

BRIDGING THE VISION



with Dr. Kate Daly Rolander

Welcome to the winter issue of **PROGRESS!**

In 2021, an Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey revealed that only 56% of Americans could name the three branches of government, and a 2018 Johns Hopkins Survey found that a third of Americans surveyed couldn't name their state's governor. Yet 97% of people surveyed had strong feelings about the effectiveness of Congress, meaning many Americans have strong opinions but little knowledge about how legislative processes operate. Looking at this data, it appears many of us could use a civics refresher, not just those who are new to this country, in order to have more of a voice in our legislative processes.

Knowledge of civics and government helps us understand how ideas and preferences become regulations. Civic education and civic participation help raise our own and our learners' voices in how the decisions that turn preferences into laws are made—at the local, state, and federal levels. Civics is how we participate in communities, to work together to solve problems and effect change.

Effective civic education can empower learners to make a difference in their governments and in their communities, and meaningful civic participation can go a long way toward making our learners and the communities where they live more connected to essential resources and opportunities. Fortunately for adult learners in Virginia, we have strong programs around the state that are doing great things to engage learners in civic participation. Dig into this issue to learn more about what these programs are doing.

This issue of **PROGRESS** showcases promising approaches, strategies, and resources from around the state that help expand access to civic participation for adult learners in our programs, particularly English learners. Read about how some instructors are designing their programs to be more community-centered, including the English Empowerment Center's Neighborhood Ambassadors (p. 6) as they work to build bridges and connect vulnerable communities with local government and the nonprofit organizations that can support them. Explore how one English language program (p. 10) focuses on building community outside the classroom as a means of delivering civics education and making it relevant to learners' everyday lives and learn

Continued on p. 2>>>

- P3.....
Virginia's John Marshall Center for Constitutional History and Civics
- P6.....
Empowering Neighborhood Ambassadors
- P10.....
Community as a Key to Unlocking Civics Education
- P14.....
Creating Space for Civics in Adult Multilingual Classes
- P18.....
Expanding Civics Education Through Distance Learning
- P20.....
Outside the Classroom, Beyond the Textbook: Learning to Engage in Our Community
- P24.....
Teach Civics for Democracy, Basic Skills, and Résumé-Worthy Transferable Skills
- P27.....
How Can We Make Citizenship Preparation More Accessible?
- P30.....
Strategies and Tips for a Productive Citizenship Preparation Class
- P33.....
Enhancing Civics Instruction with Guest Speakers
- P36.....
Civics Resources
- P38.....
PROGRESS Calendar

PROGRESS

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>>>Continued from p.1

how the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) (p. 14) integrates civics into language learning with a focus on what it can mean to be part of a community. Find out how a Family Center intertwines English learning with civic engagement (p. 20) through field trips and activities. And read about how the John Marshall Center for Constitutional History and Civics at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture (p. 3) is adapting their student programming on the processes that govern American society for adult learners. This issue also features ideas for bringing in guest speakers to the classroom (p. 33), inviting the community into the learning space.

Another article details the many reasons one instructor has for teaching civics (p. 24), including exposure to authentic content, student relevance and voice, and options for learning activities that can even beef up a learner's résumé. We further hear from a new-to-adult education instructor (p. 18) who gives their perspective on how to expand civics education through distance learning. Learn how one program worked to make citizenship preparation more accessible (p. 27) and read about the resources and strategies that have been developed (p. 30), leading to higher pass rates on the citizenship interview.

We hope you enjoy this issue of **PROGRESS** and take away some great ideas for building civics education in your programs. Join the conversation and share what you're doing around civics education! 

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Virginia's John Marshall Center for Constitutional History and Civics



by **Caroline Legros**

It will likely come as no surprise to learn that the national state of civic understanding is on the decline, but the degree to which Americans struggle to understand basic functions of our government is, quite frankly, stunning. The [2023 Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey](#) found that nearly 20 percent of respondents could not name even one branch of the United States (U.S.) government, and the majority struggled to recall more than one right protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution. Students are faring no better; the [Nation's Report Card NAEP Civics Assessment for 2022](#) found that student scores had dropped for the first time in two decades. Further, the [American Bar Association's 2023 Survey of Civic Literacy](#) found that Americans also struggle to engage with each other in a productive manner. Their study reported that “85% of U.S. residents believe civility is worse compared to 10 years ago, and a majority believe social media and media are to blame” (American Bar Association, 2023, p. 1).

For those of us who work in the field of civics education, it's important to see this data as an opportunity for change, rather than an insurmountable challenge. The John Marshall Center (JMC) for Constitutional History and Civics, now housed at the [Virginia Museum of History and Culture](#), is focused on providing content that explores the intersections of our government, the judiciary, and the American citizenry. We deliver programs to audiences of all ages that demystify the processes that govern our society in the hopes of creating a more civically engaged citizenry. Our presentations run a wide gamut, content-wise—among our offerings are activities that highlight the basics of constitutional history, unpack the structure of the U.S. courts system, and detail how to participate in local government.

While many of our visits, both off-site and in the museum, target student audiences; we have found that by tweaking our approach just slightly, these programs can be just as effective for adult audiences. In fact, many adults are just as confused by the way our government functions as school-aged Americans might be. Often, they're even more nervous and embarrassed than children are to ask for help in understanding how our government works.

Continued on p. 4>>>



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[In 2022,] student scores had dropped [in Civics] for the first time in two decades.

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One example of a program that we've adapted for adult use is "Building Bridges," a workshop created with the [Virginia Bar Association](#) that uses legal mediation skills to help people better navigate difficult conversations. We piloted a version of the program with middle and high school groups but we found great success in adapting the materials for an adult audience. "Building Bridges" teaches individuals to implement particular communication techniques when they find themselves in an interpersonal conflict. During both adult and student presentations, our educators would introduce new communication skills, then allow the participants to practice those skills by acting as mediators with fictional scenarios. The program is intended to improve civil discourse, bridging the gap between a political divide that seems increasingly vast.

We adapted "Building Bridges" for adults in a few key ways. First, our educators were able to discuss mediation skills in more depth and complexity with adult learners. The average adult has experienced more types of relationships than has the average

student—an adult is more likely than an 8th grader to have been a parent, an employee, a spouse, a business owner, and so on. As a result, our educators could ask adult participants to draw on those life experiences when they were demonstrating how to de-escalate conflict between individuals.

We also were able to cover topics that were more politically heated with our adult learners. We often steer clear of hot-button issues with our younger audiences, but weren't afraid to get adults talking about weighty subjects. We wanted to encourage dialogue and debate with the adults, and talking about contentious issues always generates lively conversation. Once people began arguing about a particular issue, we were able to shift the program's focus to how that conversation could be improved by implementing our mediation skills.

Finally, we realized that a successful programmatic outcome would look different depending on our audience. The type of engagement we expected

from students wouldn't be typical for adults. Unlike their school-aged counterparts, adults are less likely to speak up in a group setting and are more hesitant before participating in an activity. Our educators couldn't expect a group of adults to get as excited to participate in a game of "rock, paper, scissors" as a gaggle of 12-year-olds might—that type of energetic participation just isn't a typical response from adult audiences. To that end, we restructured many of the "Building Bridges" activities to better facilitate adult interactions. For example, the group discussions were done in smaller groups and we added more written prompts to help adults organize their thoughts before sharing them aloud.

Although many of the John Marshall Center's resources were originally built for student audiences, a few small adaptations are all that's needed to deliver these programs for adult groups. Our team is always happy to adjust a program for adult audiences, so we encourage you to reach out to us for ways to bring civics education and constitutional history to your adult learners. The best way to connect with us is by visiting our website, www.virginiahistory.org/civics. Here, you can explore [our repository of resources for educators](#), learn about our attorney/judge classroom visits, and view items from the John Marshall Collection. You can even put your own civic knowledge to the test! One part of the JMC website that may be of most interest to adult learners is our [archive of Pop Civ posts](#)—these articles investigate the intersection of pop culture and constitutional history. The articles are for readers of all ages and should inspire dialogue about current issues being debated by Americans. We hope all of the JMC resources help you navigate the challenging landscape of civic education and we welcome the opportunity to help you in your work with adults. 📍

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Caroline Legros is the Manager of Civics Programs at the John Marshall Center (JMC) for Constitutional History and Civics at the VMHC, where she creates content for audiences of all ages that explores the intersection of civics and history. Caroline has more than 20 years of experience in museum education, designing lesson plans, curating exhibitions, and working closely with classroom educators. Before joining the JMC, Caroline was the Education Coordinator at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) from 2018 to 2019 and the School Program Coordinator at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture from 2009 to 2017. Caroline holds a bachelor of arts degree in French language and literature from VCU.



AI image by Adobe Firefly

Empowering Neighborhood Ambassadors Through English Language Teaching

by Lisa Vaughn and Xavier Muñoz

The [English Empowerment Center](#) has partnered with Fairfax County's [Opportunity Neighborhoods](#) program to build essential language and digital literacy skills for their Neighborhood Ambassadors. Ambassadors are residents who act as a bridge between the vulnerable communities in which they live and local government and nonprofit organizations in the region. Ambassadors share information, identify needs, raise awareness of available services, and advocate for their neighbors and community.

In this article, we share about the group of 10 neighborhood ambassadors who completed the English Empowerment Center's English for Community Engagement course in 2022.

