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## Presentation of Civic Identity in Online High School Social Studies Discussion Forums

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Presentation of Civic Identity in Online High School Social Studies Discussion Forums

by

Holly McBride

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in Curriculum and Instruction  
with an emphasis in Social Science Education  
Department of Secondary Education  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

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Studies

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Lori. Mom, without you, all of this would not have been possible!

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## **Abstract**

Twenty-first century high school students' learning experience in an online setting is no longer limited by a time-constrained schedule, lack of resources, teachers' formalities, and restrictions affecting learning progressions. The list of benefits to the virtual learning experience is vast, however, there are substantial pitfalls and ambiguities that must be resolved. One of the pitfalls for social studies educators is their ability to properly measure whether or not students are gaining prudent civic competences, skills, and dispositions. The mission of social studies education is the acquisition of civic knowledge, but more importantly, the overall development of a lifelong caring, active, and educated citizenry. Yet, online high school social studies instructors are faced with a quandary when attempting to find optimal and indirect techniques toward achieving this end.

Through a review of literature, fostering effective discussions in online courses allows students to indirectly learn and practice democratic processes authentically. This current qualitative research study is a discourse analysis that attempts to understand how students' civic identities are constructed and presented through structured, weekly asynchronous discussion forums in five online high school social studies courses in Florida. The examination of students' language-in-use in relation to civic identity construction and/or exhibition is a crucial element for virtual social studies instructors to consider when attempting to understand how young people are civically (and politically) connected to their communities in a digital age; in present times and in the future.

This study's four major findings were: (1) students revealed utilitarian and social justice elements within their civic identities; (2) students' showed an eagerness to question and analyze society and the government; (3) the data revealed concrete instances of civic identity exhibition along with civic engagement testimonies; and (4) the interactions that transpired within the discussion forums were a vehicle for civic identity development. The majority of these students did not display an achieved civic identity status due to their lack of an advanced historical and political knowledge base; however, knowledge and skills only comprise a portion of one's civic identity. In addition, results showed that students need to engage in more self-reflection or self-discovery activities, more opportunities to experience an authentic connection with their community through activities like service-learning projects, and more time spent on developing sound 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic skills.

Attention to civic identity construction and enactment as a goal of virtual high school social studies instruction could be a promising target so educators can understand how students see themselves as important members of their communities. Thus, a high school virtual social studies curriculum and course must be empowering; focused on students' self-development while maintaining a rigorous, meaningful, open, and flexible design. Virtual social studies teachers should use numerous pedagogical strategies to empower students to discover and achieve their talents and purposes in life as a tool for accomplishing democratic goals and commitments necessary for our nation's advancement.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

“Knowledge always means, precisely, considering opposites. Its superiority over preconceived opinion consists in the fact that it is able to conceive of possibilities as possibilities. . . . [So] only a person who has questions can have knowledge” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 389).

The improvement of information and computer technologies throughout the last two decades has radically transformed the methods by which we teach, learn (Diem, 2000), and live. Computer technology supports the learning experience and is particularly useful in cultivating higher-order thinking skills and scientific inquiry approaches by engaging students in authentic, complex assignments within cooperative learning conditions (Roschelle, Pea, Hoadley, Gordin & Means, 2002). The latest technologies are, in fact, “reshaping the skills, understandings, and dispositions students need in a technologically advanced and globally interconnected world (Maguth, 2009, p. 2). Technology is making our world flatter as culturally and geographically diverse populations are interacting together on a daily basis. For students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology offers unlimited opportunities to engage in public life (Bennett, 2008) and democratic processes. Young people today take on the role as creators of new information, knowledge, and experiences rather than acting as passive patrons (Bers, 2008) because the Internet provides endless sources of information and opportunities for personal and societal advancement.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 95% of all teens, ages 12-17, are actively using the Internet (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, & Zickuhr, 2011). The ‘Digital

Divide' is thinning as research indicates that all virtual students have access to the Internet and computers in their schools (United States Department of Education, 2004). In past years, however, the 'Digital Divide' was remarkably widespread. In 1981, approximately 18% of classrooms throughout the U.S. had access to one or more computers. By 1994, almost 98% of classrooms had computer access and five years later 98% of classrooms could connect to the web (O'Brien, 2010). Computer-based learning "has the potential to facilitate the development of students' decision-making and problem-solving skills, data-processing skills, and communication capabilities. By using a computer, students can gain access to expansive knowledge links and broaden their exposure to diverse people and perspectives" (Berson, 1996, p. 486).

