

Can Students Click Their Way to a Better World?

Technology could help young people learn civics lessons—and use them, too.

By Chris Berdik



Don't call them slacktivists.

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The rap on kids these days is that they don't know much about civic life, and they care even less. But a growing group of scholars says the problem isn't with the kids, but rather with an outdated approach to teaching civics.

The public square is increasingly online, they argue, and that's where civics education needs to go, too. Instead of addressing our civics shortcomings just by adding more classes and mandating tests, we should tap technology to better engage young people in both the learning *and the doing* of democracy.

Most educators agree that civics should be a higher priority in schools. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, aka "The Nation's Report Card," recently released **the latest dismal results** from its quadrennial civics test. Less than one-quarter of eighth-graders had a "proficient" understanding about the fundamental values and functions of our democracy, continuing a flat-line trend stretching back more than a decade.

In response, many states are bolstering their civics requirements. But mandates alone won't solve the problem, according to Louise Dubé, executive director of iCivics, a nonprofit founded in 2009 by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The iCivics team creates free online role-playing games for middle-school social studies classes, such as *Executive Command*, *Win the White House*, and *Do I Have a Right?* More than 72,000 educators have used the games and the accompanying lesson plans.

Real civics education shouldn't be

We need to make civics lessons more meaningful to students, Dubé said, "by putting them in the center of the action."

Others push that idea even further, using digital media to help kids get involved with issues in their communities. Joseph Kahne, an education professor at Mills College in Oakland, California, is a principal investigator for the **Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP)** research network, which studies young people's use of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and other online platforms to share information, debate, and mobilize on social

regurgitating facts.

and political issues.

“Why are we teaching democracy like a game show?” Kahne asked in a recent *Education Week* commentary, criticizing several states’ plans to make the American citizenship test a graduation requirement. The test asks

questions such as “How many justices are on the Supreme Court of the United States?” Real civics education shouldn’t be regurgitating facts, Kahne argues. It should empower young people to speak up and take part in civic life, and technology is key to that effort.

One YPP initiative is **Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age**, a partnership between Mills College and the Oakland Unified School District. Two years ago, the initiative’s leaders convinced Oakland Unified to change its mission statement to say that high school graduates should not just be college and career ready, but “community ready” as well. To that end, education researchers and school administrators teamed up with teachers to weave new media literacy into their lesson plans, skills such as fact-checking information and searching for multiple viewpoints online, using digital media to speak out on issues, and engaging in respectful online debates. These lessons build to a senior-year community-oriented capstone project.

Next week, the district will honor several high school seniors with “community ready” awards for extracurricular efforts on behalf of their classmates and their city. The honorees will include Ronye Cooper of Castlemont High School in east Oakland, a school with mostly Hispanic and black students. A year ago, after Cooper’s computer science teacher persuaded her to attend her first hackathon—a marathon coding session in which teams build software and hardware products—she realized that code could make tools to help her school and community, but she didn’t see many people like her, especially other women of color, who could code. So, Cooper started a **girls coding club at Castlemont**.

In December 2014, the coding club ventured to Palo Alto for a public safety hackathon. It was just weeks after **protests and rioting swept through Ferguson, Missouri, following the police shooting death of an unarmed black teenager**, and days after other protests erupted over police killing unarmed men in New York City and Phoenix. The girls from Castlemont programmed an app called Copwatch that Cooper describes as “a Yelp for cops,” with which people could post details of their interactions with police via smartphone, and link those stories to digital pins on a city map.

Similar efforts to plug students into digital citizenship are happening in several other cities. In Boston, for instance, law professors and students at Northeastern University’s **NuLawLab** are working with high school bicycle advocates to digitally map the city from a cyclist’s point of view. This summer, the high school cyclers will fan out across the city uploading text, video, and other media to NuLawLab’s mapping app to document things like dangerous traffic and potholed bike lanes, which could later be used to lobby city officials on bike-related policies.

“It’s a lot easier to advocate for something when you have evidence,” said Neil Leifer, a Northeastern law professor facilitating the project.

Also this summer, political science professors and graduate students at the University of Chicago who curate the **Black Youth Project**, an online clearinghouse of research, blogs, and media postings by young black Americans, will partner with the city schools to train a couple dozen high school students in survey methods, digital literacy and production, and organizing via social media. The same partnership is also weaving new media skills into a **pilot civics curriculum linked with a service-learning requirement** in Chicago Public Schools, just as the Illinois state legislature is poised to **make civics a high school graduation requirement**.

Of course, Kahne and the other YPP researchers know online political participation is often dismissed as lazy, knee-jerk, and ineffectual “slacktivism.” But they point out that offline civic engagement also leads to its share of dead-ends, and that many online efforts have shown real-world muscle. For instance, crowdfunding sites have raised millions of dollars for civic-minded nonprofits. The online petition site **Change.org** claims victories ranging from the release of political prisoners to the cancellation of banks’ debit-card user fees. And the recent, nationwide protests over police killings have been sparked by circulated smartphone videos and sustained by live tweets from the street, with mobilizing hashtags such as **#blacklivesmatter**.

“Nobody thinks you can bring real social change just by clicking ‘like,’” Kahne said. Nevertheless, YPP research suggests that people who “like” a political blog post, post a topical article, sign an online petition, or make any other low-effort online participation are also far more likely to take on higher-demand civic engagement, such as volunteering for a political campaign or organizing a protest.

“All those activities give kids a chance to be active,” Kahne said, “and to see themselves as people who can speak out and make a difference on issues they care about.”

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