

Learning To Be a Citizen

By Peter Levine, Ph.D.

The purpose of social studies education is to prepare students to take informed action in their communities and our democracy—throughout their lives.

Taking Informed Action

What Is Informed Action?

Citizenship is not a spectator sport. The system created by the United States Constitution depends on people voting, serving on juries, forming associations and organizations, expressing their opinions (and listening to other people’s views), making demands on governments, and sometimes, serving in the military.

Students are not likely to learn how to perform these activities from books and classroom discussions alone. Just as biology should not be taught without lab experiments—or basketball without practice shooting baskets—learning how to be a citizen requires hands-on experiences.

Taking informed action also makes education vivid and memorable. Most American adults perform poorly when surveyed about how well they understand our political system and history. Yet most of these people were required to study these topics in school. Apparently, many forgot what they learned, and a likely reason is that they never applied the knowledge.

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Important civic activities, such as voting, volunteering, and participating in groups are voluntary. There are no immediate penalties for failing to do these things. If we expect millions of adults to choose to be active and informed citizens throughout their lives, we must help them develop habits of engagement when they are young. One way to form a habit of civic engagement is to take informed action during social studies class.

Students need backgrounds in history, geography, economics, and civics/government to act effectively, and all of those subjects come alive when they are applied. Students can conduct oral histories of community members with lived experience, identify solutions to solve local problems, or analyze their community's economy and present their findings—all as forms of informed action.

Action Civics

An ambitious approach to taking informed action has been labeled “action civics.” In this model, groups of students brainstorm issues in their community (whether within or outside the school), choose an issue to work on together, investigate it, plan some type of action, implement their plan, and evaluate and present the results.

Another Alternative: Simulations

Action civics is a powerful method of engagement, but it does not fit in every course and curriculum, and it presents some challenges. The full model takes weeks to implement and can require transportation and present logistical issues. In addition, some student projects might prove too controversial to implement.

When action civics is not appropriate, students can practice taking informed action in mock trials and simulated elections or political conventions. They can plan strategies for addressing issues without actually implementing their plans. They can take specific actions that require a minimal amount of time, such as posting comments on a proposed government regulation or emailing an elected official. They can develop messages and communicate them to each other by making speeches or presenting posters to the class or the school.

Models for Taking Informed Action: School Groups

The school's extracurricular groups and programs also provide powerful opportunities for students to take informed action. In student-led clubs, teams, and organizations, students learn how to recruit members, raise funds, reach consensus, and take collective action. Meanwhile, social studies teachers can use class time to make connections and analyze how these groups and programs incorporate methods that are used in real life, such as following rules for elections and decision-making.

Global Competency

What Is Global Competency?

The world is, and always has been, deeply interconnected. Becoming a fully informed and responsible citizen of the United States means understanding these global connections and being aware of the world beyond the nation's borders.

Understanding History

Students become more informed when they learn that American history and world history are closely linked. The United States emerged as a result of interactions between European settlers and Native Americans, conflicts among European empires, and the Atlantic slave trade. Even during colonial times, Americans were involved in long-distance trade networks. The population of North America reflects massive and continuing migration from all of the inhabited continents. In turn, the United States has influenced the rest of the world as a result of its military and political power, economy, and culture.

Understanding Global Challenges and Relationships

Informed citizens know that many of the world's most significant issues are international. For example, it doesn't matter where on Earth a ton of carbon is extracted and burned; it still affects the climate of the United States. A pandemic can start in any region and spread throughout the world. Addressing challenges that affect all of us requires international cooperation.

Nations cooperate by negotiating treaties and coming together in various groups. They also exchange diplomats and hold summit meetings. Meanwhile, people cooperate across borders by joining international organizations and movements. Learning about these forms and methods of interaction is an important component of social studies education, relevant in ancient history, world history, American history, geography, economics, and civics/American government.

Making Comparisons

Whether and in what ways the United States is—and ought to be—unique is hotly debated today. This debate unfolds under the heading of “American exceptionalism,” and adults hold a variety of views about it. Students cannot enter or assess this discussion without actually understanding some of the other systems of the world. The United States is unique in some ways but is typical in many others. It is a matter of fact—not just an opinion—whether other countries have similar laws and policies, constitutions, and economic systems like those of the United States. Learning about other countries is a way of informing our judgments about our own system. Comparing the United States' policies and institutions to those of other countries does not only provide a better basis for pride and appreciation of the American system, but it can also generate ideas for improving it.

