

Education for Civics Discussion

This discussion paper is to provide background for a conversation among people interested in the education for civics topic.

I realise many others have thoughts and ideas on this topic and so this is not an exhaustive, deeply researched paper. Others may have done that work.

The paper outlines an idea for a national project and provides some introductory background.

Possible outcomes

Community of Practice

Plan would be to set up a community of practice to share experience, knowledge and ideas, and to coordinate activities.

Potential Project Outline

Purpose: to create resources and programs in collaboration with teachers for teachers to use in the Civics and Citizenship strand within the HASS section of the National Australian Curriculum.

As a secondary part to this project, create resources (or promote/ translate AEC and other resources) for use by organisations and individuals to inform the general public about similar topics such as elections and voting procedures in Australia with a special focus on NESB and Indigenous communities.

Project might be auspiced by the Awakening Democracy Foundation, Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy's charitable vehicle.

A pilot project might be run in one or two locations to test the developed materials and feed into a second round project to expand.

Context

The past two federal elections have demonstrated that many people in Australia do not understand the electoral system in Australia. Coupled with the reduced trust in the political system and disenchantment with how mainstream electoral politics works, exemplified by voters turning toward community independents and minor parties, the ground is ripe for a project to raise awareness among citizens about the importance of the electoral system for electing MPs who will work in the community's interest for the public good.

The Australian Curriculum

Within the national Australian Curriculum is the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) strand that includes Civics and Citizenship for years 7-10.

"The Civics and Citizenship curriculum is all about ensuring students have the skills and values to become active and informed citizens. Students will investigate political and legal systems, and explore the nature of citizenship, diversity and identity in contemporary society."

Rationale: A deep understanding of Australia's federal system of government and the liberal democratic values that underpin it is essential in enabling students to become active and informed citizens who participate in and sustain Australia's democracy.

Aims: a lifelong sense of belonging to and engagement with civic life as an active and informed citizen in the context of Australia as a secular democratic nation with a dynamic, multicultural, multi-faith society and a Christian heritage

Structure: The Years 7–10 Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship is organised into two interrelated strands: civics and citizenship knowledge and understanding, and civics and citizenship inquiry and skills.

The 2021 Review of the Australian Curriculum provides little additional information apart from, on page 47 and reflected elsewhere in the Review: “such as not covering the special aspects of Australia's electoral system,” suggests more specific content about Australia's electoral system is needed. This provides a starting point for developing resources to support teaching this component.

Further, there is a theme, from some teachers, that there is already too much to teach; so adding resources should be designed to help teachers manage the content more easily. Resources also need to link specifically to other curriculum areas eg English.

Other Education Context

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Under the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, in Goal 2 which aims to produce lifelong learners who are active and informed members of their community, there is a specific point:

“understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change”

and in the commitment to action the Declaration says:

“Partnerships create opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, business and industry and support the development and wellbeing of young people and their families. These connections and associations can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, **promote a sense of responsible citizenship** and encourage lifelong learning. These partnerships should aim to enhance learner engagement, progress and achievement. (emphasis added)”

Youth Parliaments

The ACT SEE-Change Parliament of Youth on Sustainability (<https://seechange.org.au/parliament-of-youth>) provides a model for a participatory educational activity for schools that can engage young people in learning across multiple strands of the curriculum.

It is active, participatory, engaging and fun.

The model could be adapted to more specifically focus on how our parliamentary and electoral system works either as a stand-alone event but perhaps more usefully as part of a broader activity on improving the public good across multiple topic areas.

Informal Feedback

From recent students we hear that the HACC citizenship program did not inspire them to participate in politics and really didn't help them understand how the Australian political system or electoral system works.

We also hear that teachers are stretched and find teaching the subject difficult.

Adult Education

Commentary from various sources suggests that the general public doesn't understand clearly the voting systems used in Australia. Partially this is due to the mix of electoral systems, for instance the various proportional and preferential systems, and particularly optional preferential systems used in some jurisdictions.

While the AEC has good resources available, these are not immediately accessible nor easily understood / too technical. Similarly other resources that are available online eg the Animal Kingdom videos, are not designed specifically for Australian conditions.

Easily digestible, available resources for the adult / late teen population in Australia would be useful.

Potential Content

These topic themes have emerged from a variety of discussions over the past 6 months.

Title: how democracy / parliament can work for us?

Topics

Power playing: what is power, how to know who has it, how to exercise your power (as community)

Voting: how to get the MP you want; who is telling you what? How to use your preferences? Voting for Bad Arses.

Getting RAPT: how do we make sure our MPs are delivering for us. Responsive, adaptive, participatory and transparent politics.

It's more than just voting: how to get MPs / parliament / government to work for the public good.

Outputs

Just-in-time, brief materials for download and hand outs.

Quick guides for being involved in democracy.

More in-depth material for being an active citizen.

Additional ideas from recent conversations

Further discussion and feedback about the idea of education for civics has brought up these additional ideas.

- Make the learning fun. Make the lessons simple.
- Brief, quick to access and use materials.
- Reframe from civic duty to making government work for us.
- Provide easy to access and use resources for teachers.
- Use The Big Deal documentary as a resource.
- The process of the teaching, using experiential democratic methods in a variety of ways in schools, making it alive and relevant to students and young people, is as important as the

content. This will require close work with several disciplines: curriculum designers, teachers, youth, theatre / drama people and others.

- Note Museum of Australian Democracy's mandate to teach this and to provide resources. Note their past partnership with the Canberra University Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis for several projects.
- Note AEC has a lot of resources about the electoral system too; use these or work with AEC to make them more 'user friendly' and promote them.
- Is a possible outcome a 'Democra-con'? A virtual one.
- All resources and materials able to be expanded to cater for adults in adult education contexts.
- All resources and materials able to be available for use by the general public.