

## National Civics Teacher Survey: Information Literacy in High School Civics

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Funded principally by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation

January 2014

Teaching students to use news and information media (“information literacy”) is an important aspect of civic education, especially now that news sources are rapidly changing and fragmenting along ideological lines. Information literacy is required in several state standards, and it is also frequently defined as an important “21st century skill.”<sup>1</sup>

Civics and government courses are among the places where information literacy can be taught. Using the data from our National Civics Teacher Survey (see notes), we explore the extent to which information literacy is taught in high school civics classes and how its teaching varies.

Overall we find that:

- ★ Civics teachers believe that information literacy is critical and that students must be able to identify, gather, and produce credible information
- ★ Less than half of teachers are very confident about teaching information literacy. A majority are interested in receiving more training and resources.
- ★ Teachers commonly use news articles as sources, and 80% discuss election-related issues at least weekly
- ★ AP and honors courses are more likely to incorporate information literacy than courses that are required for graduation.
- ★ Teachers who perceive more support are more likely to teach information literacy.

The survey asked teachers to answer questions about the courses they taught in the fall of 2012; most teachers reported on more than one class. It’s important to note that this semester was probably unusual. In 45% of courses offered that fall, teachers reported spending much more time than usual on politics because of the upcoming presidential election.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Abby Kiesa, Alberto Medina, Peter Levine and Sarah Shugars at CIRCLE and Tisch College at Tufts University for assistance with this brief. Other findings from the Teacher Survey and from other studies by the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge can be found at <http://www.civicyouth.org/commission-on-youth-voting-and-civic-knowledge-releases-report/>

## Civics Teachers Believe Information Literacy is Critical

The high school civics and American government teachers whom we surveyed strongly emphasized the need to teach information literacy and believed that information literacy is an important learning outcome. Virtually all of them believed that students should know what is credible in a sea of information (69.4% strongly agreed, 30.5% agreed). Furthermore, they thought that students need to know how to gather (56.8% strongly agreed, 43.2% agreed) and produce (50.7% strongly agreed, 48.0% agreed) credible information. In some of their fall 2012 courses, teachers spent a considerable amount of time teaching students how to critically analyze the news. For instance, a majority (51.9%) of classes allocated a whole unit or more to this competency; in 23% of courses, critical analysis of news was a major emphasis of the whole class. Teachers spent at least one class session on this topic in more than 92% of the courses they taught.

**Table 1: Critical analysis of news coverage (topics like media bias, the difference between news and opinion, how to choose a news source, etc.)**

Not covered	2.0%
Briefly mentioned	5.4%
Focus of about one class session	11.2%
Focus of two or more class sessions	29.5%
Major emphasis of one unit	29.2%
Major emphasis of the whole course	22.7%

## Teachers Commonly Used News Articles as a Source and Discussed Election-Related Issues

Over half (53.9%) of the civics and American government courses taught by teachers in our survey incorporated current-event discussions daily, and an additional 34.9% had current-event discussion at least weekly. The teachers most commonly required students to read news articles (85.1%), followed by watching presidential/vice-presidential debates (72.1%), watching election-night coverage (44.7%), watching other political debates (33.2%), and following news on new media such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook (31.5%). As these courses were taught in the months leading up to the 2012 presidential election, discussion of that contest was quite common. Overall, 80.2% of courses discussed election-related issues at least weekly.

## Less than Half of Teachers are Very Confident about Teaching Information Literacy

About 90% of the teachers showed at least some level of confidence in teaching specific elements of information literacy. However, only about one-third felt “very confident” in teaching skills and topics like identifying valid information, creating credible information, and why a free press matters in a democracy.

**Table 2: Confidence in teaching how to...**

	Sort fact from fiction in the digital age	Consume and create credible information	Gain a greater understanding of the importance of a free press in a democracy
Not at all confident	1%	1%	0%
Not very confident	3%	3%	1%
I am not sure	8%	7%	4%
Confident	59%	60%	57%
Very confident	30%	30%	37%

Furthermore, a majority of the teachers had at least some access to resources on how to teach this type of class content. At the same time, a majority were interested in receiving more training and resources on each of these topics.