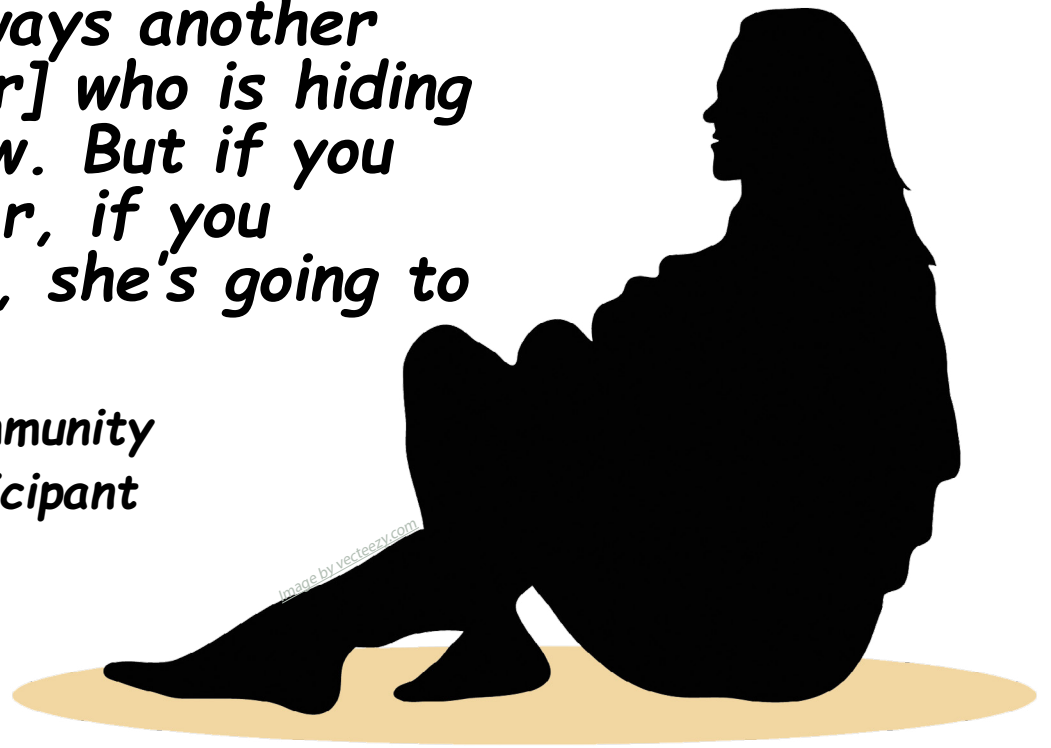
"Today I feel like I am a part of this country because I can give something back."

– English for Community Engagement participant



"There is always another [adult learner] who is hiding in the shadow. But if you encourage her, if you motivate her, she's going to shine."

- English for Community Engagement participant



Opportunity Neighborhood leaders approached the English Empowerment Center knowing that, with English language instruction, these ambassadors could better express concerns and advocate for their communities. Opportunity Neighborhoods leadership recognizes the importance of building ambassadors' skills to fully represent community voices. As one ambassador stated, "I really want to have the same conversation I have with English speakers as I do with Spanish neighbors because they are human just like me." [Watch the full speech](#) this ambassador gave at an English Empowerment Center event.

Continued on p. 8>>>



In the first cohort of English for Community Engagement, the ambassadors were all native Spanish speakers, with 8 of the 10 having children of their own. Through 50 hours of instruction spanning 10 weeks on Zoom, intermediate- and beginning-level classes learned strategies to communicate clearly, actively listen, interpret information, and participate confidently in community meetings. The teacher used active learning strategies such as role plays, presentations, and small group work. Learners in the beginning class were offered 22 hours of supplemental tutoring.

In the culminating project, each learner prepared a presentation on either a community problem and potential solution or how their work as ambassadors has helped residents. Presentations covered topics like COVID-19 vaccinations, installing crosswalks, overcoming language barriers, boosting community involvement, accessing resources, and being a voice for neighbors. Learners practiced their digital literacy skills by sharing slides and photos over Zoom.


"This class helped me to empower myself."

- English for Community Engagement participant

With the right resources and support, neighborhood ambassadors are equipped to create change. As one ambassador shared, "The problem in my community is the silence that many times [people] do not express their problems since the language is a barrier." This English course moves ambassadors and their communities from silence to action.

After the first cohort of classes, our partner shared an example of a class participant taking community action. At a county meeting, an agenda item directly impacting her community was being discussed but no translators were present to facilitate participation from speakers of language other than English. Recognizing this gap, she assertively voiced the concern, leading to the meeting chair promptly postponing the session and committing to have translators present at the rescheduled meeting. Our Opportunity Neighborhood partner credited the practice and training received in our class for the ambassador to feel comfortable insisting on the equitable representation of her community.

We encourage readers of **PROGRESS** to seek out or advocate for grassroots initiatives in your own regions or consider how to integrate and contextualize instruction to include community and political participation. In partnership, we can upskill local changemakers to raise up the voices of those marginalized by systemic inequalities.

English for Community Engagement was customized for Fairfax County Opportunity Neighborhoods as part of the English Empowerment Center's Destination Workforce® program. Through Destination Workforce®; we design, test, and deliver scalable language-based workforce training for business, government, or community partners. 





This English course moves ambassadors and their communities from silence to action.



Lisa Vaughn, B.S.W., M.P.A., is the Community and Donor Relations Manager for the English Empowerment Center, formerly Literacy Council of Northern Virginia (Region 8). This work includes fostering relationships to find resources, develop opportunities, and advance equity for English language learners throughout the region. In various roles across the country, she has spent more than 13 years partnering with schools, nonprofits, businesses, faith communities, and local governments—working together to build strong communities.



As the Director of Academic Programs and Student Services at the English Empowerment Center (Region 8), Xavier Muñoz (he/him) oversees adult English language acquisition, family literacy, and workplace literacy classes as well as distance learning, digital literacy, and student advising initiatives. He has more than 10 years of adult ESOL experience as an instructor, tester, teacher educator, and Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) program manager.

Community as a Key to Unlocking Civics Education

by Susan Otero and MaryAnn Cunningham Florez



What really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership.

— Robert D. Putnam

”

The community/civics education connection

What motivates people to be civically participatory? Is it when they recognize the benefits of living within a community and what it can provide them? Is it when they understand their own roles and their value in a community so that they become invested

in building and maintaining it? In a learning community like our adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program, we know that supporting students in feeling a sense of belonging, interdependence, relevance, and self-efficacy—**community**—promotes engagement

and achievement. Why not capitalize on that relatable concept of community and help students expand outward, linking their learning with their real communities? For example, when considering instruction, community could start with field trips to community concerts or farmers' markets but can then lead to practicing higher levels of civic participation such as providing input at meetings on park revitalization initiatives, volunteering to support homebound senior citizens, or doing outreach on topics of interest to immigrant communities.

Why we chose to focus on community

Thinking of community as a key component of civic participation helped our program develop community as a central topic around which we could build instruction for our annual summer term. The term is very brief (4–5 weeks) and requires a focus that keeps continuing learners connected while providing a welcoming space for new learners who are walking into our program for the first time. We also wanted the instruction to be engaging, rigorous, and flexible enough to serve students at different language proficiency levels and varied experiences of participation in their U.S. communities. As those objectives could involve everything from helping students build vocabulary about their communities to accessing community resources or identifying community issues, we challenged ourselves to begin building out a curriculum that would support students in language, skills, and awareness to support civic participation. Fortunately, using community as a gateway to civic instruction also easily accommodated best strategies and practices from adult English language instruction, adult learning, employability skills development, and academic language and skills development.

*See the box to the side for references of some of the important resources we consulted as we developed (and continue to develop) our civic participation instruction through the context of community.

Continued on p. 12>>>



Adult Learning Theories

https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/11_%20TEAL_Adult_Learning_Theory.pdf

Adult Learner Persistence: Drivers of Persistence

<https://nelrc.org/persist/drivers.html>

Center for Applied Linguistics 8 Fundamental Principles of Effective Adult English Language Instruction

<https://www.cal.org/cals-8-fundamental-principles-of-effective-adult-english-language-instruction/>

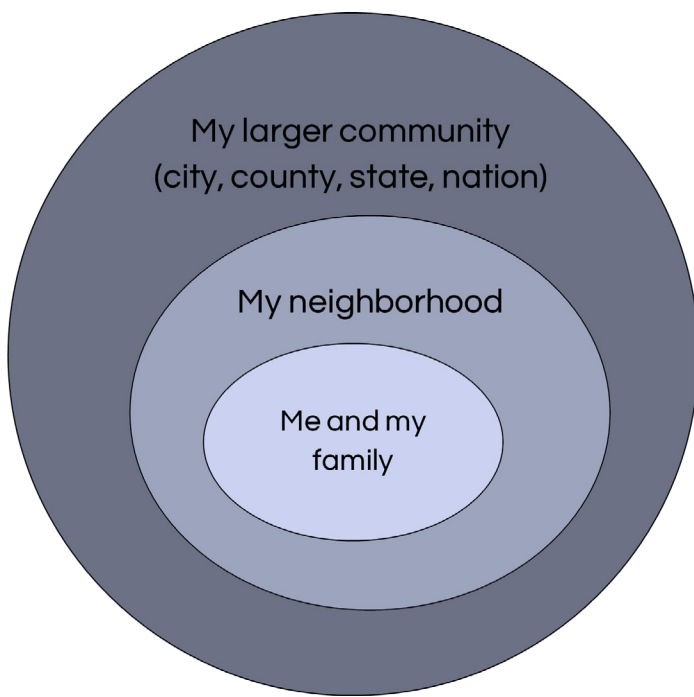
Employability Skills Framework

<https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/employability-skills-framework>

Teaching Skills That Matter and the TSTM Civics Education brief

<https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/teaching-skills-matter-adult-education>

<https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/TSTM-CivEducationBrief-508.pdf>



The Levels

Our program offers classes at six levels (low/high beginning, intermediate and advanced). In the summer session, some classes are combination classes, so we looked for materials that are flexible and relevant across the levels. Here's how we addressed the common theme of community at different levels.

