



POLICY BRIEF

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Civic Education and Media Literacy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The link between civic education and informed participation in a democratic society is undeniable. Active involvement proceeds from robust civic education and is shaped by news and information, which is increasingly mediated by technology. Thus, media literacy plays an important role in how students and adults access and understand news and information as well as how civic education is taught both formally and informally. Current school reform initiatives, such as the Common Core State Standards, do not address the current decline in civic education. It is not controversial to suggest that civic education and media literacy are means of advancing the wellbeing of a democratic society. However, wishful thinking will not achieve that end. It falls to thoughtful educators, policy makers, and concerned citizens to act as advocates for improvement of teaching and learning in these fields.

INTRODUCTION

Civic education in a democracy is education in self-government, which means that citizens are actively involved in their own governance. There is an unbreakable link between civic education and informed participation in a democratic society. Active involvement proceeds from robust civic education and is shaped by news and information, which is increasingly mediated by technology. With the emergence of the Digital Age, educational technology plays an ever more important role in how students and adults access and understand news and information. Educational technology therefore also significantly affects how civic education is taught, both formally and informally, and how civic engagement is encouraged. In a democratic society it is foundational to support and encourage robust civic education and, in this Digital Age, to couple this endeavor with the teaching of media literacy.

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DISCUSSION

Civic education has experienced a decades-long decline in the school curriculum and is far from robust in most schools and colleges. Current school reform initiatives, such as the Common Core State Standards, do not directly address the decline in civic education. “We maintain that this new education reform mantra—preparing students for college and career—is incomplete,” according to Ted McConnell, executive director for the Civic Mission of Schools. “It’s about preparing students for college, career—and citizenship” (Hardy 2012). American Academy fellow Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2013) sums up the current education environment:

In the past decade, low levels of youth voting and non-proficient student performance on a widely respected civics assessment test have elicited efforts to increase the amount and quality of time spent teaching civic education and have ignited a movement to create common standards in the social studies. Complicating these efforts is ideological disagreement about the content that should be taught and the values that ought to be inculcated. Validating the belief in the worth of civics education and underscoring the importance of reform efforts, data reveal that schooling in civics and other, related co-curricular activities are associated with increased knowledge of the U.S. system of government and heightened participation in democratic activities such as voting. (p. 65)

Jamieson makes reference to John Dewey’s piquant notion that “democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife” (Dewey 1900). This must surely be the case in this new Digital Age, in which communications technology increasingly shapes how individuals in all age cohorts, but especially the young, become informed citizens. Consequently, a robust approach to civic education must necessarily be paired with the teaching of media literacy, which is a combination of competencies in analysis and evaluation designed to help students become critical media consumers.

The Digital Age has changed how people get news and information. Today, according to an American Press Institute (2014) study, Americans, “follow the news on a wide variety of devices, including through television, radio, print versions of newspapers and magazines, computers, cell phones, tablets, e-readers, and devices such as an Xbox or Playstation that link the internet to a television.”

The survey authors also point out that there is a “powerful connection between the growth in mobile internet technology and social media.” Unsurprisingly, young adults get their news and information from different sources than older adults. For example:

Young adults are significantly more likely than older adults to say they used their cell phone to get news in the last week. Seventy-six percent of adults age 18-29 who own a cell phone and 84 percent of adults age 30-39 who own a cell phone say they used it to get news in the past week, while just 59 percent of adults age 40-59 and 37 percent of adults age 60 and over say they did so.

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Identifying education issues revolving around “best practices in the creation, use, and management of technologies for effective teaching and learning” is elemental to the AECT Vision and Mission and consistent with the association’s strategic plan. In the current era of rapid technological change it is important to examine the intersections of teaching, learning, and educational technology. This examination is critical with regard to civic education, in particular during the current era when the future of public education, which is fundamental to a democratic society, is uncertain.

According to *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Gould 2012), six proven best practices for effective civic education are:

1. Classroom Instruction: Schools should provide instruction in government, history, economics, law, and democracy.
2. Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues: Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Service-Learning: Schools should design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Extracurricular Activities: Schools should offer opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom.
5. School Governance: Schools should encourage student participation in school governance.
6. Simulations of Democratic Processes: Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. (pp. 6-7)

Interwoven with civic education must necessarily be education for media literacy. The ability to “read” many types of media is a primary goal in the use of educational technology for teaching and learning. Today’s communications media inform civic knowledge and understandings. According to the Media Literacy Project (2015), media literacy helps young people, among other things, to:

- Develop critical thinking skills
- Understand how media messages shape our culture and society
- Recognize bias, spin, misinformation, and lies
- Discover the parts of the story that are not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on experiences, skills, beliefs, and values

There are undeniably strong intersections of civic education and education for media literacy. Improving teaching and learning in both fields, together, is a more robust approach than simply attempting to strengthen one or the other independently.

CONCLUSION

The conjoined challenge of improving both civic education and media literacy through educational technology is resident in the AECT Vision and Mission to improve teaching and learning. Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) are among researchers who believe that media literacy is a core competency for engaged citizenship in a democracy, which echoes the earlier assertion by Ted McConnell (Hardy 2012).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Robust civic education coupled with media literacy is essential to the maintenance of a democratic society. Strengthening civic education and education for media literacy through educational technology is goal that must be actively pursued.

Federal, state, and local policy makers, educators, and concerned citizens should be encouraged toward advocacy that sends a strong message, in the words of the *Guardian of Democracy* report, “that preparation for active, informed citizenship is the co-equal purpose of education along with preparation for higher education and career (as is stated in most states’ constitutions or education establishment codes).”

It is not controversial to suggest that civic education and media literacy are means of advancing the wellbeing of a democratic society. However, wishful thinking will not achieve that end. It falls to thoughtful educators, policy makers, and concerned citizens to act. In consultation with leading civic learning scholars, the authors of *Guardian of Democracy* provide an extensive resource list of Civic Learning Policy Recommendations for a variety of policymaking audiences:

- Schools and administrators at the local level
- State policy makers
- Federal policy makers
- Postsecondary institutions
- Scholars and researchers
- Funders
- Parents, the media, and all citizens (pp. 41-43)

These recommendations provide starting points for active involvement in advocacy on behalf of improving civic education and media literacy.

Additional suggestions and recommendations can be found in the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research paper, “Digital Opportunities for Civic Education” (Kahne, Ullman, and Middaugh 2011).

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