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## Educating Youth for Online Civic and Political Dialogue: A Conceptual Framework for the Digital Age

by Erica Hodgin on [June 27, 2016](#) in [Article](#)

### Abstract

With the rise of digital media and online communication, supporting youth to navigate online civic and political dialogue is increasingly critical. Drawing on four high school teachers' work on a participatory academic platform, this paper details five stages of opportunity that built young people's capacity for civic voice and influence. These learning opportunities, as well as three key challenges teachers faced, provide a conceptual framework for educators in the digital age.

### Introduction

Dialogue is essential to maintaining a healthy democracy and is a key aspect of civic and political life.<sup>1</sup> With the rise of Internet-fueled communication, a variety of online platforms enable more frequent opportunities to engage in civic and political dialogue. In the past, civic dialogue occurred primarily in private circles or in structured forums, such as town hall meetings or letters to the editor.<sup>2</sup> Now, online dialogue can take place anytime, anywhere.<sup>3</sup>

However, online dialogue can be riddled with conflict leading people to disengage. Kushin and Kitchener found that 30% of discussions in Facebook political groups contained personal insults and offensive language.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, a string of news sites, including the *Chicago Sun Times*, *Popular Science*, and *Vox.com*, removed comment features after vitriolic comments turned readers off, while other sites integrated features that limit anonymity.<sup>5</sup> Conflict or fears of backlash may also diminish youth engagement. For example, Weinstein, Rundle, and James found that 32% of their sample of seventy highly active civic youth had silenced or quieted their online civic expression just two years later.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, engaging youth in productive civic and political dialogue is increasingly critical. In fact, Lenhart and colleagues found that youth reported relying on advice and support from adults—mainly parents and teachers or another adult at school—to help them navigate online conflict.<sup>7</sup> And, yet, there is a lack of research focused on how to effectively and equitably support youth in schools to take advantage of the opportunities for meaningful and productive online dialogue and navigate the challenges.

Drawing on four high school teachers' work with their students on a participatory academic platform, this paper conceptualizes five stages of opportunity for online civic and political dialogue as a means of building young people's capacity for civic voice and influence. These stages of opportunity, as well as three key challenges teachers faced, provide expanded considerations for educators in the digital age.

## *Youth Engagement in Online Civic and Political Dialogue*

The affordances of digital media provide expanded opportunities to learn about issues, share one's points of view, be exposed to multiple perspectives, share feedback with leaders and institutions, and push for change. These opportunities are particularly significant for youth, who have traditionally been limited in their ability to participate in institutional activities. In addition, youth engagement in online civic and political dialogue is growing. Fifty-four percent of 18-24-year-olds who use the Internet engaged in online dialogue related to politics in 2012,<sup>8</sup> up from 43% in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

### *Challenges Involved in Online Civic and Political Dialogue*

Although the digital age opens up expanded opportunities, online dialogue is often fraught with challenges such as filter bubbles<sup>10</sup> and echo chambers<sup>11</sup> that limit one's exposure to like-minded information and individuals. In addition, increased anonymity can reduce interpersonal cues and fuel unproductive conflict.<sup>12</sup> From a nationally representative survey of youth ages 15-25, Middaugh, Bowyer, and Kahne found that witnessing online conflict is common.<sup>13</sup> Those most engaged with politics online were more likely to experience conflict directly. Furthermore, when asked to evaluate scenarios of conflictual online political dialogue, a significant number of respondents recommended withdrawing from the conversation rather than working toward productive dialogue. Therefore, engaging youth in productive online dialogue as well as teaching strategies to navigate disagreement and conflict are critical.

### *Learning Opportunities for Civic and Political Dialogue*

Engaging young people in discussions of local, national, and international issues has long been regarded as a core component of civic learning in and out of school.<sup>14</sup> When youth engage in discussions of current events and decision-making, they report being more engaged in school. They also report greater interest in politics, improved communication and critical thinking skills, increased civic knowledge, and a higher chance of participating in civic life as adults.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it is key for youth to engage in discussion of controversial issues. Unfortunately, due to fear of controversy, schools and teachers either shy away from such discussions or downplay the contentiousness inherent in discussing meaningful issues.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, research shows that not all youth have the same opportunities to engage in political discussion.<sup>17</sup> For example, in a study of forty-eight high school social studies classrooms, Nystrand, Gamoran, and Carbonaro found discussions taking place in only 10% of the classrooms.<sup>18</sup> On average these only lasted for approximately thirty seconds. In a study of more than 2,000 California high school seniors, Kahne and Middaugh found a civic opportunity gap where higher academic standing, White, or higher income students had more civic learning opportunities, including discussions of social and political topics.<sup>19</sup> In order to not replicate political inequality, all students need opportunities to learn how to discuss civic and political issues.

