

## Chicago Tribune

### Occupy L.A. offers a hands-on civics lesson for students, teachers

Who says history has to be about dead men and a dreary assortment of dates and names?

For countless students and teachers, the Occupy L.A. encampment at City Hall has become a living classroom, a place to put a contemporary twist on topics such as the causes of the Great Depression and the limits of the 1st Amendment.

On a recent afternoon, students from at least three schools joined the colorful milieu of protesters — playing ball, posing with pet roosters and sounding off about corporate greed — to interview them about their aims.

[Cleveland High School](#) student Ryan Janowski, for instance, asked hard questions about whether the movement's leaderless structure would impede its progress.

Classmate Christopher Berry sniffed the aroma of marijuana and wondered whether a few "dignified leaders" might help protesters gain wider public acceptance.

The students are part of Cleveland's humanities magnet program, which is exploring class differences in America and comparing the Occupy movement with 19th century transcendentalism.

"It fits in with everything we're doing," said Rebecca Williams, an English literature teacher at the Reseda school. "It's a real-life movement — history in the making."

Educators across the nation have taken up the Occupy movement as a teaching opportunity for civics, history, government and even geography classes. Organizations such as [C-SPAN](#), the [Bill of Rights Institute](#) and the Annenberg Classroom have developed lesson plans for mass consumption.

One such teaching tool put together by Ben Bohmfalk, a Colorado social studies teacher, features video clips and articles intended to help students evaluate the movement's aims.

The [lesson plan](#) on C-SPAN's Classroom Deliberations website offers material for three reading levels and a vocabulary list that includes such words as bailouts, deregulation and meritocracy.

Bohmfolk said the link to the Occupy lesson plan was sent out to more than 40,000 teachers nationwide. A handful of them, he said, protested that teaching about the movement implies supporting it. But Bohmfalk, who also has taught about the politically conservative "[tea party](#)" movement, disagrees.

"For a movement to gain so much public attention, teachers have a responsibility to teach about it," he said. "This cracks open all of the issues. It takes them out of dusty textbooks and makes them very current."

Bohmfolk has used the material in his classes to discuss issues such as the role of government in regulating the marketplace, the limits of free speech and assembly rights and even U.S. parallels to inequitable living conditions in Mexico City.

But, he said, a major challenge has been helping students understand the complex economic issues underlying the movement's simple slogans.

Catchphrases such as "99%" require understanding of income distribution and tax systems. "Corporate personhood" involves looking at campaign financing systems and a related Supreme Court decision. Add to that references to bank bailouts, [Fannie Mae](#), [Freddie Mac](#) and [Cairo's](#) Tahrir Square, and the issues get very complicated very quickly, he said.

"What a lot of adults forget is how little background knowledge about current events 16-year-olds have," Bohmfalk said.

At [Downtown Magnets High School](#), 11th-grade AP history teacher Daniel Jocz has videotaped the Los Angeles encampment for use later in the year when he will ask students to compare and contrast the Occupy movement with the economic forces that drove the Great Depression.

Jocz said he plans to ask students to take a position on whether more government or less would best alleviate the problems — similar questions faced by Presidents Hoover and [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) in the 1920s and '30s.

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