

**TEACHING MATTERS
ELECTION CONNECTION PROJECT**



Report on the Spring 2004 Implementation

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BACKGROUND

In May 2004, the Institute for Learning Technologies at Teachers College, Columbia University (<http://www.ilt.columbia.edu>), agreed to conduct an evaluation of the implementation of the Election Connection, a Teaching Matters literacy project aimed at increasing teacher and student competence in persuasive writing. The Election Connection project is to be implemented with two cohorts of teachers. Cohort 1, in Spring 2004, consisted of 46 7th-grade teachers in 23 schools; Cohort 2, in Fall-Winter 2004-2005, will consist of 24 8th-grade teachers in the same 12 schools. Cohort 1 teachers, who were trained in two groups, had support in their classrooms during May and June 2004. They are also expected to continue to implement Election Connection projects in their classrooms in Fall 2004.

The goal of the evaluation is to gather quantitative and qualitative information that can be used for formative (planning) purposes and in a final (summative) report that will evaluate the project's overall success and replicability. The evaluation is using surveys, interviews, and classroom observations in order to look at the impact of the project on (1) teacher practice and pedagogy and (2) student practice and learning.

The two key objectives in terms of impact on teachers are:

- To increase competence in teaching persuasive writing.
- To introduce teachers to ways in which technology, and particularly Internet resources, can support instruction in persuasive essay writing.

Outcomes are to be measured by the following:

- The ability of Cohort 1 to implement the Election Connection project in Spring 2004 and Cohort 2 to do the same in Fall-Winter 2004-2005.
- The ability of Cohort 1 to implement the Election Connection again in Fall-Winter 2004-2005 with no support from professional developers.
- For Cohort 1, changed in teacher practices in teaching persuasive writing after training is over.
- For all teachers, a demonstrated understanding of how an Internet-based project can enhance core literacy tasks such as persuasive writing.
- For all teachers, increased comfort levels with using technology, and particularly the Internet, with students.

In order to assess the progress made by the teachers in reaching these outcomes, we have:

- Developed pre-implementation questionnaires in order to gather baseline information on teachers' current practices in teaching persuasive writing; technological proficiencies; and experiences with integrating persuasive writing into the curriculum.
- Developed post-implementation questionnaires to gather follow-up information on the effectiveness of the workshops, and the successes and problems with implementation in the classroom. These will be given to all Cohort 1 and 2 teachers after they have received training and implemented the project.

In Fall-Winter 2004-2005, we will also:

- Conduct interviews with a sample of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 teachers. The interviews with Cohort 1 teachers will assess their perceptions of the longer

term effects of participation in the Election Connection on their teaching. The interviews with Cohort 2 teachers will explore their perceptions of the effectiveness of the curriculum in their classrooms.

- Visit project classrooms of Cohort 1 teachers in Fall 2004 to see if fidelity of project implementation has been maintained.

The two key objectives in terms of impact on students are:

- To increase interest in persuasive writing by engaging them in a multi-task persuasive writing assignment.
- To increase competence in the various tasks involved in persuasive writing assignments.

Impact on students is being measured by the following:

- Increased interest in persuasive writing.
- Increased competence in the various tasks involved in producing a successful piece of persuasive writing.

In order to assess the progress made by students in achieving these outcomes, we have:

- Developed a short pre- and post-assignment questionnaire to assess student attitudes toward writing, as well as their evaluation of the project.

In the second phase of the implementation, we will:

- Develop a post-assignment assessment question to evaluate what students' have learned about the subject area in the assignment.
- Assess samples of students' persuasive writing collected from both cohorts in Fall-Winter 2004-2--5. (Each teacher will be asked to submit the two

excellent, two middle, and two poor pieces of persuasive writing from the project. These will be evaluated by a group consisting of TMI staff, DOE staff, teachers, and the evaluator.)

- Conduct interviews with teachers about their perceptions of student progress.
- If available, analyze results from the 8th-grade persuasive writing assignment.