Moreover, Marker (2006) argues that the web provides endless resources and information full of diverse opinions and viewpoints about the current state of the planet and its people. Social studies teachers can help students sift through daily piles of information from the web and adopt a perspective that "accurately reflects the world" so that they may understand "important patterns, divergent points of view, and future trends" of the planet (p. 82). Today, as in the year 2013, we live in a high-tech and fast-paced world and acquiring the necessary skills, values, and competencies for effective citizenship and successful 21st century living is the business of education. A myriad of the nation's schools, however, are still teaching and learning on a twentieth century, industrial model. The issue at hand is the fact that U.S. society has already transitioned from an industrial society to an information society, yet our educational system is still in the process of shifting from a training culture to a knowledge culture (Rosenberg, 2012).

The dichotomous nature of how educators view technology and civic engagement are still pervasive. On one hand, technology is perceived as a means of developing civically active and engaged young people due to limitless opportunities for young people to take part in political and

civic arenas. The other viewpoint is that technology is the culprit for the increasing political and civic disengagement among young people today (Bennett, 2008). This disengagement perspective views the increasing time spent on current technologies by young people as encouraging further individualism and distractions (Putnam, 2000) from activities involving traditional democratic practices.

According to Taba (1962), the proper aims of education should coincide with changing societal conditions, especially the changes introduced by technology. Technology is causing rapid vicissitudes in society (then and now) with unpredictable effects and consequences on our democratic and globally interconnected ways of living. Education, for Counts (1952), can determine whether we arrive to a dark age or a golden age. In a golden age, education reshapes men by embracing the whole person where intellectual development, the unity of man and society, and an awakening of individual talents are the objectives. Achieving great endeavors and societal progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot occur if the aims and actions of our educational system continue to act as a dualism: the separation of mind from experience or school from reality (Dewey, 1916, 1938).

An effective social studies education program (or aim) is one that helps students find connections between the ways they live their everyday lives in conjunction with their learning experiences (Bahmueller, 1991). A common perception prevailing in society is that knowledgeable citizens are the keystone of a strong democracy. An assumption to the perception is that students must have basic knowledge of history and government and understand their “role in promoting and defending a robust democracy” (Ferguson, 2013). Simply put, a strong democracy requires competent, active, and virtuous citizens because it is a form of self-government.

Fundamentally, the purpose of a democracy is to protect the rights of the citizens but rights can only be protected if citizens are informed. The Father of the Constitution, James Madison, wrote in 1787, “to secure the public good, and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed” (The Federalist, paper 10). Clearly, Madison (1787) and Dewey (1916,1927) would encourage citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to recurrently find methods to work toward the progress of humanity and sustain a democratic lifestyle as it is constructive, associative, and continually changing. Democracy cannot be learned in the political arena alone, it must also exist in the everyday lives of the people.

### **Problem Statement**

As Crowe (2006) points out, “technology has and continues to influence how we participate in democracy and, in turn, shapes what educators must consider as they prepare students to become active members in a democratic society” (p. 111). No one can argue against the fact that life in contemporary U.S. society largely depends on and takes place in the virtual milieu. For instance, the majority of brick-and-mortar stores have an online option for purchases, Facebook is the largest social arena in the world, banking and financial transactions are mostly digitalized, online schools are becoming as abundant as traditional schools, and political processes (e.g. campaigns) depend on operating successfully in the virtual environment as well. According to Diem (2008), technology is “ubiquitous within world culture and citizenship” (p. xiii) and “democracy is evolving through technology and needs to be part of citizenship education constructs” (p. xx).

The term citizenship is one’s connection to, knowledge of, and participation in their civic and political community (Owen, 2004). The experiences that students have in their schools and

communities “shape their understanding of what it means to be American citizens” (Rubin, 2007, p. 450). Prudent skills fostered in social studies classrooms, like decision-making and problem-solving skills, prepare students’ for their roles as active, informed, and collaborative citizens. Put simply, citizenship is an abstract concept that highlights the relationship between the people and the country in which they live, but, in the minds of many people, is predominantly focused on rights. According to Miller (2009), we need to “expand our conceptualization of the social responsibilities of citizenship—personal, participatory, and community—and our expectations of individuals within our community” (p. 7).

The ways in which individuals associate, behave, and communicate in their communities are simply “outward manifestations of internally constructed civic identities” (Childers, 2006, p. 33). Civic identity is “rooted in the actual behavior of people who believe they are interacting with and impacting the “communities in which they live and work” (p. 34). However, citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have access to more “communities” than citizens did in decades of the past (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, church, school, sports, blogs, Second Life, etc.). When focusing on education in particular, it is unknown if imperative opportunities to learn various democratic processes and engage in community experiences in the traditional brick-and-mortar social studies classroom can carry over into the virtual school. Another unanswered question is whether or not online education will have an effect on civic disengagement among our nation’s youth as virtual schools typically have undefined borders, thus, an absence of the traditional, geographically-based community.

