmental officials, including Alexandra-Luminata Petrescu, a special advisor to the President. She discussed their government's concern about the failure of their educational system, designed under Communism, to prepare students for the rigors of democratic citizenship. In their traditional educational system, students were trained to be recipients of information. It was a very information-centered educational system, where students were expected to master information and report it back to the teacher. The problem was that when students graduated, they had the same relationship to the state; they passively received information and then carried out their assigned responsibilities. The government realized that this did not work in a democracy. Passive students become passive citizens.

And as Fredrick Douglass has reminded us, passivity can never bring about change.

Without struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will.

Because we strongly share these views, the pedagogical approaches we use and teach teachers to use is as important as our curriculum. We have found that short segments of purposefully chosen video or audiotapes, coupled with directed discussion, fully engages students. We know that well-chosen and thought-out simulations or role-play, debates, art projects, oral history, interactive web-based sources, and primary documents help students remember lessons. This pedagogical approach empowers students to become teacher of themselves and thus inculcates the values of active citizenship. By incorporating students into the lessons of history and politics, they begin to be engaged. Fear dissipates. Political engagement becomes possible.

The uniqueness of the Hamer Institute does not lie in our mission, our curriculum, or our pedagogy. Instead, our contribution is found in our

awareness of the way these elements must reinforce each other. We believe this new history of local engagement and social transformation must be taught in a manner that requires student engagement and societal investment. It is through this integration that we hope to engage our students, reinvigorate the American citizenry, and help continue the ongoing project we call democracy. For additional information about the Hamer Institute and our programs you may access our website at <[www.jsums.edu/~hamer.institute](http://www.jsums.edu/~hamer.institute)> or email us at <[hamer.institute@jsums.edu](mailto:hamer.institute@jsums.edu)>.

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