



“The Evolution of Civic Education in the Digital Age”

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI7DzXep5oU>

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Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, good morning.

I am truly honored to be a part of this distinguished panel and to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of IFES – the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, on the evolution of democratic civic education in the digital age. As IFES’ global lead on civic education, I have the privilege of working with a great team on designing and implementing civic education programming worldwide.

I am fortunate to also be IFES’ Deputy Country Director for Ukraine, which is where I am currently based. It is in Ukraine where our team has been hard at work over the past number of years, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, together with 20 universities and growing, to develop and offer, an innovative, semester-long course on democratic citizenship for thousands of students across the country.

This course builds upon IFES’ global civic education methodology and goes far beyond teaching about democracy. It creates opportunities for students to experience democracy in their classrooms.

Our civic education programming in Ukraine and across the world, offers important lessons learned and food for thought for the future of education for democracy in the digital age. Some of which I will have the opportunity to share with you today.

The importance of effective civic education to maintaining a healthy democracy, and its effects on aspects of democracy like informed voting, is well understood and is by no means a new phenomenon.

That said, over the past decade, this understanding has not always translated into effective national strategies, policies and actions that have systematically supported civic education for democratic citizenship at schools and universities.

With the onset of the digital age, and all that this entails, democracies are increasingly challenged to take a critical look at the functions and structures of their own educational institutions. Democracies are challenged to consider the relation these institutions have to the health of their democracies.

To aid in this reflection, there are four revealing questions that I would ask all of us in this room to reflect on:

- are the interactions and power dynamics in our classrooms, between teachers and students, reflective of the structures of power and decision making that democratic societies aspire to see between citizens and authority figures?
- in addition to knowledge, is the development of citizenship skills prioritized through a curricula and methodology that fosters democratic values and attitudes?
- does this happen with an eye to preparing students for the inherent opportunities and challenges of the digital age?
- are we doing enough?

Before we jump into the digital age, let us briefly take a step back to consider what we mean by the phrase: “Effective Civic Education for Democracy”. We’ve talked a lot about the importance of civic education, but what do we mean by Effective Civic Education.

Broadly speaking, democratic civic education encompasses the development of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that correlate with an individual’s active and informed participation in their community and in their democracy.

Democratic civic education is most effective when it is part of a life-long learning process from childhood into and through adulthood. It can be informal through trainings and other programs, or formal through schools and universities.

While effective civic education promotes the ideals of democracy and encourages a reasoned pledge to democratic values and principles, it should never position democracy as a utopia. Democracy is messy, and effective civic education should not hide from this fact.

The ultimate goal of civic education is to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills that enable them to engage mindfully in their democracies, through an environment that fosters democratic values and attitudes.

Effective civic education blends theory with practical application of that theory to individuals’ everyday lives. It moves beyond the what and the when and focuses on the how and the why. It does this by using Socratic and interactive teaching methodology that stimulates critical thinking, alongside a range of other key skills.

Effective civic education embodies a shift in power dynamics, where the teacher is not the infallible master, but rather, three parts facilitator, one-part expert. Through their facilitator role, civic educators guide students through a range of simulations and interactive sessions. This enables students to experience democracy within the classroom, as opposed to merely learning about it.

Lastly, effective civic education creates opportunities for individuals to apply what they are learning inside of the classroom, by effecting change outside of the classroom.

As illustrated by Bloom’s hierarchy of education— a tool that classifies educational learning objectives, the methodology used for effective civic education is specifically designed to move beyond a passive learning that is associated with recalling facts and basic concepts, to an active learning that is associated with understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and finally, creating.

The importance of higher-level learning objectives is not new. However, the need for us to re-discover and accelerate our pursuit of these learning objectives through effective civic education is particularly dire in our current era, the digital age.

