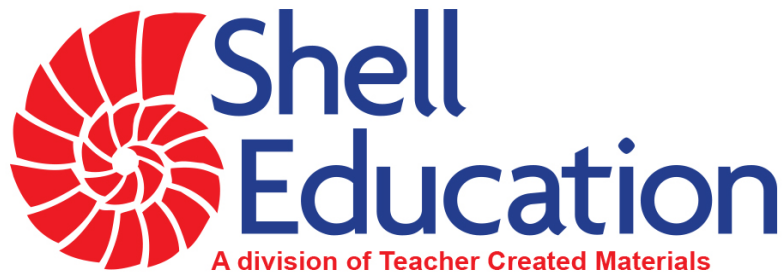


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# Teaching **CIVICS TODAY**

The **i**★**CIVICS** Approach to  
Classroom Innovation and Student Engagement



**John Larmer**

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# Preface

I wrote this book because I care about helping students understand the concepts, values, and skills necessary for the United States to thrive as a democracy: participatory citizenship, respect for differences, belief in the importance of reason and evidence, being willing to compromise, and more.

There should be increased emphasis on civic education in schools, from kindergarten through 12th grade—and not just more, but better civic education. To me, that does not mean lecturing, textbooks and worksheets, and memorization of facts; it means more engaging and active teaching methods. Students should be practicing democratic values in the classroom, discussing civics-related issues, and participating as citizens of their communities and the wider world. I'm a big advocate for project-based learning, so you'll find many examples of civics projects in this book that connect to real-world issues and problems and student interests.

I hope this book helps reinforce the vital role teachers play in providing more and better civic education. If you're not already persuaded to take on this role, I hope you will be after reading this. In addition to helping to strengthen our country, teaching civics can be rewarding and downright fun. I know I enjoyed it as a high school social studies teacher. The activities and resources described in this book will help you and your students enjoy it, too.

Here's an overview of what the book covers. In Chapter 1, we explore the importance of civic education: why it is valuable and why it's needed today, more than ever. We look at why civic education has declined in recent decades and new bipartisan efforts to promote civic education.

Chapter 2 looks at what, exactly, is civic education? We consider the goals of a good civic education and what citizenship means. Then, we delve into the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* and the recent *Educating for American Democracy (EAD) Roadmap*. Finally, we explore some of the tensions and challenges in civic education and the need for "reflective patriotism."

Chapter 3 is where what I think of as the fun part begins. Here we dig into best practices in civic education. We'll examine the research about why active learning is better than memorization, and we'll look at how the C3 Framework and EAD Roadmap promote active learning and inquiry. This chapter also considers how to teach civil discourse, how to approach controversial issues, information literacy, and civics learning beyond the classroom.

Integrating literacy in civic education is the focus of Chapter 4. We'll see how English language arts standards align with best practices for teaching civics. Then, we'll delve into how to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening in civic education and how to teach civics during literacy instruction. We've included recommendations for fiction and nonfiction that teaches students about civics.

Chapter 5 is rich with time-tested strategies, ideas, and resources for teaching the dispositions and skills that are part of civic education. We'll consider how to practice democracy in your classroom, why and how to teach public speaking, best practices for teaching content, including using simulations and experiential learning, and current events. We'll also look at project-based learning: what it is and is not, and see well-developed examples of civics projects.

As you can tell, there's a lot in here. You'll also find links to helpful resources and additional information to explore—it can be quite a rabbit hole, so we've carefully curated it all. Other resources from Teacher Created Materials and iCivics will help you on your mission, too, so I encourage you to check them out.

Best wishes for your teaching, and may your students be the citizens our nation needs!

# Chapter 3

## Best Practices in Civic Education

In Chapter 1, we discussed why we need more and better civic education in this country. In Chapter 2, we talked about what civic education is and what it should include. In this chapter, we will look at how to teach civics in ways that engage your students and build civic understandings that will last a lifetime.

