

# The People Unite: Learning Meaningful Civics Online

Annette Boyd Pitts, Charles Dziuban, and Jeffrey W. Cornett

## The 21st Century Student and Digital Democracy

Throughout the world, today's students are being characterized as digital natives, the "net generation." This twenty-first-century student cohort is adept at multi-tasking and at using a variety of tools and resources including electronic search engines, blogs, wikis, visual images, videos, gaming platforms, and social networking. Current estimates suggest that teenagers spend an average of 30 hours a week online or in networking activities.<sup>1</sup> They co-create knowledge, learn through active participation, exhibit a growing distaste for traditional transmission of information educational systems, and are anxious to communicate with their global peers.<sup>2</sup>

For more than a decade, social studies educators have been calling for curriculum and instruction that incorporates powerful learning opportunities for these students that are meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active. All these elements may be enhanced through the appropriate use of technology.<sup>3</sup> This article is a report on one such effort to engage students in a powerful teaching and learning civic education environment.

## Online Citizens Take Action

For more than two decades, the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. (FLREA) has facilitated international civic education exchanges with the primary goal of enhancing students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for civic engagement in democratic societies.<sup>4</sup> Recently, that effort has focused on utilizing technology to tap the natural interests and abilities of today's students through online communications that showcase civic education content and processes.

**ThePeopleUnite.com** (TPU) is the partnership's latest innovation that combines technology with civic education as classrooms in Central Europe, Latin America, and the United States partner in a virtual exploration of public policy and problem solving (see screenshot on p. 161).<sup>5</sup> This online problem-solving model, adapted from the Center for Civic Education's traditional Project Citizen program, has been expanded by FLREA and the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara to include a wide range of digital resources, critical thinking exercises, collaborative online activities, and intellectual tool charts to explore community-based problems around the world. TPU provides an easy to follow step-by-step digital framework that assists students as they identify a problem to address in their communities, investigate alternative policies to resolve their selected problem, and develop an action plan to work with their government in implementing policy recommendations. The online

environment provides opportunities for research, interaction, communication, and reflection with partner classes around the world. Through the process, students in each country learn about the structure and function of government, institutions of democracy, the role of the citizen in influencing government, and a wide range of skills needed to be effective citizens.

As an added reciprocal benefit, students learn about each other's country and how the local problems and governmental processes vary. Classroom boundaries are expanded as students interact and learn from each other's experiences living in different democratic environments. Ultimately, students are brought together for change through this technology-based project. This change includes increasing students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes about democracies, including their own, and action that results in change in their community.

## The Pilot

The initial pilot involved 170 students and 11 educators representing four countries. Program administrators sought teachers with experience in teaching Project Citizen as well as those with expertise in technology and language skills. In some instances, civics teachers were partnered with technology instructors to ensure on-site support

Teachers Rosie Heffernan (Florida) and Kriszta Racs (Hungary) meet with students following the peopleunite online partnership.



**ThePeopleUnite.com** (TPU) partnership is a component of the Civitas International Program administered by the Center for Civic Education under the Education for Democracy Act. One of several collaborative models, this partnership includes NGOs, universities, and public schools in Florida, Romania, Mississippi, Hungary, Peru, and Panama. The TPU online resource is one of the multiple facets of the partnership that also include Democracy Camps for teachers and students, curriculum development, civic education campaigns, professional development, and a wide range of partner-specific activities.

TPU includes a series of classroom-based, password protected, e-learning modules with specific learning objectives. The site incorporates interactive civic education activities, blogs, surveys, online bulletin boards, and a host of resources and materials for developing a portfolio to showcase the work of the students. Each class works through the modules at their own pace, posting materials as directed and reviewing and commenting on their partner school's postings. A timeline is provided for general guidance; however, classrooms advance based on their individual school schedules.

TPU incorporates a 14-step problem-solving model complete with classroom activities, worksheets for posting assignments, video clips, podcasts, file sharing, interactive assignments, newspaper and resource links, and constitutional applications. The steps include "The Need for Government" and "Citizen Participation," among others. Additionally, each class develops a multimedia presentation at the conclusion of their work to share with their partner class in another country. In the culminating activity, students meet online with their partner class to present their work in a virtual showcase. A reflection component completes the process.

This online citizen-building initiative provides a blending of face-to-face classroom instruction, technology-based activities, and authentic problem-solving opportunities. Students interact with their peers abroad and are exposed to a wide range of documents, ideas and people including government officials, students, and community members.

