Civics Education

This Brief

What Does It Mean to Have Civics Education Skills?

Civics education means "education services provided to English language learners who are adults, including professionals with degrees and credentials in their native countries, that enables such adults to achieve competency in the English language and acquire the basic and more advanced skills needed to function effectively as parents, workers, and citizens in the United States. Such services shall include instruction in literacy and English language acquisition and instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation, and may include workforce training" (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Pub. L. 113-128, July 2014).

Civics education equips adult learners to deal with issues of critical importance in their lives and communities, with advocacy and agency as central tenets. Agency refers to a learner's ability to take control of their learning in pursuit of their personal aspirations and goals (Duff, 2012). Civics education may be incorporated into adult high school equivalency (HSE) completion and adult basic education (ABE) programs and is the foundation of integrated English literacy and civics education (IELCE)
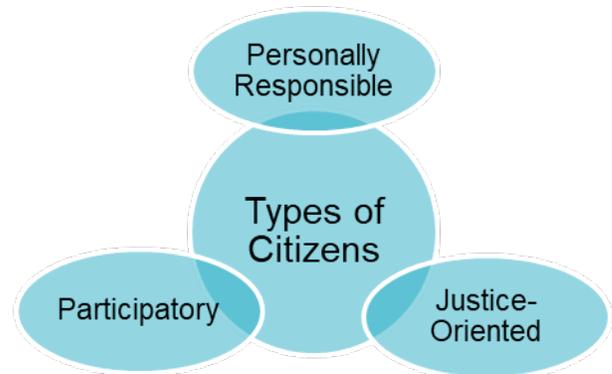
classes for immigrants to the United States.[1] Whether preparation for passing the United States citizenship examination or the social studies sub-test on HSE exams, civics education provides learners with an understanding of the fundamentals of government and U.S. history, ideally through a critical lens that draws on learners' own experiences, beliefs, and world views. More important, a well-designed civics education program supports the individual's full integration into society with opportunities to accept leadership roles and participate in community organizations (ALLIES, 2017).

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) propose three types of citizens: personally responsible citizens, or those who are responsible members of their community; participatory citizens who become activity engaged in local issues and organize others around those issues; and justice-oriented citizens, who "critically assess social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes (p. 240)" and strive to affect systemic change. A scan of adult education materials and English language civics materials for new immigrants reveals that many contain activities that are primarily focused on community involvement (making donations, attending school meetings, learning about recycling) that support becoming only the first of these—a personally responsible citizen. While that is an excellent starting point, and these kinds of topics are common in IELCE classes, a civics education curriculum and instructional approach also should prepare adult learners to identify problems in their communities and act to solve them by drawing on and analyzing information from multiple sources and perspectives.

Why Is Civics Education Important?

Civics education has equal importance for both those born and raised in the United States and those who have come as immigrants or refugees and for whom civics education is one part of a process of integration into a new society (ALLIES, 2017; Shapiro and Brown, 2018). As stated in Millona and Gross (2014), the National Partnership for New Americans believes that "immigrant integration is a two-way process that strengthens the systems and tools that allow immigrants in the U.S. to participate fully in their families, jobs, and communities, and that benefits all Americans by providing immigrants with the opportunity to contribute fully to those jobs and communities and to the strength of the nation as a whole (p. 1)."

Only 26% of Americans could name all three branches of government, voter participation was at its lowest point in two decades, and public trust in government was only about 18 percent. (University of Pennsylvania, 2016)

Equally important and paralleling the effort to support newcomer integration is increasing civic knowledge and engagement of those adult learners in ABE and high school equivalency completion programs. An Annenberg Public Policy Center (2016) survey revealed that, at the time it was published, only 26% of Americans could name all three branches of government, voter participation was at its lowest point in two decades, and public trust in government was only about 18 percent. Quality civics education provides a means for all learners to become not only personally responsible but, potentially, participatory and justice-oriented citizens as well. At

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[1] See Title II Section 243 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, Pub. L. 113-128, July 2014) for more information on what services are provided through IELCE programs.

the broader community level, it also means "improving relationships and trust between immigrants and receiving community members, as well as among immigrants from different countries and backgrounds; and improving the capacity of receiving community organizations and institutions to value the assets and contributions of immigrants" (Kallenbach et al., 2013, p. 13).

How Do You Implement the Skills That Matter for Civics Education?

To be an engaged citizen, individuals must understand how governing systems work and must recognize their rights and responsibilities as citizens as well as the responsibilities of those who govern them. In the context of adult education programs, learners should be afforded the opportunity to grapple with complex problems that affect their own lives and take action to find solutions. Learners in adult education classrooms must appreciate the connection between the surrounding community's concerns and their own academic goals; and they need to see how the skills of problem solving, decision-making, and effective communication that are fostered through rich community projects are the same skills as those used in school, work, and home (Nash, 2000). These understandings and perceptions can best be achieved through project- and problem-based learning approaches or by following an integrated, contextualized approach that uses civics topics as the content of instruction (e.g., learning about critical historic issues that demonstrate democratic processes at work while developing learners' literacy, language, mathematics, and soft skills). Within any of these approaches, all of the skills that matter can and should be fostered through the selection of appropriate instructional tasks as described by the examples below.