Recall that the three basic categories of what to teach in civics are:

- ★ Content knowledge
- ★ Skills and dispositions for citizenship
- ★ How to participate as a citizen in a democracy

This chapter covers each of these and provides examples of best practices.



## Active Learning of Content, Skills, and Citizenship

Most people in America would agree that a certain basic set of facts and concepts is important for a good civic education. The debate is over *which* facts and concepts, as we discussed in Chapter 2. There is less debate, however, over *how* to teach facts and concepts, at least within education.

Students should not learn civics facts and concepts simply by memorizing them from a teacher's lecture, a textbook or worksheet, or their electronic or online equivalents. Memorizing is not even learning as educators and psychologists now know. Think about all the fact-based tests you took and how little information you retained the next year, month, or even week. For something to truly be "learned," it must stick with you—not word-for-word, but enough for you to be able to use it later (or at least recall that it's significant so you can look it up).

The rationale section of the C3 Framework states:

The days are long past when it was sufficient to compel students to memorize other people's ideas and to hope that they would act on what they had memorized. If 20 years of National Assessment of Educational Progress report cards on youth civic, economic, geographical, and historical understanding mean anything, they repeatedly tell us that the success of that telling-and-compelling effort no longer works in the 21st century, if it ever did (Smith and Niemi 2001). (NCSS 2013, 89)

So, how should students gain knowledge of civics? How will they come to understand, for example, the three branches of government and why separation of powers is important? How will they learn how the president is elected or how laws are made? They do so by learning *actively*.

Active learning is just that: students are not sitting passively as the teacher pours knowledge into their empty heads. Instead, they are thinking about what they are learning and doing something with the information. They are connecting knowledge to what they already know and what they want to know. They are applying the knowledge to real situations and to their own lives.

According to the Center for Teaching Innovation at Cornell University, "Active learning methods ask students to fully participate in their learning by thinking, discussing, investigating, and creating. In active learning classrooms, students may be asked to practice skills, solve



problems, struggle with complex questions, propose solutions, and explain ideas in their own words through writing and discussion” (n.d.). This approach can be traced to John Dewey, who advocated “learning by doing” early in the twentieth century. Active learning also connects the work of educators and theorists such as Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Paolo Freire.

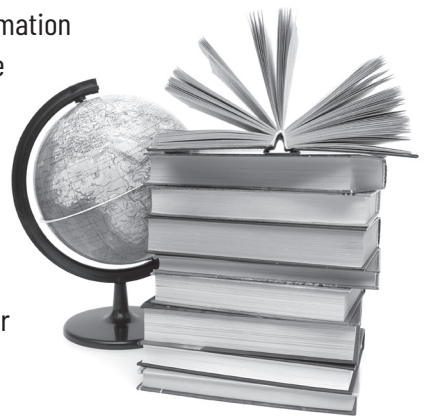
Just as active learning helps students gain content knowledge that they will retain, they can simultaneously gain the skills needed for democratic citizenship. It helps them think critically, evaluate information, use evidence in arguments, and discuss issues rationally with people they disagree with. They do this not by memorizing what concepts mean but by putting them into practice.

The same holds true for learning how to participate as a citizen. We wouldn’t ask students simply to memorize the definition of *volunteerism* and a list of examples. To deeply learn about it, they would need to do research, consider their options, then actually volunteer somewhere. They don’t learn best about elections through a lecture or a video about how they are held. They learn about elections by voting in the classroom or school or by playing a role in a real election in their community. They gain content knowledge as part of the process and in a way that internalizes it.

## Combining It All

Active learning, therefore, teaches content, skills, and participatory citizenship at the same time. If students are working to inform their communities about local issues in an upcoming election, they would need to know the details about elections, such as when and where they are held. They would need to know who can vote, what a ballot is, and how the results are counted. They would need to decide what sources of information are trustworthy, think about and discuss the issues, and figure out what messages would work best for different voters. All the while, they are learning firsthand about the role citizens can play in creating a healthy democracy, even before they are old enough to vote.

