

# **Role-Playing, Politics, Citizenship and Dressing Up: Year 10's Re-creations in the 1972 "It's Time" Election.**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper examines a four-week simulation that has evolved for a decade in the History Faculty at Warners Bay High School in N.S.W. The simulation focuses on exploring the world of the 1972 "It's Time" Election in a local context and features the role-playing of various election events, culminating in all of Year 10 becoming enfranchised 1970's voters and deciding if it "was time." This annual learning event has been embraced by the school community and has become an institutional rite of passage for Year 10. The paper reports on youth disengagement with politics and the functions of their own democracy, and examines how civics and citizenship education is addressed in N.S.W. Years 7-10 History Syllabus. The simulation is one school's response to the challenge of disengagement and is a demonstration of what can be accomplished with multi-relational teamwork and purposeful "chaos." The unit is examined in terms of its organization, sequencing and strategies and analysed as an example of transformational education flourishing in the constraints of a traditional school environment. The paper proposes this Warners Bay High civics and citizenship simulation as a model of best practice and as evidence of the effectiveness of simulation and role-play in civics, citizenship and electoral education.

## **Introduction:**

*The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (MCEETYA, 1999) includes an emphasis on educating students to understand their role in Australia's democracy and states that when they leave school students should "be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life." To this end, over recent years there has been a focus on the development of teacher interest and expertise in civics education and the provision of resource material supported by the Commonwealth and all State and Territory Government. However, the problem of Australian youth disengagement with the workings of their democratic system has been a consistent finding in research.

This paper examines one school's response to this educational challenge and is a demonstration of what can be accomplished with multi-relational teamwork and purposeful "chaos." A four-week simulation unit has been evolving for a decade in the History Faculty at Warners Bay High School in N.S.W. The simulation focuses on exploring the world of the 1972 "It's Time" Election in a local context and features the role-playing of various election

events, culminating in all of Year 10 becoming enfranchised 1970's voters and deciding if it "was time." This annual learning event has been embraced by the school community and has become an institutional rite of passage for Year 10. I wish to acknowledge the significant contributions of my teaching colleagues Ken Leslight, Erin Sainsbury, Dennis Thurlow, Heather Vaughan and Helen Winter to this on-going work.

## **Youth Disengagement and Civics and Citizenship Education**

***"I thought that politics was boring and nothing to do with me..."***  
***(Student Evaluation, 2004)***

To function effectively democracies need engaged and involved citizens. Indeed, as Print points out "citizen participation is the very raison de etre of democracy" (Print, 2007, p.327). However, the evidence is clear that in advanced industrial democracies the citizens have become increasingly distrustful of their politicians and skeptical about democratic institution and processes (Dalton, 2004).

Civics and citizenship education for the young has been seen as an important part of the solution to this disenchantment, and in Australia there have been a number of attempts to raise the profile of civics in our diverse state-based education systems. In 1994 the Civics Expert Group concluded that there was "civics deficit" among young Australians and as a response to this identified need the ambitious *Discovering Democracy* programme was implemented from 1997-2003 (as discussed in Print, 2007). The 2002 IEA Civic Education Study quantified and reaffirmed the lack of interest and understanding of civics issues in Australian adolescents that many teachers were reporting in their classrooms. The study concluded that Australian students do not have a strong understanding of the workings of a democratic system. Although they favoured democratic institutions at a school level, only 11% thought they might join a political party. Two thirds of students thought it is unimportant to discuss politics and 50% believed that it was not important to know about political issues. The findings of the YES (Youth Electoral Study) project supposed the earlier findings. It revealed that half of the students feel that they lack the fundamental knowledge to understand the political parties and the key issues and that many would not register on the electoral roll if it was not compulsory (Print et al, 2004). The 2006 MCEETYA report found only modest levels of civic knowledge in students from Year 6 to 10. Despite attention from policy makers and considerable funding, many Australian adolescents appear to have only a vague knowledge of the workings of their government and take little interest in politics and their electoral responsibilities.