Recognizing Students' Backgrounds as Assets

Many Americans have personal memories of countries from which they migrated or family members who are first-generation immigrants. When students know about their own families' countries, cultures, and regions of origin, they can contribute that knowledge in the social studies classroom. In turn, treating all students with respect requires some understanding of their countries of origin.

Types of Citizenship

Individuals hold legal citizenship only within particular countries. Being a citizen of the United States comes with specific rights—and responsibilities—that all students should learn. It is also valuable to learn what legal citizenship means in some other countries.

Our citizenship doesn't extend to our nation alone. Rather, we are citizens of all the communities to which we belong, from a child's kindergarten classroom to a social media platform that a person uses to the whole world. Being a fully responsible and capable adult means learning to be responsible at many different levels.

Digital Media Literacy

The Media: Yesterday and Today

An effective citizen in the modern world must use digital media effectively. We cannot know our national leaders personally; we cannot grasp an issue like climate change from direct personal experience. We depend on media—especially digital, electronic media—to provide us with information and communicate our views.

The media landscape has changed dramatically in just a few decades. As recently as the 1980s, most Americans subscribed to at least one daily newspaper. Professional reporters who worked for newspapers, television, or radio stations collected and presented most of the news.

In those days, media literacy involved teaching students to obtain high-quality news. Students were often taught the difference between a news article and an editorial. High-quality media literacy education also addressed concepts like bias and propaganda and the potential for owners and advertisers to influence the news.

Today, far fewer people subscribe to newspapers and work as reporters. Meanwhile, other sources of news and information have vastly proliferated. Social media platforms provide excellent content, but that content can often contain errors and misinformation. Conventional distinctions, such as between editorials and news articles or even between news and entertainment, are irrelevant on many social media platforms. It can even be difficult to discern whether a source of news is a real human being or a computer-generated “bot.”

Studying News Sources

It remains valuable to learn who collects and presents the news and to distinguish various forms of news media, including blogs, podcasts, and homemade videos, as well as newspaper articles and network television programs. The media environment changes rapidly, and sometimes students are more aware of it than adults are. Indeed, youth now play significant roles as generators of news media and as the people who decide what news spreads to large audiences.

Students should be encouraged to ask questions about the source, motives, values, and factual basis of everything they choose to read or watch and share with others.

Achieving News Literacy

It is perhaps more important than ever to have a basic grounding in political systems, democratic values, and scientific methods. We need those values and methods to help us choose which sources and evidence to trust. A solid social studies curriculum provides students with the concepts, methods, and values they need to navigate the media.

Engaging in Difficult Conversations

The Challenge

Democracy requires discussion. It works when people who disagree with one another come together to exchange ideas, learn from diverse perspectives, build consensus, and hold each other accountable. By most accounts, American adults are not performing these tasks very well. The population is deeply polarized along political party lines, and to some extent, also by race and ethnicity, religion, and region. Many communities are ideologically homogeneous, but the country as a whole is divided. Public institutions that are supposed to reflect thoughtful discussions are widely seen as failing. For example, the United States Senate has been nicknamed “the world’s greatest deliberative body,” but few would regard today’s Senate as a model of deliberation.

Young people can learn to talk about contested issues with people who disagree, however, and gain insights, knowledge, and empathy from such conversations. They can learn to argue respectfully with their fellow students and disagree about matters of principle without despising the people with whom they disagree.

The social studies classroom is an excellent venue for such learning. Students can be assigned to discuss the contested issues that arise pervasively in all the social studies disciplines. They can be required to be prepared for discussions and should maintain standards of respect and civility.

Choosing Good Topics

One challenge is choosing appropriate issues for discussion. At least some topics that students discuss in a social studies classroom should be debated today. Students need experience talking about the topics that divide us in the present, not just matters that were resolved in the past. Events (such as a recent natural disaster) may be worth addressing in a class, but they are not “issues.” Issues involve choices about which people disagree. For example, what should be done about crime, homelessness, or religious persecution?

The choice of an issue to discuss might depend on the makeup of a particular class. If all students happen to agree about a given issue, it is not an interesting or appropriate topic for discussion as it does not contain multiple perspectives. If students are likely to split along the lines of identity, such as gender or race, a topic may be difficult to manage in ways that benefit everyone. Disagreement can be found in every classroom; however, some topics will divide a group in unpredictable ways. These issues make excellent choices to discuss.

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