A first report, delivered in July 2004, presented the results of the first (baseline) teacher and student surveys. The first teacher survey was given at the end of the teacher workshops, in March 2004, while the first student survey was given at the beginning of the project, in May 2004. Forty-four teachers from 19 schools and 490 students from 17 schools (an average of 29 students per school) responded to the baseline surveys.

This report will present the results of the second (post-project) teacher and student surveys, both of which were administered in May-June 2004, make comparisons where applicable, and present a series of recommendations for consideration before the next implementation. Twenty-one teachers and 291 students from 12 schools (an average of 25 students per school) answered the follow-up survey. The lower response rate was undoubtedly due to the multiple end-of-year demands faced by both teachers and students.

THE TEACHERS

As noted above, while 44 teachers answered the baseline survey, only 21 answered the second survey. Ten of the 21 had not answered the first survey, leaving 11 matched pairs—teachers who had answered both surveys—available for statistical analysis. However, an analysis of the responses of the matched pairs shows that

they were similar to the responses of the entire group, allowing us to include the results from all 21 in what follows.¹

Most of those who answered the two teacher surveys were classroom teachers, but there were also a few literacy coaches and computer coordinators:

	Survey 1	Survey 2
Classroom teacher	30	12
Literacy coach	5	1
Computer coordinator	9	4
Did not say	0	4
Total	44	21

The first survey asked the teachers if they felt their students were well-prepared for persuasive writing assignments. Two-thirds felt they were only “Somewhat” prepared:

Do you feel your students are well prepared for persuasive writing assignments?

Yes, definitely	25%
Yes, somewhat	66%
No	9%
Total	100%

The second survey asked whether the project had helped them in this area. Almost all felt it had:

Do you feel the Election Connection helped prepare your students for persuasive writing assignments?

Yes, definitely	81%
Yes, somewhat	19%

¹ In other words, the entire group shows the same changes and trends as the matched pairs. Although we cannot use statistical tests to compare the entire 44 with the entire 21, because many are different people, we can argue that the entire group of 21 is similar to the matched pairs, and then compare all 44 to all 21.

No	0%
Total	100%

Almost 100 percent of the teachers who did not already feel well-prepared to teach persuasive writing said that the project had helped them in this regard, with 43 percent saying it had “Definitely” helped:

Do you feel better prepared to teach persuasive writing as a result of the Election Connection?

Yes, definitely	43%
Yes, somewhat	38%
No, not really	5%
No, I felt prepared before	14%
Total	100%

The second survey also asked which aspects of persuasive writing the Election Connection project had helped with the most. Ninety percent the teachers felt the project was helpful with almost every activity. They are ranked here in order of those the teachers found “Definitely” the most helpful:

Did the Election Connection help your students with any of the following aspects of persuasive writing?

	Yes, definitely	Yes, somewhat	No, not really	Total
Distinguishing between facts and opinion	68%	27%	5%	100%
Supporting their main ideas with appropriate material	68%	27%	5%	100%
Persevering through the entire writing process (Drafting, revising, proofreading)	59%	36%	5%	100%
Reading and understanding appropriate material	57%	38%	5%	100%
Synthesizing material from more than one source	52%	48%	0%	100%
Taking notes that they can use later	43%	48%	9%	100%
Interpreting material from two sources that contradict each other	38%	48%	14%	100%

This is particularly important given that over 80 percent of the teachers who responded to the baseline survey felt that their students had a least moderate difficulty with all but one of the activities listed above:

	Great difficulty	Moderate Difficulty	Very little or no difficulty
Synthesizing material from more than one source	29%	49%	22%
Interpreting material from two resources that contradict each other	21%	64%	14%
Persevering through the entire writing process (drafting, revising, proofreading)	19%	60%	21%
Taking notes that they can use later	18%	68%	15%
Supporting their main ideas with appropriate material	14%	67%	19%
Reading and understanding appropriate material	12%	71%	17%
Distinguishing between fact and opinion	2%	45%	52%

The one activity that the teachers did not feel their students had difficulty with was “Distinguishing between fact and opinion.” As we will see below, the students also believe they have little difficulty distinguishing fact from opinion. We think it likely that both students and teachers are referring to the ability to distinguish styles of discourse, not to the ability to know when a “fact” is an opinion in disguise (see Recommendations).

Since the Election Connection was designed to encourage use of technology, on the baseline survey we asked the teachers several questions about how they used computers with students. Almost most had had their students use the Internet for research at least sometimes, two-thirds reported that they had not used PowerPoint with students and one-third almost never had their students write papers using word-processors:

	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom/ never	Total
Using the Internet for research	32%	50%	18%	100%
Write their papers using a word-processor (i.e. Word)	36%	30%	34%	100%
Use PowerPoint, AppleWorks or Keynote for presentation	7%	26%	67%	100%

Almost all the teachers did all these activities with their students as part of the project, an important advance made possible by the project:

Did you have your students do any of the following as part of Election Connection?

	Yes	No
Using the Internet for research	100%	0%
Write their papers using a word-processor (i.e. Word)	91%	9%
Use PowerPoint, AppleWorks or Keynote for presentation	100%	0%

As a group, these teachers had considerable computer access. On the baseline survey, 42 percent reported that they had 5 or more computers in the classroom, and another 19 percent had 3 or more,² while 61 percent reported that they took their students to the computer lab once a week or more. During the project, however, teachers reported that students accessed the Internet in the classroom and at home, rather than the computer lab. In addition, a fair number of teachers printed out web pages and brought them to class:

**How did your students access Internet resources for the Election Connection?
(You can check more than one)**

They used the Internet in the classroom	86%
They used the Internet at home	81%
They used the Internet in the computer lab	57%

² This response may be slightly higher than the entire population since the teachers had to have access to technology to respond to the survey. In addition, the schools were chosen in part because they did have good technology.

I printed out web pages to bring to class	39%
They used the Internet in the school library	33%
Others	14%

We asked the teachers how frequently, during the Election Connection project, their students had searched for and evaluated information, and debated issues:

Did your students do any of the following as part of the Election Connection?

	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom/ never	Total
Find information in the school or public library	81%	19%	0%	100%
Evaluate the trustworthiness of library resources	68%	32%	0%	100%
Find information on the Internet	33%	38%	29%	100%
Evaluate the trustworthiness if Internet resources	29%	57%	14%	100%
Debate the issue in class	14%	38%	48%	100%

This greater use of the library compared to the Internet for a project that encouraged the use of Internet resources would seem to indicate that relying on the limited number of classroom computers made it difficult for teachers to use Internet resources to the extent expected by the project. In addition, the fact that almost half the teachers did not debate issues in class is worth considering (see Recommendations).

In addition, well over half (57 percent) of the teachers said that they sometimes needed help with the technology aspects of this project, which might indicate that the teachers themselves preferred the familiarity of book to the unfamiliarity of the Internet:

Did you need help with the technology aspects of this project?

Yes, frequently	14%
Yes, sometimes	57%
No	29%
Total	100%

The teachers were asked an open-ended question about what they had found to be the most helpful about the Election Connection in teaching persuasive writing to their students. Their responses fell into three categories, which are listed here with some of the teachers' comments:

Literacy: researching, evaluating, debating, and presenting information

- "Accessing information and then evaluating and incorporating that information into presentation format was invaluable to my students."
- "They were able to see that an effective persuasive argument has to have evidence to support the opinions."
- "By having the students debate with each other, they were able to place a real value on their efforts to put together a respectable persuasive essay."
- "The organization and scaffolding of each task or lesson helped my students understand that persuasive writing and debate is a process that requires rigor."

Technology

- "The use of PowerPoint software to both visualize and present different points of view on a topic. I also think the students were impressed with their peers' varied presentations, and topics, and it will motivate them to excel next year."

Social aspects: cooperative group work, motivation, and building self-esteem

- “Persuasive writing is a major element of the Social Sciences. Election Connection was such a powerful program that the teacher was there for guidance and it allowed the students to work cooperatively to think and create the persuasive essay based on discussions among themselves.”
- “The urgency of current events made it more urgent and appealing to students. They really got into the issues.”

We also asked the teachers what changes they would suggest to make it more useful for them and their students. Their responses fell into the following categories:

Time

Almost half the teachers mentioned time, with most suggesting that the project needed a longer time frame. Here are some quotes on this issue:

- “Time!! More time is needed for the students to work on their projects. They felt rushed and unprepared. It would be better if they had a full semester to complete the whole process. I know they would have liked to debate the topics more fully. The amount of research to be read and understood takes some students a little longer to digest. They enjoyed the challenge!!”
- “The teachers should be offered this program earlier so they may better prepare for the administrative portion of preparing the trip and other special times for students to meet. The Social Studies teacher should also be made aware of this program so that there can be cross-curriculum lessons prepared.”
- “The only change I would make is adding more time. I felt that the time suggested was a little unrealistic especially since we only have about 40

minutes of actual work time per day. That comes out to a total of about three hours and twenty minutes a week.”

- “Give a longer time frame to complete the project.”
- “Have the sessions more often and for a longer period of time.”

On the other hand, a few teachers felt the project went on for too long:

- “The project was too long, many students got tired of it after a month and want to move on.”

It is a particular challenge to find materials on the Internet that are suitable to students of mixed reading levels, so the survey asked the teachers to evaluate whether the readings were appropriate. Over 50 percent found them either “Somewhat” or “Much too difficult”:

How did you find the content level for your students?

At their level	43%
Somewhat too difficult	52%
Much too difficult	5%

This is a difficult issue and we will return to it below (see Recommendations).

THE STUDENTS

As noted above, the baseline survey was answered by 490 students and the second survey by 291 students. Seventy-five percent of the 291 (216 students) reported that they had also answered the baseline survey, while another 45 were not sure. Since the survey responses were anonymous, we could not match pairs, but the large number of responses to both surveys makes it seem likely that the responses are fairly representative of the entire body of participating students.

On the baseline survey, students were asked whether they liked writing reports and essays. Only 15 percent said they “Definitely” liked writing, while a huge 85 percent was less than enthusiastic:

Do you like writing reports and essays?

Yes, definitely	15%
Yes, somewhat	44%
No, not really	28%
No, not at all	13%
Total	100%

The Election Connection project engaged the students in a wide range of tasks in addition to writing, and the students indicated that they liked those that involved the most activity the best:

Did you like these parts of the Election Connection project?

	Yes, Definitely	Yes, somewhat	Not really /Not at all	Didn't do this	Total
Debating the issue	51%	34%	12%	3%	100%
Making a presentation	47%	31%	16%	6%	100%
Researching the issue	43%	33%	22%	2%	100%
Writing a persuasive letter	31%	38%	29%	2%	100%

The students were asked how often during the Election Connection they engaged in activities associated with research and writing. Almost all of the students reported that they had engaged in these activities at least once, and most had engaged in them many times. “Making presentations” was an exception, since students would only be expected to do this once. However, one-third of the students reported that they never made presentations at all:

	Many times	One time	Never	Total
Work in groups	85%	9%	6%	100%
Support your main ideas with facts and figures	76%	19%	5%	100%
Organize your writing	76%	19%	5%	100%
Proofread your writing	71%	25%	4%	100%
Distinguish between fact and opinion	63%	28%	9%	100%
Take notes	68%	26%	6%	100%
Revise your writing	67%	27%	6%	100%
Compare two sources of information that contradict each other	50%	41%	9%	100%
Making presentations to the class	25%	42%	33%	100%

Since a major goal of the project was to have the students use the Internet for research, we asked them an open-ended question about how it helped and what problems they had. Their answers about how it helped fell into four categories:

- The Internet provides resources or information.
- The Internet makes research easier or faster.
- The Internet helps me to learn new things
- The Internet helps me to prepare presentations (i.e., with pictures, statistics).

Their responses about the difficulties using the Internet fell into two main categories: problems with the research process itself and problems with the technology. Here are some examples of each, in their own words:

Problems with doing Internet research:

- "It is time consuming."
- "Lots of information to read."
- "Some websites are not helpful."
- "I can't find the information I want."
- "It's hard to find the picture I want."