Now let’s look at how the two major civic education initiatives discussed in Chapter 2 incorporate active learning into their recommendations for teachers.



## The C3 Framework and Active Learning

The C3 Framework recommends active learning in the form of an “Inquiry Arc” that focuses on the following four Dimensions of Inquiry:

1. Developing questions and planning inquiries
2. Applying disciplinary concepts and tools
3. Evaluating sources and using evidence
4. Communicating conclusions and taking informed action

The use of the term *arc* is significant; it means they are all connected. There is a first step, a pathway, and a destination. Here’s what this looks like, with C3’s examples:

### Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

According to the C3 Framework, “the way to tie all of this content together” in civics is by using two types of questions: compelling and supporting. Compelling questions can come from the teacher or students. They focus on “enduring issues or concerns,” not superficial questions. They are “both intriguing to students and intellectually honest,” which means they’re about something that truly is of concern to social scientists or historians. They “deal with curiosities about how things work; interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts; and unresolved issues that require students to construct arguments in response” (NCSS 2013, 23).

Compelling questions are complex and open ended, with no agreed-upon right or wrong answer. For example, “Was the American Revolution revolutionary?” can be looked at from different points of view and debated. It appeals to students because it sounds contradictory and makes them reconsider impressions they might already have about the event.

An example from early elementary grades is, “Why are there rules?” That’s inherently interesting to a child, who is subject to adult rules and likely wonders about them. There is also no simple “right answer” to the question. Some compelling questions can be answered by inquiry in one discipline. The question about rules, for example, is about civics. Others need to be explored from more than one discipline. Evaluating the American Revolution involves history, economics, geography, and civics.

Supporting questions can be generated by the teacher but often come from students, especially when students are older. These questions help a student answer a compelling question and are typically more about facts and concepts. As such, they are not quite as open-ended as compelling questions. In the American Revolution example, students might ask supporting questions, such as “What regulations were imposed by England on the colonists?” or “Why did some colonists oppose the Revolution?” or “Who were the people who led the Revolution?” In the elementary example about rules, students might ask, “What rules do families follow?” or “Who makes the rules?” or “What are some rules adults have to follow?”

### Inquiry and Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Inquiry-based lessons that take students into local communities support culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, which emphasizes making the curriculum more relevant to students and linking it to their languages, cultures, and communities (Ladson-Billings 1994). You will find the teaching of civics naturally provides many topics and issues that students can relate to and connect to their own cultural contexts.

### Developmental Readiness for Inquiry

Younger students may have more difficulty asking compelling questions about civics. The C3 Framework makes it clear that teachers need to provide younger students with a lot of support for the process. They also give indicators that break down what students should be able to do in grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. The concepts are laid out in Figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1—Indicators for Compelling Questions**

By the End of Grade 2	By the End of Grade 5	By the End of Grade 8	By the End of Grade 12
<b>Individually and with others, students...</b>			
<p><b>D1.1.K-2</b> Explain why the compelling question is important to the student.</p>	<p><b>D1.1.3-5</b> Explain why compelling questions are important to others (e.g., peers, adults).</p>	<p><b>D1.1.6-8</b> Explain how a question represents key ideas in the field.</p>	<p><b>D1.1.9-12</b> Explain how a question reflects an enduring issue in the field.</p>
<p><b>D1.2.K-2</b> Identify disciplinary ideas associated with a compelling question.</p>	<p><b>D1.2.3-5</b> Identify disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question that are open to different interpretations.</p>	<p><b>D1.2.6-8</b> Explain points of agreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.</p>	<p><b>D1.2.9-12</b> Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.</p>

### Determining Helpful Sources

Dimension 1 also asks students to decide where to find answers to their questions. Again, teachers need to support this process. Young students need to know the kinds of sources to use and where to find information. Older students need to consider differing opinions and alternate points of view on the topic. Sources of information and evidence can come in many forms. It could be the teacher’s own knowledge; textbooks, news reports, and other secondary sources; or information can be gathered from primary sources, such as historical and contemporary documents, government websites, the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence, and court rulings.

### Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools

This is the phase of the Inquiry Arc when students learn to use the basics of civics as a lens to apply to their investigation. In contrast to traditional instruction that includes a lot of memorization, however, students understand that they are learning the material for a larger purpose. They are preparing to answer the compelling question.

Typical state curricular content standards specify exactly what students should learn in each grade level. The C3 Framework focuses more on bigger ideas, concepts, and skills within a grade band. In Chapter 2, we discussed the three categories for the content of civics: civic and political institutions; participation and deliberation; and processes, rules, and laws.

### Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

As students build their knowledge of disciplinary concepts and tools and find sources of information, they need to evaluate the quality of their sources. “Not all sources are equal in value,” the C3 Framework points out, and many may not provide good evidence for a claim.

As students move to the fourth phase of the Inquiry Arc, they will need to back up their explanations and arguments with evidence. This is a key skill for democratic citizenship.

### Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

This is where the active learning in the Inquiry Arc ultimately leads. After asking questions, learning about the disciplines, and evaluating evidence, students *do* something. They either communicate their answers in public venues, meaning with someone other than their teacher, or they combine that with taking action. Students should collaborate with others in this phase.

### Communicating and Critiquing Conclusions

Students can communicate their answers to the compelling questions with evidence in a variety of ways:

- ★ Essays in a particular genre, such as persuasive or informational writing, which could be a letter to a state or national legislator or an opinion piece to a local newspaper
- ★ A speech delivered to an audience, or an opinion statement read on a local radio station
- ★ Authentic written products, such as a report for a particular purpose and audience, a mock “policy brief” for a government official, or a ruling by a judge in a role-played mock trial
- ★ Multimedia presentations, podcasts, videos (e.g., public service announcements shown to other students or parents, uploaded to a website, or shown on local TV)

For some of the formats described above, you may need students to complete more than one task to fully demonstrate both their understandings of the material and their ability to construct arguments. A single, substantial essay may contain enough for assessment purposes. But a multimedia presentation or an authentic written product may not provide enough evidence of the knowledge and conceptual understanding gained, or it may simply not be appropriate to include all that detail in an authentic product.

Consider the example of a video public service announcement produced by a team of students. The script is going to contain a lot fewer words than an essay or written report. It's a distillation of students' understandings, not a complete package. To assess adequately what students have learned, you might also ask students to submit written explanations of the choices they made. This is even more necessary when the product is created by a team of students; you can ask each student to write an explanation individually.

For younger students who may not be able to express themselves in writing yet, you'll need to do what you always do to assess their understanding: observe what they do and talk with them. The C3 Framework breaks this down into grade-level bands as shown in Figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2—Assessing Understanding**

By the End of Grade 2	By the End of Grade 5	By the End of Grade 8	By the End of Grade 12
<b>Individually and with others, students...</b>			
<p><b>D4.1.K-2</b> Construct an argument with reasons.</p>	<p><b>D4.1.3-5</b> Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.</p>	<p><b>D4.1.6-8</b> Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.</p>	<p><b>D4.1.9-12</b> Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.</p>
<p><b>D4.2.K-2</b> Construct explanations using correct sequence and relevant information.</p>	<p><b>D4.2.3-5</b> Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data.</p>	<p><b>D4.2.6-8</b> Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.</p>	<p><b>D4.2.9-12</b> Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose.</p>

## The Need for Critique

In addition to communicating their own conclusions, students should also have opportunities to critique others' ideas. This helps to deepen their understandings of concepts and tools in civics and also helps them build skills and attitudes that will help in their further education, on the job, and as citizens in a democracy. Respectfully disagreeing with other citizens—or knowing how to critique with arguments and evidence—is absolutely vital, so students should learn how to do it from an early age.

There are many places to find critique protocols for students. One of the most comprehensive collections is from the National School Reform Faculty ([www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org)).