- **Critical thinking**: Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to weigh arguments on every side of each issue before coming to a conclusion. Learners create and conduct a survey of class members' civic engagement, with survey items regarding attendance at city council, school board, or other government meetings; voting; volunteerism; and engagement with community organizations. Groups analyze data they collect around one of the issues, create graphs, present findings, and summarize class engagement levels.

- **Communication:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively share ideas with others; understanding information shared by others. Learners observe video clips of interactions with different community members (e.g., a neighbor, a school teacher, someone in law enforcement, an INS official at a naturalization interview) and note differences in the forms of address, ways of responding to questions, and overall level of formality. Instruction focuses on the specific language used in these varying contexts.

- **Processing and analyzing information:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to consider facts, opinions, and potential outcomes for decisions on one's own life and the surrounding community. Learners explore a current issue of concern in their community through case studies; for example, an increase in ICE raids of local businesses, or how possible changes in DACA legislation may affect families. They research legislation and current practices and propose action steps for those involved.

- **Self-awareness:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to understand one's impact on others and to be mindful of personal and cultural biases. Using the classroom as a model for democratic practice (Nash, 2010), students are given an issue affecting the classroom, e.g., what type of feedback they would like to receive from one another on their writing. Voting by secret ballot, results are counted to illustrate the concept of majority rule (Foster, Aguiar, & Anderson, 2014). Students then reflect on the impact of their voter participation and how this extends to their rights and responsibilities as voters.

- **Problem solving:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to identify when to address issues that arise, both in one's own life and in the lives of those in the larger community. Learners investigate an issue of concern; for example, causes of homelessness in their community. They learn about factors affecting homelessness: jobs and average pay available to people with limited education; costs of housing in their area; or the availability of homeless shelters. This could lead to actions such as volunteering at a homeless shelter or collecting used clothing for homeless families.

- **Navigating systems**: Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to understand different ways of making one's voice heard, including voting and to complete the steps necessary to register to vote or become a citizen. Using project-based learning, teams investigate services in the community based on their personal needs; for example, recredentialing supports, voter registration, food banks and other forms of public assistance, tenants' rights organizations, or affordable childcare. They create posters and take part in a gallery walk to discuss and learn about those services with one other.

- **Adaptability and willingness to learn:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to seek new ways to improve one's situation as well as the situations of others in the community and to recognize that one has room for growth. Learners read about the positive impacts of community involvement and complete a self-assessment to determine the likelihood that they will engage in various practices. Then they identify actions they are willing to take to increase their involvement in the community.

- **Respecting difference and diversity/interpersonal skills:** Students must have the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate norms and systems in the United States while maintaining one's identity and traditions, as noted by Kallenbach et al. (2013). Adult education programs are often "a microcosm of the broader community and the lack of understanding that can exist between and among groups" (Kallenbach et al., 2013, p.13). Projects that revolve around all players in an adult educational setting can provide vehicles for building cross-cultural understanding. Working with learners across classes within a program, students process scenarios related to the cultural groups represented at their adult learning centers. They evaluate multiple perspectives on one event (e.g., differing values and beliefs around issues; varying forms of address; differing ways of participating in teams or with class colleagues; varying forms of physical contact or gestures).

Building these skills that matter in the context of civics education serves to foster learner agency and voice. Any of the practices outlined above can be applied to high school equivalency, ABE basic skills, or IELCE classes.

What Are Some Tips for Teaching Civics Education Skills in Your Classroom?

- **Consider learners' personal circumstances**. Each learner has unique circumstances, needs, and issues. For learners to become participatory or justice-oriented citizens, situate instruction using opportunities for engagement in their own communities. Establish their personal goals, motivations, and comfort in becoming involved in a community problem or issue they are facing. There must be buy-in and a genuine need to engage with the topics. Often, this approach requires differentiating—that is, having different groups work on different projects in class. Spend time generating ideas and activating learners' prior knowledge of topics that are covered.

- **Support language development.** Civics topics can provide engaging content for language development. Use authentic, current reading and listening materials to work on strategies for accessing complex texts, such as informational videos on community organizations or infographics, tables, or charts that provide real-world data on anything from school choice to crime rates. Provide the academic language frames needed to engage in deep, sustained discussions (e.g., expressing opinions: *"As far as I'm concerned."*, agreeing: *"That's an excellent point."*, or elaborating on others' ideas: *"I see your point, and I would add…"*).

- **Work on multiple literacies.** Often, civics-related content is presented using infographics, charts, or graphs, and current information often is provided online. Integrate varying forms of text (print and digital) frequently. Gather current information from any number of government agencies (e.g., the U.S. Census Bureau, the Pew Research Center).

- **Provide community engagement opportunities.** Have guest speakers come to class. Go on field trips and attend events as a class (e.g., caucuses, school board meetings). Assign out-of-class tasks such as individual field trips that require students to gather information and report back to class (Parrish, 2019).

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