### Variations by Types of Teachers, Schools, and Courses

We found that teachers used different pedagogies and allocated their time differently when they taught graduation-requirement courses rather than Advanced Placement (AP) or honors courses:

- ★ Teachers incorporated daily current-event discussions in 62% of AP/honors classes, compared to 50% of graduation-requirement courses.
- ★ Critical analysis of news coverage was considered a major emphasis of one unit or of the whole course in 68% of the AP/honors courses, but in only 45.4% of the graduation-required courses.
- ★ All of the news-related course assignments were more common in the AP/honors classes than in graduation-requirement classes. For instance, 42.9% of AP/honors classes required students to follow news via new media, compared to 27.7% of required courses; and 59.9% of AP/honors courses required students to watch the election-night coverage, compared to just 40.6% in required courses.

Given that these teachers often taught both types of courses, the differences are not completely attributable to the types of schools they teach in. Rather, these differences may possibly relate to constraints on what and when to teach certain topics, and to students' interests.

Teachers who perceived a greater level of support from their principal, district, and students' parents were more confident in teaching all three aspects of information literacy. Furthermore, teachers' personal attitudes toward deliberation and appreciation of students' voices and contributions in the classroom strongly predicted their confidence.

Teachers who supervised or advised student government, social-issue clubs, groups that attended political speeches, and ethnic or cultural clubs were, on average, also more likely to be confident about teaching these topics. On the other hand, teachers who advised or coached sports teams, arts and culture clubs, and service clubs were no different from the average. There were only nine teachers supervising school newspapers in the sample, which is too few for an analysis.

Years of teaching experience, educational attainment, college major, geographical region, the number of professional development experiences, or school type (private or public) did not predict how confident teachers felt about teaching information literacy. Likewise, none of the reported school-wide demographic factors (e.g., the percentages of immigrant students, Black students, college-bound students, or students receiving reduced lunch) seemed to matter

### **Possible Implications**

This analysis of information literacy in high school civics classes suggests that many students are being exposed to current-event discussions at least weekly, and that half of teachers are spending at least one unit on critical analysis of news coverage. However, there is some evidence of a possible gap between the amount of time spent on information literacy and teachers' confidence in teaching it, as only about one-third of teachers surveyed said that they were "very confident." **Schools of education and other professional development providers** can help to increase this number of very confident teachers by devoting time and resources to developing peer exchanges, trainings, and lessons on teaching information literacy.

Additionally, the fact that information literacy receives more attention in AP/honors classes than in graduation-requirement courses raises important questions about the causes of this discrepancy. **State education officials** should seek to understand the possible reasons in their own states; for instance, do state standards for social studies overlook information literacy, or are the existing standards not being implemented consistently?

**Funders in government and philanthropy** should consider supporting resources, training, experimentation, and innovation to enhance teachers' grasp of information literacy and to ensure that all students are exposed to it.

### **Methodology: The National Civics Teacher Survey**

To gauge the trends and variation in pedagogy and the effects of state policies, CIRCLE and the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge surveyed a national sample of teachers. In the months following the 2012 presidential election, CIRCLE worked with an educational marketing firm MDR to contact U.S. high school civics and government teachers. MDR's sample of 8,000 is thought to include approximately half of all the U.S. high school civics and government teachers. We contacted 4,000 of those teachers via U.S. mail with a letter and an enclosed \$2 bill inviting them to participate in the survey (which was available online or on paper). About one week later, MDR sent an invitation email, written by CIRCLE, to 4,837 teachers (from the same pool) whose email addresses were available. MDR sent a follow-up email if the teacher opened the initial email but did not click on the embedded survey link. The survey was open from May 10, 2013 to June 1, 2013 and we received a total of 720 responses (4 were in paper format). We cannot know how many teachers received one or both

solicitations, so the response rate may range from 9.0% to 14.9% (which is higher than the 1-2% rate common for email surveys). Previous studies suggest that the U.S. mail outreach has a positive impact on response rates. Of those who started the survey, 86% finished the last questions in the survey.

Each region of the U.S. was represented proportionately by the participating teachers, who worked mostly at public high schools (93%) and tended to be more educated than the general teacher population, with 69.9% holding a master's degree or higher (5.1% held doctorate degrees). Exactly half of the teachers worked in schools where 50% or more of the students were eligible for a reduced-price or free-lunch programs. More than one quarter (26.6%) worked in schools where the teachers thought less than half of the students were "college-bound," while 36.4% thought three-quarters or more of their students would go to college. Each teacher could provide information about as many as two courses he or she taught in the fall of 2012. Well over half of the participating teachers described two courses, resulting in a descriptive sample of 1,034 courses.

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<sup>1</sup>Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, "Framework for 21st Century Learning," <http://www.p21.org/about-us/p21-framework>