However, the situation is not entirely negative. Other studies have found that young people do hold strong political views and are concerned about the future (Norris, 2002 and O’Toole, 2003). Many young people are members of activist organizations and engage in Internet protest activities. Some are prepared to demonstrate their strongly held views in street protests, despite the threat of arrest by the authorities and the possibility of violence. An examination of CIRCLE’s categories of engagement indicators for civics and citizenship suggests that the disengagement is with the more formal and institutional indicators. So the question for educators, how to capitalize on the concerns of young people and make the workings of their own democracy significant to them?

Figure 1: Civics and Citizenship Engagement Indicators (CIRCLE, 2002)

Civic Indicators	Electoral Indicators	Political Engagement Indicators
Active membership of groups/associations Volunteering Fundraising for charities Community participation	Regular voting Persuading others Contributions to political parties Assisting with political campaigns	Contacting officials Contacting print and broadcast media Protest Written petitions Boycotting Emailing petitions and internet engagement

## Civics and Citizenship Education in N.S.W Years 7-10 History

### *“Democracy is a lot of work” (Student Evaluation, 2004)*

There is no doubt that civics and citizenship education is part of the work of the History teachers. The 2000 *National Inquiry Into School History* report emphasized the vital role of history as the “main arbiter and interpreter” civics and citizenship education (Taylor, 2000,p.9) History explains the origins and development of our society, governmental system and the principles of democracy; creates a sense of national identity by presenting the narratives of individuals and groups who have made significant contributions to our national image and heritage; develops an understanding of the interpretative and problematic nature of information; and encourages research and communication skills. Historical literacy allows for critical evaluation of contemporary political debate and the historical justifications that are used in the current policy directions. “Students are required to analyse, in a critical fashion, not only the forms and structures of governance but also the events that illustrate the successes and failings of governments at all levels.”(Taylor 2000, p.9) Civics and citizenship education gives opportunities for students to see the connections between the past and their present and helps students appreciate the role and importance of national traditions and customs.

Figure 2: Linking Curricular Aims and Objectives concerning Civics and Citizenship Education in N.S.W.

K-10 Curriculum Framework	Year 7-10 History Syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2003)	Citizenship Objectives (from History Syllabus)
1. Understand and appreciate social, cultural, geographical and historical contexts and participate as informed citizens	1. Develop a knowledge and understanding of significant developments in Australia's social, political and cultural history. The study of history strengthens understandings of civics and citizenship.	1. Informed citizens
2. Prepare all students for effective and responsible participation in their society	2. Critically analyse the structures and processes of government and their impact on people in different historical contexts.	2. Active citizens
3. Promote a fair and just society	3. Value and appreciate the opportunity to contribute to a just society through informed citizenship	3. Advocates for a fair and just society

In N.S.W., the junior secondary History course, as prescribed in *History Years 7-10 Syllabus* (hereafter referred to as the History Syllabus), contains numerous references to civics and citizenship education. These focus on valuing citizenship, understanding governmental structures and processes and developing commitment to the creation and maintenance of a fair and just society. These aims are congruent with those of the *K-10 Curriculum Framework* that provides the broader context for education in N.S.W. and outlines the overall curriculum objectives and learning outcomes. The above comparison table demonstrates the relationship between the aims and objectives of the *Framework* and the History Syllabus. It is evident that the rationales, aims and objectives explicitly support a civics and citizenship perspective, see Figure 2. To emphasize the civics and citizenship focus even further, in the Year 10 battery of public examinations, the History paper is called the *Australian History and Civics and Citizenship Test*. As John Aquilina, the State Minister for Education explained the policy “placing the external examinations at the end of Year 10 will help to ensure History, Geography and Civics are treated more seriously” (Aquilina, 1997, p.4).