To register, teachers complete an online application at [www.thepeopleunite.com](http://www.thepeopleunite.com). Once registered, the application is reviewed for an appropriate classroom partnership, before access is granted. Grade level, language skills, and technology requirements are reviewed prior to acceptance. If accepted, a username and password is required to access the site. Teachers are provided with guidelines for use of the site, a timeline to assist with pacing throughout the school year, and a multimedia slide presentation to assist with registering online and preparing the profile page for each virtual classroom. The "Facebook" type environment allows teachers to post classroom assignments and respond to the partner class through a password-protected environment. Only the partner classes are allowed access to the virtual classroom-posting site.



during the partnerships.

While most communications between participants were conducted in English, two bilingual classroom partnerships were initiated in the pilot year. Jackie Viana, a bilingual 7th grade teacher from Hialeah Gardens Middle School in Miami-Dade County, was partnered with Monica Diaz's 8th grade class in Lima, Peru. Ms. Viana is the 2010 American Civic Education Teacher of the Year and a veteran civic and law related education instructor. Students in both schools addressed local problems affecting their respective communities. Ms. Viana's class addressed a dangerous intersection and the flow of traffic due to a traffic signal that was operating ineffectively. Accidents at the intersection had led to injuries and deaths of community members. Ms. Diaz's students contacted the local mayor to request assistance with an ordinance to prevent businesses from selling liquor within 300 feet of an educational facility. "Nos sentimos muy afectados ya que el estos establecimientos están muy cerca de instituciones educativas como la nuestra, así que tuvimos que actuar para resolver el problema de nuestra comunidad." (We are very concerned that these facilities are very near educational institutions like ours, so we had to act to resolve the problem of our community.)

Ms. Viana reported that her students were engaged and excited to participate in the program throughout the school year. "Students would come to class and ask if we could do the online project again each day," stated Ms. Viana. "At first I would say no, we have other priorities today and then I realized how engaged and excited they were and I knew that whenever students are this excited about learning, you have to make time!"

Projects during the pilot year ranged from addressing environmental problems and traffic issues to smoking in schools and the need for community teen centers. Virtual showcases enabled students to see each other's classrooms and discuss their projects. Additionally, students strengthened their understanding of each other's cultures as they shared their interests in music, sports, and a wide range of cultural topics.

Students in Miami, Florida, and Budapest, Hungary, worked together online to solve problems related to texting and driving as well as dangerous parking lots, respectively. High school students in Rosie Heffernan's comparative government class at Our Lady of Lourdes Academy were partnered with students at Trefort Agoston Bilingual Secondary School in Budapest. Teacher Kriszta Racs, a veteran civics teacher at Trefort, utilized [thepeopleunite.com](http://thepeopleunite.com) site

to teach about citizen participation and self-government.

Students driving to school were faced with few parking options and ultimately were parking in a dangerous lot. The lot was not paved and did not have individual parking spaces allocated. It was filled with all kinds of dangerous objects protruding from the ground, which created issues for the vehicles and the students.

Students from Trefort Secondary School drew a layout for a refurbished parking lot, gathered signatures for a petition, and ultimately met with the mayor of district XIX to submit their request. Students prepared a PowerPoint presentation with photos and shared it during a videoconference with their partner school in Miami. The Miami students in turn shared their project, which incorporated research on the problem of texting and driving in Florida. The students examined alternative public policies to solve the problem including a review of legislative proposals. The students' action plan incorporated contact with local and state officials to gain support for their legislative proposal. The proposed bill addressed the prohibition of texting while operating a motor vehicle and included penalties, enforcement, and conditions and exemptions.

Students from Our Lady of Lourdes Academy were so intrigued by the experience that they visited Budapest later that year as part of a summer comparative government component. The trip incorporated visits to government institutions and schools as well as cultural experiences. The students met with their partner teacher and students during the trip, which also included a trip to Bucharest, Romania.

### Powerful Teaching and Learning

Surveys, questionnaires, and interviews during the past three years have provided feedback for project developers to consider in strengthening the program, both in the civic education objectives and resources, and in the technological platform. It is clear that the program has



yielded powerful teaching and learning and our use of technology is improving, both as we prepare teachers to use it and the platform to guide student work.

