



*iCivics engages learners and creates a bridge between the regular classroom and the school library.*

# iCivics—A Fun Way to Enhance Learning

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How can students learn about topics important to all U.S. residents and have fun simultaneously? By “playing civics” at the iCivics website <[www.icivics.org](http://www.icivics.org)>. This innovative educational gaming site, which was a 2013 AASL Best Website for Teaching and Learning <[www.ala.org/aasl/standards-guidelines/best-websites/2013](http://www.ala.org/aasl/standards-guidelines/best-websites/2013)>, is designed to help students learn more about elections, constitutional law, the three branches of government, forms of government (mainly democratic), economics, campaigns and elections, and other topics. In 2009 the site was founded by retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor as a direct response to students’ declining knowledge of civics and as a way to foster better understanding of the United States system of government.

The site contains seven sections of games and twelve webquests that cover the major curriculum topics for K–12 civics classes: citizenship, constitutional law, economics, and the three branches of government. Educators can register each of their classes on the site. The time needed for each game session ranges from approximately fifteen to sixty minutes; therefore, students can play one complete interactive game within a single class period. The site is designed to allow all registered students to keep track of their previous scores, or students can opt to skip the registration phase and play online anonymously.

The iCivics site also includes educators’ resources. Because iCivics content is arranged in

curriculum units, each with an accompanying lesson plan, collaborating with teachers is easy; lessons can be tweaked and adapted as appropriate to develop a custom experience for students to work through. Each lesson plan is set up in a familiar form with an overview, lesson objective, step-by-step procedures, recommendations for what lessons should come before and after the current lesson, and accompanying student work and informational sheets. All of these resources are available for teachers in a copyright-free downloadable Teacher’s Guide. Some lessons even include decks of presentation slides.

## iCivics in Action

I discovered iCivics in spring 2013 via its Twitter site and thought

**A STRAW POLL WAS TAKEN AT THE END OF THE YEAR,  
AND THE MOST POPULAR GAME LAST SCHOOL YEAR WAS SUPREME DECISIONS.**  
In this game students listen to both sides of a case and help to influence the remaining tie-breaking decision. According to many students, the chance to practice the concept is what helped them to clarify detailed issues and retain information.



iCivics would make an excellent site to link to my library's website so eighth-graders could review right before our state standardized tests were administered. Based on the most recent results from both formal and informal classroom and district assessments, the areas most in need of attention for eighth-grade civics classes in my building were the major concepts relating to economics.

After approaching my school's two eighth-grade civics teachers with the idea, I was delighted to find out that they were well aware of iCivics. However, they did not have much opportunity to use the site consistently due to either the high demand for computer labs in our building or because their rooms were in a WiFi dead zone

that prevented students from using wireless capabilities with the devices on the mobile carts. I offered the library computer lab and instructional space for collaborative review.

Six weeks prior to the official test date, I met with both teachers during their planning time. After reviewing the online lesson and pupil handouts, we were able to devise a pacing chart for carrying out the review in three sessions. The first two sessions' focus was reviewing the major characteristics of the market economy and clarifying the concepts of supply and demand. Each session was divided into two segments. The first lesson segment took place at the work tables in the instructional area of the library's main floor.

The second segment took place in the computer lab.

### **Sample Sessions 1 and 2— INSTRUCTIONAL SPACE:**

Using the library instructional space on the main floor, as coteacher, I explained the logistics of that specific session. Upon entering the library, students were directed to the computer lab to log on at a designated station and then redirected back to the instructional area so the classroom teacher could introduce the lesson to the students and go over the lesson concepts. PowerPoint presentations, either from the iCivics site or created specifically for the lesson, were used during this segment as part of the review process.

## Sample Sessions 1 and 2— COMPUTER LAB:

Using the computer lab, the class was directed to the library's wiki to access online documents. To better engage the students in this review, I updated all printable worksheets by transferring the info from the iCivics forms to online Google document forms, using the same fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice formats from the iCivics downloadable form. Completion of the Google forms allows teachers to see immediately who needs additional remediation on a specific concept. After students completed submission of the review form, we closed out the lesson, either at the computer stations or in the instructional space, depending on the time available.

## Sample Session 3— COMPUTER LAB:

A third session in the computer lab was set aside to follow up on the concepts of budgeting; students played the game People's Pie or, in some cases, another iCivics game chosen by the teacher as appropriate for general review.

By the third session, students were hooked. They were enthralled with the opportunities the site provided for role-playing lawyers, judges, and political figures. A straw poll was taken at the end of the year, and the most popular game last school year was Supreme Decisions. In this game students listen to both sides of a case and help to influence the remaining tie-breaking decision. According to many students, the chance to practice the concept is what helped them to clarify detailed issues and retain information. In my school 96 percent of the eighth-graders passed their state-mandated civics test that spring! This was an improvement of 5 percent over the previous year.

Of course I can't give total credit to iCivics, but it didn't hurt.

As a result of the springtime success with the iCivics site, I have incorporated the site into my lesson plans. According to *Empowering Learners*, "The mission of the school library program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. The school librarian empowers students to be critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers, and ethical users of information..." (AASL 2009, 8). This kind of engaging lesson supports that mission.

### Collaboration with Teachers

This type of collaborative effort also speaks to one of the other goals established by AASL, which is to build collaborative partnerships with other educators. By building relationships within small circles of curricular or grade-level areas, school librarians can begin to establish themselves as trusted sources of support for the curriculum and as experts in information-gathering and resource management. Having a link to iCivics on my library resources website helps teachers see me as a valuable instructional partner.

During the 2013–2014 school year I am again working with both civics teachers. I'm aware of their pacing calendar, and as their classes move on to new concepts, I take the initiative to work collaboratively with the teachers throughout the year. Use of iCivics has been expanded at our school; the site is used to introduce students to new concepts from the curriculum and to support re-teaching or remediation.

The iCivics resources are also great for cross-curriculum planning. This year the English classes will be

reading *Nothing but the Truth* by Avi, a book that deals with freedom of expression. The iCivics mini-lesson "Texas v. Johnson (1989)" covers the basics of what freedom of speech is and how the U.S. government cannot prohibit an individual from expressing himself or herself because others in society disagree with the means of expression or the ideas expressed. The unit on the Avi novel has provided me with another opportunity to collaborate with classroom teachers.

### Everybody Wins

Overall, iCivics engages learners and creates a bridge between the regular classroom and the school library. This resource offers an opportunity for the school librarian to become partners in learning with the students who are exploring multiple resources on a given topic, to become an information specialist in charge of collecting and providing access to resources, and to be a teacher who draws on curriculum from other content areas to supplement and enhance what the other educators in the building are doing!

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### Work Cited:

American Association of School Librarians. 2009. *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs*. Chicago: ALA.

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