



Civics in the Adult Education Classroom

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Civics can be broadly defined as the “lifelong process that makes people into active, responsible, and knowledgeable members of their communities.”¹ This definition supports the concept of civic integration, one of the three pillars of immigrant integration and inclusion, along with linguistic and economic integration. Civic integration is critical to helping immigrants acclimate to and become full contributing members of their new communities.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) issued a broad charge to adult educators to provide adult education services that enable English learners (ELs) to “acquire the basic and more advanced skills needed to function effectively as parents, workers, and citizens.”² To support the integration of immigrants as citizens and residents of the United States, WIOA authorized Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) activities, which specifically include instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation. Therefore, English language acquisition (ELA) classes in general, and IELCE activities in particular, often include components that help ELs and immigrants gain the skills and knowledge

The **Enhancing Access for Refugees and New Americans** project aims to support adult educators in developing and delivering high-quality IELCE/IET programming in alignment with an immigrant integration approach.

Enhancing Access Spotlights describe and provide examples of specific aspects of IELCE/IET implementation.

needed to engage with and integrate into their communities.

IELCE is defined in law as “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.”²

¹ “What Is Civics?” CivXNow, accessed August 2023, <https://civxnow.org/our-vision/what-is-civics/>.

² WIOA Section 203, Public Law 113–128, July 2014, <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/hr803/BILLS-113hr803enr.pdf>.

Although WIOA defines that IELCE services shall include instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation, civics activities are not strictly defined in the law, providing adult education programs and instructors the flexibility to determine what civics content will be

included in ELA and IELCE classes. Therefore, civics instruction can promote gaining the knowledge, skills, values, and actions that contribute to a greater sense of belonging and engagement with one's society as well as the ability to understand, participate, advocate, and make change within one's community.

- This spotlight describes and provides examples of how civics content and activities can be integrated and contextualized into instruction in four discrete ways:
- 1. Teaching specific civics education topic
- 2. Supporting civic integration
- 3. Offering opportunities for civic engagement
- 4. Focusing on a civic understanding for the workplace

Civics Education

Civics education, which can include formal instruction on civics topics, such as U.S. government, U.S. history, political science, and law, is an allowable use of funding. For example, adult learners preparing for high school equivalency exams often study civics content, learning about the U.S. government and U.S. history. In addition, some states such as Arizona,³ Illinois,⁴ and Wisconsin⁵ have civics requirements. In these states, adult learners must pass a civics test in addition to the other requirements for earning a high school equivalency diploma.

Citizenship preparation instruction itself is not an allowable use of WIOA funding; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) funds adult citizenship education programs for eligible immigrants preparing for the naturalization exam, which assesses English literacy and knowledge of American history and government. Adult education programs

funded under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) should not duplicate these services and instead can support citizenship preparation and attainment through the following methods:

- Using intake processes and ongoing discussions to identify students who may be eligible for citizenship in order to refer them to an adult citizenship education program.
- Introducing and embedding civics content and vocabulary in IELCE activities that prepare learners for more formal citizenship education activities, such as preparing for a high school equivalency or taking a citizenship or civics test.
- Using learner-centered approaches that allow instructors to learn more about the elements of civics that students are interested in learning about.

³ "AES Arizona Civics Test Information," Arizona Department of Education, accessed August 2023, <https://www.azed.gov/adultedservices/aes-arizona-civics-test-information>.

⁴ "The Illinois State Constitution Requirement," Adult Education & Literacy, Illinois Community College Board, accessed August 2023, https://www2.iccb.org/adult_ed/hse/students-test-takers/the-u-s-and-illinois-constitution-test/.

⁵ "WI Civics Graduation Requirement," Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, accessed August 2023, <https://dpi.wi.gov/social-studies/laws/civics>.

Practice in Action

The [English Skills Learning Center](#) (ESLC), a community-based organization and ELA provider in Salt Lake City, Utah, receives AEFLA funding to provide ELA programming and USCIS funding to provide adult citizenship education programs.

Recognizing that adult citizenship education programs are appropriate for learners who are at a National Reporting System (NRS) Level 2 or higher and are eligible for citizenship, ESLC carefully identifies learners who meet the language and eligibility requirements to participate in citizenship instruction programming, while also supporting civic readiness in all ELA programming. This includes embedding citizenship vocabulary and concepts in ESLC ELA instruction to help prepare ELs for citizenship without the pressure of an upcoming naturalization test or interview.

Civic Integration

To support civic integration, adult education programs can help ELs and immigrants become integrated into their communities by helping them learn and understand their new communities' expectations for them and by helping them fulfill their own goals and potential as parents, workers, and citizens. A review of the role of communities in integration by the Migration Policy Institute noted that "experience to date indicates that successful immigrant integration results from the twofold responsibility of immigrants and their host societies."⁶ To support this concept

Explore More

- Explore [this page on the USCIS website](#) to find a USCIS-funded provider of adult citizenship education programs near your adult education program in order to refer eligible learners.
- Explore the [First Amendment Rights Lesson Plan](#), developed by the Teaching Skills that Matter project for the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE), for an example of how civics education can be taught at the High Intermediate ESL level.

of "twofold responsibility," ESLC in Salt Lake City applies a two-way integration approach, which teaches ELs the language and skills needed to participate fully in English-dominant communities while simultaneously providing activities to help all community members understand the immigrant experience and ways to be more welcoming.

Contextualized civic integration instruction can include activities in which learners learn English language skills while engaging in solving their own real-world civic integration needs.

⁶ Corrie Macleod, "The Changing Concepts around Immigrant Integration," *Migrant Information Source* (September 17, 2021), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/changing-concepts-immigrant-integration>.

This can include instruction to help learners:

- Navigate systems such as education systems, employer websites, and online banking or payment apps.
- Access community services, including other federal or state supports a learner may be eligible for in order to meet their own basic needs and those of their families.
- Gain access to devices and broadband to ensure learners have opportunities to build their digital literacy and digital skills, and that they can access online information and resources.
- Attain government documentation such as a state identification card or driver's license.

In addition to helping ELs and immigrants learn how to navigate and participate fully in their communities, adult educators can also provide workforce preparation activities that help prepare learners for work. Workforce preparation activities are defined in WIOA as “activities, programs, or services designed to help an individual acquire a combination of basic academic skills, critical thinking skills, digital literacy skills, and self-management skills, including competencies in utilizing resources, using information, working with others, understanding systems, and obtaining skills necessary for successful transition into and completion of postsecondary education or training, or employment.”⁷

Through workforce preparation activities, adult education programs can also help learners learn more about the U.S. work environment and culture. This can include activities that focus on:

- pay systems and structures,
- employer expectations,
- workers' rights and protections, and
- workplace culture.

These topics should be contextualized into ELA instruction.

Texas has developed state standards that include civics integration content, such as becoming and staying involved in your community.⁸ Through these standards, learners find and use information to identify and solve problems and contribute to the community.

Practice in Action

The Polish American Association, a community-based organization in Chicago, Illinois, receives AEFLA funding to support ELA programming, including IELCE activities; USCIS funding to offer adult citizenship education programs; and WIOA Title I funding to support job training and job placement services. The Polish American Association also offers services such as case management, substance use treatment, counseling, and housing support. Through these varied funding streams, the Polish American Association is able to help its clients gain access to a robust set of wraparound services, strategically advancing the linguistic, civic, and economic integration of diverse immigrant communities.

⁷ 34 CFR § 463.34 – What are workforce preparation activities?

⁸ Texas Adult Education and Literacy Content Standards v. 3: Civics – Citizen/Community Member Content Standards, Texas Workforce Commission, accessed August 2023, <https://tcall.tamu.edu/docs/Standards/Civics-Standards4-2023-2023.pdf>.

Explore More

- Explore the [Civics Education Issue Brief](#), developed by OCTAE's Teaching Skills that Matter project, to learn more about how civics education can include broad skills that may align with workforce preparation activities, employability skills, and other 21st-century competencies needed to fulfill learners' goals as members of society.
- Explore the [Preparing English Learners for Work and Career Pathways](#) companion learning resource, developed by OCTAE's ESL Pro project, for additional guidance and support when deciding how to prepare ELs for their next steps.
- Explore EARN's [Expanding the Use of Online Resources in IELCE Activities to Support Immigrant Integration and Inclusion](#) for examples of how civic integration activities can be embedded into IELCE activities.
- Participate in the [Preparing Adult English Language Learners for State-Adopted Academic Content Standards](#) e-training modules. These three modules support adult educators in getting started in using the [English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education](#).

Civic Engagement

IELCE activities provide an opportunity for adult education programs to build learners' sense of community through advocacy and volunteer activities that build engagement with local civic and community-based systems and personnel. There is some evidence on the benefits of civic engagement opportunities (e.g., leadership, service projects, volunteerism) to individuals, such as enhanced professional advancement and network expansion, increased sense of belonging and self-efficacy, political knowledge, engagement and advocacy, and reduced social isolation.^{9,10,11}

To support instruction related to civic engagement, Texas's civics standards include

a focus on civic and community engagement in which learners form and express opinions and ideas, work together, and take action to strengthen communities.⁸

Other programs have used family literacy models to help students learn how to advocate on behalf of their children. This can support parents in understanding the purpose of parent-teacher conferences and how to engage in them, how to understand report cards and other methods of assessment, and how to advocate for children who may need additional services, including second-language supports.

⁹ Amy L. Best, Katie Kerstetter, John Dale, and Samantha Retrosi, "The Strength of Civic Ties: Connecting Civic Engagement and Professional Attainment among Educated Immigrants in the United States," *Community, Work & Family* 25, no. 2 (December 16, 2021): 174–193, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2021.2008876>.

¹⁰ Zita Dixon, Melissa L. Bessaha, and Margaret Post, "Beyond the Ballot: Immigrant Integration through Civic Engagement and Advocacy," *Race and Social Problems* 10, no. 4 (June 29, 2018): 366–375, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-018-9237-1>.

¹¹ Joshua Cramer and Blaire Willson Toso, *Family Service Learning Brief*, National Center for Families Learning and the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, 2015, https://www.familieslearning.org/pdf/NCFL-FSL-brief_F3.pdf.

Practice in Action

Examples of civic engagement activities include the following:

- Adult Options in Education in Hopkins, Minnesota, builds civic and community engagement into the curriculum. This includes participating in fundraising efforts for local organizations supporting the community.
- Academy of Hope in Washington, DC, brings students to the City Council to advocate on behalf of adult education and adult learners.
- Queen Creek Unified School District in Arizona brings learners to school board meetings and town council meetings. The district also invites principals, school board members, and law enforcement officials to the program to help students understand how to navigate community systems.
- Briya Public Charter School in Washington, DC, hosts Briya Voices for All, a student advocacy group. The group released a [podcast](#) featuring two students who had participated in community organizing to increase access to health insurance. One student said of her experience, “[It was a] life-changing experience. Seeing...the power that we actually have. And we actually were able to do something.”
- The ESLC in Salt Lake City, Utah, has an Empowering Parents program developed in partnership with the local school district to help parents understand how to get involved with their children's education.

Explore More

- Explore the [Flint Water Crisis Lesson Plan](#), developed by OCTAE's Teaching Skills that Matter project, for an example of how learning about current or community events can be taught in ELA classes. A lesson like this can lead to further civic or community engagement activities where students learn more about or advocate for drinking water safety in their community. View the Flint Water Crisis Lesson Plan in action in [this video](#).
- Explore the [Community Involvement as Social Change Integrated and Contextualized Learning Plan](#), developed by OCTAE's Teaching Skills that Matter project, for an example of how to help students understand the value of community engagement and involvement. A lesson like this can lead to a class volunteer project or other ways of giving back to the community.
- Explore the [Family Service Learning Brief](#), which provides a structure for building a service-learning project with adult learners and outlines promising practices and example projects. Service-learning projects create contextualized opportunities to build workforce preparation skills and learn about local systems, literacy and language, and digital literacy skills, and encourage lasting civic engagement for immigrant learners.

Civic Understanding for the Workplace

In addition to workforce preparation skills like navigating systems, collaborating and communicating with others, and problem-solving, successful workers often need a set of civics skills that are related to a specific occupational sector, employer, or workplace. Workforce preparation or training programs can include targeted civics content to help prepare learners for success in specific careers.

IELCE activities may include workforce training and are often delivered in combination with Integrated Education and Training (IET) programs, which require the integration of workforce training, workforce

preparation activities, and adult education and literacy instruction. IELCE activities that use bridge strategies to connect learners to specific IET programs can identify specific civics content relevant to the workforce training component of the IET program to integrate into the IELCE instruction. The civics content in the IELCE activity can be contextualized to the occupational area of the IET, in the same way workforce preparation activities are. The integration of job-specific civics content into English language instruction helps prepare learners to participate in the IET program and succeed in the career field.

Practice in Action

An example of integrating workforce-specific civics content is evident in Montgomery College's IELCE/IET Pharmacy Technician program. With this approach, Montgomery College prepares ELs for participation in the Pharmacy Technician IET program through IELCE activities that integrate English language instruction that is relevant to pharmacy and health care with civics content that is relevant to workplace skills needed to work successfully in pharmacies. This includes understanding relevant legislation that pharmacy technicians need to abide by, such as privacy laws and an understanding of the U.S. health care system. It can also include relevant workforce preparation activities that build the skills pharmacy technicians will need on the job, such as communication skills, digital literacy skills, and systems navigation skills. The video linked below highlights this contextualized skill-building:

- Students practice the skill of respecting differences and diversity when they learn about interacting with pharmacy customers in an appropriate way.
- Students practice navigating systems as they learn about the specifics of the health care system and how pharmacies fit into this system.

View [this video](#) to hear Montgomery College staff explain how they contextualize civics content in IELCE activities to the workplace.

Explore More

Explore EARN's [Enhancing Access: Using Bridge Strategies to Connect IELCE Activities to IET Programs spotlight](#) to learn more about how bridge strategies can be used to deliver IELCE activities in combination with IET programs.

Comprehensive Civic Literacy Approaches

Although this spotlight describes four distinct approaches to delivering civic literacy activities, these activities can be blended and scaffolded to develop a cohesive approach to supporting the full participation of ELs in U.S. society. Adult education agencies and programs can support the creation of intentional programming or tools that promote civic readiness instruction. For example, California provides a set of

performance-based Civic Objectives and Additional Assessment Plans (COAAPs) from which adult education programs and IELCE instructors can select.¹² Instructors use COAAPs to guide instruction in a range of civic objectives that span seven key competency areas: government and law, consumer economics, community resources, health, transitions, employment, and workforce training.

Practice in Action

The Chaffey Adult School in San Bernardino County, California, takes a comprehensive approach to civic literacy, incorporating activities, resources, and instruction that help students improve their knowledge of civics, civic integration and engagement, and civics in the workplace through use of COAAPs. At the start of each year, Chaffey surveys its students to gather their civic interests in each of the seven COAAP competency areas.

This information helps Chaffey administrators develop a set of civic literacy offerings that include the following:

Civic Literacy	COAAP Competency Area	Chaffey Practices
Civics Education	Government and Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Embedding supports for interacting with local and state government systems in standard English as a second language (ESL) classes (e.g., obtaining identification)Encouraging eligible students enrolled in ESL classes to register for Chaffey's USCIS-funded adult citizenship education programs
Civic Integration	Consumer Economics, Community Resources, Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Building students' confidence and skills in communicating with health care professionals (e.g., making appointments, talking with pharmacists) through a focused unit on health in ESL classes

Continued

¹²Pre-approved Civic Objectives for Use in California EL Civics Programs with Civic Participation and/or IELCE in the 2023–2024 School Year, CASAS, accessed August 2023, https://www.casas.org/docs/default-source/el-civics/pre-approved-civic-objectives-list.pdf?sfvrsn=32fb305a_28?Status=Master.

Civic Literacy	COAAP Competency Area	Chaffey Practices
Civic Engagement	Community Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing instruction on immigrants' rights and responsibilities • Furthering civic integration and engagement by making community resources and opportunities widely available through consolidated and widely accessible webpages • Providing localized activities to help students find and use local services (e.g., libraries, police stations) across the county
Civic Understanding for the Workplace	Employment Workforce Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting digital literacy in advanced ESL classes through the use of Google Classroom, where students must obtain and submit their assignments • Providing English language instruction to further communications related to the training topic • Offering IELCE/IET activities on Microsoft Office, Instructional Assistant, and Small Business Management in which civics instruction is relevant to the workplace literacy component

Explore More

- Explore CrowdED Learning's [Subject Area Frameworks for Adult Learners](#), which includes sections on civics education, digital literacy, and workforce preparation activities, all of which may help support civic readiness broadly.
- Explore the CASAS [California Civic Participation and IELCE](#) webpage, which includes resources for performance-based instruction and assessment in IELCE.

Reflection

As programs consider how best to integrate instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation in IELCE activities, consider the following questions:

- Does your state provide tools (e.g., standards, COAAPs) that guide civic-related instruction?
- How does your state or program determine what content to include in instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation?
- Which, if any, of the approaches described in this spotlight (e.g., civics education, civic integration, civic engagement, and civic understanding of the workplace) has your program used? Which approach do you think would resonate best with your learners?
- Does your program measure or assess students' progress toward full participation as citizens, workers, and parents?