Political scientists have attempted to unravel why citizens are active or inactive in democratic processes but have not found an exact cause for this phenomenon. Levy (2009) describes several factors related to political participation such as political connectedness, socio-



economic status, and political efficacy. Indeed our educational system in the U.S. has a duty to assist students in gaining the proper civic skills, dispositions, and competencies (Sabahattin, 2013) necessary for maintaining our democratic posterity but the role of education in achieving these outcomes seems to continue to be a topic of debate (Lopes, Benton, & Cleaver, 2009). To make matters even more complicated, students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have the option to learn about their roles as productive citizens in either the brick-and-mortar setting or the virtual realm—or often both. Online schooling is becoming more and more popular due to its convenient, multifaceted, stimulating, on-going, and engaging nature. Thus, K-12 distance education programs continue to proliferate each year throughout the U.S., especially in states like Florida.

Not only have a myriad of public schools districts in Florida launched district virtual school programs but private companies have also started emerging, such as, Florida Virtual School, the largest K-12 virtual program in the U.S (Florida Department of Education, 2013). Schlosser and Simonson (2002) define distance education as an “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (p. 1). The flexible lifestyle and student-centered learning experience in the virtual milieu that traditional brick and mortar schools do not provide is one of the leading factors in the increase of online enrollment numbers (Bushweller, 2012).

Within the past decade, enrollment in distance education courses has increased exponentially. In the year 2000, only 45,000 students were registered for a distance education course. However, in 2009, more than three million students were taking a course in a distance education program (Horn & Staker, 2011). In the K-12 realm alone, over 1, 800,000 students were enrolled during the 2009-2010 school year and 31 states had full time distance education

programs (iNACOL, 2012). By 2019, it is estimated that half of all high school courses in the United States will be conducted online (Horn & Staker, 2011).

State governments are currently passing laws that mandate public school districts to create their own distance learning programs. Within the recent past, the Florida Legislature passed S.B. 7197/Digital Learning Act (2011) into law which mandates all school districts to offer digital learning options for all students. Additionally, all Florida high school students must take at least one course online prior to graduation. It is no wonder that 31 states have virtual K-12 programs and over 1.8 million students are enrolled in at least one online course.

The impact that technology has made on education is being nationally recognized and even celebrated more than ever before. In fact, on February 6<sup>th</sup>, any school districts, U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, and supporters of online learning celebrated the second annual Digital Learning Day. Educational supporters promoted awareness of the importance and effects that technology has had on society and our educational system (Digital Learning Day, 2013). Still, a significant stigma surrounding the effectiveness of distance learning programs and courses continue to echo due to high student attrition rates and lack of traditional social interaction for students (Zydney, deNoyelles, & Seo, 2012). In this view, this lack of social interaction correlates with a decrease in motivation and academic success. In addition, the deficiency of professional development of best practices for online instructors (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Preston, 2008), and the infancy of the majority of K-12 distance learning programs, encourage further skepticism. In effect, many parents may question whether the flexible lifestyle guaranteed via virtual schools is more of a risk than a benefit.

Paloff and Pratt (2007), however, emphasize the importance of virtual instructors creating an online learning community to ensure effective courses and student satisfaction. An

online community includes the “ability to build mutual trust, a connection of the spirit, a sense of belonging, a sense of membership and support, and an ability to share in the educational journey together” (p. 26). Thus, the educative experience online must not be a passive pursuit but active, social, self-directed, and engaging. Ensuring communicative experiences is the key for maintaining a successful social studies program; face-to-face or online.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (2013), the primary mission of social studies education is “to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (para. 1). This mission should provide social studies teachers with a goal or purpose in their daily pedagogy; online or the face-to-face classroom. The emphasis on encouraging students to become active citizens in a diverse democracy and globalized world can come packaged in a variety of methods, but a social studies teacher should offer authentic, student-centered instruction that will prepare each student for their futures in the twenty-first century.