Problems with the technology

- "There is only one computer in the classroom for everyone to share."
- "The connection is slow."
- "The network is down."
- "The computer got frozen up sometimes."
- "I click on the picture, but the file is not there."

They were also asked if computers helped with writing, and if so, how. Some students reported that computer is helpful because it can correct grammar/sentence structure and check spelling, and because it makes writing faster and neater. Some noted that they learn new vocabulary and are better able to revise and proofread on the computer.

Not all students found the computer helpful, however. Some of these were the ones who did not have adequate computer skills:

- "I type slow."
- "The computer just does nothing."

Others simply felt they wrote better on paper:

- "It's better to write your own ideas on paper."
- "I like handwriting better."

And others endorsed some adult words of wisdom:

- "It increases laziness if computer does all the work for you."
- "You don't learn the new word because computer automatically correct it for you."

The students were asked what they liked about Election Connection project. It is clear from their responses that they liked the project for many reasons—and that in fact one of its strengths is that that it appeals to different students for different reasons, all of which, however, contribute to increased literacy. Their answers fell into the following categories:³

New content knowledge

About 27 percent wrote that what they liked about the project was that it opened their eyes to new information and ideas. Here are some examples:

- “The Election Connection project opened my eyes to my surrounding world by showing me the different issues faced with each day.”
- “The project was really fun because it helped me learn about things I haven’t learned about before. I never knew that some states enforced some cameras in certain schools. I also never knew that power plants seriously affected us.”
- “What I liked about the Election Connection project is that it gave me more knowledge on the topic I was researching.”
- “It made me learn more about the issues that I had. It also made me think more.”

Working in groups

Nineteen percent reported that they liked the group work. Here are some examples:

- “It gave me time to realize that working in groups is sometimes better than working alone.”
- “We worked together in groups and we had fun researching our projects. We all took it very seriously.”

³ Some of the students gave more than one reason, so the total adds up to more than 100 percent.

- "I liked that we had to work in teams because working in teams means helping each other."
- "It was fun to have a project that everyone worked on together."
- "I have also made some new great friends in the process."

Public presentation

Fifteen percent reported that they liked the public presentations, particularly because these gave them the opportunity to make their voices heard:

- "I think it gives the children a voice. I think we get to speak up about the way things are going and how we don't or do want to live with them."
- "I had a chance to present in front of important people."
- "You get to express yourself and tell people how you feel about this issue."
- "The Election Connection project gave me a chance to speak out and say what my opinion is about the issue and listen to others."
- "We get to finally tell the council members our ideas to help the city out."

Use of technology

Fourteen percent of the students wrote that they liked the opportunity to learn new technologies, particularly PowerPoint:

- "I liked putting together the Power Point presentation. I found a lot of pictures that matched exactly when my writing was about."
- "The presentation and the chance to work in the computer room and actually working on the computer."
- "It was fun because I've never done anything like this. Working with computers and friends in the class was awesome."
- "What I most liked about the Election Connection was when we had to do the Power Point presentation."

- “That I got to work on the computer and type.”

Using the Internet for research

Some students (11 percent) wrote that what they liked doing research on the Internet:

- “What I liked about the Election Connection was going online and reading all the interesting articles.”
- “I liked the part that we were about to go to the library and work on the computers to find information for the project.”
- “What I liked about Election connection project was using the Internet to find pictures and information....”
- “I liked that we got to do lots of research on it and got to work together in the library.”
- “It was fun when we had to get the research on the computer.”

Debating

Some students (8 percent) explicitly mentioned debating as what they liked. Those who wrote about this aspect of the project were the only ones who used the term “fun”:

- “I got to speak my mind and defend a topic.”
- “What I liked about the Election Connection project was being able to debate the issue I was working on. To me debating is really fun. I like to get my point across and make people think believe that I was right.”
- “It was fun but most of the fun was when we debated.”
- “I liked debating. It made me think about becoming a lawyer.”
- “...I enjoyed debating with my classmates.”

Writing process

A few students mentioned writing (7 percent) as what they liked about the project. Some of the responses in this category show how writing can become interesting for students when they are writing about something that is meaningful to them, particularly when they get to express themselves by making a point:

- “I liked about the Election Connection that I can write about the topic of how I think is right.”
- “I think I like about the Election Connection project that I got to express my feelings by writing my essay.”
- “I got to say my opinion about an important issue and then write about it.”
- “My writing skills improve after I do this project.”
- “I liked that Election Connection help us with our problems we have in writing and make us understand that writing is fun.”

The students were also asked what they did *not* like about the Election Connection project. Here the responses go in the reverse order: those activities that the most students disliked were the activities that the fewest students liked—with the addition of one category of things they did not like, time.

Writing process:

Sixty-seven percent reported that they did not like various aspects of the writing process, which they clearly found tedious:

- “I didn’t like revising, proofreading, and publishing my essay.”
- “Taking notes. Taking notes isn’t my thing.”
- “I didn’t like when we had to come up with one essay for the entire group from the essays we all already had.” [Synthesizing]

- “What I didn’t like about the Election Connection project was that we had to rewrite our paragraphs over again a lot of times and had to gather a lot of information.”

Time issues

Over half the students (51 percent) complained about time issues, but although most felt they had too little time to do the project justice, there were those who felt it went on for too long:

- “What I didn’t like about this project was that we all had too little time to do the project. That showed to me that they really didn’t care who did the project or how well that they just wanted some kids to go to city hall.”
- “I didn’t have enough time to really do a really great job on it.”
- “It used up a lot of energy and time and it was nerve racking.”
- “What I didn’t like about the Election Connection project is that it took a lot of time to finish it.”
- “I didn’t like that we work on this like forever and took a long time with it.”

Internet research

While many students liked Internet research, many more (45 percent) wrote about the time and frustration involved. Although this can be seen as healthy frustration, because it shows how this kind of project forces students to find the right information, rather than just grabbing material from the first website that comes to hand, it indicates an area that the project may be able to help resolve (but see Recommendations):

- “What I didn’t like about the Election Connection project was struggling to find information and not being able to find pictures.”

- “I didn’t like that the project had a lot to do with research and that it was mostly based on your research.”
- “What I don’t like about the Election Connection is that the information that I’m looking for is not always presented on the Internet.”
- “Not being able to find all the info needed on the Internet.”
- “What I didn’t like about Election Connection project was that sometimes when you research a lot, you get kind of tired.”

Public presentation

Twenty-seven percent of the students mentioned the public presentations as something they did not like. However, this was also a split category: although many wrote about how they did not like making presentations in public, a surprising number wrote about their disappointment at not being able to go to City Hall (or, as it was in the end, the New York Historical Society). The disappointment evident among those who did not get to go to the final competition bears consideration in the next round (see Recommendations):

- “I also didn’t like the judgments on the presentations to see who was going to City Hall.”
- “The only thing I did not like about the Election Connection project was that we did not win, besides that I had a great time.”
- “I also didn’t like that only one group was able to win and go present in City Hall.”
- “Having to present it. I’m a little shy.”

Group work

Although, as noted before, many students reported that they like working with peers and in groups, 17 percent reported problems with the group process: either they did

not get along with the members of their group, did not know how to handle disagreements within the group, or were irritated at laggards who still got credit for the work. Again, the project may be able to help with this in the next round (see Recommendations):

- “That I couldn’t work with my group because I had problems with a kid in my group.”
- “The disagreement with the group.”
- “Sometimes my group would argue over the smallest thing and none of us could get them to stop arguing. There was never a day where the group didn’t argue.”
- “Somebody in my group did not do any work and get credit for it.”
- “Sometimes when my group didn’t listen, I didn’t like that.”

Smaller numbers of students mentioned a number of other aspects of the project that they did not like, including the limited number of topics they could write about, inadequate technology, debating, and the amount of work:

- “I didn’t like the fact that we were not able to pick our topic and the fact that we did not get to choose who we wanted to work with.”
- “It was too much work.”
- “I did not like any of it except the debate.”
- “I liked everything except the part where the computer’s Internet didn’t work.”

And finally, some did not like what they had learned about the world—hardly a negative finding from the project’s point of view and a suitable way to show how the impact of the project went well beyond either literacy or technology:

- “I didn’t like that the troop have been dieing in this war.”

- “What I didn’t like was the stories. They tell terrible news.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the teachers felt this project was a very useful component of their literacy instruction and the students enjoyed the various components, there are nevertheless areas that could be improved.

Level of the reading material

As noted above, many teachers felt the reading level of the Internet material was above the reading levels of their students. Some had specific suggestions for how to deal with this:

- “Much simpler articles should be given.”
- “Find easier articles for the kids to read.”
- “A mix of different reading levels for the articles might be helpful.”
- “Provide reading vocabulary/glossary of terms in advanced, so that students were ready for the materials when they arrived.”
- “The readings were above the level of most of my students. Much simpler articles should be given. And perhaps it should be made clear that they are informational, pro, or con. Sometimes it was hard for them to understand what they were reading, let alone which side of the issue it was on.”
- “When using articles for students to read, consider their level of comprehension. Rewrite the articles so that they can be understood.”
- “In addition, much of the sources are tailored to a reading level above the vast majority of my students. Creating leveled summaries and fact sheets would enable students to access the same available variety of sources and synthesize the information on an appropriate level.”

Finding appropriate material on the Internet is a difficult issue faced by most elementary and middle-school projects, and the problem with most of these suggestions is that they would involve considerable work for the Teaching Matters staff. In general, it does not seem advisable to rewrite the Internet, so it may be that the topics have to be confined to those where easy-to-read material is available.

Technology support

A number of teachers mentioned that they still need help with the technology, while some students wanted to learn advanced functions of PowerPoint that their teachers were not able to teach them. It is worth investigating whether it is possible to enlist the newly funded cohort of Technology Staff Developers to be partners with the teachers in this project.

Interdisciplinary possibilities

Some teachers suggested that other teachers, particularly Social Studies, should be included in the project because it has a strong cross-curriculum potential.

Presentations

Many students clearly became very engaged in the project, which led them to feel deprived when only one group from each school was chosen to present in public. In addition, some felt that the selection process was unfair. One teacher suggested that all finalists be given a certificate with their name on it. Others suggested more opportunities for recognition, including more public presentations and posting presentations on the website.

Debates

It is clear from their comments that the students loved the debating aspect of the project, but it also seems that many teachers did not use it. Although this was no doubt due to very real time constraints, teachers should be encouraged to build in time for real debates into the process.

It also might be possible to use the online Bulletin Board as a forum for debate. In this implementation, the Bulletin Board was not particularly emphasized by Teaching Matters, but it could be better utilized. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of the students reported that they read messages posted to the Bulletin Board at least sometimes, two-thirds also reported that they had not written messages:

	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom/ Never	Total
Read the Election Connection bulletin board	16%	48%	36%	100%
Write a message on the Election Connection bulletin board	8%	26%	65%	100%

Issues with group work

It is difficult to tell if the students' frustrations with group work were the result of teacher inexperience with organizing groups or simply the unhappiness of a few students. (We did not ask teachers about their experience with group work.) The Teaching Matters staff developers might ask teachers about this and provide support for those who had less experience—for instance, in how to form groups, how to adjudicate disputes (or have the students do this), etc.

Issues with Internet research

The students expressed frustration with Internet searching. Aside from the fact that Teaching Matters provided many resources for the students precisely so they would not have to do the searching, Internet search skills are not well taught in schools, in part because the teachers themselves do not know how to search. However, Internet searching requires many important literacy skills and can be taught with that in mind. All Teaching Matters staff development should teach teachers how to search with this in mind.

Distinguishing fact from opinion

As noted above, neither the teachers nor the students felt that they had difficulties with distinguishing fact from opinion. However, it seems that finding may be the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of what a “fact” is, and that rhetorical style may have an undue influence on how each is categorized—and therefore on why the students and teachers feel it is easy to distinguish them. Although we do not have a specific recommendation here, it is an issue that is worth considering in the second iteration of the project.