## Making a Real-World Impact

The C3 Framework points out that when students learn civics by actually doing something in the real world, it not only supports college and career readiness but also the third goal of the Framework: readiness for civic life. Taking informed action is where it all comes together: civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions.

Making a real-world impact can take many forms, both in school (since that's part of a student's real world) and outside it. Students have many options to take action by communicating their conclusions to a public audience, including:

- ★ Present to external stakeholders about a local issue they have researched. Community members could visit the classroom, students could present to an online audience, or students could visit members of the community.
- ★ Plan and carry out a social media campaign to inform and influence others about an issue.
- ★ Contribute to the work of an organization that helps communities; promotes democracy; or addresses community, state, national or global issues.
- ★ Take action in other forms of civic engagement, such as making decisions within the classroom, working to affect school or district policies, or starting or leading organizations in the school.

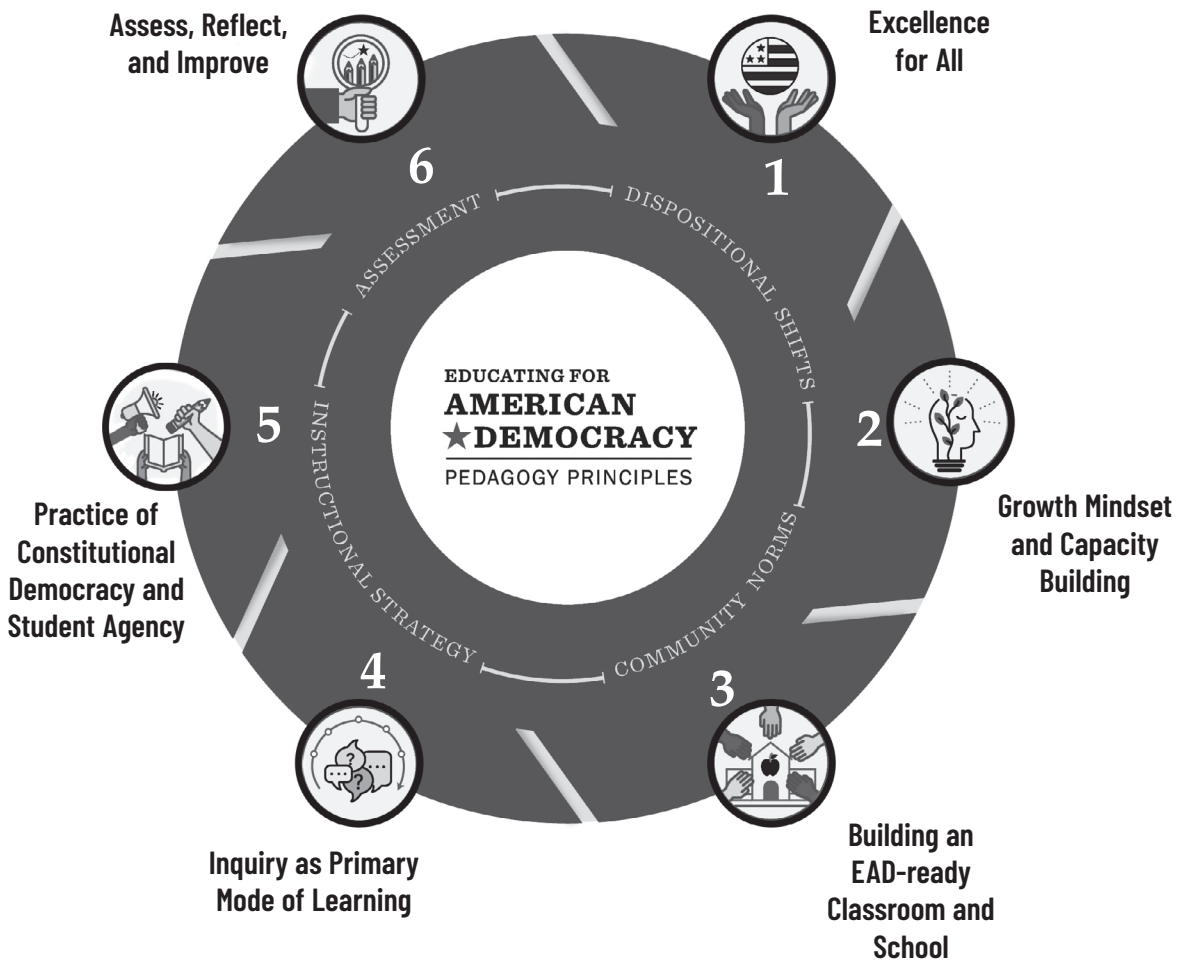
Find more examples of lessons and projects in which students communicate their conclusions publicly and take informed action in Chapter 5.