### *Engaging Youth in Online Civic and Political Dialogue*

Online discussion is becoming a more common component of teaching and learning in the digital age. For example, blogging has drawn increasing interest from teachers because of the expanded focus on and interaction around writing.<sup>20</sup> Blogging and other forms of online publication have created more authors than ever before.<sup>21</sup> A significant number of these online authors are youth. In 2005, 17% of teenagers reported creating their own blog compared to 7% of adults.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of audience has also shifted in the digital age to include known, unknown, and unknowable audiences.<sup>23</sup> In online spaces, students can interact with an audience that reaches beyond the classroom walls. However, despite

posting content online and attempting to engage an audience, many efforts yield very little attention or response. This is what Levine calls “the audience problem.”<sup>24</sup> While expressing one’s political views online can be beneficial on its own, it is important for educators to set realistic expectations and scaffold activities so that youth can effectively produce and circulate political content to a responsive audience.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise, assignments where content is shared online may end up feeling like a regular assignment for the teacher.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, instruction focused on online communication generally will not fully prepare youth for civic and political participation in the digital age. For example, in a study of fifteen young civic dialoguers, James found that participants noted a lack of or “outdated” curriculum related to online civic participation.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, educational efforts that combine digital literacy development alongside of civic learning are key to fully preparing youth for participation in the digital age.

Educators in the digital age must also attend to the inequitable access to and use of digital tools in schools.<sup>28</sup> For example, many schools in low socioeconomic areas do not have the structures to maintain, update, and fully integrate robust technology into instruction.<sup>29</sup> Warschauer and Matuchniak found that “the most important technology discrepancies in U.S. schools are not whether computers and the Internet are used, but for what purpose.”<sup>30</sup> High-income youth, for example, are significantly more likely to use educational technology to prepare written text or media presentations. Whereas low-income youth are more likely to learn or practice basic skills<sup>31</sup> causing what Schradie called “the digital production gap.”<sup>32</sup> It is crucial for all students to have access to high-quality digital civic learning opportunities that focus on an array of skills and capacities.

## Methods

Through qualitative analysis of nine student interviews, nine classroom observations, four teacher interviews, and one teacher focus group, I sought to understand the opportunities and challenges teachers and students faced when engaging in online civic and political dialogue. I conducted open coding based on themes derived from an emerging conceptual framework.<sup>33</sup> Since this is a new area of research, I utilized strategies from case study<sup>34</sup> and grounded theory<sup>35</sup> methods of data analysis to iteratively build a theory regarding educating youth for online civic and political dialogue. Through this inductive method, “comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated. The type of theory is called substantive theory—theory that applies to a specific aspect of practice.”<sup>36</sup>

## Context

Three of the four teachers taught in public high schools in Oakland, California, ranging in size from approximately 700 to 1700 students. Oakland Unified School District’s (OUSD) diverse student body is made up of 30% African American, 14% Asian, 1% Filipino, 39% Latino, 0.5% Native American, 1% Pacific Islander, 12% White, and 2.5% not specified. The graduation rate was 67% in 2012-2103 compared with a statewide graduation rate of 80%.

These three teachers all participated in a digital civics initiative launched in 2012 called Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age (EDDA). The EDDA initiative—a partnership between OUSD, Mills College, and the National Writing Project (NWP)—has taken a district-wide approach to re-envisioning civic education in the digital age by building professional learning communities of teachers who integrate digital civic learning opportunities into the curriculum.

