CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW TO STRENGTHEN PROGRAMS

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Center has developed a Civic Education Primer that explores how to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate civic education programs for both youth and adults.

Civic education consists of education, training, and awareness-raising programs that focus on sharing information, practices, and activities to build the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes necessary for individuals to fulfill their democratic responsibilities, understand the role of government, and assert their rights.

The ultimate goal of civic education is to prepare generations to understand the essential principles and values of democracy, instill within them a high sense of responsibility, and encourage them to actively engage in issues within society, the community, or the state.

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<th>THERE ARE THREE MAJOR TYPES OF CIVIC EDUCATION PROGRAMMING:</th>
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<td><strong>Classroom-based programming</strong></td>
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<td>Development of multiple opportunities through the primary and</td>
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<td>secondary education experience.</td>
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<td><strong>Outside-of-school and post-secondary programming</strong></td>
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<td>Activities that help students to apply knowledge through</td>
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<td>active participation in schools and communities.</td>
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<td><strong>Adult education programming</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fosters supportive democratic attitudes, values, and behaviors</td>
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<td>among adults, especially in emerging democratic contexts.</td>
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The evidence shows three key elements that strengthen the success of a civic education program:

> The frequency and intensity of the individual’s exposure. “One-off” workshops and community events are not likely to be effective.

> The kind of pedagogical methodologies that are used in civic education instruction. Open, participatory, and interactive methods are more likely to be effective than lecture-based information provision.

> The quality of teachers and facilitators conducting the instruction. Higher-quality teachers and facilitators are more likely to be effective.

**COMMON CIVIC EDUCATION MYTHS**

**MYTH:** Civic education takes place only in the classroom.

**FACT:** A substantial portion of civic education activities take place outside the classroom in service-learning and leadership programs for students and programs promoting democratic citizenship targeted toward the general adult population and to marginalized and vulnerable communities.

**MYTH:** Civic education may succeed in teaching people about democracy, but it is not possible to change people’s dispositions to participate in democratic political processes.

**FACT:** Evaluations of the impact of civic education programs often show larger effects on actual political participation than on political attitudes and values. This pattern is especially pronounced in programs bringing youth and ordinary citizens in contact with local officials so that individuals can “learn by doing” politics at the local level.

**MYTH:** Civic education consists only of instruction in factual political knowledge about political institutions and processes.

**FACT:** The overwhelming majority of civic education programs go well beyond the provision of basic political facts to include information on rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship, the promotion of democratic values such as tolerance and the rejection of violence, and the need for direct citizen involvement in community and national affairs.

**MYTH:** Civic education is less relevant in the contemporary digital age; young people’s attention spans are more limited and they have access to numerous alternative sources of political information.

**FACT:** Civic education can and has evolved to encompass digital programming that is compelling and impactful in stimulating youth and adult engagement in both offline and online forms of political participation.
## Recommendations for Strengthening Civic Education in the Digital Age

1. **Use active and participatory pedagogical methods.** Provide opportunities in both online and offline programming for younger students to engage in group activities, role-playing exercises, games, and simulations related to democratic learning. Provide similar activities for older youth and adults along with opportunities to interact with local political officials and institutions via service-learning leadership programs, participation on local boards, or community-oriented civic engagement.

2. **Devote the necessary resources for teacher and facilitator training.** There is overwhelming evidence regarding the importance of high-quality teachers and facilitators for civic education to “work.” There is a need for considerable investment in teacher training, with this need being increasingly urgent given the complexities involved in online civic education delivery.

3. **Expand online and hybrid online-offline civic education programming.** Utilize accessible online civic education, either by itself or as a component of traditional interventions, as a means to further both online and offline political participation.

4. **Expand civic education curricula to counter current global challenges to democratic governance.** Traditional civic education curricula stressing political knowledge, civic competencies, and participation as well as support for democratic values continue to be important. But these areas must be complemented by content devoted to countering anti-democratic trends and the spread of disinformation and misinformation via digital communications.

5. **Be mindful of, and attempt to mitigate, the potentially negative effects of both online and offline civic education.** Online programming of any sort, including civic education, takes place in spaces where individuals may be exposed to harassment and surveillance and may be susceptible to misinformation. Additionally, online programming fails to include those populations without access to digital technologies or the internet, and civic education in these instances runs the risk of exacerbating pre-existing political inequalities.

6. **Integrate opportunities for online and offline activism.** Historically, activism relied on the development of strongly tied networks. With the advent of new digital technologies, there are multiple opportunities for online activism focusing more on loose clusters of relationships via social networking and other digital technologies.

7. **Utilize impact evaluations from previous interventions to make evidence-based programming decisions.** There is a large amount of evidence, based on rigorous impact evaluations in both the policy and practitioner literature, on what does and does not work in civic education programming. Draw on this literature in program design and implementation by following some of the impact-based recommendations above and in the evidence reviews from specific sections in the primer.

[Click here to access the full Primer on Civic Education in the Digital Age.](#)

[Click here to access the Civic Education Assessment Tool (CEAT).](#)