Beginning-level learners used the [Oxford Picture Dictionary](#) as they were supported in building vocabulary and English language proficiency in the context of exploring the community. From a focus on "me and my place in the community", students learned about and connected with resources the local community has to offer.

Intermediate-level students read articles from [The Change Agent](#), a digital adult education magazine written by fellow learners. While increasing English language development, they explored self-identification and their role in the community, connected with resources, identified issues/problems (both personal and collective) and brainstormed action steps, discovered growth opportunities in new communities, and collaborated on ideas of how to welcome others new to the community.

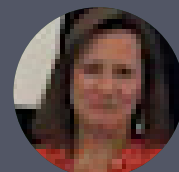
Advanced-level classes bridged from social communication to more rigorous academic content.

The young adult novel [Seedfolks](#), about a diverse group of people who turn a vacant lot into a thriving community garden, provided a rich context to explore what it means to be part of a community and how the actions of each individual can positively impact an entire community. There were also ample opportunities to engage with academic and higher-level language functions, reading strategies, and use of digital skills and tools.

Curricular and support materials

The program invested and will continue investing in program-specific resources to organize and share materials with instructors across multiple locations and class times. The program utilized shared Google drives for each curriculum to provide lesson plan templates, a pacing guide or outline of topics over the course for both intensive and non-intensive class schedules, and sample lessons. We shared curated Oxford Picture Dictionary supplemental materials related to community. We recommended articles in *The Change Agent*, issue 57-[Creating New Community](#). Further, Seedfolks has been in a 10-year process of developing resources, cultivating teacher development, and sharing supplemental materials. They provide digital literacy-enhanced elements such as a student blog, student created Google slides, etc.

Using a shared Google drive allows for promoting the collective development and/or sharing of teacher-developed materials, thus creating an ongoing community for the teachers around the curriculum. Additionally, we conducted level-specific introductory training for teachers prior to the launch of classes. 📍



Susan Otero is the Educational Specialist and MaryAnn Cunningham Florez is the Program Manager for [Fairfax County Public Schools \(FCPS\) Adult ESOL Program](#). Together they have 60+ years working in all aspects of adult ESOL education in the Northern Virginia area and abroad.

Primary curricular materials

Low and High-Beginning Levels

Adelson-Goldstein, J. & Shapiro, N. (2016). *Oxford Picture Dictionary* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/dictionaries/oxford_picture_dictionary_third_edition/9780194505291?cc=us&sellLanguage=en

The accompanying eBook and OPD Teacher Resource Center (both require paid accounts) are critical resources for the instructors.

Low and High-Intermediate Levels

Peters, C. (Ed.). (2022, November). *Creating New Community: The Change Agent*. The New England Literacy Resource Center/World Education. <https://changeagent.nelrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Issue-57-Creating-New-Community-2.pdf>

Login username: VALRC, PW: VALRC2023

Low and High-Advanced Levels

Fleischman, P. (1997). *Seedfolks*. HarperCollins Publishers. <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/seedfolks-paul-fleischman?variant=41225498525730>



CREATING SPACE FOR CIVICS IN ADULT MULTILINGUAL CLASSES

by Melanie Siteki

A few words come to mind when I think of civics education: participation, inclusion, and of course, community. Images come to mind too, of people and all the places where we gather.

At the heart of these spaces and the concrete words even beginning-learners use to identify them, lies shared values. “School” represents our hopes for our children, ability to work, and joy of discovery; and “Park” brings to mind the environment we share with trees, animals and our neighbors. By including civics in our lessons, we can highlight these values and explore the messy process of decision-making.

I’ve used the following strategies and resources across levels and adapted them to a variety of contexts to integrate civics into multilingual classes.

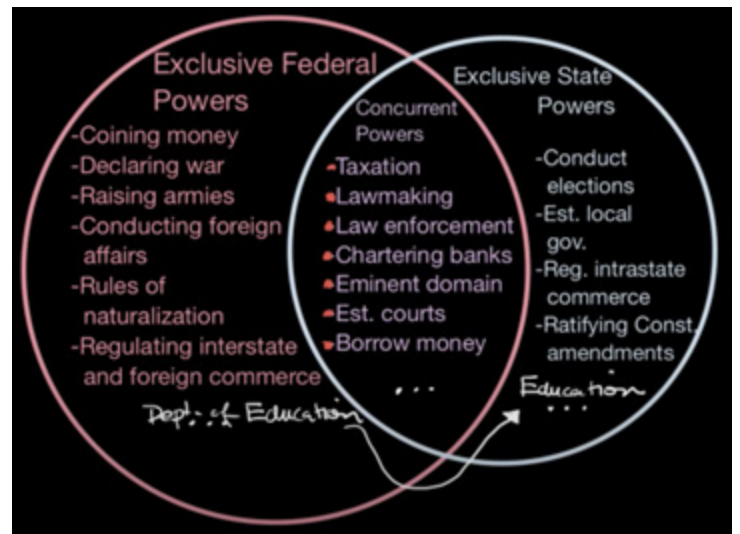


All images by Adobe Firefly

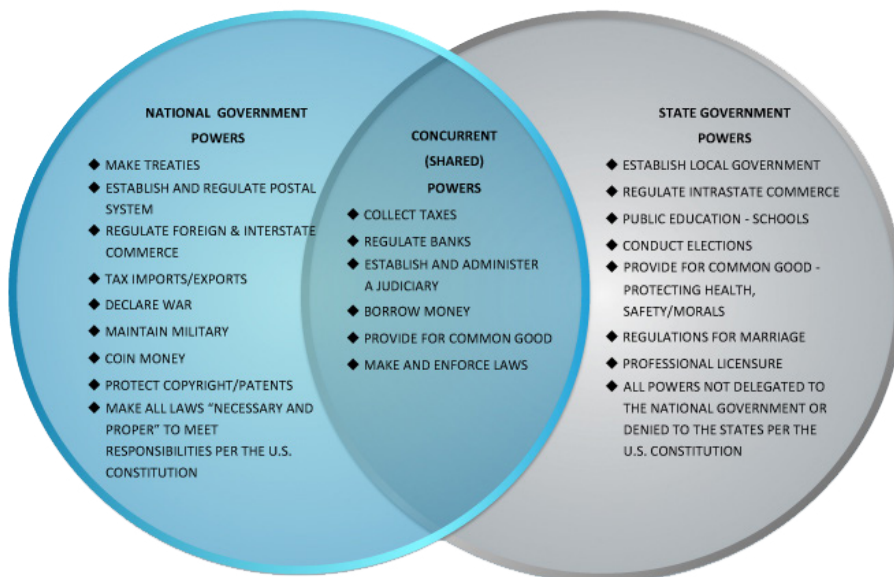
VENN Diagrams (and other graphic organizers)

Venn diagrams, consisting of overlapping circles, can be used to build classroom community and teach history and government content. From day one, they help learners discover what values, experiences, hopes, needs, goals, or interests they share.

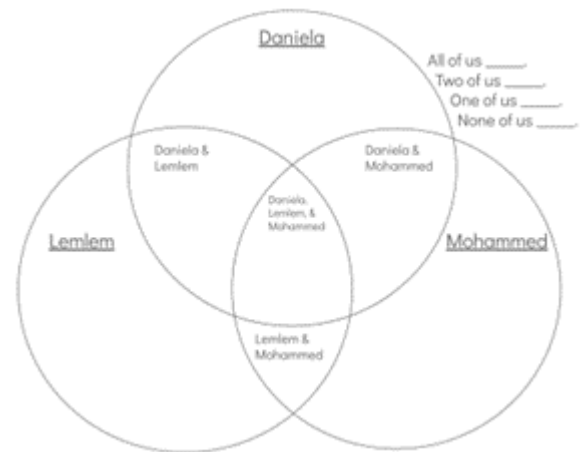
They are also useful for introducing, brainstorming, and otherwise engaging with complex civics content such as rights and responsibilities or state and federal powers of the U.S. government—basically any topic that involves comparing, contrasting, or sorting.



Source: [Khan Academy](https://www.khanacademy.com)



Source: [Civic Education VA](https://www.civiceducationva.com)



Language Frames

When preparing for a class with potentially difficult topics, [sentence starters](#) are a useful tool across levels. Learners will practice agreeing and disagreeing with respect, asking questions, and changing the subject. The class will learn to initiate speaking and keep conversations going. They can be introduced when making decisions together about class rules and topics, practiced during conversations or role-plays using cards or strips of paper, and displayed so learners can refer to them when they might come in handy.

- "I have a different point of view..."
- "Have you ever thought about...?"
- "I care about you, but I disagree because..."
- "What if..."
- "What do you think..."
- "When you say _____, I feel..."
- "I would like..."
- "Have you considered...?"
- "At first I thought...but then I learned..."

Source: [Colorín Colorado](https://www.colorincolorado.com)

Continued on p. 16>>>

Community Engagement, Problem Solving, and Decision Making

Group and partner interviews about neighborhoods, legal issues (e.g., police and immigration), work, health, and transportation are an effective way to practice problem solving in English and share experiences. After interviewing a volunteer student in front of the class about a problem, learners can reflect on their own experiences and [interview each other](#) in small groups, provide feedback, and discuss possible solutions. At this point, each group can prepare a skit about one of the experiences or situations and/or write about their own or a classmate's story. The instructor and class can use a bulletin board for sharing community resources.

Voting on class rules and topics, sharing opinions, and conducting surveys are effective activities to make decisions together as a class and learn about the process of civic engagement in the United States ([Civics Class Slides](#)).

Bring the wider community to the classroom by planning in-person or virtual field trips to local libraries, museums, or community events. These experiences provide a shared moment that can be leveraged to facilitate language learning opportunities.

REEP learners visit the library to sign up for library cards.



