

# ***A New Dawn: Civic Competence Requires Peace Education***

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## **Abstract**

The demand for civic education has increased in recent years as a result of the high visibility of political discord and violence. In response to this, organizations, like iCivics, are leveraging their virtual know-how to advance a passive civic learning. Peace education has the potential to go beyond the limitations of conventional civic education and can help young people overcome passivity.

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The heightened visibility of political violence since January 6th, 2021, has generated a surge in interest in civic education (ADL H.E.A.T. Map Hate, Extremism, Antisemitism, Terrorism, 2022). It's typical for the problems of now to animate educational initiatives, which means that it's also crucial that learning for peace be the keystone of civic education.

Holistic education that responds to the needs of the school-aged population is unquestionably needed now. Medical experts are just starting to understand the impact of COVID-19 on youth (New CDC data illuminate youth mental health threats during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2022). Pew reported in August of 2022, that over half of public schools were limited in their efforts to provide mental health support to students due to inadequate funding (Schaeffer, K. 2022).

Civic education has traditionally focused on things such as the branches of government, checks and balances, as well as features relating to the writing and ratification of the Constitution. Occasionally, service projects or mock elections are sprinkled into the mix. The efforts of former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor brought the concept of the "Gamification of Civics" to the general public

with iCivics – an entertaining model of classroom content delivery (iCivics FY21-25 Strategic Plan, 2021).

Online interfaces, like iCivics, may meet many students "where they are," yet their design exposes the very limitation underlying this style of learning. It is an approach to learning that is not so different from the use of the traditional textbook, which clearly delineated between the "expert" author and the student as a passive receptacle of information. Products like iCivics disguise their implicit assumptions about learning as "deficit correction" under a facade of flashy cartoons. As such, they assume the learner brings nothing of value to the learning environment—other than to show mastery of a predetermined set of facts.

Education of this kind is one where the learner is at war with themselves. An element of the age of alienation, it perpetually draws attention toward the superficial and artificial, displacing the inner voice and constraining visions of a future that is different from the past. The needs and desires of the self are subsumed by either the desire for gratification via "winning" or by a lack of an outlet for expressing the felt needs of daily life. In this way, iCivics provides a bounded technocratic solution to a human and democratic need. Marketing hooks and techniques of

modern consumerism cannot substitute for the deeply rooted desire to create, to be respected and to be free.

Peace education begins at a point where the parties and ideas involved are all honored. Each person in the learning space is recognized for their uniqueness and talents including their many potentialities. It is in this kind of setting that we can come to understand the meaning of education— by collectively learning the Latin root of the word educate; to bring forth (Sarason, S. B., 1999).

Creating a setting for intra- and interpersonal peace is a step toward achieving civic aims. A communal space can be where contentious issues can be discussed through peer to peer and student to teacher dialogue. This kind of classroom is one where people pause to listen to the concerns of one another. It prioritizes understanding divergent views and aims to work through the problems of the community. In the process, participants learn how to maintain respect for self and the truly held values of others; born from an array of experiences and backgrounds.

Critics may dismiss this nascent forum of communal dialogue as overly personal or unavailing of the building blocks necessary to renovate the crumbling edifice of our democratic institutions. On the contrary, the practice of the ideals of liberty are what preserve liberty—not the ideal itself. We breathe life into civics when we practice peace through structured dialogue and dispute resolution.

With this type of basis for learning, we may better know our students and follow their interests. An education for peace places trust in the curiosity of learners. Practitioners subscribe to an oath similar to that of a medical physician's Hippocratic pledge to, "first do no harm." This calls for extended time for the learner or group of learners to explore their world and spark a desire for deeper knowledge through experience.

As a teacher once told me, "Humans constantly make complicated systems for tracking and management." Labyrinthine bureaucratic regulations and standards may pose a challenge to a more peaceful style of education, but the human heart yearns for peace and freedom.

When we learn to listen to young people, new possibilities are born from imaginative play. It's a simple idea, but one that is scary for many, especially at a time when the political sledgehammers of censorship and public chastisement are wielded as instrument of blunt force to silence and flatten

the lives of children and those dedicated individuals who caringly devote their lives to nurturing the rising generation.

As the sunflower reaches upward toward light, we too shall stretch ourselves toward the dignity of a peaceful life (Magazine, S., & Mufarech, A., 2022). We too shall scatter seeds of resilience and of dreams of childhoods uninterrupted by nightmarish violence, oppression and war. We will be the sign of a new day, growing from the gardens of our own minds. The new civic education must recognize our natural abundance.

Pause for a moment today, and commit toward this small, yet meaningful way to be a part of the peace movement as you welcome a new dawn in civics.

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