However, when one turns to the detailed descriptions of topic options and content in the *History Syllabus*, the focus on civics knowledge and understandings is not clear. There is no mention of them in the topic learning outcomes and civics and citizenship is not referred to explicitly. One suspects that the Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment has a valid point when it claims, in its response to the parliamentary inquiry on electoral education, unless civics issues are given a framework they will have “a low priority given the surfeit of responsibilities teachers work under” (AFSSSE, 2006). There is not clear setting for teaching about the democratic functions of the Australian society and it becomes the

responsibility of the individual teacher or group of teachers to embed this perspective into an already-crowded course.

The *History Syllabus* does not provide an obvious setting for what might be called electoral education, understanding how our system of government functions and the role of the citizen in society. However, it does include requirements for students to examine what Marsh (2005) labels the “civic megatrends evident in the Australian society. These are the complex issues that affect society “in multiple ways and require both a knowledge-based and values-based” response (Marsh, 2005, p.303). Kennedy (1995) and Macintyre (1996) have identified these important issues as multiculturalism, reconciliation, republicanism, the status of women and immigration. Obviously, the playing out of these issues in Australian society will define the nature of our future society and they are an important part of civics and citizenship education.

There is a great need to create an integrated program that addresses electoral education and incorporates investigations of these megatrends. “Disembodied facts, unrelated to everyday life and real needs, will not connect young people to a future that should be full of hope and promise.” (Marsh, 2005, p.304) It would be feasible to retain the integration of civics and citizenship in the mandatory history and geography courses, but the topics need to be explicitly included in the syllabus documents. It is ironic that in a prescriptive and rigid education system, the effective teaching of civics and citizenship education is a matter of teacher discretion, interest and skill.

What follows is a description of how a group of History teachers in a large comprehensive high school took up the challenge of teaching electoral education in an historical context. The result was a four-week history happening and a demonstration of democracy-in-action that, over the last decade, has become a yearly event on the school calendar and an eagerly anticipated unit for Year 10 History students.

## **The Simulation - Role playing and Re-creating in the Past**

***“Voting was fun. You felt like you were making a difference to the future, which is now. How weird is that.”  
(Student Evaluation, 2002)***

The term simulation refers to the notion that the presented scenario is mirroring a real situation. This unit uses simulation on a grand scale as it seeks to take 120 students back to the world of the 1972 election. A major initial advantage of this strategy is the variety it brings to the teaching schedule and the “novelty value” it offers to a Year 10 cohort unused to being required to “pretend” for an extended period of time.

The many benefits of role-play are well known (Hunt 2007). It is an effective strategy for the creation of an active learning, student-centred dynamic. It lends itself to cater for different learning styles especially visual, hands-on and

kinesthetic learners, and can give students choice in their participatory mode. Role-play is empowering for many and gives opportunities to deal with complex social emotional and ethical issues (Killen, 2005). It can bring an historical debate to life and allows students to see all perspectives of an argument or issue, often challenging their own beliefs and attitudes. It develops students' ability to extemporize arguments and justifications and "think on their feet" in debates and interviews (Luff, 2000). Perhaps most importantly, role-play develops empathy, giving students the opportunity to investigate the past with their emotions as well as their intellect. As Taylor and Young point out "combining historical structure with imaginative reconstruction – the heart of historical explanation – is quite a sophisticated assignment" (Taylor and Young, 2003, p.57). Role-play facilitates higher order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and creation and enactment strengthens recall of content material. The purpose of role-play is not recreate events in "intricate detail for a few, but to recreate the tensions and perceptions inherent in any great historical event" for the group as a whole. (Luff, 2000, p.8)

### **The School Context**

Warners Bay High School is a comprehensive secondary school run by the N.S.W. Department of Education and Training, Australia. Due to its location near picturesque Lake Macquarie, its student population trends towards the middle to higher end of the socio-economic continuum. The large population of around 1350 has a diverse range of abilities and interests. The school enjoys a good reputation in the local community and has strong results in the Higher School Certificate. The History Faculty has seven teachers, most of whom teach the mandatory course to all Year 10 students. Typically, this form has about 240 students.