Guest speakers to our program have included County and School Board members, and community partners such as public health, community outreach, and the local [One-Stop career center](#).

REEP learners engage with Former Chair of the Arlington County Board, Christian Dorsey.



Focusing on Civics

Choose civics texts that allow engagement with difficult questions, conflict resolution, helpful advice and information, examples of community and courage, and stories and resources that represent all people, including those who are marginalized. Teachers can remind learners of their right to an interpreter in health care, legal, and other contexts. Everyone has the right to ask for help to bridge the gap between English ability and access to resources and participation in civic life.

“Webquest” type activities provide access to online materials, while jigsaw and information gap activities can help learners engage complex texts with civics content in communicative ways.

The language in history and government texts is often complex, formal, and—with primary sources such as the Constitution and Bill of Rights—also antiquated. We can “translate” these into everyday

language (see [Slides](#)).

At a very basic level, we need to provide space to support community and civics engagement. From a social-emotional learning perspective, we can also model patience and respect. Having a few extra moments to process empowers learners. Learners will feel the agency that comes with real communication. Building language skills and civic awareness will give learners the confidence to engage in their larger community space.

I will close with the philosophy that I explicitly share with my classes: don’t wait to participate in your community—you are already an essential part of it. Language proficiency exists on a spectrum, but being a part of the community does not. Civics transcends language and no one should be excluded from rights and responsibilities because of their English proficiency. 🌱

Do you agree with the Supreme Court’s decision regarding free speech outside of school?

NO

- No, I don't agree even though outside from the school she must have responsibility to respect any people.
- No, I don't agree, she because she has responsibility to respect every person outside.
- No, I don't agree, because that will open windows for everyone to be un behave for his school and community, this is unrespectful and irresponsible behavior from the girl, Nibal!
- No, I don't agree with that, because everyone has the right of speech but it must be polite and respect others.

in-between

- I think that even if a person has a bad way of speaking, they should have the freedom to talk about something, the punishment was too heavy.
- I am in-between, but I lean to the supreme court decision, Neba.
- In-between because we have to support the press but outside she can do that it doesn't mean the agree about the fact I think it's not fair between freedom and authority.
- I am in-between but I lean to the court decision, we are in 18th and the girl had the right of speech according to the bills of rights.
- I like this constructive idea!
- I am between, Zarema.

it's not easy being 14!

- I am agree with the decision, she was frustrated teenager and probably to take this to the Supreme Court was a exaggerated action, I think that there are another ways to solve this kind of situation, and of course the first.
- I agree with the Supreme Court' decision, because the first Amendment protect the freedom of speech, Néstor.
- Yes, I agree. Because everyone has the right to free speech, Clemen.
- Yes, Jose, I think that would be different, although I'm not 100% sure (see example about armbands in school...)
- Yes I agree, but I'm confuse for example if she makes this speech in social media inside the school could be another decision? Jose Adrian.

YES

- First of all our country is a new nation so the political nation very nice but we had a conflict with our neighbor an except the economic affect the policy is very good by the leader people Front Democracy and Justice all the idea.
- Yes, Nibal—and I think part of the question in court was what is the responsibility of the parents vs. the school...
- Democratic Country in action!
- I agree because this is a great example how implement the protection of the Civil Rights in the school system.

Resources

- [REEP Curriculum](#)
- [Best Practices in Civics Education: A Case Study](#)
- [LINCS: Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education Resources](#)
- [Google Slides from Melanie's ACCESS Class](#)
- [TSTM Skillblox Resource Library](#)
- [The Change Agent](#)



Melanie Siteki has taught a variety of levels with the Arlington Education and Employment Program ([REEP](#)) since 2001, including REEP’s *Advanced Culture, Civics, and English Studies (ACCESS)* curriculum. She has a bachelor’s degree in anthropology and modern languages and a master’s degree in language, culture, and humanities education. She loves creating language learning materials and is now enjoying being back in the classroom with high-beginning learners after three years teaching online.



From K–12 to Adult Education: Expanding Civics Education Through Distance Learning

by Craig Jones

Education, it need hardly be said, is in a time of massive transition. New methods, technologies, and practices are being developed at lightning speed to improve student outcomes. For educators, this is a wonderful opportunity to improve our instruction while easing some of the burdens of lesson planning. This has been especially notable for me, a high school English and Social Studies teacher who has been in the classroom for nearly a decade. But this semester—the fall of 2023—I have expanded into teaching civics for the [Laurel Ridge Community College adult education program](#), which has allowed me to test some of my previous practices on adult students. Through my personal transition from K–12 to adult education, the role of technology in education has only become more apparent to me.

In high school, I have the benefit of having my students in class every day. I can catch them up if they miss a day, remediate if a lesson did not stick, and enrich and extend if a student gets the

concept immediately. In my adult education class, I see my learners once a week in an online call. In the past, this would have been a challenging situation to maintain the same level of connection many educators believe is essential for the educational experience. Consequently, the ability for me to make personal connections and to stay on top of student achievement and progress might be assumed to suffer because of the virtual meeting format, but I can proudly say this has not been the case.

For my online learners, I started using online review services like [Kahoot!](#) and [Quizlet](#), among others. These services provide me with data on what learners are consistently getting right or wrong, allowing me to tailor my instruction for future classes and address those areas of weakness. These sorts of programs also encourage learners to take ownership of their own education. While it is sometimes hard to motivate children, adults can usually understand the importance of what they are learning. My online adult learners can, at their convenience, study material previously discussed in class, wherever they are,

whenever they want. **This gives them the power to decide for themselves what they need to do, and when they need to do it.** Crucially, this also gives them confidence in the success of their learning. Instructors get useful data, and learners feel that they are involved in the educational process.

Online education need not simply consist of review games, however. I have been fortunate to be able to augment my instruction with various online resources specific to civics. My community adult education program has provided learners with access to an online, asynchronous class that they can take to enhance their understanding of civics during the time in-between our weekly classes. This is also a marvelous way to enrich those who have understood the information, as well as remediate those who are still struggling. Online, self-paced courses have many of the same benefits mentioned above for the review games. Learners feel empowered to take their education into their own hands, while at the same time getting the flexibility to attend class and study for class in ways that **give them freedom of choice.**

Another aspect of the online environment that strikes me as transformative is the ability to video-conference wherever someone happens to be. This has the convenience of allowing learners to call into class regardless of where they are, but there is a far more important benefit that I think gets overlooked. Videoconferencing in education enables people who otherwise would not be able to attend class to do so. This is incredibly important as it has the potential to open education up to underserved communities and allow educators from nearly any location to share their expertise. It also allows for the personal touch that would otherwise be missing from entirely online classes. I can still joke with my learners, ask them questions, check for understanding, and more. This **empowers the human component of education**—a component I feel is vital—to remain in the

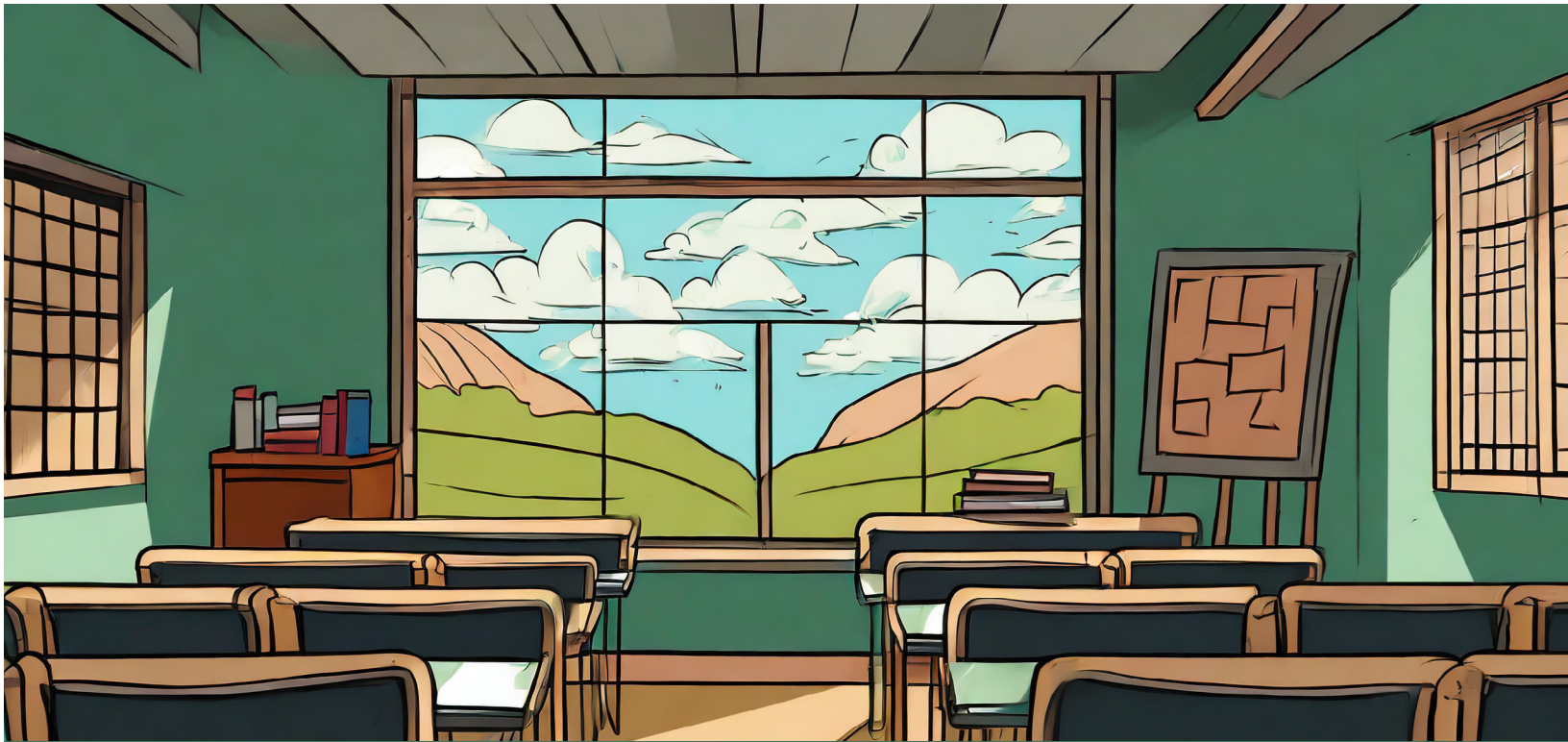
online environment.

