

# Chapter 61

## Participatory Literacy and Taking Informed Action in the Social Studies

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of the social studies is to prepare students for life as citizens in a democratic society, and this requires attention to the variety of digital spaces inhabited by our K-12 students in today's increasingly digitized world. Incorporating participatory technologies into structured inquiries in the social studies may help develop students' skills and abilities in critically sourcing, evaluating, sharing, and creating media, and provides the opportunity for increasingly democratic participation and civic engagement both in and out of the school setting. In this chapter, the authors suggest the integration of participatory literacy with the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework as a means of supporting students in taking informed action.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Participatory literacy has taken on new importance in the era of fake news and misinformation. Since the 2016 presidential election, educators and policymakers have been increasingly concerned with the ability of our students to navigate a complex and often deliberately misleading online landscape. In order for students to develop participatory literacy, they must have opportunities to develop the requisite skills to interpret, share, and create on digital platforms (Wohlwend, 2017), as well as to be able to discern credible information from web-based sources. This includes the ability “to contribute to blogs, wikis, social networking and sharing sites, virtual worlds, and gaming environments, which rely upon creativity, reasoning, focus, critical thinking, and capacity to collaborate” (IGI, 2019).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3706-3.ch061

In the social studies, participatory technologies appear to provide students with more opportunities to engage in inquiry-based civic learning, while also honing their participatory literacy skills. One particular structure, the National Council for the Social Studies' *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, shows promise for supporting teachers in integrating civic action more explicitly into the social studies classroom in a structured manner.

In this chapter, the authors explore strategies for supporting the development of participatory literacy with a specific focus on civic engagement. The *C3 Framework* helps teachers provide the explicit scaffolding that is necessary for navigating the complex context of contemporary digital media. Integrating participatory literacy with the inquiry-based *C3 Framework* provides a structured approach for supporting student' development of deep content knowledge, critical and participatory literacy skills, and consideration of ways to impact the world beyond school.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION AND CIVIC EFFICACY**

In order to truly prepare students for democratic citizenship, a key, though often overlooked, component of social studies education is supporting students as they take civic action or engage in participatory civic experiences (Levinson & Levine, 2013; Parker, 2003). Research on civic education suggests that the most effective approach to supporting students in developing their civic capacities and competencies is by providing active learning experiences focused on relevant issues, both inside and outside of the classroom (Croddy & Levine, 2014). For example, James Youniss (2012) argues that “democratic citizenship is best acquired by taking, rather than reading about, action” (p. 116). Taking action often emerges from posing and solving authentic problems that are posed through inquiry-based education, and the *C3 Framework* provides one pathway towards inquiry-driven studies.

### **Civic Learning in Schools**

Research suggests that a lack of explicit instruction related to civic engagement is typical of student experiences in K-12 schools. A 2012 survey of young adults (18-24) conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) revealed that just 27% of respondents reported having participated in a project in the community as part of their high school social studies classes (Godsay et al., 2012; Levinson & Levine, 2013).

There is also evidence of markedly uneven civic engagement among young Americans (e.g., Han, 2009; Godsay et al., 2012; Levinson, 2010, 2012; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012; Swalwell, 2015); one of the primary divisions is between college-going youth and those who have never attended college. National survey data collected by CIRCLE in 2012 show that a majority of non-college youth are essentially disengaged from civic life, with 37% completely disconnected and 13.5% reporting to be “broadly engaged” (Godsay et al., 2012). Economic insecurity, family needs, financial debt, long work hours, and weak organizational connections may also contribute to low levels of civic engagement for these young adults (CIRCLE, 2013). Wealthy, well-educated citizens have traditionally had a greater voice than less advantaged citizens in American political processes (Han, 2009). According to the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004), the advantaged “roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow,” while “citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials” (p. 1).

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