# The EAD Pedagogy Companion and Active Learning

Like the C3 Framework, the *Educating for American Democracy (EAD) Pedagogy Companion* emphasizes inquiry and active citizenship. In addition to the design challenges and content themes (discussed in Chapter 2), the companion adds six core pedagogical principles (Figure 3.3). Each comes with helpful, practical “moves” for teachers, students, and school and community leaders.

Figure 3.3—The EAD Teacher



© Educating for American Democracy 2021. Used with permission.

The first pedagogical principle, “Excellence for All,” has to do with a teacher’s mindset regarding civics and history. This principle asks teachers to:

- ★ Commit to learn about and teach full and multifaceted historical and civic narratives.
- ★ Appreciate student diversity and assume all students’ capacity for learning complex and rigorous content.
- ★ Focus on inclusion and equity in both content and approach.

The next two pedagogical principles focus on a growth mindset for teachers and students and on creating a classroom and school culture that supports active learning and civil discourse. These are sample “teacher moves” for the latter:

- ★ Intentionally seek to learn more about students and their families and strive to build relationships with and among students.
- ★ Create opportunities through a variety of discussion structures and protocols for students to understand diverse perspectives.
- ★ Help students engage productively with disagreements and solve conflicts.
- ★ Support students to process emotionally difficult events using different modes of expression, including dialogue, writing, and creating art.

The fourth principle includes using various teaching strategies to support inquiry, from direct instruction (in its more complex forms, not just lectures). This includes discussions, debates, investigations, project-based learning, and simulations of democratic processes.

Here are some teacher moves to support this principle:

- ★ Design lessons that uncover the complexity of an event, social group, or leading individual.
- ★ Incorporate opportunities to analyze diverse forms of evidence, including images and texts.
- ★ Introduce new concepts by building on background knowledge.
- ★ Engage students in historical-thinking skills.
- ★ Build student engagement with media literacy.

The fifth principle is about taking action: Practice of Constitutional Democracy and Student Agency. The teacher moves include the following:

- ★ Provide students the opportunity to practice democratic skills in the classroom.
- ★ Facilitate opportunities for students to interact with community leaders, initiatives, and issues.
- ★ Facilitate opportunities for students to take informed action in their communities.
- ★ Design lessons to support student research skills, including data collection, conducting interviews, and reporting findings.

The sixth principle is about assessment, reflection, and continuous improvement (Educating for American Democracy 2021b). The entire guide is a thoughtful, comprehensive document, worth reading from start to finish.

## Teaching Civil Discourse

As we said earlier, civic education in a democracy must include learning how to talk with one another. It must teach students how to engage in civil discourse. In President Joe Biden's Inaugural Address on January 20, 2021, he said, "We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal." He echoed a sentiment from now-retired Senator Orrin Hatch (2017), who said:

"Civility is the indispensable political norm. It is the public virtue that has greased the wheels of our democracy since its inception. Although nowhere mandated in our Constitution, civility is no less essential to the proper functioning of our government than any amendment, court ruling or act of Congress. Without it, little separates us from the cruelty and chaos of rule by force."