The digital age represents a new reality for democratic citizenship. It is an era in which innovations in technology and access to information continue to transform how individuals engage with or disengage from their democracies across the globe; the ubiquity of smart phones

and new technologies such as artificial intelligence, grows exponentially by the day; social media's datasets and fine-tuned algorithms about our behaviors and preferences continues to expand to unprecedented levels; the tools that both good and bad actors have to engage or manipulate the electorate are more sophisticated and targeted than anything that has been seen by our civilization to date. The situation is further compounded by what some see as a crisis of vision and values, in which democracies across the globe struggle to combat percolations of authoritarianism, attacks on longstanding democratic institutions and norms, and a range of other old and new threats.

In light of this reality, our democracies must continuously ask the following critical questions:

- What are the skills, knowledge and values that are essential for democracy to persevere in the digital age?
- What skills and knowledge do we as individuals need to thrive as mindful consumers, in a way in which we control our digital tools, rather than the other way around?

While the broader application of time-tested, effective civic education for democracy is not a silver bullet that will solve all of democracy's ailments, it is certainly a foundational step forward if we are to begin to address the significant challenges we face.

That said, re-invigorating this conversation, while a key first step, is not enough on its own. Alongside the critical need for its broader and systematic application, civic education will need to continue to evolve and to emphasize those skills that are particularly critical for mindful civic participation in the digital age, while staying true to its core mission and guiding principles.

This could include a heightened focus on: critical thinking and logical deduction; consensus building and conflict resolution; digital and media literacy; active listening; defending those democratic values and institutions that are under attack; and lastly, introducing new forms of engagement.

As part of its evolution, civic educators will need to open the door to a broader understanding of what it means to be civically informed and active in the digital age. From voting, to other forms of engagement such as petitioning, advocating, testifying and forming coalitions, we are now well into the next stage of engagement, where the simple act of buying a cup of coffee from one place rather than another could be a form of informed civic action.

The way forward for effective civic education for democracy in the digital age is not without challenges. This learning module is at times either under-valued, or obscured and attacked by those who see it, and skills like critical thinking, as a threat. Overcoming challenges associated with how civic education is framed and understood is only part of the battle. As we know well, in spaces where civic education is understood and appreciated, it is often greatly under-resourced and not prioritized. Notwithstanding these and many other challenges, we also see opportunities.

New technology offers new tools that allow educators to engage more people in more ways than ever before. The democratic regression over the past decade has shaken both young and mature

democracies, and, in a way, has offered a needed wake-up call and a reminder of something that some nations have seemingly forgotten. That democratic citizens are not born democratic.

So, what do we do about it?

We all have an important role to play in ringing the alarm bells and reinvigorating the conversation on this topic. In other words, we must all become civic education champions and advocates.

We must take on the challenge, in our individual and institutional capacities, to remind ourselves and our peers that effective civic education cannot be seen as a luxury. But rather, as an essential component to a healthy and vibrant democracy.

It is in this spirit that IFES works worldwide, together with election management bodies, civil society, and academia, to equip individuals with the tools necessary to manage the threats to and opportunities for democracy in the digital age.

In Ukraine, this has translated into the university level course that I referenced in my introduction, and as I move to the end of my talk, I would like to screen a two-minute clip that offers a glimpse into this initiative.¹

Through our work in Ukraine and beyond, IFES has, over the last 30 plus years, witnessed the tremendous impact of effective civic education for democracy.

As noted by one alumnus of IFES' course in Ukraine:

“We often say: ‘the state must’ or ‘society must’... we seem to be separated from all of this. It sounds like someone is obligated to do something for us. The course helped me understand the importance of citizen participation in the life of the university, city, society.”

If we are to move forward, we must remember that democracy is not a certainty. Democracy is messy, and it is hard work. It must be nurtured by and grow with each passing decade and generation.

For this to happen, our classrooms should be a reflection of the democracies we want to see for this generation and the next. while, at the same time, evolving to meet the specific challenges and opportunities that are inherent to democracy in the digital age.

In closing, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to our hosts and organizers, the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania, RECEF, and the International Organization of the Francophonie.

¹ <https://www.ifes.org/multimedia/multimedia-democracy-theory-practice>