### **The Unit Context**

The Election Unit, as it is known at Warners Bay High, is taught in a course constrained by a public School Certificate examination, a content-crowded syllabus, a less than adequate timetable allocation and a rigorous assessment regime. The large cohort of Year 10 students and the fact the group is timetabled on two separate lines, dictates that the teachers run two re-creations concurrently. The unit is allocated four weeks and so has twelve forty-minute periods to be organized and enacted. The re-creation incorporates 1970's Decade Study (Topic 8) and Section C People, Power and Politics – Gough Whitlam (Topic 7) and providing background for Section B Topic 7 The Dismissal and Sir John Kerr (*History Years 7-10 Syllabus*, 2003). The unit is designed to build from rigorous historical research of the 1970's as a decade with a focus on the circumstances, issues and results of the 1972 Federal Election in the national, state and local spheres. Using these understandings, the students create a microcosm of the 1972 "It's Time" Election in the fictionalized electorate of Warners Bay.

## Scenario and Organization

***“The 1972 election became our election.”***  
***(Student Evaluation, 2002)***

***“It was hard being a candidate. How do you get the voters to listen?”***  
***(Student Evaluation, 2005)***

- The year is 1972 and Australia faces an important election. Students are given a short explanation of the “It’s Time” Election, the role of each of the groups in the simulation and the culminating events (the Rally, Media Conference and Voting). They watch news footage from the time.
- The action takes place between four groups of approximately equal size and each group has a supervising/facilitating teacher. Students choose from one of four groups: Labor; Liberal; Special Interest Groups; Media and Electoral Officials.
- The cohort divides. Teacher gives short narration of history/function of their party or group. The work begins with the writing a mission statement and an action plan. The groups now begin to plan for the campaign.

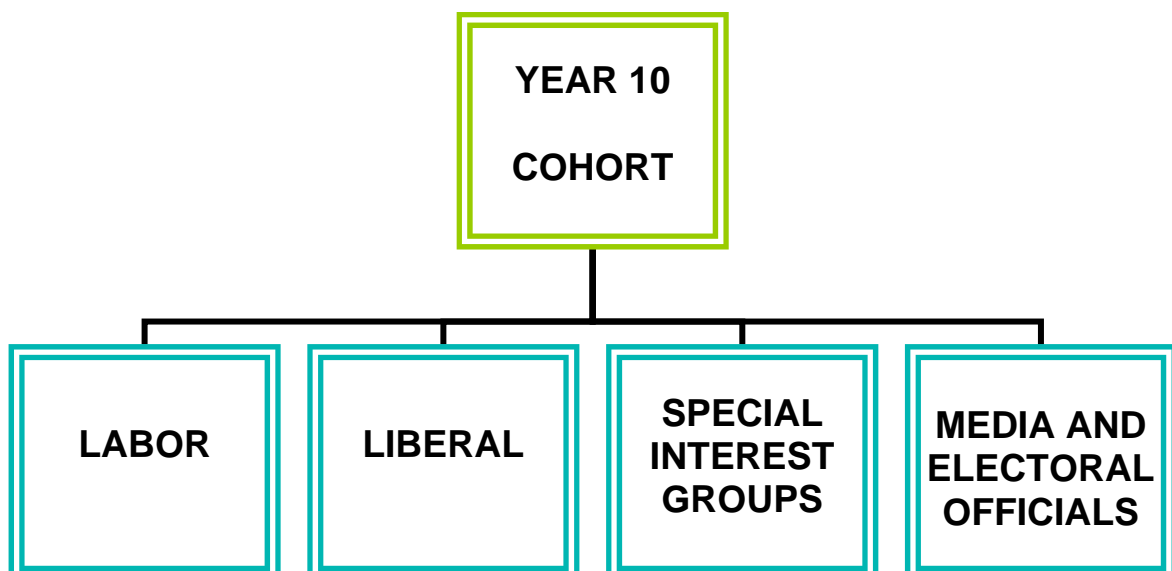
### Re-creations in the “It’s Time” Election

#### Focus Questions (N.S.W Years 7-10 History Syllabus)

What have been some important political developments in post-war Australian history?