A major challenge for current online social studies instructors is how to measure and observe whether or not their students are making informed and reasoned decisions (for the public good) because their instructors do not interact with their students in a physical sense and have a chance to observe how they make decisions associated with citizenship. A face-to-face teacher may be able to observe whether or not his/her students are acting in a democratic fashion in the classroom according to their day-to-day dispositions and behaviors. However, at this time, there is no lucid research based method for measuring the satisfaction of the goals of social studies education in an online or face-to-face classroom. Teachers can attempt to inspire their students to become lifelong caring and active citizens through a variety of pedagogical techniques but studies do not show a link between the two key variables: civic engagement and teacher

influence (Thornton, 2013). Nevertheless, students who learn essential democratic skills and are active participants in their schools and communities have shown positive outcomes, such as, academic success, higher self-esteem, more effective connections with others, and an increased attention toward a career path (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007).

Just as questions begin to emerge about how our current and future generations will interpret and carry-out their civic engagements online and offline, educators are also questioning how to prepare students for this new era of democratic citizenship in online, hybrid, and offline environments (Hoffman, Jones, & Young, 2013). In an online learning environment, the instructor and the students are physically separated and perhaps the only methods for measuring students' development of civic competences, skills, and dispositions is through an analysis of their language-in-use and observance of their digital dispositions and behaviors. At the heart of this study is a compelling interest in online instructor's ability to assist students in developing robust civic identities. Erikson (1950, 1968) theorized that during adolescence, young people develop their identities and attempt to discover their place in the social order. Coming to terms with "the identity task is vital to becoming responsible adults and active citizens" (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012, p. 521). Hardy, Pratt, Pancer, Olsen and Lawford (2010) suggest that civic identity and civic engagement have a reinforcement cycle where the enactment of one influences the other. By focusing on civic identity as a "theoretical construct for understanding how individuals integrate social experiences into beliefs, attitudes, and goals for one's future" (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012, p. 534) and as an indicator of civic engagement, it is imperative that social studies instructors (online or face-to-face) find methods for students to develop, enact, and/or reveal their civic identities.

In addition to a lack of research on successful methods to foster lifelong civic engagement commitments and imperative essential democratic skills and competences in virtual students, there is a foundational problem. The foundational problem is the dichotomy existing in research where articles are solely focused either on best practices for general online teaching or best practices for specific subjects and/or grade levels in a face-to-face setting. The marriage of best practices and a specific online discipline is generally lacking (especially at the high school level) for the social studies. As a result, a substantial amount of the literature review for this study will focus on bridging this gap in the research.

I will also give attention to gap in the research on best practices to provide structure and context for the greater issue in this study: understanding how civic identity is constructed and/or presented in online social studies courses. Identity is constructed through dialogue, typically during adolescent years, and “comes into being when individuals attempt to position themselves vis-à-vis others” (Childers, 2006, p. 6). Syversten, Flanagan, and Stout (2007) explain that political behaviors, perceptions, and opinions are formed by the discussions that students have with one another which encompass a large part of one’s civic identity. Therefore, I focus on the language-in-use in discussion forums as the lens through which I attempt to understand the context of this phenomenon: representations of civic identity within discussion forums in online high school social studies courses.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Certainly, ‘the point of no return’ has been reached, where we can no longer use only past traditions to guide us in making pedagogical decisions for the complex and ever-changing 21<sup>st</sup> century. The teaching and learning of 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy and citizenship in a highly interactive, technology-rich environment must be re-examined from the ground up. The

proliferation of distance learning programs throughout the U.S. in recent times, the lack of research supporting effective learning outcomes and best practices in online high school social studies programs, and a limited understanding of how civic identity is developed, portrayed, and enacted at a distance has pushed me to conduct a research study that explores these topics collectively. Invariably, research suggests that young people are less knowledgeable and less participatory in civic and political life than previous generations (Putnam, 2000), while a plethora of other research argues that students are civically engaged, especially in non-traditional (Parks, 2009). For instance, students are using social networking sites for activism purposes as a means of drawing attention to important political events (Maguth, 2009). The common denominator in all of these nontraditional, technologically enhanced methods of civic engagement is, in fact, quite traditional: the effective use of language. Uncovering students' language-in-use as it relates to civic identity construction and/or presentation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may lead to rich findings of how students participate and perceive their place in a democratic culture.

Because I am an online high school social studies teacher, my pedagogical approach and teaching philosophy centers on the act of assisting my students in the development of their civic identities. As Rubin (2006) writes, "social studies educators must begin to develop practices that encourage students to wrestle with the gaps between civic ideals and realities and consider how those gaps are unevenly distributed throughout society" (p. 228). Simply said, social studies teachers have a duty to assist their students in the development of their civic identities for future civic engagement endeavors. Phipps (2010), for instance, perceives effective social studies instruction as one that ensures decision-making experiences for students to discover their place within society. However, properly measuring, assessing, and/or promoting the construction,

portrayal, and/or enactment of students' civic identities in a virtual environment is ambiguous as learners are at a distance.

