

1.1 CIVICS AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Essential Question(s): What does it mean to be an “American”? What is civics?

Overview

Young people are making their voices heard in public discussions, protests, social media posts and writing about current events, elections, policies and issues that they believe directly affect their lives and communities. This climate has heightened a call for comprehensive civic education, already emergent in a “politically divisive time,” so that young people are prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to be effective and engaged community members. Civics learning can turn high school classrooms into laboratories where students learn how to discuss complex civic issues from multiple perspectives and explore ideas for civic action.

Snapshot

What Students Will Learn:

In this lesson, students will begin by examining the many meanings of the word “American” and describing what goes into a successful, engaging, meaningful civics education.

Standard(s):

SS.IS.1.9-12

D2.Civ.7.9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1.D

Time: 50 minutes

Objectives

- Define the term “American” and reflect on the usage of the word, including its limitations and connotations.
- Define “Civics Education” and consider what goes into succeeding in a civics class.

Differentiation

Students can work in partners or small groups.

What’s Needed

- Writing utensil and paper or 1:1 technology
- Chart paper and markers or Post-it® Notes
- Online discussion board or equivalent online tool
- Prepare the information in step #9 on Civics from the Education Commission of the States to be projected for whole class viewing.
- Make copies of the “[Vocabulary Four-Square](#)” one for each student.

Classroom Setup

- It is helpful if desks are arranged in pairs or small groups.
- If using an online discussion board, create four boards titled: “Civics Education,” “Successful Civics Student,” “Successful Civics Teacher,” “Civics Needs.” If using poster/chart paper label four sheets with these same titles.

Direct Teaching

1. After welcoming students to the classroom, have them form small groups/partners to work with on the lesson (assigned or self-selected, depending on when in the school year this is, and how much classroom community has been built).
2. Tell students they are going to begin their discussion of civics education by defining the word “American.” Distribute the “[Vocabulary Four-Square](#)” worksheet to each student or have them find it on their 1:1 device. Then give them instructions for completing the worksheet. You could say:

In the circle on your worksheet, write the word “American.” Then, starting with the upper left box, complete the four boxes moving in a clockwise direction. When it asks for a dictionary definition, you can use your 1:1 device, or a print version of a dictionary. Finally, you will draw a picture/visual representation of the term in the lower left corner.

Key Vocabulary

American
civics
civics education
ethnocentrism



3. Ask students to complete their worksheets individually. Allow approximately 10 minutes for this task.
4. Begin a conversation about the word “American” by having a few students share their definitions of the word, then the dictionary definition that they found, as well as their pictures and synonyms. Expand the discussion by asking students how they think other people might respond when trying to describe or define “American.” (This might mean people not in the room at the moment; it might mean people in different parts of the world. A good reminder to consider “Whose voice aren’t we hearing?” in any discussion you may be having.)

Have students consider how different connotations of the word can either include or exclude people. The term “American” carries many different meanings (i.e., citizenship status, geographic location, etc.).

You can conclude by asking students to continue thinking in terms of continents, ethnocentrism and the pros and cons of being “American.”

5. Tell students that being “American” is defined in part by participation in American civic life. Ask students, “What is civics?” Have them work individually to generate a list of words and phrases they associate with the word ‘civics’. (Students may not feel they’re able to define civics, but may have some ideas and facts they associate with the word). Next, have students discuss in pairs/small groups, and then share out to the whole class.
6. Direct students to the online discussion board or chart paper with the four titles. Tell students the following:
Your task is to brainstorm a list that describes each term, then record your list in each discussion board. If using chart paper, record your group’s responses on the corresponding sheets with post-it notes or markers.
For “Civics Education” brainstorm a definition of civics education. Then, brainstorm a list that describes a successful civics student and a successful civics teacher. Finally, make a list of the things you think you will need in a Civics class in order to succeed. Consider both tangible and intangible things, like a “willingness to engage with different perspectives” or “a positive attitude.”
7. Ask 1–2 students to summarize what the class has written.
8. Tell students that central to any discussion about civics is an understanding about what it means to be a ‘citizen’. Explain that for our purposes in this course, we are going to work with a broader definition of citizen, as shared by writer and civics scholar Eric Liu, who said, “When we say the word ‘citizen’ we are not talking only or perhaps even primarily about documentation status under the immigration and naturalization laws of the United States. We are talking about a greater, broader, more ethical conception of citizenship that you might think of as essentially the art of being a prosocial contributor to a community.”
9. Share with students the following information on Civics from the Education Commission of the States. While reading, have students write down key points and/or phrases:
Self-government requires far more than voting in elections every four years. It requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues. Generations of leaders, from America’s founders to the inventors of public education to elected leaders in the twentieth century, have understood that these qualities are not automatically transmitted to the next generation—they must be passed down through schools. Ultimately, schools are the guardians of democracy (p.7).
The purpose of civic education is to prepare students to be informed and engaged citizens. Schools should help young people acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to prepare them to be responsible, thoughtful citizens.

10. Ask students to independently journal, then talk in pairs or small groups about what they notice and what questions the reading raises. Ask 1–2 students to summarize their noticings and questions. Then, read a few of the brainstorms from the other boards/quadrants. What did students say made a successful student, teacher, and what is needed for a successful Civics class?
 11. Ask students, “Is there anything we should change, add, or take away now that we know this definition of “Civics Education?”
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Extension Activities

- Have students go to the [Define American](#) website and watch and listen to different stories about what it means to be “American.”
- As a homework assignment, have students read “[How to Make Citizens](#),” a transcript of Eric Liu’s presentation about preparing citizens in a democracy. Explain that Liu states, “people are still capable of practicing citizenship at the local level.” Instruct students to identify 1–2 ways they can practice citizenship, being a contributor in their school and/or community. Have them share their ideas with the whole class.

VOCABULARY FOUR-SQUARE

Name: _____

My Definition	Dictionary Definition
Picture	Synonyms

