

# Learn to Be a Citizen

By Peter Levine, Ph.D.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Levine, Ph.D., is Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs in Tufts University's Jonathan Tisch College of Civic Life. He is a co-organizer of the Civic Mission & Strategy Report (2003), chair of the civic committee for the Center for Civic and Community Leadership (2013), and one of the Principal Investigators of the Educational Activities Research (2021).

Important civic activities, such as voting, volunteering, and participating in groups are voluntary. There are no immediate penalties for failing to do these things. If we expect millions of adults to choose to be active and informed citizens throughout their lives, we must help them develop habits of engagement when they are young. One way to form a habit of civic engagement is to take informed action during social justice class.

## Global Connections

### World | Global Connections?

The world is, and always has been, deeply interconnected. Becoming a fully informed and responsible citizen of the United States means understanding the global connection and being aware of the world beyond the nation's borders.

### Understanding History

Students become more informed when they learn that American history and world history are closely linked. The United States emerged as a result of interaction between European settlers and Native Americans, conflict among European empires, and the Atlantic slave trade. Ending colonial time, Americans were involved in long-distance trade networks. The population of North America reflects massive and continuing migration from all of the inhabited continents. In turn, the United States has influenced the rest of the world as a result of its military and political power, economy, and culture.

### Understanding Global Connections and Requirements

Informed citizens know that many of the world's most significant issues are international. For example, it doesn't matter where on Earth a ton of carbon is extracted and burned; it still affects the climate of the United States. A pandemic can start in one region and spread throughout the world. Addressing challenges that affect all of us require international cooperation.

Nations cooperate by negotiating treaties and coming together in various groups. They also engage in climate change diplomacy and hold summit meetings. Meanwhile, people cooperate across borders by joining international organizations and movements. Learning about the forms and methods of



## **Standard 3: News Sources**

It remains vital to learn how to collect and present the news and to distinguish in various forms of news media, including blog, podcast, and homemade video, as well as newspaper article and network television program. The media environment changes rapidly, and sometimes students are more aware of it than adults are. Indeed, both nontraditional platforms can play a significant role as generators of news media and as the people who decide what news spreads to large audiences.

Students should be encouraged to ask questions about the source, motive, value, and factual basis of everything they choose to read or watch and share with others.

## **Academic News Literacy**

It is perhaps more important than ever to have a basic grounding in political system, democratic values, and scientific method. We need those values and methods to help choose which sources and evidence to trust. A solid social studies curriculum provides students with the concepts, methods, and values that are needed to navigate the media.

## Classroom Debate

One challenge in choosing appropriate issues for discussion. At least one topic that students discuss in a social studies classroom should be debated today. Students need experience talking about the topic that divides in the present, not just matter that were resolved in the past. Events (such as a recent natural disaster) may be worth addressing in a class, but they are not "issues." Issues involve choices about which people disagree. For example, what should be done about crime, homelessness, or religious persecution?

The choice of an issue to discuss might depend on the makeup of a particular class. If all students happen to agree about a given issue, it is not an interesting or appropriate topic for discussion as it does not contain multiple perspectives. If students are likely to split along the lines of identity, such as gender or race, a topic may be difficult to manage in a way that benefits everyone. Disagreement can be found in every classroom; however, some topics will divide a group in unpredictable ways. The teacher makes the call on which issues to discuss.

Promote active citizenship in your classroom.

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