The importance of studying and giving learners ownership of their education is all the most important given who I am educating. The adult education program I work for intends for my civics class to be taken by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners looking to prepare for the United States Naturalization Test in order to become citizens and learn the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the United States. These learners have decided to commit themselves to a new country; to learn the laws, customs, and government of this country; and to eventually swear loyalty to the country. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this work for the learners themselves, and the responsibility on the part of the educator is also obvious and deeply felt. Having technology help any student learn is wonderful, but helping the ESL learners in our adult education program reminds me every day how important education is for the daily lives of our students.

I am incredibly grateful to be teaching in this time of rapid change. I can talk to anyone, anywhere, about an incredibly important topic in their lives; and do so in a way that is relevant, useful, and engaging. I can use online programs and websites to support the learners in my classes, while giving myself useful data on their progress. These thoughts and observations are admittedly not revolutionary, and the utility of online services in education has been well understood for years. I am not writing to share something new. I am writing to share my new experiences. Adult education was one of the first areas of education to embrace online learning; but with a little attention to the student experience, enhanced and supported by technology, it can still be at the forefront of educational innovation for years to come. 📍



Craig Jones is a secondary education teacher with eight years of experience in high school English and social studies classrooms. Craig is also in his first semester of teaching Civics for the Laurel Ridge Community College (LRCC) Adult Education Program. Before teaching, Craig was born and raised in central Pennsylvania where he graduated from Bloomsburg University with two bachelor's degrees, one in history and the other in English literature. He went back and earned his M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction from the same university. Craig would like to thank his colleagues at LRCC Adult Education for giving him the chance to learn and grow as an educator and a person.



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Outside the Classroom, Beyond the Textbook: Learning to Engage in Our Community

by Elizabeth Magee

The families learning class described here was a collaboration between the [English Empowerment Center](#) (formerly Literacy Council of Northern Virginia) and Crestwood Elementary School and its [Family Center in Springfield, Virginia](#). The Family Learning Program at the English Empowerment Center employs a [four-component, intergenerational family literacy model](#) for adult English learners and their families. Planned and implemented with the learners' needs and interests in mind, the field trips and activities that follow align with many of the subtopics in the civics education aggregate framework in the [Subject Area Frameworks for Adult Learners](#) by [World Education](#).

At Crestwood Family Center, learning English is intertwined with civic engagement. As students and teachers together, we learn English as members of our community. This means that talking, thinking, and doing activities related to community happen in every class, from the first to the last. Field trips are not unusual events but part of our learning from the first day, when we go from our trailer classroom where the adult learners meet for English class to the “Children’s Room” in the school where the children who are also members of our class have their own educational activities. In the Children’s Room, we meet the children’s teachers and sometimes other members of the school community. We also do an activity together, like singing a song with actions or listening to a story. On returning to the adult classroom, we talk about what we had noticed as we passed through the school. We also discuss how we can share responsibility for educating our children. During our course, adults often meet separately from the children; at other times adults go to the Children’s Room for a part of the class time to learn together with the children. The sharing of responsibility for education is what happens when our

children go to school—the teachers and school do some of the work, and the parents do some of the work. We share responsibility.

Other short, outside-the-classroom experiences support our learning about community. Every semester, we visit various places in the school and the people who work there. An example is the Main Office, where we meet the principal and assistants and talk about how we as parents and school staff can work together. On another day, we visit the school gym to participate in a sample gym class. Sometimes we go to the cafeteria to meet the workers and to see where the children eat lunch. Sometimes we visit the school library to listen to a story read by a school librarian. These short visits are intended to build understanding of our school community and of opportunities for parents to collaborate with the school in the education of their children.

We also take longer field trips. Each semester we visit the Fairfax County Adult and Community Education Center near our school. There, we join in on-going adult ESOL classes and learn about vocational classes also offered. We visit the local public library where each of our students receive a library card and learn how to check out and return library materials. We prepare for this library visit from the beginning of our class by talking about the community library as a place which welcomes everyone—babies, grandparents and all in-between—to share in building their own education.



Since Virginia has an election every November, we learn about elections—beginning by observing the many campaign signs that appear on street corners every October. Some of our students are U.S. citizens, so we make sure they are registered and know where and when to vote. In a year of a national election, we always hold a “mock” election with the children in the Children’s Room so that we can use words like ballot, ballot box, count ballots, winner, and loser in context.

Guest speakers are also helpful in building understanding of working together as community members. An example is a visit from our school crossing guard, a retired police officer. Many of our students are afraid of police officers, so we invited him to visit our class to talk about what he did to promote safety at school. Although not everything he said was understandable for all students, we were able to follow up in later classes with

Continued on p. 22>>>



>>>Continued from p. 21

practice for safe street crossing, something parents need to teach their children.

Classroom visits from the School Health Aide and the School Nurse are opportunities for our adult students to learn about school and community immunization rules and health checkups. On one occasion, we had a blood pressure clinic as part of our class. Each student learned about their blood pressure and received referrals for monitoring in cases where the blood pressure appeared high.

We are fortunate to hold class within an elementary school since it enables us to see ourselves as part of our community through participation in our school as well as through visiting sites beyond the school itself. Several of our students have become volunteers in their child's classroom. Being in a school has been an ideal arrangement for learning about our community and thinking about how we might contribute to it.

Classes that meet in other locations may need to adapt some of these ideas. It may be good to begin with just one important visit outside the classroom: to the public library nearest you. Libraries are welcoming places. Librarians are always happy to show people around and to talk about their resources. They are trained in answering questions and in helping people find their own answers to questions. Libraries have activities for all age groups, from story hours for preschool children with their parents to events for school-age children and programs for adults. Visiting the library and learning to use its resources can be an ideal beginning for new members of our community as they develop their own education and engage with others to benefit their families.

Our class has learned that education happens not just in classrooms but in the community we live in every day. By going to places in our neighbor-



Our class has learned that education happens not just in classrooms but in the community we live in every day.

hood, we got to know people like the librarian, the crossing guard, and the school nurse. We learned how to use resources like the library, the doctor's office, and the school itself. This helped us feel part of our community. It also taught us that we can work together with community members to support our families. We can share what we learned with others who want to know about community resources. When we help one another learn, the whole community gets stronger. 🌱



Elizabeth Magee is an instructor at The English Empowerment Center. She has taught in both K-12 schools and adult education in Africa, Asia, and the United States. She particularly enjoys working together with immigrant parents in the United States to promote education for the whole family.



For the latest resources on family literacy, family engagement, and family leadership; explore the National Center for Families Learning's (NCFL) library.

<https://familieslearning.org/resources/>





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SO MANY REASONS TO TEACH CIVICS

Most would agree that civic participation is inherently good. It strengthens our democracy by lifting up diverse voices and gives all of us a chance to influence policies that have a big effect on our lives now and in the future. For adult education teachers and students, there are even more good reasons to engage in civics: it teaches reading and writing, speaking and listening, digital literacy, and transferable skills that are extremely attractive to employers. In this article, I will share with you one activity for civic engagement that checks all these boxes (and more!)— the Voting Ambassador training developed by [The Change Agent](#) at [World Education](#).

A UNIQUE SOURCE OF CONTENT

Before I get into the details for the Voting Ambassador training, let me introduce you to *The Change Agent*. It is an online magazine written **by and for** adult learners. In February of every year, we circulate a [Call for Articles](#) to adult education programs nationwide on a topic that is relevant to adult learners. We receive hundreds of submissions.

TEACH CIVICS FOR DEMOCRACY, BASIC SKILLS, AND RÉSUMÉ-WORTHY TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

by Cynthia Peters

An editorial board makes recommendations about what to accept and then I (the editor) put together three issues that include the students' writing, along with standards-aligned pre- and post-activities and extensions. As a teacher, you get classroom-ready teaching materials, and as a student, you get highly relevant, engaging stories written by your peers. In 2023, our editorial board included a teacher (Mary O'Brien) and student (Svitlana Troesch) from [Literacy for Life](#) in Williamsburg, Virginia. They helped shape the content for a three-part series we are publishing on transferable skills. Use your VALRC login credentials [username **VALRC**; password **VALRC2023**] to see Issues [59](#) and [60](#) in this series and [all our back issues](#).

CENTERING STUDENT VOICE

Why share this background about *The Change Agent*? Well, the [Voting Ambassador](#) training is unusual in the field because it includes articles by students. This is not a training that centers the voices and perspectives of people outside the field of adult education. On the contrary, in the lead are the voices and perspectives of adult learners who share what they think is important about voting and civic engagement. When students have access to peer-written civics articles, it acts as scaffolding for students to engage more fully in civics, take on complex texts, and step outside their comfort zone to incorporate real-life digital tools and speaking and listening challenges.