The fourth teacher in the study developed connections with the three Oakland teachers via Youth Voices (youthvoices.net). He taught at a religiously affiliated private high school in Utah. The school enrolled just over 700 students and offered more than thirty Advanced Placement courses. Ninety-eight percent of the Class of 2015 continued their education in a postsecondary institution in the fall of 2015. According to the 2010 census data, the city where the school is located was made up of 75.1% Whites, 2.7% African American, 22.3% Latino, and 4.4%

Asian.

Youth Voices is a school-based social network platform that was developed by NWP teachers to bring students together online to share writing and engage in conversation. The site now includes forty-one middle schools and high schools across the United States. Teachers moderate the site, but students have the ability to comment and post content through their individual account. Youth Voices is unique in some ways. However, the affordances of the platform are similar to other online dialogic communities and, therefore, make it a helpful setting to study. Drawing on teachers' and students' use of the Youth Voices platform, this paper highlights how teachers shifted their practice to support students to engage in productive and meaningful online civic and political dialogue.

### Findings:

#### Stages of Opportunities for Online Civic and Political Dialogue

By analyzing teachers' and students' experiences on Youth Voices, I identified several stages of opportunity that were key to developing students' capacities for online civic and political dialogue. Teachers and students also faced obstacles in their efforts. These opportunities and challenges highlight important considerations for educators and schools aiming to prepare students for civic voice and influence in the digital age.

Five key stages of opportunity surfaced from analyzing the data. These opportunities built on one another and helped students develop the various skills and capacities needed to engage in productive online civic dialogue. While there is no conventional way to move through these stages, teachers in this study generally implemented the following scaffolded progression.

#### *Becoming a Part of an Online Dialogic Community*

One of the initial stages of opportunity for students was becoming a member of an online dialogic community. Teachers often asked students first to post a short bio introducing themselves. Over time, students learned about other community members and got to know the social context and norms of the platform. Students engaged with classmates, students from neighboring schools, and students from other areas of the United States. When asked what they liked most about Youth Voices, seven out of the nine students described some beneficial aspect of interacting with an online community of peers. Contrary to some blogging projects where teachers and students struggle to access an authentic audience,<sup>37</sup> Youth Voices provided an active academic community with which to engage. An eleventh grade student from Utah shared, "I don't think that in other places we get the chance to communicate with people that aren't really close to us.... And so when you get an honest post from someone who lives across the country from you..., I think it's more interesting than talking to someone sitting right next to you."<sup>38</sup> Students were able to connect with others outside their classroom walls, engage in conversation about what they were learning, and learn about different points of view on an array of topics.

Engaging in dialogue with a diverse audience and navigating controversial topics like the minimum wage, economic inequality, or police brutality in an online setting could lead to conflict or disrespectful disagreement. However, both teachers and students described the positive and supportive norms that existed. Teachers set up the site so that there are no anonymous or independent members. In order to post or comment, students must sign-up for a User-ID and be connected to a participating teacher. Teachers often also set aside time for students to read posts, comment on posts, and learn about participating schools and the communities they were located in before posting.

In the interviews with students, they each clearly distinguished Youth Voices from other social media platforms. They described it as a safe space focused on learning where they could be taken seriously and express themselves academically and politically. An English teacher in Oakland described it as "a nice sort of small pond version of the

Internet, because it really is just other high school students looking at their writing. And, because it's this sort of moderated and smaller format, it's, I think a much more civil place than a lot of the Internet at large...."

### *Analyzing Discussion of Civic and Political Issues*

Next, students often deepened their sense of the online community by analyzing discussions on the site. Students were often exposed to multiple and diverse perspectives and expanded their understanding of civic and political issues. The opportunity to connect with students who were from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, different religious backgrounds, or had different lived experiences was also very compelling for students. For example, students in a twelfth grade economics class in Oakland posted about economic inequality after interviewing community members who lived on the minimum wage. A student in Utah read these posts and was struck by the wage gap between CEOs and minimum wage workers, which she said isn't often discussed in her school or community. In addition, a student in Oakland shared how important Youth Voices was to her because it has made her rethink her perspective on issues.

