

White's Rules for Action ***Promoting Literacy Via Citizenship*** by Paul D. White

Wonderful things happen when teachers use citizenship activities to improve their students' literacy. By citizenship activities, I mean embedding academic standards in creative lessons and projects that teach young people their privileges, obligations, and responsibilities as members of a democratic nation. In this approach to teaching, academic skills are presented as the means to an end, and not as the ends in themselves.

Even as standardized test scores rise, and reading and math levels increase, a disquieting voice within our collective national heart is telling us that the changes we want must go deeper than this. We know we must spend less time teaching performance for the sake of performance and a lot more time helping our children understand what they're living for.

As I write about in *White's Rules*, at West Valley Leadership Academy, I teach my students that the real purpose of learning history, science, economics, and government is not to memorize facts, but to familiarize themselves with the timeless problems civilizations always face. Once they understand the problems, they can try to figure out ways to solve them.

The challenge in working to improve students' literacy skills is not that they don't have the ability to read and write effectively, but that they frequently don't care enough to make the effort. A telling statistic is that when school recesses each day in the United States, the average student goes home and reads for only eight minutes and sits in front of the television for four hours. ("How Children Spend Their Time," Hofferth and Sandburg, University of Michigan; "TV and the Family," American Academy of Pediatrics). Sporadic attendance and half-hearted effort in class negate the best teachers' efforts to improve student performance. To counter this trend, I offer some examples from my own experience of how citizenship activities can boost awareness of a problem and spur students to dig for truth, improving their writing in the process.

Excerpted from ***RHI: Promoting Active Citizenship***, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of *RHI*, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Citizenship"

As a teaching principal at a small elementary school, I taught social studies to students in third through sixth grade. Each day we started by skimming the *Christian Science Monitor*, a newspaper we chose because of its international scope. For a couple of weeks, I had tried in vain to interest my class in the growing conflict in central Africa. I was looking for a way to breathe some life and interest into my lessons. And then one day, an African family from Burundi arrived on our campus doorstep. They had just escaped the same civil war we'd studied and were feeling homesick and alone.

A simple class interview of the Burundian mother provided the spark I'd been looking for and led me to ask, "What can we do to help?" First, we were motivated to read and research everything we could find on that part of the world and the history of the conflict. When the students wanted to learn more, the mother then expanded her talk to teach us about her country's language and foods. (The kids were thrilled to eat "real African food"!)

Finally, we were moved to declare a "peace offensive" against the nation of Burundi, on behalf of its people. We drafted an official proclamation—signed by students, teachers, parents, and board members—declaring our school's intent to send letters to the Burundian president, along with toys and clothing to the children. We even offered to help them negotiate peace among the many warring factions. Imagine our surprise when we arrived at school one morning to find a personal fax from the Burundian president, thanking us for our resolution and asking for our help! This peace offensive went on to become a national story, and the same newspaper we originally read to learn about the conflict ended up publishing a feature about our response. Significantly, that year's pre- and post-standardized test scores showed an average growth of more than two years per child, in all subjects, within an eight-month period.

A short time later, I moved to my present position at a small alternative school, teaching the most high-risk junior high and high school students in Los Angeles. But since that incident opened my eyes years ago to the potential for using citizenship activities to improve my students' literacy skills, I've never been without three things: my class set of newspapers to begin each day; heightened student interest in our lessons; and striking academic growth.

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Below is a short list of some other citizenship activity projects my students have learned from and enjoyed.

◇ A study of the **plight of third-world children** led my students to “adopt”—with their own money—one child each from Central America, Africa, and Asia. We write them regularly and track their countries’ progress in the paper and on the Internet. At the other end of the spectrum, we have a pen pal in the Texas prison system. In prison for the sixth and final time, abandoned by all his family, this man will die of old age in his cell. “I’ve so ruined and wasted my life,” he wrote to us years ago, “would you mind if I wrote to the kids sometimes and encouraged them not to waste their lives like I have wasted mine?” Both sets of pen pals continue to teach my students valuable lessons.

◇ Our school’s ongoing personal **relationship with a Holocaust survivor** led a neo-Nazi gang member to write a letter, telling this woman how sorry he was for his past hateful behavior toward Jews and vowing to stop it. This letter, along with letters from many of my other students, were included in a book the survivor later wrote. She said, “Of all the thousands of letters I’ve received over the years, your students’ were the most heartfelt.” My students also learned that one of their classmates had a mother who’d survived the Cambodian genocide. The students did more research and writing, and then prepared a “day of forgiveness and healing” for our entire community, inviting both local citizens and members of some rival gangs. Both genocide survivors spoke, and the effect of their stories on those who attended was overwhelmingly positive.

◇ While reading and discussing **op-ed essays** in the newspaper, two students decided to write essays about their own feelings and submit them to an online newspaper. One girl wrote about escaping a crystal meth addiction as well as dealing with the stereotype of being a “better Asian American” student. Another student wrote about the difficulty of trying to be a good teenager and a good

Muslim in the United States. Both girls received dozens of positive responses to their articles. Suddenly, everyone in my class wanted to write opinion essays!

◇ **Learning about the problems that confront our city's future** resulted in a large-scale research project that called for determining the most pressing problems that face Los Angeles. Students brainstormed solutions, packaged them in a professional format, and presented them to the mayor, whose personal assistant later came and spoke at our school, inviting us to attend and participate in a special City Hall meeting.

◇ **In studying the problems of substance addiction and homelessness**, as well as in struggling with their own addiction problems, my students have developed a long-term relationship with a local homeless mission. We have alternated as speakers and group leaders at each other's facilities, and two girls in my class personally helped a homeless woman in our neighborhood get off dangerous streets and enroll in the mission's counseling program. As our school's reputation has grown, we've been guest speakers for community and law enforcement meetings, where each student has had the thrill of delivering a short, prepared speech before a large, formal audience. We are also working with an eighteen-year-old former gang member, who recently became a quadriplegic as the result of a serious beating. This young man hopes to become a motivational speaker to prevent other children from joining gangs, and my students take turns in helping him prepare for this work. Improved public speaking has been an important result of these efforts.

These stories and many others are contained in *White's Rules*, as is a step-by-step description of how to implement them. Educators using my approach generally can expect four immediate results:

1. Students will become motivated and genuinely excited about what they're learning.
2. Teachers will find a renewed sense of purpose and interest in the lessons they're presenting.

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3. Strictly as a side effect, reading and writing abilities will soar.
4. The learning environment will improve, as moral and social behavior problems virtually disappear.

Beyond that, educators who adopt this approach will be able to do the one thing that's more thrilling than reading about someone else's successes: they will experience and increase their own successes, inside the classroom and beyond.

About the Writer

Paul D. White *walked away from a successful construction business to find a career that let him give back to the world. He remains a friend and mentor to students he has turned around over the past four decades.*

White's Rules Saving Our Youth One Kid at a Time

by Paul D. White with Ron Arias

White's Rules is a lesson to parents and educators who can't control their kids or their classrooms. For Americans who truly want to stop the violence, end the apathy, and improve academic performance, White poses a challenge: Try his rules. The ten-rule list that he developed covers everything from character values to schoolwork, from getting off drugs to learning personal finance skills.

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