How have significant individuals and groups exercised their democratic rights in the post-war period?

What have been the major social and cultural features of a post-war decade?



### **POLITICAL PARTIES' TASKS**

Elect candidate and advisors/  
speech writers who are responsible for  
creating policy platform based on research,  
write press releases and speeches and  
make preference deals with other parties or  
lobby groups. This group reports back to the  
party and they brainstorm slogans for  
campaign.

The rest of the group find out about the  
1970's in Australia– fashion, music,  
entertainment, technology, sport,  
international relations, foreign policy,

The party creates advertising campaign,  
slogans, posters, “stunts” and photo ops.  
Posters displayed around school.

Organize clothing and party paraphernalia  
for events, such as, badges, hats, banners,  
and placards.

After preference deals, prepare “how to  
vote” cards, assign members to hand out  
cards and be scrutineers during vote  
counting

Organize “5 minutes of persuasion” for Rally  
– speech by candidate, item.

### **SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS**

Explore issues and form interest groups, such as  
Aboriginal, Women, Conservation, Anti-War, Gay  
Rights, Local issues

Decide whether to form lobby group or party.

Lobby groups try to raise awareness of their  
issues and influence parties. They often develop  
advertising campaigns.

Parties field candidates and take on tasks of  
political parties

### **MEDIA AND ELECTORAL OFFICIALS**

Research issues. Elect reporters and assign  
production roles, such as camera, editing

Interview candidates and party members and  
record campaign process - create a documentary  
of the campaign

Develop questions for press conference

Electoral officers organize enrolment of voters  
and create electoral rolls

Take a poll of voting intentions at the end of week  
one and two. Publish poll results.

Set up voting centre, booths, pencils, rolls, and  
ballot boxes. Count votes and announce results.

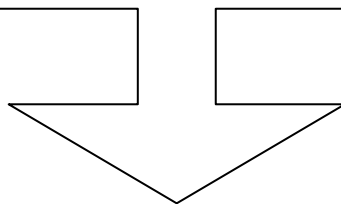
## **The Events – The Last Two Days**

### **The Press Conference**

***“As the campaign got going our candidate lost sight of the party’s  
beliefs. He was promising what everyone wanted to hear.”***

***(Student Evaluation, 2006)***

This event is held the day before the Rally and voting and it gives the voters a  
chance to hear the candidates answer questions about their policies and plans.  
All members of the cohort attend. The reporters ask questions of the candidates  
on agreed topics and then there is a question time with the candidates fielding  
questions from reporters and the audience.

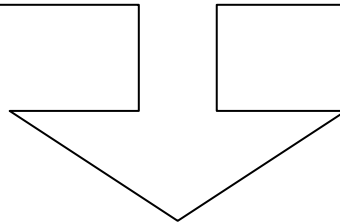


### **The Rally**

***“The Rally was just an entertainment but some people voted on what they saw there without thinking of the issues.”***

***(Student Evaluation, 2005)***

This is one of the culminating events for the simulation. The group comes together dressed in their 1970's fashions and party paraphernalia. Each party has 5 minutes to “get their message” across. Usually this takes the form of a motivational speech from the candidate with lots of cheering from the party faithful and an item, such as, a cheer squad of party members, the performance of a reworked 1970's song or a brief play. Each party seeks to convince the voters of their worth, just before they head to the voting booths.



### **Voting**

***“I was disappointed that the voters were so influenced by who the candidates were rather than what they would do for Warners Bay and Australia.” (Student Evaluation, 2005)***

After the Rally, the students are sent in random groups to vote. They are offered “how to vote” cards from the parties as they enter, their names are marked off and they are directed to a booth. They cast their vote and place it in the ballot box. All members of the cohort are required to vote. The electoral officials count the votes watched by the party scrutineers and announce the simulated electoral results as well as the actual “It's Time” election results to the waiting voters. While the counting is taking place the Media Group show their documentary of the campaign to the citizens.