The last time I saw a post about ... Black Lives Matter, I really loved it, and I really learned a lot of things from the post.... We have talked about police brutality before, but this post was so different because I saw some of the comments that this post got, and some people were like, "Oh, but police are good, and my cousin is a police [officer],".... And I didn't know that African American people have to go through a lot of things, and they're being really targeted by the police. And I learned that that's really sad. Like you see a person walking. You don't know what's going in their lives, and it brings me to feel connected to their story because sometimes I feel like that's happened to me because I have faced discrimination before when I was a newcomer.

These opportunities to connect with others across difference and discuss pressing and, at times, controversial issues enabled students to learn about an issue from different angles.

Students in Oakland and Utah also used the platform to analyze topics further by conducting field research. Youth Voices served as a diverse audience that students could reach out to and gather primary source material. For example, a student from Oakland circulated an online survey via Youth Voices and Facebook and collected ninety-five responses. Another student received sixty-four responses on his online survey about bullying from youth in California, Utah, and Vermont. His teacher described how much this built up his confidence because he was able to share his personal experience and data from different regions across the country. By tapping into the online community of Youth Voices, students were able to investigate issues from different viewpoints and gather unique information.

### *Engaging in Productive Online Civic and Political Dialogue*

Engaging in productive online dialogue by commenting on others' posts or responding to comments was another significant opportunity for students that usually occurred after getting to know the platform. Over time, teachers developed and posted conversational guides on Youth Voices that suggested respectful ways to agree, disagree, or generally discuss someone's post while also backing up your opinion with reasons and evidence. However, students were also encouraged to move beyond the structured suggestions and create their own response while keeping the following guidelines in mind:

1. Speak directly to the student or teacher whose post you are responding to.
2. Quote from the post or describe specific details.
3. Relate the work to your own experiences or to another text, image, video, or audio that this one reminds you of.
4. Be encouraging and generous with your remarks. End on a positive note.

Not only did these guidelines support students in learning how to comment, but they also seemed to establish a tone of mutual respect on the site.

During the interview, students were asked to read an actual Youth Voices post about graffiti and a few selected comments, including ones that were disrespectful. Several students were taken aback to read the comments and were surprised that they existed on Youth Voices. I asked students to describe how they would respond in this situation. There were several consistent themes in students' responses:

- Be respectful and polite by introducing yourself, addressing the person by name, and using academic language.
- Acknowledge and respect the person's opinion.
- Explain why you agree or disagree and back up your opinion with evidence.
- Share your own experience.
- Uplift the person by giving suggestions, sharing constructive criticism or constructive questions, helping them improve, and pointing out something you liked.

The conversational strategies that students' described were not unlike the guidelines posted by teachers on the site. When asked what was the most important thing she learned from Youth Voices, one eleventh grade student from Utah said, "I learned how to respectfully comment on other people's posts while disagreeing with them. I thought that was kind of cool—kind of a good thing to learn 'cause you can disagree with someone and bring up your points...without offending them."

#### *Going Public with One's Civic and Political Perspectives*

The stages of opportunity described above often led students to gain skills and capacities needed for posting on Youth Voices. Going public, a core digital civic literacy, as outlined by Middaugh and Evans, where students use digital tools and networks to share their perspectives on civic issues,<sup>39</sup> was comfortable and exciting for some students. Whereas, others were nervous to put their opinions forward online. One student said he worried about starting an argument if someone disagreed with him, while another was concerned about how honest to be about her views. Several students talked about how posting motivated them to reflect on their online persona, as well as improve their written communication so their audience would take them seriously. One Oakland teacher said this was why she used Youth Voices. "I really do enjoy seeing them step into a sort of more adult voice in some ways as they try to figure out how to navigate an online presence. And I think it's very different from how they're used to presenting themselves online and that that's super valuable.... They want to be seen as thoughtful and smart individuals."

One common type of post students shared on Youth Voices was a public reflection about their learning. Due to the nature of the platform and blogging as a genre, posting reflections was more fitting than posting a final five-paragraph essay. Seniors in Oakland and Utah, for example, were able to share what they were learning from their senior research projects, explore what challenges or hurdles they were facing, and how their thinking was evolving. A teacher in Oakland shared what her students got out of posting public reflections.