In this current research study, I examine students' language-in-use in discussion forums as a virtual teaching and learning tool and attempt to understand how students construct and/or reveal their civic identities within these forums. This research has the potential to enrich our collective knowledge as called for by Bennett (2010), who calls for research that investigates "productive and efficient use of the internet in K-12 social studies classrooms" (p. 34). Swan and Hofer (2008) remind us that more research in social studies education should focus on how technology is being utilized to support learning outcomes. Whitworth and Berson (2003) deem that future research should focus on "how technology use in the social studies impacts academic achievement and learning outcomes" (p. 484), and Berson and Balyta (2004) argue that more research must be conducted when it comes to the impact of technology on social studies pedagogy.

Based on Lee and Hirumi's (2004) article, *Analysis of Essential Skills and Knowledge for Teaching Online*, more research is needed to "determine how specific disciplines, delivery modes, and learning outcomes/strategies affect the skills and knowledge necessary for distance educators to teach successfully online" (p. 538). In addition, DiPietro et al. (2008) caution the acceptance of best practices in the field of distance education because much of the scholarly work is conducted by those who are neither online educators nor traditional classroom educators; instead, they tend to be technologists for whom the central question is always one of successfully deploying technology in the schools. This current research study will, however, examine and consider best practices in online high school social studies courses through a careful analysis of

literature, researcher experience in the field, and a systematic research process conducted in a virtual social studies environment.

My research focus will not be placed strictly on best practices for teaching online social studies; instead, I dedicate substantial attention to this topic as means of providing context and consistency to the entire research study. Simply put, the discussion of best practices in online high school social studies courses is used as a backdrop for the main objective of the study: investigating online discussion forums as a venue for establishing and presenting civic identity. According to Thurlow (2006):

Formative contexts can be established to link actions with the discourse of change, and to explain how individuals reproduce the discourse as they enact it. Contexts help to suggest the pre-existing set of rules that constrain how organizational language, events, and actions may be viewed” (p. 60).

Attempting to understand civic identity development in a poorly designed online social studies course may not advance this current study’s goals because a poorly designed discussion negatively impacts students’ responses and constrains the learning experience (Vonderwall, Liang, & Alderman, 2007).

At the foundation of this work is a thorough understanding of the discourse used and its role and relation to students’ civic identity development and presentation. Accordingly, Fairclough (1995) maintains that “a critical awareness of language is a prerequisite for effective citizenship and a democratic entitlement” (p. 264). Discourse develops social identity by “defining groups, group’s interests, their position within society and their relationship to other groups (Ainsworth, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, the research method that aligns perfectly with this particular research inquiry is discourse analysis.



Discourse analysis, for this study, is an analytical instrument to qualitatively study the interaction of language between individuals and groups. Discourse analysts are “interested in how language is used ‘on site’ to enact activities and identities” (Gee, 2005, p. 7). Discourse analysts primarily study “naturally occurring, unedited text or talk as data with attention to the significance and structuring effects of language” (Ainsworth, 2001, p. 3). The current study regarding the construction and/or presentation of civic identity in discussion forums is descriptive since it explores the discursive processes itself rather than attempting a critical discourse analysis study that focuses on uncovering power relationships, inequalities, or political structures.

Once again, the main objective of this research study is to examine students’ language-in-use as it relates to the construction and/or presentation of civic identity within asynchronous discussion forums via a discourse analysis theoretical model and a qualitative research method. Discourse analysis as a “method focuses on the nature of meaning for participants in a socially constructed world” (Thurlow, 2006, p. 77) and the objective of qualitative research is to understand and interpret a particular phenomenon in its natural setting to find meaning brought forth by the participants involved (Patton, 2002). Moreover, this study is a retrospective examination of high school social studies students’ weekly discussion forum threads throughout one school year, 2013-2014.

The analysis of the discussion forums will help identify “clues to understand what is going on inside my students’ minds” (McGowen, 2002, p. 30). Utilizing a discourse analysis approach may “reveal implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions operating within the context of day-to-day interactions” (p. 31). Therefore, the aim for this study is to discern how civic identity is constructed, enacted, and/or revealed by analyzing discussion forums as civic identities move

toward two poles: achievement or confusion (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meese, 2012). Understanding how civic identities are constructed, enacted, and/or revealed in online settings will provide insight on how social studies educators can assist students toward civic identity achievement(s).