Civil discourse is not simply about being "polite." That may be part of it, but overemphasizing politeness can sometimes prevent people from saying what must be said. According to the Charles Koch Institute (2018):

"Politeness does not fully encompass what civility is.... Civil discourse is not polite conversation that simply clutches its pearls in horror at crassness. Civil discourse is conversation with a serious purpose. It is

conversation that looks to find shared opportunity, not conflict. It is conversation that looks to remove barriers, not build new ones. It is a conversation that instead of becoming paralyzed by our disagreements, uses them to propel creative solutions and alternatives.”

This may sound like a tall order. After all, young people today see incivility everywhere, from social media and cable TV news to pop culture and sporting events. But as a teacher of civics, you can help provide students with a foundation in civil discourse that will carry them into their lives as citizens.

## Best Practices for Teaching Civil Discourse

Much has been written recently about how to teach civil discourse. Most of it is focused on middle and high school, but it can be applied to elementary students as well. The following material is drawn from two organizations: Facing History and Ourselves ([facinghistory.org](http://facinghistory.org)) and Learning for Justice ([learningforjustice.org](http://learningforjustice.org)) (formerly Teaching Tolerance), whose websites contain more details and resources.

- 1. Examine your own beliefs, politics, and emotions so you can keep learning goals objective when it comes to civics-related issues.** Reflect on your own context. What perspectives do you have, and how might this differ from how others view the world? What topics might you find difficult to bring up in the classroom, and why?
- 2. Create a classroom community, and build trust.** Build relationships by getting to know your students and helping them learn about one another by sharing aspects of their identities and lived experiences. Form emotional bonds through team-builders and other shared, enjoyable experiences.
- 3. Co-create norms for discourse with students.** These are sometimes called community agreements, ground rules, or even a “contract.” Ask students to suggest ideas, such as “It’s okay to disagree respectfully” or “No put-downs” or “Listen to understand.” Narrow the list down to four to six items, write them on a poster, and put them on the wall. Be sure to revisit the norms before every discussion and check with students periodically to see if the list needs revision. Be aware that students’ cultural backgrounds may have different norms around speaking in public or how civics-related issues are discussed—or are not

discussed—in the home.

4. **Set goals for a discussion.** Don't just make the discourse a formless free-for-all. Possible goals could be to reach agreement on an action or to outline the key points of both sides of an issue.
5. **Ask students to prepare before a whole-group discussion.** Ask students to prepare by doing some reading, making notes, and outlining their ideas—it could be anywhere from 10 minutes beforehand to a day or two in advance. Also, be sure to allow time for students to reflect and then share with partners or in small groups to prime the pump for whole-group discourse.
6. **Teach students how to make an argument.** Discuss how an opinion is different from an argument. Teach the three “ARE” parts of an argument—assertion, reasoning, and evidence—with lots of examples. Discuss what makes evidence solid and reliable.
7. **Establish routines for discussions.** Help students get familiar with how things are done every time. One possible routine may be to have 10 minutes of prep time, 2 minutes for norm review, 20 minutes for discussion, and 5 minutes for reflection and debriefing.

## Unsung Heroes of Civic Education

Lots of civic learning takes place outside of civics classes . . . elementary school teachers regularly teach and model behaviors and attitudes that are essential to helping young people develop into productive citizens: the ability to share, cooperate, take other people's perspectives into account, negotiate, and so on. They're doing essential work but with little recognition or support.

—Raj Vinnakota, President, Institute for Citizens & Scholars (2019)

## How Civic Education Supports Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

When you teach civics in the ways we discuss in this book, you are also building students' social-emotional competency. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) developed a framework for SEL with five core competencies:



### 1. Self-Awareness

The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts



### 2. Self-Management

The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations



### 3. Responsible Decision-Making

The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations



### 4. Relationship Skills

The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups



### 5. Social Awareness

The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts

These competencies come into play often in civic education. Many of the topics and issues students learn about in civics will cause students to reflect on their own emotions, thoughts, and values. Students will need self-management and relationship skills, plus decision-making and social awareness, when they engage with others in civic discourse and when they participate in activities and projects whose goal is to make a real-world impact (CASEL, n.d.).