

Teaching about

Civics and
Citizenship
with the Internet

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TRYING TO WRITE A COLUMN on teaching about civics and citizenship education with the Internet brings to mind the somewhat off-color quote usually attributed to Zsa Zsa Gabor: "I know what to do, but I'm not sure how to make it interesting." The term citizenship education is so often used in our literature and professional meetings that we sometimes lose track of its meaning. If someone completely unfamiliar with social studies were to ask, "What is social studies?", "What is its purpose?", and "What do social studies teachers do?", the answers are clear:

- "Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence." (NCSS social studies standards)¹
- "Social studies programs have as a major purpose the promotion of civic competence—which is the knowledge, skills and attitudes required of students to be able to assume the 'office of citizen' (as Thomas Jefferson called it) in our democratic republic." (NCSS social studies standards)²
- "Social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy." (NCSS mission statement on the NCSS website, at www.socialstudies.org)

Clearly, citizenship education is the foundation of social studies and civics. So, a column listing and describing good websites for teaching about this most important aspect of social studies should be an easy task.

Except, it isn't easy. There are so many not-for-profit organizations, government agencies, publishers, and for-profit corporations that

provide information, materials, lesson plans, and participatory programs that it's very difficult to select a dozen or so that are better than others. A search using the term citizenship education on the Google search engine turns up about 24,300 hits. (If you use just the single word citizenship, close to 2,000,000 hits are identified.)

Faced with this surfeit of possible websites to evaluate and describe, I divided the sites chosen for the column into two categories: (1) the main line, traditional sites that should probably be on every social studies teacher's list of bookmarks; and (2) a number of sites that offer something distinctive or have a somewhat different approach to content or presentation. Many of the sites have a "related links" section that provides even the most patient or addicted web surfer with more places to explore than there is time available. I know. I tried to look at all of them. I also tried to select sites that would be of interest and use to elementary, middle level, and secondary teachers and students.

Organizations and Websites That Teachers and Librarians Should Bookmark

The Center for Civic Education
www.civiced.org

The CCE is one of the best-known and most visible organizations within U.S. social studies professional circles. Its mission statement sounds remarkably like the NCSS background and mission statements: "The Center for Civic Education is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational corporation dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy." Its programs include "We, the People" and "Project Citizen," and it also

sponsors "Youth for Justice" and "Civitas," and international civic education exchange programs. On its website, teachers can find some free lessons, the National Standards for Civics and Government, and many links to other websites that emphasize civic education.

Constitutional Rights Foundation
www.crf-usa.org

Like the Center for Civic Education, the Constitutional Rights Foundation is a California-based, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that designs programs and curriculum materials for K-12 teachers and students. Its mock trial program is widely known, and its "Sports and the Law" program uses students' natural interest in sports to illustrate issues related to law and society. Its "Free Expression in a Free Society" program encourages students to learn about issues related to freedom and the Bill of Rights by developing a video or multimedia project. The foundation's lesson plans include many related to the 2002 mid-term elections.

Close Up Foundation
www.closeup.org

The Close Up Foundation has been working with social studies teachers and students since 1970 and is based on the belief that textbooks and classroom discussions are not enough to help students understand the processes and responsibilities of citizenship in a participatory democracy. While best known for its program that brings more than 25,000 students, teachers, and other adults to Washington, D.C., annually, it also sponsors state and local programs designed to put young people in touch with government officials, lobbyists, and policymakers. The Close Up website includes direct links to seminal government documents such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

CongressLink

www.congresslink.org

CongressLink, designed as an Internet resource for teachers and students, was created by Dirksen Congressional Center in Pekin, Illinois. Named for the golden-throated senator who repeatedly tried to have the marigold declared the national flower, the Dirksen Center offers programs that cover far more than just the legislative branch of the U.S. government. While it does include a daily updated guide to every bill, committee meeting, and resolution in Congress, it also includes lesson plans, online historical materials, and a list of websites especially selected for teachers.

C-SPAN in the Classroom

www.c-span.org/classroom

C-SPAN offers far more than round-the-clock television coverage of House and Senate members droning away in front of a nearly empty chamber. It has some outstanding lesson plans, archives of significant speeches that can be played to full classrooms or viewed by small groups of students, and teacher's guides and suggested student projects on all forty-one U.S. presidents. Several of C-SPAN's instructional activities are designed to heighten student interest. These include an "American Presidents Scavenger Hunt" and primary sources related to many civic education topics. C-SPAN may be one of the best (and most overlooked) websites for classroom teachers.

Other Websites

Ask ERIC

www.askeric.org

The ERIC has become much more teacher friendly and teacher-helpful in the past few years. Once the home of esoteric research reports and three-line summaries of thirty-page documents, ERIC is now a wonderful place for teachers looking for lesson plans. Most teachers I know never use another teacher's lesson plan "as is." They modify and usually improve the plan so that it fits their students' needs and characteristics as well as their own teaching style. If you go to the Ask ERIC site above and click on "Subjects-Social Studies-Civics," you'll find about two dozen good lesson plans designed for grades K-12. Additionally, there are many more lesson plans on all subject areas in the social studies curriculum.

Law offices of Rajiv Khanna

www.immigration.com

Could your students pass the U.S. Citizenship Test? It's given orally at Immigration and Naturalization

Services offices throughout the country, and the questions are taken from the one hundred listed on this immigration lawyer's website. Each question has a link to the correct answer. While other websites have versions of the U.S. Citizenship Test, this website has information about citizenship in most other countries. Some very interesting student activities could be designed using the information and links on this site.

Lesson Plan Central

www.lessonplancentral.com

This site, while a dot-com, commercial site, provides a wonderful array of teacher resources. If you go to the home page (URL above), then to "Social Studies," and "Civics," you'll find many outstanding lesson plans on citizenship education, character education, and comparative civic education. Many of these lesson plans come from the New York Times "Learning" page and have been evaluated and recommended by a board of educator advisers. For example, the lesson "Too Free, or Not Too Free," designed for middle level and high school students, examines the attitudes toward electronic surveillance in a democracy. Additionally, this site has a wealth of other educational resources for teachers. Its free "Classroom Clip Art" section has categories such as history, dinosaurs, geography, and more. Bulletin boards would be easy to keep up to date with this resource.

Civics Online

www.civics-online.org

This site is sponsored in part by Michigan State University, and its activities and resources are keyed to the Michigan Curriculum Framework for Civics, one of the better state frameworks being used today. It includes a wide array of primary sources, professional development tools, and interactive activities for both students and teachers. For example, there is an excellent activity, "Who is Elian Gonzalez?", that focuses on citizenship issues. It is presented for several different grade levels—K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Each level asks similar but increasingly sophisticated questions. The "Case Studies" section features teachers at different grade levels working with their classes on significant topics related to citizenship education. I particularly thought the case studies dealing with teaching about "core democratic values" were both interesting and instructive.

Freeman Butts, who died in 1998, but whose words continue to both inspire and challenge social studies educators, wrote that "the very foundational purpose upon

which free, universal, common schooling was originally envisioned and created in the United States was its civic mission to prepare informed, rational, and human citizens for effective participation in a democratic political community." At a time when both "free, universal, common schooling" and "rational . . . effective participation" are threatened in this nation, we as social studies educators must recommit ourselves to those values that brought most of us to the classroom. The websites presented in this column will help us in that commitment. G

Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies Task Force, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 1994), 3.
2. Ibid.

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