From this feedback, it is clear that the project has been meaningful in that students have studied local issues of importance to them, and have addressed the problems by gathering systematic information, analyzing data, and using their inquiry skills to impact public policy. It has been integrative in that they have drawn from economics, geography, history, political science, and sociology disciplines to conduct their inquiry, and used their technology, reading/writing skills, and communication skills as a key component of their work. It has been value-based as they critically think about authentic issues, seek out opposing points of view, and demonstrate social responsibility throughout the process. It has been challenging as they develop in-depth research related to their issues and utilize, create, and communicate sophisticated ideas from a variety of sources including websites, graphs, charts, and databases. Finally, it has been a model of active learning, as students work collaboratively to make informed decisions about their project and communicate those deliberations not only with their local government leaders, but also with their peers around the world. The project heeds the advice from the "National Council for the Social Studies Technology Position Statement and Guidelines" that suggests technology can revitalize citizenship education.<sup>6</sup> It does so by promoting enhanced opportunities for civic action that utilizes technology as a tool to enhance communication about democracy among students and teachers on three continents.

The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc., will continue to adapt and improve the site as the digital partnership evolves and countries expand their usage of the platform. New adaptations of the site will incorporate a multi-lingual translation capacity that

includes English, Hungarian, Romanian, and Spanish.

## Conclusion

**ThePeopleUnite.com** provides free access to an enriching online curriculum combining technology with civic education to prepare students for their roles as citizens of their communities and the world. The site provides a balance of academic and clinical experiences utilizing cooperative learning and individualized activities to impact a diversity of learning styles. Responding to this newfound digital pluralism, Tapscott suggests that digital citizens exhibit a newfound caring about the civic process finding traditional politics a turnoff.<sup>7</sup> They have moved from civic action to political action and want a say in their government. This blended approach to teaching and learning provides a unique and challenging, yet comfortable model for today's online citizen where education can lead to authentic participation in the civic process. 🌐

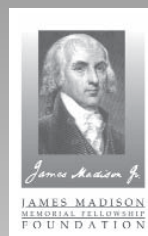
## Notes

1. Ron Reis, "Promoting Higher Education through Web 2.0," *Southeast Education Network* 11, no.2 (Fall 2009), 74-75.
2. George Lorenzo, Diana Oblinger, and Charles Dziuban, "How Choice, Co-Creation, and Culture are Changing What it Means to be Net Savvy," *Educause Quarterly* 30, no.1.
3. The National Council for the Social Studies position statement, "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy" (2008), may be retrieved at [www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful).
4. FLREA has served as a partnership site for international civics since 1995. Civitas International Programs are directed by the Center for Civic Education and funded by the U.S. Department of Education under the Education for Democracy Act approved by the United States Congress; additional support is provided by the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other sources.
5. The online partnership initiative is a product of The Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc., in cooperation with its Civitas partner, the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara (IIT). The online partnership idea originated with Civitas partner Calin Rus, director of the IIT. The modules were developed and refined over the last three years with teachers providing feedback and direction for future programming. Multiple platforms have been used and evaluated throughout the partnership. This year, a new site-based platform will be incorporated. As the digital partnership evolves and countries expand their usage

of the platform, new technologies will be incorporated to keep abreast of current developments.

6. The National Council for the Social Studies Technology Position Statement and Guidelines may be found at [www.socialstudies.org/positions/technology](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/technology). This position statement quotes Cheryl Mason, Michael Berson, Richard Diem, David Hicks, John Lee, and Tony Dralle (2000). "Guidelines for Using Technology to Prepare Social Studies Teachers," *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* [Online serial] 1, no. 1. Available: [www.citejournal.org/vol1/iss1/currentissues/socialstudies/article](http://www.citejournal.org/vol1/iss1/currentissues/socialstudies/article).
7. Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009).

**ANNETTE BOYD PITTS** is the founding executive director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. She can be reached at [ABPflreaED@aol.com](mailto:ABPflreaED@aol.com). **CHARLES DZIUBAN** is the director of The Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness (RITE) at the University of Central Florida. He can be reached at [dziuban@mail.ucf.edu](mailto:dziuban@mail.ucf.edu). **JEFFREY W. CORNETT** is chair and professor of the Department of Foundations and Secondary Education at the University of North Florida. He can be reached at [j.cornett@unf.edu](mailto:j.cornett@unf.edu).



**JAMES MADISON  
GRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS  
AVAILABLE UP TO  
\$24,000**

Available to secondary school teachers of American history, American government or social studies to undertake a master's degree program emphasizing the roots, principles, framing and development of the U.S. Constitution.

Fellowships pay the actual cost of tuition, fees, books.

For information and to download an application, visit

**[www.jamesmadison.gov](http://www.jamesmadison.gov)**

James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation