
Democracy & Education

Going Beyond the Games with iCivics

Brooke Blevins (Baylor University) Ph.D. and Karon N. LeCompte Ph.D. (Baylor University)

Abstract

Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska suggested that there is a tension between the goal of the iCivics games and the goals of democratic education. In this response, we suggest that iCivics can be utilized to help meet the goals of democratic education and to encourage our nation's youth to become active civic participants if used alongside other instructional practices, such as Action Civics. We offer three important reasons for the use of iCivics as a tool for democratic education and engagement. Firstly, we describe the affordances of several other iCivics games not explored in Stoddard's study as well as other elements of the iCivics program including lesson plans, impact points, and discussion boards. Secondly, we suggest that iCivics games should not be a stand-alone curriculum and describe ways to extend the iCivics games to inspire students to consider issues in their community and engage them in action civics. Thirdly, we describe the need for high quality professional development which is central in using iCivics games as part of a comprehensive civics curriculum. Our response extends the findings of Stoddard et al.'s study by suggesting ways educators can go beyond the games to utilize iCivics as a tool for democratic education.

This article is in response to

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IN "THE CHALLENGES of Gaming for Democratic Education: The Case of iCivics," Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska (2016) examined the affordances and constraints of iCivics, an online civics education gaming program, for democratic education. Stoddard and colleagues' study presented a critical analysis of four iCivics games and the ways in which those games encouraged and hindered democratic education. Using both law students and upper-class undergraduate political science majors, the authors examined how these participant researchers reacted to the iCivics game content, rules and structures, and overall narratives presented in the games using a think-aloud protocol coupled with gameplay data. To frame their analysis, Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska referenced the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools' report entitled *The Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Gould, 2011).

BROOKE BLEVINS, PHD is an assistant professor of social studies education at Baylor University. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in secondary education, social studies education, and multicultural education. Her research interests include citizenship education in the digital age, action civics, critical historical thinking, and preservice teacher education. Blevins is a former secondary teacher and has a passion for equipping practicing teachers with the resources needed to engage in humanizing social studies education.

KARON LECOMPTE, PhD, is an associate professor of curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in social studies education at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. She teaches classes in elementary social studies methods. Her research interests include civics education, technology, and teacher preparation.

Results from their study suggested that iCivics games may have affordances for democratic education because of the specific design of the games for classroom-based use, clear scaffolding for players, and ties to state and national curriculum standards. The constraints of the games, including a lack of emphasis on dynamic civic content, little application to civic action, and few opportunities to weigh multiple perspectives and engage in decision-making may outweigh the affordances of this civics education platform. The researchers suggested that there is a tension between the goal of the iCivics games, which is to win by accumulating points or by maintaining citizen satisfaction, and the goals of democratic education, including promoting deliberative discussion, conveying knowledge of the structures of government, and equipping students for civic action (Gould, 2011).

Their review of the iCivics games is on point, and we agree with many of their concerns and critiques. In particular, Stoddard and his fellow authors (2016) argued that iCivics games simplify civic-related concepts and fail to engage “players in the kinds of deliberation of controversial and engagement in different perspectives necessary for deliberative democratic education” (p. 10). We agree that the four games examined by their research team do fall short in these areas. In our work with iCivics in both in-school and out-of-school contexts, we have also found that several of the uninvestigated games and related curricular materials can be used, particularly alongside other pedagogical practices like action civics, to further the goals of democratic education. We agree, however, with Stoddard and his colleagues, that teachers play an integral role in utilizing iCivics to reach these goals.

We contend that iCivics can be used to meet the goals of democratic education and to encourage our nation’s youth to become active civic participants. iCivics can be, and we believe should be, used alongside other instructional practices, such as Action Civics, to help prepare youth for participation in the contemporary world (Youniss, 2012). In this response, we offer three important reasons for the use of iCivics as a tool for democratic education and engagement. Firstly, we describe the affordances of several other iCivics games not explored in Stoddard’s study as well as other elements of the iCivics program, including lesson plans, impact points, and discussion boards. Secondly, we suggest that iCivics games should not be a stand-alone curriculum. We describe ways we have extended the iCivics games to inspire students to consider issues in their community and engage them in action civics. Thirdly, we affirm Stoddard and colleagues’ call for professional development and describe its importance in using iCivics games as part of a comprehensive civics curriculum.

To frame our response, we also utilize the six proven civic education practices outlined in *The Guardian of Democracy* report (Gould, 2011). These six practices have been shown to increase students’ civic or political commitments, knowledge, skills, and activities (Gould, 2011). These methods include providing:

1. information about local, state, and national government
2. opportunities to debate and discuss current events and other issues that matter to students

3. service-learning opportunities
4. involvement with extracurricular activities
5. opportunities for youth decision-making
6. experiences with simulations of civic processes.

The six proven practices of civics education are a framework for high-quality civics instruction; they not only help create students who are knowledgeable about their civic responsibilities as members of a democracy but also create the potential for the students to be active participants in their society.

iCivics Games and Resources

Stoddard and colleagues’ (2016) study examined four of the nineteen iCivics games and none of the associated iCivics lesson plans or curricular resources. While we agree with several of Stoddard and colleagues’ claims about these four games, it is important to note that there are other games and curricular materials that might better attend to elements of democratic education. We agree that some of the iCivics games simplify civic-related concepts and ideas and may not account for the messy nature of democratic citizenship. Additionally, we recognize that the game-like environment in which players accumulate points and win could run counter to the goals of democratic education. Finally, we acknowledge that not all of the games may engage players in discussion or deliberation of important civic concepts and ideas. However, even Stoddard and his fellow authors acknowledged that their study did “not play out every possible scenario or narrative that could be constructed from the games; nor do the views and actions of our research assistants match those of the 10-to-13-year-olds who are the games’ target audience” (p. 4). Below we provide examples of other iCivics games and curricular resources that might be used to attend to these issues.

Stoddard claimed that “certain scenarios in the games trivialize this important knowledge [knowledge of congressional and presidential war powers] by using examples that avoid complexity and do not apply in the current geopolitical context (e.g., the war on terror)” (p. 7). We agree that some iCivics games do utilize simplified or silly scenarios (e.g. Immigration Nation). Given that iCivics games are designed for middle school students, it is no surprise that these games use simplified scenarios as a means of providing age-appropriate content. While some game models may be simplified, the concepts students are learning through the games are often much more complex. (i.e., considering evidence, weighing multiple perspectives, determining agendas, and developing reasoned arguments).

For instance, in the game *Cast Your Vote*, players simulate personal and public methods for evaluating candidates seeking to win an election. Players select their personal priorities, consider each candidate’s views on multiple issues, and then use their preferences to agree or disagree with candidates on issues presented in a debate format. At the end of the debate, players select a candidate to vote for based on which candidate’s position on issues best fits with their personal priorities. Players do not win or lose this game; rather, they are given feedback indicating whether their final vote made sense based on their ratings of each

candidate's response to the issues. *Cast Your Vote* requires students to explore important democratic concepts such as applying the principles of popular sovereignty, examining multiple perspectives on issues, experiencing the deliberative process of voting, and explaining how their interests factor into voting choices. The scenarios presented in this game may be slightly simplified, but they are realistic and do expose students to relevant and meaningful civic concepts.

In *We the Jury*, players engage in a simulation of jury duty. On this platform, students deliberate with other jury members over the relevance and significance of evidence presented in a court case. To be successful in the game, players must work to come to a consensus about the decision of the case. Again, there is no winning or losing in this game; instead, players are awarded points based on their use of evidence, their fruitful conversations with other jurors, and their ability to reach a verdict. While some cases may be simplified, the overarching concepts addressed in this game—using evidence to make a claim, examining multiple perspectives, and noting the importance of deliberation and reaching consensus—are essential skills for participation as a citizen in a democracy.

In *Activate*, players are asked to adopt the role of community volunteers and group organizers regarding public issues. In this game, students engage in the process of advocating for issues in the family, school, and community settings. Through participation, advocacy, and decision-making within the game, players can eventually rise to the position of leaders of public interest groups at the state level and experience a means by which they can address problems within their society. This game provides players with a framework for and options about realistic scenarios such as helping one's family, volunteering at an animal shelter, cleaning up a local park, and combating school bullying. Throughout the game, players are introduced to various ways that individuals and groups can influence their community and evaluate the effectiveness of different civic engagement tactics.

While many of the iCivics games center on fictitious scenarios, *Argument Wars* focuses on landmark Supreme Court cases. Players attempt to use robust evidence and compelling argumentation to prove or disprove the validity of governmental action. The simulated judge allows students to see the reflective process of decision-making at the highest level as a law is evaluated on its constitutional merit and judicial precedent. Players learn not only how to argue a case on legal grounds but also about the ruling on the actual case and its effect on jurisprudence.

Many iCivics games do engage students in realistic simulations designed to promote critical thinking. As such, iCivics games themselves attend to the first and sixth proven practices in that they provide students with information about local, state, and national governments and experiences with simulations of civic processes (Blevins & LeCompte, 2014). As research has shown, "Civic knowledge encourages civic action. Young people who know more about government are more likely to vote, discuss politics, contact the government, and take part in other civic activities than their less knowledgeable counterparts" (Gould, 2011, p. 16). Our previous research has shown that playing iCivics games does increase students' civic knowledge and, in turn, has the potential to increase

young people's propensity for civic action (LeCompte, Moore, & Blevins, 2011; Blevins & LeCompte, 2014). In addition to the games, iCivics offers lesson plans, discussion boards, and impact points that can be used to help supplement the games and promote teachers' goals of democratic education.

iCivics lesson plans provide teachers with ideas and information to extend the games. Lesson plans include background reading for students, activities, extension questions, and assessments. The lessons are designed to "teach the material in the context of problems and issues that are relevant to students" (iCivics). Stoddard and his colleagues (2016) argued that the lesson plans "are more traditional lessons that extend from the content in the games but do not promote models or specific strategies for engaging students in playing and directly applying this content from the games" (p. 10). While this may be true of a few iCivics lesson plans, in our work with iCivics, we have found quite a few lessons that encourage students to apply the content of the games to realistic scenarios, engage in discussion, weigh evidence, and take action. For instance, the lesson "Students Engage" provides students the opportunity to investigate issues in their community. In this lesson, students are encouraged to consider the importance and cause of community issues and to develop a plan of action to solve these problems. This lesson plan mirrors many of the phases outlined in the action civics process (Levinson, 2012). Other lesson plans, like the "Political Debate Guide" and "Candidate Report Card," ask students to apply skills they have learned in the games to real-life political candidates and their debates. In addition to lesson plans, iCivics provides a series of persuasive writing lesson plans that help students develop their skills of argumentation, deliberation, and effective communication, and other skills essential to democratic citizenship.

iCivics.org also offers other resources to engage students, such as class discussion boards, impact points, a unique argumentative writing tool called Drafting Board, and a primary source analysis tool called DBQuest. While we do not have time to analyze each of these resources in the scope of this article, these resources do have the potential to promote the goals of democratic education. While many iCivics games require students to take action and make decisions based upon the problem presented in the game, due to the nature of the gaming environment, the choice of actions available to the players is often prescriptive. As such, the iCivics.org website provides additional resources to help elaborate on the games themselves. For instance, a teacher could set up a class discussion board in which students attend to essential questions about immigration policy and its impact on students. Teachers could then help students use deliberation to develop potential solutions to immigration issues and then communicate their conclusions to informed audiences. Exploring how concepts presented in the games play out in real life fosters a greater understanding regarding these problems and brings the virtual world back to civic reality.

Throughout gameplay, students can earn impact points. Students can choose to spend these points to support youth-impact projects currently conducted around the world. Every three months the impact project with the most points receives a \$1,000

grant from iCivics. Further, students can create and register their community action projects in iCivics. In this way, students can engage in youth decision-making and service-learning. While the iCivics games themselves do not explicitly involve proven practices two, three, and five, which focus on debating and discussing current and relevant issues, service-learning, and youth decision-making opportunities, there is potential for teachers to utilize the iCivics games and associated resources as tools to promote these goals (Blevins, LeCompte, Wells, & Shanks, 2014).

For this potential to be realized, however, as Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska (2016) have noted, and as we observed in our research, teachers play a critical role in determining how iCivics is used to promote the goals of democratic education (Blevins, LeCompte, Wells, & Shanks, 2014; Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells, 2014). Teachers can and should use the iCivics curriculum and resources to go beyond the games to involve students more robustly in the goals of democratic education.

Going Beyond the Games

Over the past five years, as researchers we have spent time investigating the impact of iCivics on students' civic knowledge and understanding as well as examining how iCivics might be used as a springboard for promoting civic action among youth. In 2011 we began by investigating how young people's civic knowledge and understanding changed as a result of playing iCivics games for at least one hour a week over a six-week period. Results from this study revealed that students' civic content knowledge did increase after playing iCivics games for this time (LeCompte, Moore, & Blevins, 2011). Stoddard and his colleagues' assessment of our study and others like it are accurate: Our study focused on explicit outcomes of iCivics, such as the acquisition of factual knowledge, instead of measuring the kinds of inquiry, deliberation, or conceptual level understanding that are key for democratic citizenship. However, it is important to note that civics education research shows that higher levels of civic knowledge are often correlated with greater civic participation (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). As such, the civic knowledge gains experienced by students playing iCivics should not be discounted since this increase in civics knowledge may increase students' propensity for civic participation.

Building on our initial research findings, we also became interested in investigating how iCivics might be used as a springboard to help young people engage in civic action. As such, we developed a weeklong summer civics institute called iEngage. During iEngage, students play iCivics games as a way to gain background knowledge and information about different governmental and civic processes. The games provide a venue for our students to acquire basic vocabulary and some form of conceptual understanding about various governmental structures and civic processes. After playing these games, students walk away with basic civic knowledge and with questions and concerns about what they experienced during gameplay. Issues and concerns become the fodder for group discussion, deliberation, and further investigation upon which their democratic education experience is built. Student remarks after playing the games included statements such

as "I had no idea balancing the budget was so hard," "It seems like it is impossible to keep everyone happy," "What if I don't agree with everything on his platform? How do I vote?" and "The electoral college process seems a little crazy; how come everyone's vote can't count?" As Stoddard and his colleagues (2016) noted, one of the affordances of the iCivics games is their ability to stimulate affective reactions in players. This practical response is, in our experience, critical in helping young people understand the nuances of the governmental and civic processes and cultivate students' civic and political interest.

In iEngage, students have the opportunity to delve deeper into the concepts and processes presented in the games through a variety of hands-on experiences. For instance, after playing the iCivics game *Counties Work*, students then have the opportunity to dialogue with the city manager, city secretary, and various city council members. Because students have some working knowledge of the way cities and counties operate after playing iCivics, including different resources and departments needed to solve problems and the importance of responding appropriately to citizen requests, they are easily able to talk with civic leaders about pertinent issues and ask questions raised as a result of gameplay. iCivics games, therefore, serve an important catalyst for additional conversation, dialogue, and investigation.

In iEngage, students begin by playing the iCivics game *Activate*. This game encourages students to experience how they might advocate for a community issue at the local, state, and national levels. After playing *Activate*, students then choose a real-life community issue about which they care. They spend time researching their issue, including examining multiple perspectives on their issue, collaborating with community leaders, investigating potential solutions to their issue, developing a plan of action, and finally, advocating for their issue in a variety of ways, including social media. Students are given the opportunity to share their findings with community leaders and stakeholders through written communication, social media, and a community showcase. Finally, students reflect on their experiences and consider what was effective and what was not.

Through this process, students are explicitly taught research skills. They learn how to judge the credibility of sources, particularly digital ones, how to find multiple perspectives on issues, including addressing the root causes of these issues, and how to evaluate these sources. Students also engage in youth decision-making by creating, publishing, and circulating their ideas to larger audiences (Kahne, Hodgins, & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016). Such peer-based production can be and, with iEngage, proves to be politically empowering (Kahne et al., 2016). Students also investigate ways to engage in effective communication in digital spaces. Finally, students develop the ability to reflect on and refine their thinking as they examine other peoples' views.

Certainly, the model we employ in iEngage is one that can also be utilized in classrooms. By going beyond the games, students can engage in essential elements of democratic education, including youth decision-making, service-learning, and discussion of current or controversial issues. iCivics is a curriculum tool that has the propensity to launch students into the realm of active

participatory citizenship (Kahne et al., 2016). Combining iCivics with other best practices, such as discussion and deliberation of current and controversial issues and action civics, teachers can use iCivics to provide rich learning opportunities for students.

The Role of Teachers and Professional Development

We agree with Stoddard and his colleagues (2016) that teachers play a pivotal role in shaping how iCivics games are used in the classroom, including how they might be used to promote tenets of democratic citizenship. In fact, we have suggested this throughout our research on iCivics, noting:

Teachers lie at the heart of using iCivics to create a robust civics curriculum. As professionals, teachers serve as gatekeepers (Thornton, 1991/2005) who structure classroom instruction that is compelling, engaging, and relevant to students' lives. While the curriculum, games, and web-quests work together to inform the learning process, it is the teacher who must effectively situate the iCivics learning experience within their curriculum and offer supplemental information, discussion, and learning materials. (Blevins, LeCompte, Wells & Shanks; 2014, p. 70)

How teachers interpret and utilize curricular tools is certainly not a unique concern just for iCivics. We know that teachers serve as the primary decision-makers in regard to what happens in their classroom (Thornton, 1991/2005). Teachers make important decisions that influence the social studies experiences of students, including choosing the content, sequence, and pedagogy to be used. As such, teachers can help students effectively reflect upon and apply the concepts that they learn in the game to those helpful for democratic participation, but professional development is key to this process.