### **Debriefing**

***“We had the policies to give Australia the best future. How could we have lost?” (Student Evaluation, 2004)***

- Each group watches the Media Group's documentary. Followed by a group plenary session focusing on successes, problems and generally reflecting on the experience as party members and voters.
- The students undertake a role writing exercise in which they analyse their experience in the simulation and give their perspective and understandings of the process of the campaign and the result.
- Students complete an evaluation form in which they are asked to consider the degree to which the simulation was a valid learning experience and reflect on its applications to their historical and contemporary understandings.

- Students return to their normal class groupings and undertake jigsaw group work task that focuses on the role of motivation and perspective in the interpretation of events.
- Fresh from electing the Whitlam Government the classes begin their exploration of the Dismissal.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

***“I loved dressing up and cheering for my party. We learnt about the 1972 election and how important it was.”  
(Student Evaluation, 2004)***

The simulation is a demonstration of what Kalantzis has labeled a transformative approach to education and these transformative elements explain much of its success and popularity (Kalantzis, 2005). The simulation is inclusive and celebrates the different interests, talents and skills of the participants. This simulation highlights the diversity of the learning community and allows students to choose their participatory modes and the degree of their involvement at various phases. This four-week unit caters for different learning styles and allows for a variety of student contributions. Co-operative learning, collaboration and problem-solving happen constantly and naturally as the groups work on multiple projects and tasks. The students generally find the experience fun and enjoy the break from more rigid classroom routines. As the students chose their groups, they are able to work with their friends in an atmosphere of collaboration with a shared focus and purpose.

This simulation highlights the importance of engagement in the process by all members of the learning community. The students become engaged in the process and take ownership of the scenario. This often results in the two simulations, organized in an identical manner and in the same timeframe with students randomly allocated by timetable lines, producing very different events and learning outcomes. The simulation encourages the development of multiple teacher-learner relationships and the authoritarian model becomes obsolete in this context. The teachers are initially facilitators but as the pretense takes hold they become team members working with their groups to win the election. As Andrews so poetically put it “the surge and ebb of experience, reflection, adduction and action became the rhythm and melody of our immersion in a learning system.” (Andrews, 2005,p.1) The students and teachers become co-designers of the knowledge and learning.

This simulation develops understand of the rights and responsibilities of the Australian citizens and gives students an experience of being enfranchised citizens in a past decade as they approach this role in their own lives. The simulation requires students to explore and experience the nature of our political system and the joys and difficulties inherent in the democratic process. They gain first-hand experience of “the morality of compromise in the context of a pluralist society” (Kalantzis, 2005, p.14). Students develop an

understanding of the mechanisms of the voting process from preferential voting, electoral rolls to the completed ballot papers and the announced result. The learning is experiential and voting at the end of the simulation was powerful for many students, particularly as they are invested in the campaign and the result

The simulation facilitates the development of deep knowledge and understanding of the past and provides insights into the nature of history. The role playing and group membership enables the students to connect to the election and the period with their intellect, emotions and imaginations. Most Year 10 students enjoyed dressing up and reported that it made them feel like they had gone back in time. The simulation provides an authentic context for researching the 1970's and the 1972 election and so develops research, synthesis and presentation skills. Many students develop sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the 1970's and take delight in pointing out any anachronisms or historical inaccuracies that may have crept in. The interpretative and problematic nature of historical knowledge is understood and used implicitly in the learning process and demonstrations. As evidenced throughout this paper, the evaluative comments from many students demonstrate sophisticated insights and understandings beyond what would be expected by more traditional instructional strategies. This large-scale simulation develops the students' abilities to explore, negotiate, change, innovate and create.

The Year 10 election simulation unit serves as a testament to the school's commitment to civics and citizenship education, to the History Faculty's creativity and endurance and to the rich benefits of their collaborative reflection.

***“My Mum and Dad remember this election. I wonder what election I'll remember when I'm old.” (Student Evaluation, 2001)***

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