### **Research Questions**

Fostering a positive development of students' civic identities should be a main priority of online social studies teachers because a mature civic identity is the mastery of the combination of civic competences, skills, values, and dispositions that guide their behavior (Rubin, 2007). According to Childers (2006), civic identity is defined as “the sense of self emerging from one’s response to community depends, to the processes of governance, and to the recognition of power relations” (p. 20). If a student builds a strong civic identity, he/she will more than likely become active in their communities through various means and able to adapt to changes within a globalized and democratic society. In fact, Hatcher (2011) finds that a strong indicator of civic engagement is a well-constructed civic identity.

Providing opportunities and safe spaces for students to construct, enact, and/or reveal their civic identities should be the main objective for social studies teachers who embrace the educational mission of the National Council for the Social Studies (2013) of preparing students for their roles in an ever-changing democratic society. Journell (2011) asserts that citizenship can be viewed as a “type of social space in which knowledge, meaning, and identities are discursively shaped” (p. 6). The central assumption for this study is one that sees identity as a creation of discussion and social interaction. Thus, analyzing the language process or the interactions that transpire in the discussion forums is essential to understanding the creation of civic identity. Identity “does not exist before it is languaged and the key to understanding this discursive creation must lie in understanding the language in its natural setting” (Childers, 2006,

p. 39). Put simply, the ways in which we see ourselves as members of a social group is determined by the ways in which others perceive who we are through interactions with them. The methods through which we attempt to align our words and actions with others in a social group essentially molds our identity.

For this current study, I employ a discourse analysis perspective, via a qualitative research methodology, of the discussion forums from one Florida public school district's online high school social studies courses for grades nine through twelve. The discussion forum threads from one school year are analyzed in order to understand how a civic identity develops, is enacted, or is presented over time (within a given semester and course) and across various grade level groups. Because of district policy, FERPA rules, and IRB regulations, it was not possible to collect data across course enrollments or track student discourse from one course to another over multiple years

Gee (2011a) notes that “discourses are ways of enacting socially significant identities and associated practices in society through language and ways of acting, interacting, valuing, knowing, believing, and using things, tools, and technologies at appropriate times and places” (pp. 108-109). In “language, there are important connections among saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity) (p. 2). Consequently, what students type in discussion forums may lead the educational community to comprehend how students come to know what it means and entails to be active, knowledgeable, and caring citizens.

The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What does students' language-in-use in the discussion forums of five online high school social studies courses reveal about the construction and/or portrayal of their civic identities?

2. How do the interactions of virtual students that transpire within the discussion forums affect the formation and portrayal of their civic identities?

### **Significance of the Study**

No research currently exists that combines best practices in online social studies pedagogy with a discourse analysis that examines the construction, demonstration, and/or enactment of civic identities in asynchronous discussion forums. Educational scholars and researchers “have been examining online courses since the courses began to proliferate in the early 1990s but they primarily focus on the phenomenon of online learning as a tool, rather than on student learning” (Moore-Cox, 2010, p. 38). Rubin’s (2006, 2007) research uncovers youth civic identity development and awareness through structured interviews. Childers’s (2006) study highlights the changes in youth civic identity development throughout the past 50 years in an analysis of school newspapers. Youniss and Yates (1997) describe similarities and differences of civic identity construction throughout different regions of the world. Nickelson (2011) investigates the construction of civic identity and the influencing factors affecting the construction of civic identity through student perceptions. However, the gap in research for understanding how the construction, enactment, and/or demonstration of civic identity among high school social studies students in the virtual realm, over a sufficient time frame, and in its natural setting has yet to surface. Moreover, I find that the attention to online high school social studies best practices and achievements in preparing students for their futures in a complex and diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century is crucial to the academic community.

According to Penny and Murphy (2009), asynchronous discussions are the most widely utilized instructional tool in online courses, so focusing on this method of communication seems prudent to the collective online academic community. However, it remains unclear how best

practices in online social studies courses and asynchronous discussion forums influence or reveal the construction and/or enactment of students' civic identities. Youniss (2011) would agree with the importance of social studies researchers focusing on civic identity as he pointed out that,

There is no single value or way of thinking that defines American citizenship, but there is unity in a shared adherence to democracy as just stated. From a psychological perspective, this kind of citizenship entails having and practicing an American identity which involves not only participating in but protecting and appreciating the system of government and the politics which grounds it. Thus, civic education can be more than acquiring a set of facts, learning about rights and obligations, and becoming an informed voter. It is, at its psychological base, coming to know how to function in a democratic system and working to sustain it for oneself and for others (p. 102).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical perspective is the “philosophical stance lying behind a method and provides a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). The theoretical perspective that supports my views on identity formation and discussions as a learning tool is constructivism. Constructivism is an epistemological and theoretical perspective that views knowledge as something that is constructed through an individual's experiences where the individual adopts the new experience and creates knowledge with it (Ackerman, 2001).