Throughout our work with iCivics and iEngage, we have come to recognize just how significant in-depth and sustained professional development is. Professional development becomes a crucial component in helping teachers understand the goals and methods of democratic education, including how iCivics might be used as pedagogical tool to increase civic knowledge, encourage deliberation, and promote civic action. Professional development should begin by helping teachers reflect on the purpose and practices of democratic education (Millenson, Mills, & Andes, 2014). It is this clear sense of purpose that then allows teachers to consider the affordances and constraints of a curricular tool like iCivics and to evaluate in what ways they can utilize this tool to promote the tenets of democratic citizenship.

In our professional development work with teachers, we encourage them to play iCivics games as well as to investigate the associated lesson plans and resources iCivics.org provides. However, much of our time is spent helping teachers understand how iCivics can be used as a springboard to engage young people in action civics. Our goal is to encourage teachers to incorporate action civics in their classrooms as a way to empower students' voices by engaging them in deliberating, considering multiple perspectives, communicating conclusions, and taking action. We also agree with Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska (2016) that there is a need for sustained professional development.

Teachers need ongoing professional development and support to utilize iCivics in their classrooms and to go beyond the games. As digital venues become increasingly popular sites on which youth come together and advocate for social change, professional development is essential; teachers need to understand how to utilize these digital venues to promote participatory citizenship (Kahne et al., 2016).

Conclusion

iCivics games alone certainly cannot teach students to be critically minded, active citizens. However, programs like iCivics, especially when effectively mediated by teachers, can create new social and cultural virtual worlds in which students can learn civic knowledge and engage in civic action (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005). As Stoddard and his colleagues (2016) pointed out, iCivics games have both affordances and constraints for democratic education. They asked, "How can teachers take advantage of the affordances of iCivics and limit the constraints?" We contend that iCivics can be used as part of a larger civics curriculum to engage students in the goals of democratic education. However, as with any premade curriculum, educators must be careful to reflect on and modify the curriculum to meet the needs of their students and the goals of their classrooms. Mainly, educators need to be cognizant that all curricula, including iCivics, are not apolitical but are shaped by specific ideological views about politics, policies, and the roles of citizens (Apple, 2004). This is not only true of iCivics but countless other civic education programs.

iCivics represents an innovational approach to civic education that is accessible to a variety of audiences. We note that several other iCivics games not explored in Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska's (2016) study as well as other elements of the iCivics program (lesson plans, impact points, and discussion boards) offer teachers resources that can help create engaging civic education opportunities for students. We suggest that iCivics games should not be a stand-alone curriculum. Instead, we suggest that iCivics can provide the opportunity for teachers and students alike to move beyond traditional, didactic models of civic education and toward a vision of civics education that is engaging and inclusive. Finally, we underscore the need for high-quality professional development. It is essential that teachers are thoughtful about the affordances and constraints of iCivics and have the training to use this innovative program to engage in democratic education that empowers young people to become active and participatory citizens.

We fully support Stoddard and colleagues' (2016) claim that "game designers, democratic educators, and researchers should work together to take advantage of the many affordances evident in the iCivics games to more strongly work toward the goals of democratic education" (p. 27). We argue that iCivics shares this same goal. This is why we have worked to conduct independent research on iCivics for the past six years. We have been fortunate to present these findings to the national iCivics team to improve their product to meet the goals of democratic education. In addition to our studies, CIRCLE and Arizona State have also conducted a series of research studies on the iCivics products. The national iCivics team has welcomed this research and has used it to inform future game design and

curriculum development. Most recently, the iCivics national team moved their director of content across the country, so she could be embedded with the game design company to further this collaborative process. Also, the national iCivics advisory board includes notable researchers and educators, including Diana Hess, Joseph Kahne, Peter Levine, and James Paul Gee. Finally, iCivics actively seeks input from educators across the country and has developed an educator network to help ensure that teacher input is key in the development of iCivics games and curriculum. These efforts suggest that the iCivics team is committed to working alongside researchers and educators to strengthen their product.

Democracies that maintain a healthy existence require citizens who are informed, attentive, and committed to improving quality of life for all. This demands that they not only have civic knowledge but also can use this knowledge in real-world situations. iCivics is no panacea for civic education, but it does provide an innovative approach to democratic education. Teachers can utilize iCivics and other proven civic education practices to create a robust civic education program in which students “do and behave as citizens” (Levinson, 2012, p. 224). Our representative democracy is only as good as the citizens who participate in effectively electing officials, demanding action on pressing issues, holding public officials accountable, and taking action to help solve problems in their communities (Gould, 2011). Therefore, it is essential that schools develop citizens who have the knowledge, the skills, and the dispositions to carry out such practices.

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