VOTING AMBASSADORS: A HANDS-ON, INTERACTIVE TRAINING WITH REAL-LIFE IMPACT

To prepare your students to be Voting Ambassadors, start with [this set of Google slides](#). It includes three articles from various perspectives about why voting matters, including an article by a non-citizen who can't vote but who can still support others to learn the issues and vote. Next there is a piece (by me) on the "nitty gritty" of voting called, "Register, Learn the Issues, Vote, and Stay Engaged." These slides take you through all the steps you need to take to vote (including links to find out what your

state's rules are). Finally, the last nine slides prompt students to "try it out"—offering guidance for making a plan, carrying it out, and then reflecting on how it went. There is a [link to a Google doc](#) that students can make a copy of and use to guide their work.

FOR THE RÉSUMÉ!

Another feature of that [Google doc](#)—it provides a chart with a list of ten transferable skills as defined by the [Personal Workplace and Success Skills Library](#) developed by [World Education](#). These skills include: communication, leadership, teamwork, digital literacy, critical thinking, etc. Many students already have these skills, but this training gives them a way to highlight them and amplify them. With the Voting Ambassador work under their belt, they can add skills and experience to their résumé such as:


- Volunteered with others to run a voter registration drive, including using social media to promote the event, using a laptop to register people to vote online, and supporting new voters to learn the location of their polling place.
- Engaged in public speaking at my church to promote registering to vote and voting; answered questions about the logistics of voting.
- Conducted internet research to find out the rules around mail-in voting in my state and shared this information with community members.
- Coordinated rides to the polling places during early voting and on election day.

If you offer the Voting Ambassador training to your students, definitely share all the dimensions of learning (so many basic skills!) and all the benefits that can result (e.g., an actual impact on government and policy!), along with this type of meaningful addition to their résumés.

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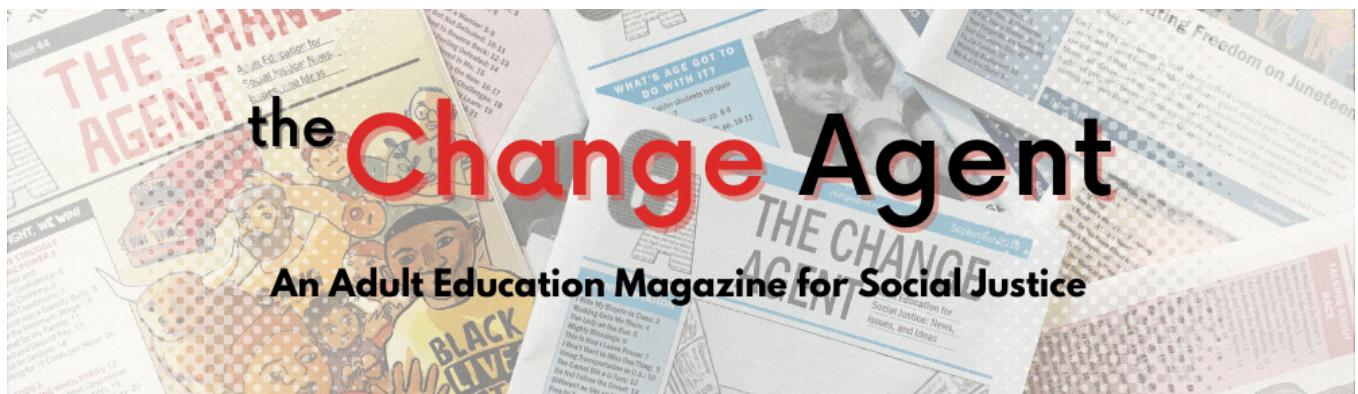
ARE YOU INTERESTED? HERE ARE SOME NEXT STEPS:

1. First, think about whether this is a classroom- or program-wide activity. If it's the latter, which colleagues do you need to consult with to make a plan? If it's the former, what steps do you need to take to integrate it into your coursework?
2. What is the timeline? Note that the presidential primary is held in Virginia on "Super Tuesday," March 5, 2024. Keep that in mind if you want to register people in time to participate in the primary. The general election will be held on November 5, 2024. In Virginia, you must register 22 days before the general election. Find out more from the [Virginia Department of Elections](#).
3. Come to a workshop on February 1 at 3:30 to learn more about the Voting Ambassador training and think with your colleagues about strategies for carrying it out.

Link to register: <https://vcu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUuduCgrjoiHdUOGgG4arP00YMU-VapaSxN3#/registration> 



Cynthia Peters has been the editor of *The Change Agent* since 2007. She is an adult basic education (ABE) teacher and a national presenter and provider of professional development to states and regions all over the country.



"The Change Agent is an online publication featuring authentic writing by adult learners that anchors classroom-ready teaching materials. By centering student voices, The Change Agent helps address equity in the adult education classroom—providing an accessible way for teachers to incorporate the ideas and perspectives of people who are often marginalized. In addition, Change Agent staff provide professional development to teachers on persistence, equity, and teaching to the standards, in the context of these socially relevant, peer-written articles and lesson activities.

Easy to use in the remote classroom, The Change Agent helps teach basic skills, digital literacy, and critical thinking to multi-level ABE and ESOL learners. Our website includes additional teacher supports, such as standards-aligned teaching packets and instructional videos about how to use the content, which are available in PDF, audio, and slideshow presentations. Organized both by theme and by level, articles address issues that matter to adult learners (e.g., jobs, immigration, transportation, health, the pandemic, etc.)." - [World Education](#)



How Can We Make Citizenship Preparation More Accessible?

by Catherine McCall

Like many organizations, we at [Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle \(LVCA\)](#) have grappled with the challenges of supporting adults in our community who are eligible to apply for naturalization. Since the pandemic shut down our in-person classes in 2020, we have been experimenting with a variety of approaches to making citizenship preparation more accessible. While we continuously strive to improve, our efforts thus far have borne fruit—we went from having a 10-year average of 13 citizenship students each year who went on to pass their citizenship interviews to an average of 65 per year over the past two years.

We know that for many of our students, transportation and fitting classes into their schedule are significant barriers. Our students have the option of in-person or Zoom classes, with our Zoom classes being more popular by a ratio of more than 5 to 1. Our Zoom classes are offered both in the morning

and the evening using the same Zoom link, so if a student who normally attends the morning class is unable to come on a given day, they can attend the same class that evening.

We also split the curriculum into two distinct citizenship preparation classes which are taught concurrently: *Civics for the Citizenship Test* and *English for the Interview*. Students who have limited availability, and those who are strong in one area, have the option to join just one class. While the majority of our students take both, we have had a number of students who have taken advantage of the flexibility that this class division provides.

Because many adult education students need to stop out for a variety of reasons, we try to make it easy for students to come back. Our class sessions are nine weeks, allowing us to provide three enrollment windows over the course of a year. The majority of our citizenship students observe Rama-

Continued on p. 28>>>



We went from having a 10-year average of 13 citizenship students each year who went on to pass their citizenship interviews to an average of 65 per year over the past two years.



dan, and this model lets us take off that month between class sessions. During the gaps between sessions in the summer and late fall, we offer a four-week practice drop-in class, open to any students who have previously taken our group citizenship classes. Offering three shorter sessions, in addition to the practice drop-in mini-sessions, reduces the time commitment for students while also making it easier for those who left to start up again.

To aid students who miss classes, we have created videos that cover the same content as each class meeting, which we send out each week to all students who have enrolled for that session. This allows students who have been absent to feel more comfortable re-joining the course when they are able. Additionally, some of our students listen in during our Zoom classes while they are working, driving, or caring for their families—the follow up videos allow for easy review.

For students with lower-level English who want to begin learning skills and content that they will need for citizenship, we offer specialized in-person group classes. All of our students (and members of the public) have access to resources on our website, which we have compiled to help them prepare for naturalization—including our video and audio recordings. I've had students tell me that while they missed seeing me between class sessions, they didn't **really** miss me because they were seeing and/or hearing me every day as they continued to review on their own.

Because we have many volunteer tutors working with students on citizenship, we have made it a priority to provide resources to help our tutors effectively

support their students in working toward that goal. The primary mission of our organization is to offer one-on-one tutoring, and we're proud to have 250 volunteer tutors supporting the literacy goals of our students. Each year, a subset of the students who are paired with tutors work towards naturalization as part of their literacy studies. Additionally, new students sometimes come to us much closer to their naturalization interviews; in these cases, we offer more intensive short-term tutoring to help them prepare. We share all of our class PowerPoint slides and videos with our tutors—some tutors will watch the class videos alongside their students, controlling the playback speed and stopping at intervals to discuss and review. Others take advantage of our reading library and online resources to integrate activities relevant to their studies. Tutors have access to the textbook we use in our civics class, our



LVCA learner and tutor

custom-made English for the Interview handbook, and activities we have created for citizenship practice.

Finally, to help ease anxiety about the naturalization interview, we offer mock naturalization interviews to all of our current and former students. Many of our tutoring pairs will join me for a three-person mock interview—I play the role of the officer while the tutor observes and takes notes to identify strengths and areas for improvement.



Catherine McCall is the Citizenship Coordinator for Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle, and has been serving in that role for four years. She has more than 25 years of experience as an educator, including teaching high school social studies, leading curriculum development and training for a civic education non-profit, and working in teacher education at the University of Maryland College Park. Catherine earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Virginia and a master's degree in education from the University of Maryland. Her current role allows her to combine her love of civic education with the joy she finds in working with adult English learners and supporting volunteer tutors.

4 parts of the citizenship interview

We celebrate as each student passes their interview and as our citizenship program grows. The support we receive from individual donations, private grants, and the Virginia Literacy Foundation allows us to invest in a citizenship preparation program which is meeting the needs of more students than ever before. 🇺🇸

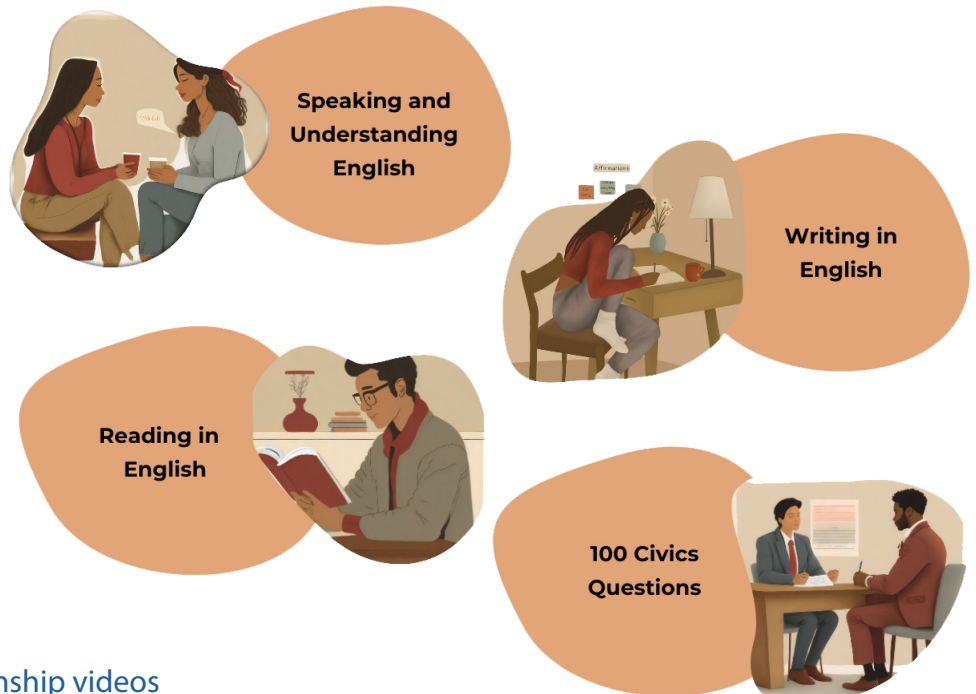
Resources

[Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle citizenship homepage](#)

[Citizenship Students' page](#)

[Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle YouTube channel](#)

[Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle YouTube playlist with citizenship videos](#)



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Strategies and Tips for a Productive Citizenship Preparation Class

by Virginia Showalter, Skyline Literacy Tutor Trainer, with input from citizenship tutors David Cockley and T. W. Johnson

Since 2007, [Skyline Literacy](#) in Harrisonburg has been offering citizenship preparation classes for immigrants in the community who are planning to become naturalized United States (U.S.) citizens. While extremely rewarding, this process can be challenging for adult learners who are juggling many responsibilities, have limited English proficiency, and have a narrow timeframe to learn the material needed for the naturalization interview/exam. Over the course of 10 weeks (two classes per week), Skyline Literacy learners study the required U.S. civics information, practice English reading/writing skills, and prepare by answering the naturalization application questions that will be reviewed orally during the interview. It's a big task! Skyline Literacy staff and volunteer tutors have developed multiple strategies to help students learn the pertinent information and practice these necessary skills:

1. Focus on material that is covered in the citizenship test and interview.

Students who participate in our classes come for one goal: to pass the citizenship test. So it is therefore the tutor's goal to help learners do that in the most efficient and effective way possible. While it may be uncomfortable to "teach to the test" and leave out deeper issues/details in American history, it is imperative that tutors remember their students' goal and the limited time students have to achieve it. Because of their limited English proficiency (beginner to intermediate), it is already a challenge for many learners to understand concepts such as the Emancipation Proclamation or Constitutional amendments, not to mention the very complex questions that are included in the naturalization application/interview, e.g: "Have you ever been a

member of, or in any way associated with a) the Communist Party, b) a totalitarian party, or c) a terrorist organization?" For this reason, tutors must focus on covering the complex concepts included in the interview/test and avoid discussing information or topics that are not relevant.

2. Bring the material to life by finding interesting ways to interact with the information.

Skyline Literacy tutors do this in a multitude of ways. Tutors show maps of the United States to learn the required information about U.S. geography. They look at photographs included in our citizenship textbook, [Civics and Literacy](#) by Lynne Weintraub, as well as supplemental photographs of our senators/representatives. With intermediate students who can handle slightly deeper conversations, seasoned tutor David Cockley encourages class discussion about current events and how those events interact with the material they are learning. Another longtime Skyline tutor, T. W. Johnson, describes a class activity in which his students act out how a bill becomes a law, with different students acting as the President, House, Senate, etc. Learners go on one field trip each quarter, often to a local museum that features the

history of the Shenandoah Valley, which includes Civil War information. Students hear a recording of the National Anthem (YouTube) and watch a video of schoolchildren reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Students practice interview skills such as eye contact, proper attire, posture, and how to ask for clarification, which are skills that are not only helpful for their citizenship interview, but also for workplace preparation. Activities such as these help students with diverse learning styles and language abilities to understand and retain these complex topics.

3. Repetition and review are keys to retaining the information.

Tutors devote time every class session to review what was learned in previous lessons. They highlight questions that students get wrong and come back to those same questions at the end of class. Halfway through the 10-week session, an entire class period is devoted to review of what was studied in the first five weeks. Again, at the end of the 10-week class is a cumulative review class. Games (BINGO or Kahoot!, for example) help to review important dates, people, and vocabulary in a fun and engaging manner. Tutors encourage students to practice the [100 civics questions](#) at home by downloading apps available on the [USCIS website](#) or other sites like [USALearns](#). Additionally, each student is offered a one-on-one mock interview at the end of the 10 weeks as a tool to evaluate their readiness for the naturalization test/interview. Some students decide that they need to take the citizenship class multiple times in order to feel confident that they can pass the interview. Students, too, appreciate the emphasis on review and repetition. Former Skyline Literacy learner (now a U.S. citizen), Kishwar Rashid said, "The teachers are helpful and supportive, and they explain things two or three times to help you understand. I knew that if I asked questions, they would respond, and if I needed something, they would help."

4. Maintain a low student/teacher ratio.

As much as possible, Skyline Literacy aims for small classes (10 learners or fewer) with multiple tutors in the classroom. This is possible because of dedicated volunteer tutors, some who come from the Harrisonburg community and others who are university students choosing to complete required

Continued on p. 32>>>



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>>>Continued from p. 31

community service learning hours with Skyline Literacy. Having multiple tutors in the classroom allows more individualized attention for students who struggle to retain information or who have low-literacy levels and need more assistance.



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Becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen is a meaningful and significant experience for many immigrants in our community. At Skyline Literacy, we appreciate the opportunity to support individuals who are in this process and cheer them on towards achieving their goal! 📖

“

The teachers are helpful and supportive, and they explain things two or three times to help you understand. I knew that if I asked questions, they would respond, and if I needed something, they would help.

—Kishwar Rashid, former Skyline Literacy learner (now a U.S. citizen)

”



Virginia Showalter is the Family Literacy Program Manager and Citizenship Tutor Trainer for Skyline Literacy. A native of the Shenandoah Valley, she appreciates the ways that the Harrisonburg community continues to become more diverse each year. She graduated from Eastern Mennonite University with a degree in elementary education and minors in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and Spanish. Her professional experience has been varied, from teaching English to adult learners in numerous settings to working as an immigration paralegal to being a case manager with migrant farmworkers.

ENHANCING CIVICS INSTRUCTION WITH GUEST SPEAKERS: INSIGHTS FROM THE ADULT ESOL CLASSROOM



by **Xavier Muñoz**

Cultural Perspectives. Holidays, like Veterans Day, can be good occasions for guest speakers. Kathleen and Karen reflect on the profound effect guest speakers have had on changing learner perceptions, especially concerning topics like the military, which may be viewed differently in other countries:

“We had some students from countries where the military is terrifying... So the idea that members of the military would be celebrated was kind of a novel concept for them and a good thing for them to start to understand about the United States.” – Kathleen

Karen goes on to say,

“On Parents Day or at various events, you could well pass someone in an army uniform walking down the hall at the same time you’re going to your child’s classroom or you could see them in Starbucks or on the Metro here in D.C. That is just another parent or just another community member.”

How do you teach in a way that keeps learners engaged and excited about what they’re learning? One idea: Bring guest speakers to class. New faces and voices who are experts in various subject matters can offer a wealth of learning opportunities for learners, from finding out about available community resources to better understanding key aspects of United States (U.S.) culture and government to simply making learners more comfortable in speaking with professionals (doctors, politicians, mental health experts, police officers, etc.). In this article, intermediate-level ESOL teachers Karen and Kathleen from the English Empowerment Center offer insights into the benefits and challenges of guest speakers to support civics education in person and online.

Connecting the Classroom to the Community

Guest speakers provide a unique opportunity to connect adult learners with real-world experiences and diverse perspectives, significantly enhancing their understanding of civic topics.



Navigating Systems and Services. Guest speakers can make topics and concepts more relevant. For example, as part of the unit on health, Kathleen invited a social worker to talk about mental health issues and to give them information on resources in the area.

When learners go to a doctor's office or hospital, they are often accompanied by a translator like a spouse or other family member. In another semester, Karen brought in a retired doctor and tried to structure role plays for learners to practice with the doctor in Zoom breakout rooms. Learners opted to talk about their own real health concerns and questions. In doing so, learners built up their confidence in having a more direct relationship with a health-care provider.

Guest speakers can also inform learners about education and workforce training options and resources available to them. For example, an instructor from the adult ESOL program within Fairfax County Public Schools shared about higher-level and specialized classes for those who graduate from the English Empowerment Center and are looking to continue their education. And, there are plans to bring in a speaker from an organization specializing in supporting internationally trained professionals to restart their careers.

Key Considerations

1. Tailor the Content for Comprehensibility.

Teachers and programs need to carefully select and prepare the guest speakers to ensure engage-

ment and relevance. Effective guest speakers should be able to adapt their content and style to the learners' language level and interests. They need to do more than just talk about the topic or about their job. They need to connect and engage with the learners dynamically. Not surprisingly, speakers with teaching experience are a natural fit!

