Listening to Democracy’s Next Generation: 
Using Web Dialogue to Connect Lawmakers and Students

By

Kristen J. Amundson, Laurie E. Maak, Kelly Sharbel

Democracy is not a spectator sport. However, as the Trust for Representative Democracy and the Center for Civic Education noted in 2003, “The older generations have failed to teach the ideals of citizenship to the next generation” [emphasis added].

Even after a Presidential election that saw a dramatic increase in participation by young voters, there are still concerns about the long-term civic involvement of America’s youth, particularly on issues relating to state or local government. Technology offers one hopeful possibility of a way to address this concern.

In 2007 and 2008, Virginia Delegate Kristen J. Amundson hosted a web dialogue—an online town meeting—with approximately 400 students in eight government classes at two high schools in her district. This technique, which has been used in other states to engage members of the public with policy makers in dialogues on public policy issues, opened up a robust conversation about issues that matter to young people. The project was a joint effort by Fairfax County Public Schools, the Equal Footing Foundation founded by the Northern Virginia Technology Council, and the California-based education non-profit WestEd.

The dialogues, called “Listening to Democracy’s Next Generation,” engaged students, teachers, legislators, and subject experts in a four-day discussion of Virginia’s budget. In this article, we will describe the web dialogues, discuss lessons we have learned, and outline our future plans to expand this model to enable legislators throughout the country to listen to their state’s next generation.

Web dialogue

Web dialogue is an online structure and process that enables legislators, subject experts, and students to take part in focused, informed and facilitated discussions. The dialogue is similar to an in-person town meeting, but the conversation takes place over time. (The four-day schedule chosen for our dialogue accommodated the schools' alternate-day block schedule.) On the first two days, students identified the needs driving the Virginia budget. On the second two days, they struggled to make budget decisions that reflected the needs they had identified and their own spending priorities. Each topic was divided into multiple discussion points to allow in-depth examination of different aspects of the issue. For example, “Budget policy needs” included discussions about transportation, education, preschool education and health care.

General education, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) government teachers at Mount Vernon and West Potomac high schools participated in the project and agreed upon dates for preparing the students for the dialogue and the content that would be included in the curriculum. Teacher Kelly Sharbel, who coordinated the program at Mt. Vernon High School, observed, “We reached consensus on engaging in the activity and the amount of time that would be devoted to it in a series of teacher planning meetings and informal ‘hallway’ discussions. We had to consider the time pressures all teachers work under to meet state curriculum standards and the additional time constraints imposed on IB or AP within their respective programs. Consequently, we decided to use two days of class on the budget game and then use about one-third of four additional class periods to conduct the dialogue itself. About 15 minutes of the
period was used to pass back responses from the expert panel and another 15 minutes used to create new questions.”

At the suggestion of the government teachers, students participate in the dialogue with their entire class. They make their entry as a group. Teachers noted that this process required students to discuss their ideas and reach a class (or at least a group) consensus before posting a question.

The web dialogue library provided background information used by delegates on the state’s budget (revenue and economic forecasts) and sections of the governor’s budget that addressed the dialogue topics. The dialogue also included a budget simulation for students to construct a budget and work through the choice-making activity. Expert panelists joined the dialogue each day. They responded to students’ questions and posed their own questions that challenged students to consider their views and priorities. Delegate Amundson facilitated the dialogue. She introduced each discussion, answering many questions of students, providing background information and asking them to consider different perspectives and conditions that impact the budget in both the short and long term.

Dialogue summaries captured discussion highlights of the first two days. Students received the summaries before they began discussing the second topic. The overview enabled the students and subject experts to “jump in” to the discussions even if they had not read every one of the previous messages. A final wrap-up summary provided discussion highlights from the entire four days.

Equal Footing gave the initiative a community-based outlet through its Gum Springs Community Center Computer Clubhouse. Students from both high schools could access the online dialogue after regular school hours. Our hope is to expand that community-based participation in future years.

A focus on the budget

The idea of focusing the web dialogue on the budget originally came from government teachers at the high schools. Many people believe that there is only one meaningful statement of any organization's priorities: its budget.

Amundson agreed. Pointing out John Kennedy’s dictum that to govern is to choose, she viewed the opportunity to learn more about the budget process as a way to help students understand the realities faced by Richmond legislators.

The dialogue took place as the General Assembly was addressing the budget. This gave real-world significance to students’ interactions with policymakers as they considered both needs and possible solutions to three critical Virginia priorities: education, transportation, and human services.