The idea of using [Youth Voices] to process write for metacognition purposes was actually really valuable. And the kinds of comments they would get back were very encouraging because they're not out there posting, "This is my response to *Native Son* when the author did \_\_\_\_." It was more about, "I'm really struggling with trying to figure out how to evaluate my sources. I don't know what to do." And so then the kinds of comments they would get back from respondents was advice, links to resources.... And it was, I felt, a way that students could put themselves out there as a learner that was super authentic.



Reflection has always been critical for civic identity development and integral to understanding civic issues.<sup>40</sup> However, digital platforms like Youth Voices have enabled more public and enduring forms of reflection that invite dialogue.

Going public on Youth Voices also included opportunities for students to craft an argument and publicly defend their perspective. This chance to express themselves politically seemed to contribute to students' sense of civic voice. Couldry defined voice as the capacity of people to "give an account of themselves and of their place in the world."<sup>41</sup> For many youth whose voices, experiences, and perspectives are often neglected in mainstream dialogues, this is significant. I asked each student to tell me about a post they were proud of that focused on an issue they really cared about. Students shared posts that focused on a range of topics from childhood obesity, to black power, to gay rights, to the safety of hockey helmets. One student described a post she wrote about young women being sexually assaulted when crossing the border to the United States:

It was something meaningful to me because I come from a really poor country. I faced a lot of violence, and that's why I escaped my country, not because I just wanted to come to the country because of money, because that's what some people think.... But when you really have something in your heart, like you wanna just tell your story to other people.... I really love telling my story to other people so they can know what is happening in my life, so they can know what struggles I had to go through to get to where I am now.... I feel like nobody talks about my country. Nobody talks about my people.... So I feel like I want people to know what these people are going through.

Students saw the opportunity to post their views on Youth Voices as a way to express their political perspective and raise awareness about a range of topics.

### *Moving from Civic Voice Toward Influence*

The final stage of opportunity that students experienced was moving from voicing their perspectives to working toward influencing change.<sup>42</sup> Some students were able to use their voices to raise awareness about civic and political issues and push for change in a variety of ways using any media necessary.<sup>43</sup> Students used Youth Voices to circulate and draw attention to things like letters to the new superintendent of their school district. Students and teachers also used other social media tools like Twitter and Facebook to further circulate content that was posted on Youth Voices. One Oakland student, for example, developed a Change.org petition compelling the state to provide more academic and mental health counselors for schools in high needs areas. Through her senior research project, she learned that her school had only one academic counselor and no mental health counselors supporting approximately 700 students, 30% of who were suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. The student wrote a post on Youth Voices mobilizing others to sign the petition and collected 118 signatures in the end. These experiences built bridges from voice to influence enabling students to see how going public with concerns and engaging in online dialogue can raise awareness about an issue.

### Challenges to Consider When Engaging Youth in Online Civic and Political Dialogue

The three challenges that were the most significant in this study highlight the need for supports and resources for this agenda. While the context of these classrooms is unique, the hurdles teachers faced raise important considerations for educators in the digital age.

### *Striving for High-Quality, In-Depth Dialogue*

As highlighted above, teachers and students appreciated the supportive environment of Youth Voices to express themselves politically and engage in dialogue. However, the quality and depth of dialogue was a challenge at times.

In a focus group with Oakland teachers using Youth Voices, one teacher shared: “I’m still trying to get my students to write better comments beyond ‘LOL, totally agree.’.... We talked about what we noticed and how people were disagreeing and how they were talking about ideas instead of individuals and stuff like that. But I’m not seeing it transfer into what my students are doing.” Later in the year, while I was observing this teacher’s tenth grade English class, she asked her students to comment on a post about implicit bias training for police officers. “I don’t want you to just comment on the original post, but I want you to read through the comments so you get a full sense of the discussion.... Add to the discussion. Make it a real discussion.” In an interview afterwards, the teacher said she did begin to see students comment on each other’s comments. Since they were all commenting on the same post, it turned into a more in-depth and authentic conversation. In order to encourage online dialogue to move beyond surface level conversations, teachers will need to model conversational strategies for depth and encourage students to go deeper in their dialogue with others.