One particularly successful guest speaker was the Associate Dean of ESL from the local community college. An immigrant herself, she "had a very clear presentation that was geared towards the learners' level of speaking and comprehension. She was very accessible and open to questions... her whole presentation was accessible and at their level." - Kathleen

But it's okay for a guest speaker to be new to talking with an immigrant or English learner audience. The teacher should review the presentation materials beforehand and suggest what to cut, simplify, or edit.

2. Engage Learners with the Guest Speaker.

Active learner participation enhances the impact of the session. But before then, teachers need to create an "[intellectually and socially safe](#)" learning environment. For classes that meet 2 days a week, 2 hours a day, waiting a month before your first guest speaker gives you time to build a strong learning relationship.

"They trust us. They know we are all on their side and working to help them, and so they assume that anybody we bring in is going to be kind of a safe person." - Kathleen

Support learners' language development. When their class had a special opportunity to meet an elected official, Karen and Kathleen taught the class what things a U.S. representative would know about; then they helped learners formulate their questions for that elected official. When you can select speakers that align with the curriculum unit, schedule the guest speaker in the middle or toward the end of the unit so the class has already learned relevant vocabulary.

Plan for one-on-one or small group time with the speaker. On Zoom when all you see are black boxes, it can be difficult to assess the level of engagement. Even if the speaker isn't effective at adapting to the learners' comprehension level, they could repeat a portion of their content (e.g., what to do if you want to find resources) with small groups. Or, identify whether there is a relevant role-play that learners could practice. With a healthcare professional, learners could practice talking about a health problem and asking for advice.

3. Maximize the Learning Opportunity Afterward.

Teachers should use follow-up activities to reinforce the learning from the guest speaker sessions. One idea is to fold it into an activity on writing thank-you notes, using effective writing instruction techniques like brainstorming something they appreciated hearing about and then analyzing a sample thank-you letter or email. More recently, Karen saw success with an [asset-based strategy](#) of having each learner give their own "guest speaker" talk to the class. Each learner chose a topic they were an expert on (e.g., foods in Afghanistan compared to in the U.S., getting a driver's license in the U.S., caring for a newborn and dealing with issues of older sibling resentment). Learners had time to write on their topic in English or even in their native language before presenting to the class.

Concluding Thoughts

The experiences of Karen and Kathleen at the English Empowerment Center demonstrate how, when thoughtfully integrated, guest speakers can enrich civics education for adult learners through relevance, confidence building, and language development. As they continue to experiment with what works best, they are excited to get more suggestions from learners on who they want to hear

from and to work with program staff to compile a list of interested and available guest speakers. 🗨️

Effective Practices

- 1. Selecting a Speaker:** Choose guest speakers for topics relevant to the curriculum or speakers who can present diverse perspectives and have experience talking with English learners; be aware of students' backgrounds, particularly cultural differences toward gender dynamics.
- 2. Preparing the Speaker:** Inform speakers about students' needs and interests; review and simplify their presentation materials (6–10 slides recommended); and provide guidance on using plain language.
- 3. Managing the Time:** Set a time limit (20 minutes for an intermediate ESOL class) but be flexible depending on student engagement level.
- 4. Engaging the Learners:** Encourage students to prepare questions in advance; teach them appropriate ways to address the speaker depending on their profession; arrange for 1-on-1 or small group interaction with the speaker in breakout rooms.
- 5. Follow-Up Activities:** Add on language development activities like writing thank-you notes, students' presenting on their own topics of choice, or sharing curated reading lists.



Xavier Muñoz (he/him) oversees adult English language acquisition, family literacy, and workplace literacy classes as well as distance learning, digital literacy, and student advising initiatives at the English Empowerment Center. He holds a teaching English as a second language (TESOL) Certificate and an M.A. in TESOL. He has also earned a [Civics Education Leader](#) badge from World Education for participating in the [Teaching Skills That Matter TSTM – SkillBlox project](#).



In 2009, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor founded iCivics with the goal of transforming civic education for every student in America with innovative, truly engaging games and resources. Of all her accomplishments, Justice O'Connor considers iCivics to be her most important work and greatest legacy.

"I feel so strongly about the topic because I've seen first-hand how vital it is for all citizens to understand our Constitution and unique system of government, and participate actively in their communities."

Image by Wikimedia Commons

Civics Resources

TOOLS

- **iCivics:** founded by [Justice Sandra Day O'Connor](#) to be the nation's premier non-profit civic education provider of high-quality, non-partisan, engaging, and free resources to more than 9 million students annually, in all 50 states. iCivics' first-of-its-kind digital [civic library](#) includes more than 260 curricular resources, digital literacy tools, professional learning materials, and educational video games. Its engaging resources have been [proven](#) to improve civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.
- **[Civics in the Adult Education Classroom:](#)** This spotlight by [OCTAE's Enhancing Access for Refugees and New Americans' project](#) describes and provides examples of how civics content and activities can be integrated and contextualized into Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) instruction in different ways. It also clarifies the importance of not duplicating services funding under other funding sources, such as preparation for the U.S. citizenship exam.
- **[LINCS, Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education \(IELCE\) Resources:](#)** The [Building Opportunities through Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education project](#) supports states and providers in implementing new program requirements under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Section 243, Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE). Resources, informed by research, are provided for use by adult educators.
- **[LINCS, Teaching Skills that Matter Civics Education:](#)** The Teaching the Skills That Matter in Adult Education project (TSTM) trains teachers to integrate the skills that matter to adult students using approaches that work across critical topics. Using the project's tools and training, adult education teachers can teach the transferable skills students need in these critical contexts. Civics education is one of five primary topic areas.

- **[Civics for Adults: A Guide for Civics Content Providers](#)**: The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has developed this guide for civics experts and content providers developing or adapting civics resources to engage adults in their workplaces and their communities.
- **[Digital Civics Toolkit](#)**: While designed for high school students, this adaptable toolkit is a collection of resources for educators to support the exploration, recognition, and the need to take seriously the civic potentials of digital life. The Toolkit draws on the research and work of the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP). It explores a range of civic opportunities and dilemmas via 5 modules focused on: Exploring Community Issues, Investigation, Dialogue, Voice, and Action.
- **[Teaching Civics: A Civic Education Project from Learning Law and Democracy](#)**: An ever-growing repository of current, professionally vetted, and unbiased civics, law-related education, and government lesson plans and materials. These lessons include materials developed by Learning Law and Democracy Foundation and lessons written by others, vetted with links to their sources.
- **[Bill of Rights Institute](#)**: A collection of educator resources including classroom-ready, constitutional principles based lessons with more than 300 engaging and relevant [videos](#).
- **[The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#)**: A large collection of free resources for teachers that includes lesson plans, [videos](#), and interactive online exhibitions.
- **[Emerging America, Inclusive Civics Education](#)**: Building teachers' capacity to access and effectively use primary sources to engage students of all abilities. Emerging America supports history educators and students — especially struggling learners — to develop skills of inquiry, exploration, and interpretation of the past through primary sources.
- **[Organizing Engagement, Six Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement](#)**: The Kirwan Institute at the Ohio State University's *Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement framework* describes essential elements of effective civic engagement in communities dealing with the adverse effects of disinvestment, discrimination, or disenfranchisement.
- **[Facing History and Ourselves, Resource Library](#)**: Compelling classroom resources with new teaching methods that help meet standards and make a difference in the lives of learners. It includes a U.S. History curriculum collection designed to help students think critically about what it means to live in the U. S. as a free and full human being, drawing meaningful connections between our country's complex history and their own lived experiences.
- **[EL Civics for ESL Students](#)**: Designed for ESL students, this collection of civics lessons includes support material such as photos, downloadable worksheets, crossword puzzles, stories, reading exercises, PowerPoint presentations, and videos. Both students and teachers will find these government and history lessons clear, concise, easy to use, and free of rhetoric.

Stay up-to-date on current Civics Education and Citizenship information and resources in adult education by joining the [LINCS Community Civics Education and Citizenship group](#).

This online group includes adult education practitioners, advocates, policymakers, and others from across the country. The focus of the group is to discuss and explore issues related to civic engagement, U.S. history, government, and citizenship in adult education.

2024

PROGRESS CALENDAR

JAN

10 [Virginia Association for Adult and Continuing Education \(VAACE\) Learning Circles Kickoff](#)
3:30 p.m.–5:00 p.m. EST
Virtual

18 VALRC Webinar: [Lessons from the Field with Ed Sadler: Teaching Digital Literacy to Immigrants](#)
3:30 p.m.–4:30 p.m. EST
Virtual

MAR

17–20 [Coalition on Adult Basic Education \(COABE\) 2024 National Conference: Adult Education, Together in Harmony](#)
Nashville, TN

21–23 [TESOL 2024 International Convention & Expo](#)
Tampa, FL (with virtual option in April)

23–26 [National Association of Workforce Boards \(NAWB\) The Forum 2024, Forging Tomorrow's Workforce Today](#)
Washington, DC

MAY

13–15 [National Skills Coalition: Skills Summit](#)
Washington, DC

FEB

1 VALRC Webinar: [Voting Ambassador Training with Cynthia Peters, The Change Agent](#)
3:30 p.m.–4:30 p.m. EST
Virtual

APR

10–13 [National Council of Teachers of Mathematics \(NCTM\) 2024 Virtual Conference: Rediscovering Joy in Teaching and Learning Mathematics](#)
Virtual

11–12 [TESOL 2024 International Convention & Expo](#)
Virtual

JUN

14 [Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium \(MERC\) Summit: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice Through Shifting Paradigms in Public Education](#)
Richmond, VA