For Crotty (1998), constructivists see that meaning and truth spring from an interaction between objects and human consciousness. Since meaning is constructed within a specific social context, there can be multiple meanings and realities in any given environment. Meaning does not exist in the object alone but is discovered through personal and/or societal interpretations and

interactions with the object and the environment. When an individual is born into a particular culture, the culture can instill certain perspectives, knowledge, and attitudes.

The individual's perceptions, interpretations, and notions of the world become his/her consciousness. His/her consciousness then forms the meaning of any object that he/she interacts with. It is, essentially, human nature to place meaning onto objects in order to make sense of the world. Constructivists hold a belief that there are no absolutely true or universally interpretations of reality due to cultural influences (Crotty, 1998). According to Turuk (2008), Vygotsky (1978) theorized that the human brain is mediated and imaginary tools are employed to understand the world. The sociocultural atmosphere influences how one employs the imaginary tools to complete tasks and respond to demands within the culture.

In essence, an individual whose undertakings and interests are connected with others has a social environment. What "he does and what he can do depends upon the expectations, demands, approvals, and condemnation of others. An individual connected with others individuals cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account" (Dewey, 1916, pp. 10-11). The association of individuals within a social environment constructs values, activities, and interests. In order for the habits, customs, ideas, achievements, values, and ways of life from one generation of a society to pass onto the next, both informal (e.g., family, community) and formalized, institutionalized educational systems must be employed. For Dewey (1916), education meant the "social continuity of life" (p. 5) and as a society becomes "more enlightened, it should be responsible to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements to make for a better future society" (p. 15).

Learning, in a narrow sense, is "characterized by the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and feelings among people, resulting in new ways of viewing the world or ways of acting" (LaPointe,

2005, p. 1). Bruner (1960) describes the true act of learning as an occurrence when a student acquires new information, transforms it as meaningful to his/her reality (a manipulation of information), and evaluates its validity by checking the manipulation and confirming it with others. A sociocultural theory views learning in a holistic manner in terms of the actions involved in the process. A sociocultural theorist perceives learning as something that occurs in interaction, not simply through interaction (Turuk, 2008). Similar to Dewey (1916) and Vygotsky (1965, 1978), Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) theorize that learning is a life-long process where knowledge is gained and mediated through language and socialization. Individuals learn to become members of a community and strive toward common goals. The roles that individuals assume bring forth problem-solving scenarios where language is the arbitrator of the activities. In other words, learning takes place when students engage in social interaction (like discussions) and solve relevant problems according to historical, cultural, and social contexts (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Freeman (2010) asserts that “Vygotsky looked at the process of learning rather than at the value of the information being learned because humans reach their fullest cultural development when they hold meaningful relationships with one another” (p. 2). New knowledge is internalized when information is negotiated with others in a social experience. Social constructivists, according to Wilen (2004b), reason that “students develop meaning as they become involved in social settings in which two or more students engage in sustained discourse about issues and problems” (p. 52). Thus, knowledge is not a product to be accumulated but an active and evolving process in which the learner attempts to make sense out of the world (Gurney, 1989) through a social experience.

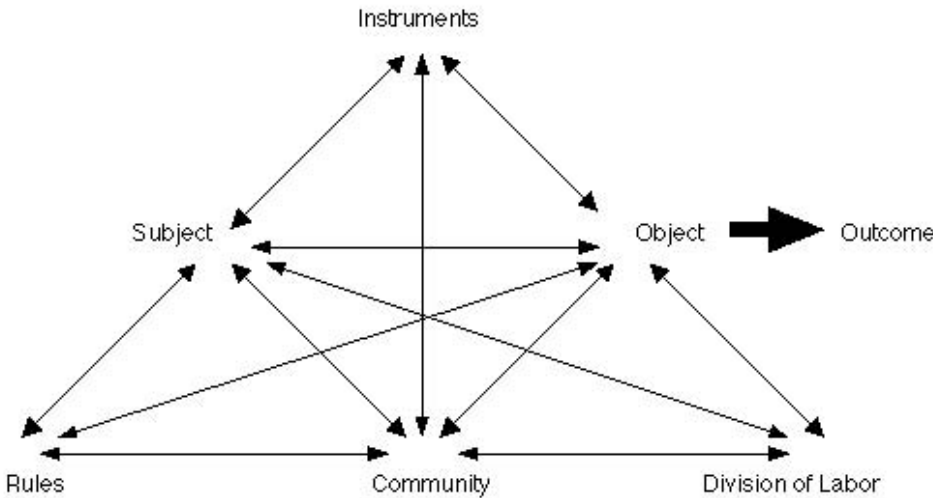
Piaget (1932, 1985) conceived that authentic learning is more likely to take place when students interact with one another rather than solely interacting with the teacher or an adult. Peer learning improves students' "motivation, participation, achievement in class, and satisfaction in the course" (as cited in Shenghua & Ottendorfer, 2011, pp. 238-239). Students who construct new knowledge through active learning experiences engage critical and reflective thinking skills that result in higher cognitive outcomes (Balaji and Chakrabarti, 2010). Activity theory, for instance (derivative of sociocultural theory), is a theoretical lens for attempting to understand how an assemblage of computer-mediated learners work toward a collective goal with consideration to the human, technological, social and organizational components (Liu & Schwen, 2006). According to Li & Bratt (2004):

