

Best Practices in Civics Education: A Case Study



What Are Best Practices in Civics Education?

- **Build a classroom community that exemplifies democratic processes and values diversity.** Have learners make decisions about class content and tasks, sometimes by consensus or by vote. Explain why you are using these student-oriented, participatory processes and how they exemplify democratic processes in the broader society.
- **Engage learners with civics topics that require research, problem solving, and critical thinking.** Problem- and project-based learning strategies are ideal for fostering and developing these skills. In addition, provide supports (language, practice with learning strategies) for deep inquiry into issues critical to learners' lives and equip learners with the content knowledge and skills needed for active, informed civic engagement.
- **Support learners' development of the skills needed to become participatory, justice-minded citizens who can take action when problems, issues, and events affect their communities.**
- **Build knowledge of U.S. history and systems in ways that are relevant to learners' lives.** To ensure relevance, always apply the students' learning to issues of concern for their families or communities.

Implementing Best Practices at a Large Urban ABE Program in the Midwest

Class description

This class is an adult basic education (ABE) low intermediate class at a large urban ABE program in Minnesota. Maria has many years of experience teaching adult learners and holds a state ABE license. The class is primarily focused on College and Career Readiness Standards for English Language Arts (CCRS ELA), but it includes a fair amount of mathematics instruction as well. The students engage in topics around a variety of content areas, including civics and government, history, science, and language arts. There are 35 students enrolled in this class, but typically only 25–30 students attend each night. The class meets 4 nights per week for 3 hours per night. Most students in this class are working toward their high school equivalency. About one third of the students are multilingual learners who speak languages other than English at home. They have completed the English language acquisition classes at this site and are now in ABE classes. A few students have interrupted or limited prior formal schooling. These students have immigrated from Somalia, Sudan, Laos, Mexico, Honduras, and Russia, and all plan to apply for naturalization within the next few years.

The Best Practices in Action

1. **Build a classroom community that exemplifies democratic processes and values diversity.** Maria conducts frequent surveys around the students' interests and personal needs regarding their families and communities. When choosing topics to explore, the class engages in ranking tasks to identify issues that are most pressing for everyone. This is a highly multicultural class, and Maria always strives to elicit multiple experiences and perspectives on the issues and content it covers. These activities promote **self-awareness**.
2. **Engage with civics topics that require research, problem solving, and critical thinking.** Maria uses authentic current reading and listening texts to work on strategies for accessing complex sources. She provides the academic language frames needed by the students to engage in deep, sustained discussions (e.g., expressing opinions, agreeing, respectfully disagreeing, elaborating on others' ideas) as well as graphic organizers for note taking and organizing information. Civics-related content is often presented in infographics, charts, and graphs, and current information is generally accessed online. Maria's approach integrates varying forms of print and digital text and draws on current information from a wide variety of government and nonprofit agencies (e.g., the U.S. Census Bureau, the Pew Research Center). These are examples of supports given to learners so that they can engage in effective **communication, problem solving, and critical thinking**.
3. **Develop skills needed to become participatory and justice-minded citizens who can take action when problems, issues, and events affect their communities.** Maria always tries to position her instruction in ways that allow learners to become participatory, justice-oriented citizens. Recently, the class considered the homeless encampment that was located one mile from the school. Over several months, the students conducted research to determine why the camp developed and what city policies governed it, gathering information from news reports, community forums, and a visit to the camp. They orchestrated a clothing drive at the school to collect desperately needed winter coats, hats, and gloves and delivered the items to the camp. Eventually, the city acted to close the camp and to relocate its residents, approximately 80% of whom were Native American. This is an example of how her class thoughtfully considers issues of **difference and diversity**.
4. **Build knowledge of U.S. history and systems in ways relevant to learners' lives.** Maria and her class became actively involved in a local movement, [#IamABE](#), that strives to make ABE services more visible in the surrounding community and that provides outlets for the students to share their ideas, needs, and complex identities. She often assigns subgroups to explore different facets of an issue (e.g., changes to school busing and districting policies). Maria works to integrate government-focused topics with mathematics and science (e.g., the Flint, Michigan, water crisis; data analysis; learning about environmental topics). Here we see how **critical thinking, processing and analyzing information, and problem solving** are all at play.



Reflection Questions

1. Which of the **Skills That Matter** do you think this teacher's approach is likely to foster and how? Remember that these skills include:
 - a. Critical thinking
 - b. Communication
 - c. Processing and analyzing information
 - d. Self-awareness
 - e. Problem solving
 - f. Navigating systems
 - g. Adaptability and willingness to learn
 - h. Respecting difference and diversity/interpersonal skills
2. What do you think makes this teacher's class successful?
3. What inspires you and surprises you about this case study? How could you apply some of these best practices in your own context? What benefits would result? What might be some obstacles you would need to consider?
4. How could this approach be used in responding to a broad range of learner needs and program expectations in your setting?