Working with the documents used by state legislators and the expert panelists, students discovered that Virginia has more needs than available resources. They saw how the budget process requires balancing heart strings with purse strings.

They also saw how investments needed for the long term (building roads or college classrooms) may conflict with more immediate demands—paying teachers and state government employees. There are no right answers to resolving these inherent conflicts, but students gained an appreciation for the challenges facing government at every level. With the help of University of Richmond professor Dr. Kirk Jonas, a simulation Budget

Game was included as one teacher resource for the web dialogue. The simulation asked students to make the same kinds of tough choices that legislators were wrestling with as they formulated the state budget. They learned very quickly that choices to lower revenue or increase spending in one area had to be accompanied by reductions in other budget areas and the areas in which the reductions could take place might well be limited. Moreover, as they presented questions to the expert panel, they also learned that what they thought was a fairly simple and straightforward question was not so simple and straightforward and could not be resolved in isolation from other issues.

At Mt. Vernon High School, the budget game required students to eliminate a sizeable budget deficit through a series of choices of budget cuts and tax increases. They were given a budget deficit and a number of budget choices, each of which could raise or lower the deficit. Working in “legislative committee” groups, the students had to come to a committee consensus on which choices to make in order to balance the budget as required by the state constitution.

This exercise gave them an appreciation of the complexities of the trade-offs involved in budget decisions and the difficulty of reaching political consensus on issues that are emotional and often intractable. The budget activity was fun and challenging for the students and an eye-opener for teachers who found students arguing passionately for and against budget choices on which they had their own position.

One caveat: It is important that these discussions be preceded by a general discussion of proper legislative protocol and respect for each other’s view. For students whose only role models for discussion of political issues are the televised programs featuring screaming panelists, a web dialogue can offer a model of civil and thoughtful discourse.

Requirements for a successful dialogue

The first step in creating a successful web dialogue is to build a strong partnership with teachers. Amundson, a former school board chairman in Fairfax County, first reached out to teachers in her district. However, in the absence of an actively involved legislator, teachers should initiate contact with their legislator’s office to request their participation and to obtain the budget information they need to get this project off the ground.

Government teachers generally adopt teaching strategies that require preparation beyond the recommendations of teacher edition textbooks. Like other strategies used in government classes—class debates on current issues, drawing up legislative proposals, Model Congress, or model elections, to name a few—web dialogues require both careful preparation and teaching of specific skills.

For the web dialogue to be successful, teachers must be willing to acquire knowledge of current budget issues in order to be a classroom resource for their students. Being able to explain the context of the budget issue and its subtleties is essential to engaging the students and getting their participation in the project. Sharbel emphasizes that it does not require the teacher to be a budget expert, just a knowledgeable resource who can guide and put into context government budget issues.

Subject-matter experts who are willing to serve as panelists are essential to presenting a topic as challenging as the budget to high school classes. Students ask detailed and thoughtful questions: how much does the state spend on public transportation? What is the cost of providing health insurance to children? How much would it cost to expand preschool education? The best panelists are those who have those facts at their fingertips. Over the two years, panelists have included Delegate Bob Brink, a member of the House.

Appropriations Committee; Isis Castro, a member of the State Board of Education; Douglas Koelemay, a member of the Commonwealth Transportation Board; Dr. Kirk Jonas, a professor at the University of Richmond and a former legislative staff member at the General Assembly; and Matt Leighty, assistant director of the Virginia Hospital and Health Care Association.

We’ve found that successful panelists have several other qualities. They need to have a sense of humor—students appreciate a panelist who occasionally confesses, “I agree with your goal, but I’m not sure how we get there.” Panelists should be comfortable using their computer. While responding to student questions is no harder than responding to email, it does require that level of tech-savviness. We wondered why one legislator who had agreed to be a panelist wasn’t responding to student questions. It turned out that he didn’t know how to type. On the other hand, Koelemay used his Blackberry to respond to students almost instantly.

Legislators are the glue that holds the web dialogue together. The legislator who sponsors the dialogue needs to be willing to make a substantial time commitment during the days the dialogue takes place. For Amundson, that meant responding to student questions during committee meetings and even during the legislative session itself. (In moments of candor, legislators will acknowledge that not every minute of a legislative floor session is occupied by high-level debate. During those fallow periods, some legislators sign letters to constituents. Amundson answered student questions.)

It’s even better if the host can recruit other legislators to participate. Their insights and voices help students see that policy is developed through discussion and debate, and that even members of the same political party don’t always agree on every issue. In both 2007 and 2008, Delegate Bob Brink from Arlington contributed his extensive knowledge of health care, his familiarity with the budget process (he serves as a member of the Appropriations Committee), and his dry wit to Listening to Democracy’s Next Generation.

**Benefits**

Web dialogues offer significant benefits for students, their teachers, and elected officials:

- Students feel connected. Some of the students who took part in the web dialogue went into the process feeling disengaged. But the web dialogue linked them with panelists and elected officials who considered questions seriously and provided in-depth responses. As a result, teachers said, “When they got an answer to their question, they thought it was the greatest thing ever.”

- Teachers gain new knowledge. Most of the teachers who participated in the web dialogue learned something about state government. Several now say they plan to devote more time to this subject in future years. “Before the first web dialogue, I usually covered state government for about three days at the end of the year after the AP exam,” one teacher reported. “But now that I see how exciting and relevant it is to my students, I am teaching it as a three-week unit in the middle of the school year.”

- Students and teachers find an engaging way to learn required content. Web dialogues offer teachers a way to bring required subject matter to life. No longer is the discussion of how a bill becomes a law a static chart on a page. Instead, students see the process through a lawmaker’s eyes, as a dynamic and challenging way to shape public policy.

- Legislators use time efficiently. Technology makes it possible to engage students, to
listen to their responses, and to provide them with serious answers to their serious questions. Without travel or severe schedule adjustments lawmakers can engage in conversations with students that bring government practice and civic responsibility into the classroom.

**Lessons learned**

The two web dialogues have taught us valuable lessons about engaging high school students in policy discussions. They include the following:

- Tomorrow’s citizens need to understand how policy gets made, what its potential impacts are, and---most important—how they can help shape that policy. If schools are to fulfill their mission of preparing tomorrow’s citizens for active participation in our democracy, they need to find ways to give students this type of realistic classroom instruction.

- Government teachers may need additional professional development to take full advantage of a web dialogue. Mt. Vernon High School teachers involved in this web dialogue all had experience in government ranging from having served internships in Congressional offices to serving for almost three decades of high level policy positions in the Congress and the executive branch. Without the understanding that those levels of experience gave to the team of government teachers, this project would be more difficult to complete.

- Technology offers a way to address both these concerns. The online environment allowed every government class to “talk” to high-level government officials—something they never could have done without extensive travel, scheduling and considerable expense. Technology could also be used to provide teachers with the in-depth professional development they need to take full advantage of a resource like this. Doug Koelemay, a panelist in the 2007 web dialogue, concluded, “In the end, web dialogues look like an emerging new way to listen to democracy’s generation next.”

**Next steps: dialogues with other lawmakers**

The successes of Listening to Democracy’s Next Generation dialogues suggest the value of holding similar dialogues with lawmakers in other states. The project is developing a pilot program that will work with a small group of legislators from throughout the country who want to use web dialogues as a way of listening to democracy’s next generation. Dr. Jonas has already developed a generic budget game that could be adapted to any state.

The goal will be to help legislators develop their own dialogue, based on the issues in their state or district, and to build their capacity to conduct subsequent dialogues independently. Key program elements including the dialogue website, teacher preparation and training, background resources and step-by-step procedures will be available with initial guidance and dialogue production assistance. Legislators interested in taking part in this early phase should contact Amundson to discuss timelines and options.

By linking students and policymakers, by establishing a two-way communication, and by listening carefully to democracy’s next generation, lawmakers can indeed help engage students in our civic life. Mr. Mims’ fifth period government class at West Potomac High

School noted that participating in the web dialogue helped them see that democracy is not a spectator sport: “What a beneficial way of hands-on interaction between students and policy makers! This is such a great way of getting high school seniors involved and interested in politics. Now that we're old enough to vote, it's important to be able to discuss topics especially with people who can directly improve problems in our society. This discussion board was a great way of having our opinions heard by people who can do or change something in our lives. We now feel like our thoughts do count and that we really can make a difference in the world!!!!!!”

Kristen Amundson, kmamundson@cox.net, represents the 44th District in Virginia’s General Assembly. Laurie Maak, lmaak@wested.org, is a Senior Project Manager at WestEd. Kelly Sharbel, ksharbel@cox.net, is the Chairman of the History Department at Pope John Paul the Great High School in Dumfries, Virginia. The archive of Amundson’s 2008 dialogue can be found on the WebDialogues website: http://www.webdialogues.net/amundson/hs08.