### *Time and Space in the Curriculum*

Teachers had to make complex decisions about how and when to fit online dialogue into their curriculum. Several teachers talked about the challenge of finding enough time to devote to students reading posts, engaging in dialogue, and preparing to go public with their writing. Taking students to a computer lab or getting a laptop cart took a significant amount of time. One teacher in a focus group asked, “My big question [is] how do you make the time in your curriculum? Because my guess is that you have to just sort of re-figure what your curriculum looks like to work around that.” Another teacher responded by sharing that publishing became a norm in her class, either on Youth Voices or in a shared Google Drive, but that this took time to develop. Teachers not only need time and space in their curriculum, but they also need professional development and support for prioritizing this agenda.

### *Access to Technology*

Teachers and students in Oakland raised challenges they faced with technology ranging from spotty Internet access, to limited computer labs or laptop carts, to broken computers. While access was becoming less of an issue, it was still a hurdle that complicated their ability to engage in online dialogue. This issue did not come up in my interviews with the teacher and students in Utah. However, participants from both areas talked about glitches in the platform and limitations of the site, like mobile compatibility. This was due, in large part, to limited capacity of teacher volunteers to swiftly fix problems and inadequate funding for upgrades. If teachers and students are going to engage in thoughtful and meaningful online dialogue, then support and resources for school infrastructure and platform development and maintenance are critical.

## Discussion and Implications

While democratic dialogue has always been key, new and expanded learning opportunities are needed for youth to successfully navigate civic and political dialogue in the digital age. If these opportunities are not provided, research suggests that youth may either minimize or withdraw their participation from online dialogue because of fears of negativity and conflict.<sup>44</sup> And, if these opportunities are not provided equitably to all students, then political inequalities will be further replicated on- and offline. Therefore, schools are critical environments to engage youth in online civic and political dialogue because a majority of youth can be reached there and they are often more diverse than other settings in which youth spend time.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the limited scope of this study, the data revealed a noteworthy conceptual framework for educating youth for civic and political dialogue in the digital age. Teachers in this study facilitated five key stages of opportunity in a scaffolded progression that enabled students to learn different skills and strategies for productive and meaningful online dialogue. While the progression is not prescribed, it is important for educators to consider how they will offer a set of opportunities that support students to be respectful in online communities, thoughtful in their analysis of the



online dialogue they view, productive in their comments and responses, compelling in their online posts, and strategic in moving toward change. Each of these experiences builds students' civic voice and builds bridges toward influence.

In addition, teachers in this study faced three critical challenges that complicated their ability to engage students in frequent and high quality online civic dialogue. Teachers were innovative in working around these obstacles despite the shortcomings of their context. However, it is not realistic to expect that all teachers will be able to do so. In order to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities, schools and teachers will need everything from professional development, to curricular resources, to collaboration time with colleagues, to technological supports, to administrative backing for such endeavors.

In addition, supports and resources are needed to develop and maintain high quality participatory platforms that provide online space for teachers and students to engage in dialogue with one another. Even though Youth Voices provided a rich and engaging space, it is largely supported by volunteers and has not had enough funds for needed upgrades in years.

Being a part of an online community like Youth Voices, enabled students in this study to learn about civic and political issues, engage with diverse and multiple perspectives, participate in productive dialogue, go public with their viewpoints, and use their voices to influence change. These valuable experiences provided students with critical skills and strategies to participate in civic and political dialogue paving the way for meaningful and productive participation in the digital age.

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### About Erica Hodgin

Erica Hodgin is the Associate Director of the [Civic Engagement Research Group \(CERG\)](#) at Mills College and the Research Director of the Educating for Participatory Politics project -- an action group of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP). She is also Co-Principal Investigator with Joe Kahne of [Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age](#) – a district-wide civic education effort in partnership with Oakland Unified School District and the National Writing Project. Her current research focuses on the the educational implications of youth civic and political engagement in the digital age. She has authored articles in *Theory and Research in Social Education* and the *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy*, as well as book chapters in *Digital Equity and Educational Opportunity* and *#youthaction: Becoming Political in the Digital Age*.

Erica received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Mills College and completed her dissertation on the ways cultural humility can enable teachers to build effective relationships with students across racial and cultural differences. Before joining CERG, Erica taught English and Social Studies and served as an instructional coach at the middle school and high school level. She also coordinated educational programs in several non-profit organizations in California and Maharastra, India.

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