Chapter 10
Innovation in Civic Education:
Preparing Citizens for a Modern World

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ABSTRACT

Educators, advocacy groups, and policymakers are mobilizing to strengthen civic education across the nation. These renewed commitments must be designed and implemented in ways that ensure today's graduates are ready to effectively engage in modern civic life. Since civic education is key to effective participation in our democracy, ensuring a quality civic education is also an equity issue. Students must have foundational knowledge about our nation's values and government, effectively evaluate the validity of claims in digital media, take and defend positions across multiple platforms, and leverage technology to inform and mobilize their community around ideas they care about. This chapter explores proven practices in civic education and technology-enhanced instructional approaches that schools can leverage to modernize their civic education programs.

INTRODUCTION

Strong civic education is key to our democracy's survival. This belief is at the core of the civic mission of schools. Civic education has positive effects on civic participation because it "affords students with political power" and "is essential for a healthy, inclusive democracy" (Hansen, 2018). This is especially powerful since a strong civic education program is also an equity program with the potential to bridge gaps in civic participation that exist by race, ethnicity, and income.

Though efforts to promote comprehensive reform in the field of civic education had stalled over the past two decades, in recent years the changing nature of political participation and discourse, as well as the increasingly partisan political landscape, have generated a revival of sorts. States have begun to rethink, and in some cases, revise their laws. New emphasis is being placed on active teaching methods

and building the skills necessary to be an active and informed participant in American democracy. While the general mood of citizens appears to be cynical about American institutions and the media, evidence shows that when schools organize to engage students in the democratic process, they can be successful in doing so.

Hope lies at the intersection of what we know to be effective teaching strategies that prepare young people for civic action and emerging technologies that connect them with information, provide them with new experiences and gives them a voice in society. Research has identified ten proven practices that effectively prepare students to engage in our democratic process. The use of mobile devices and the ability of students to connect with online resources and share their work widely unleashes unprecedented opportunities for engagement with real world problems. Social media, though not without challenges, can carry student voices well beyond the walls of the classroom.

The modern civics teacher, well versed in digital tools and empowered by the ability to connect with real world experiences has the power to realize the vision laid out in the "Civic Mission of Schools;" a classroom where students learn what it takes to be citizens by actively taking part in civic life rather than talking about a day in the future where they might do so. This chapter seeks to identify tools and practices that specifically support this goal.

The Modern Importance of Civic Education

Different than traditional "Government" courses that focus primarily on the roles and structures of our public institutions, the goal of Civics courses is to prepare students to participate in democracy and to educate them about the rights and duties of citizenship. One of the driving forces behind the renewed interest in civic education is the changing nature of how participation in civic dialogue is now taking place. Civic participation today looks very different than it has in the past. Modern conversations about politics and government typically take place online through social media platforms. If we look at where civic discourse now takes place, we can see that citizens are carrying out discussions in ways that are physically removed from those they are speaking with. It is also often conducted in the privacy of their homes or cars, or in the small in-between spaces of their daily routines. By carefully choosing to use powerful online tools in the classroom, schools and institutions can impart values and behaviors that promote safe and appropriate use. We can provide students with authentic experiences that can prepare them to be better citizens.

If the goal of civic education in America is to prepare citizens to exercise their rights and duties in a democracy, institutions need to reflect deeply on the current state of civics. Educational institutions must also be clear about their goals regarding how to prepare students to enter the altered landscape of our modern American civic forum. Just like movie theaters had to address norms due to the arrival of mobile phones, we need to think about the norms that we need to teach in order to prepare our students to operate in today's civic landscape.

The Evolution of Modern Civic Life

Engaging in civic life has been a foundational element of our nation since its inception. But it is undeniable that the rapid changes in our society have also shifted what civic engagement means and looks like. These changes have created exciting new opportunities to learn, connect, and engage with others, yet have also surfaced new challenges in navigating our complex, hyperconnected and rapidly changing

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