Activity theory views that all human activity is carried out through actions. Actions are controlled by the subject's conscious goals, which are the anticipation of the future results of the action. Actions are realized through a series of operations, each accommodated to the concrete physical conditions of the action. Operations describe how the action is realized, adjusted to the actual material conditions of the action. The human activity is guided by anticipation of these three levels (p. 22).

Activity theory is an important theory to consider in this study when analyzing the relationship between meanings, identities, and activities that emerge within weekly discussion forums. To illustrate, the weekly discussion forum topic is the object, the subject is the virtual students and instructor within the social studies course, the interactions within the social studies course and its weekly discussion forums are the community, the instruments are the tools used each week (e.g. computer and computer software), the rules are the evaluation criteria and



deadlines, and the division of labor are the various roles that are manifested within the discussion forums (e.g. instructor as moderator and students as knowledge producers).



**Figure 1: Li & Bratt (2004): The Structure of Human Activity**

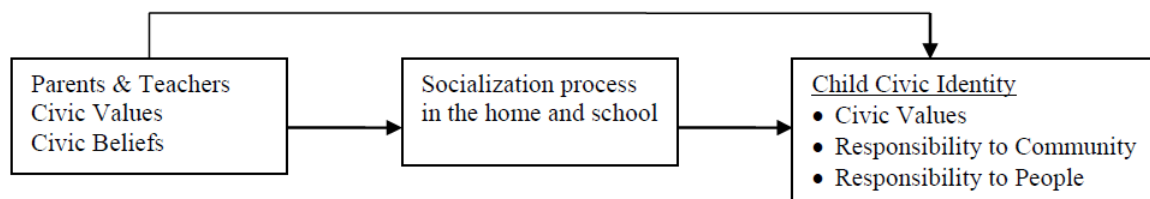
In addition to sociocultural and activity theories, theory relating to the construction, presentation, and/or enactment of civic identity must be addressed. At its core, civic identity is a social identity. Social identity theory assumes that a social identity is one’s critical awareness that they are a part of a social group or classification (Stets & Burke, 2000). An individual has knowledge that they are a member of a social group through language and dialogue with others (Norton, 2006). The identification process “occurs when people perceive that their interests are joined and they share (similar or different) ways of thinking and valuing through human discourse (Childers, 2006, p. 8). Benwell and Stoeke (2006) view identity development in a social constructionist perspective and note that:

There is no such thing as an absolute self, lurking behind discourse. A constructionist approach examines people’s own understandings of identity and how the notion of

inner/outer selves is used rhetorically, to accomplish social action. There is no way through discourse to a hidden reality, even though we might talk as if there is.

Constructionist approaches do not therefore simply replace an inner self with an outer one. Rather, it is the very idea of an inner self and its outward expressions that is constructed, metaphorically. Who we are to each other, then, is accomplished, disputed, ascribed, resisted, managed and negotiated in discourse (p. 4).

Clearly, civic identity is a form of social identity but also encompasses a greater notion: it is an individual's "sense of self in relationship to society and that individual's desire to be an active member in the present and future" (Nickelson, 2011, p. 1). An individual's civic identity is constructed overtime according to daily experiences within their community, place of work, school, family, and other social settings.



**Figure 2: White's (2012) Construction of Civic Identity in Elementary School Model**

White (2012) sees parents (family) and teachers (school) as major factors that affect the civic values and beliefs that one holds as the embodiment of their civic identity. However, White does not place emphasis on societal or technological effects and does not include civic engagement in the model. For this current study, I attempt to understand how civic identity—an "individual's connection and participation in a civic community" (Rubin, 2007, p. 449)—is constructed, revealed, and/or enacted through socialization processes (namely, weekly discussion

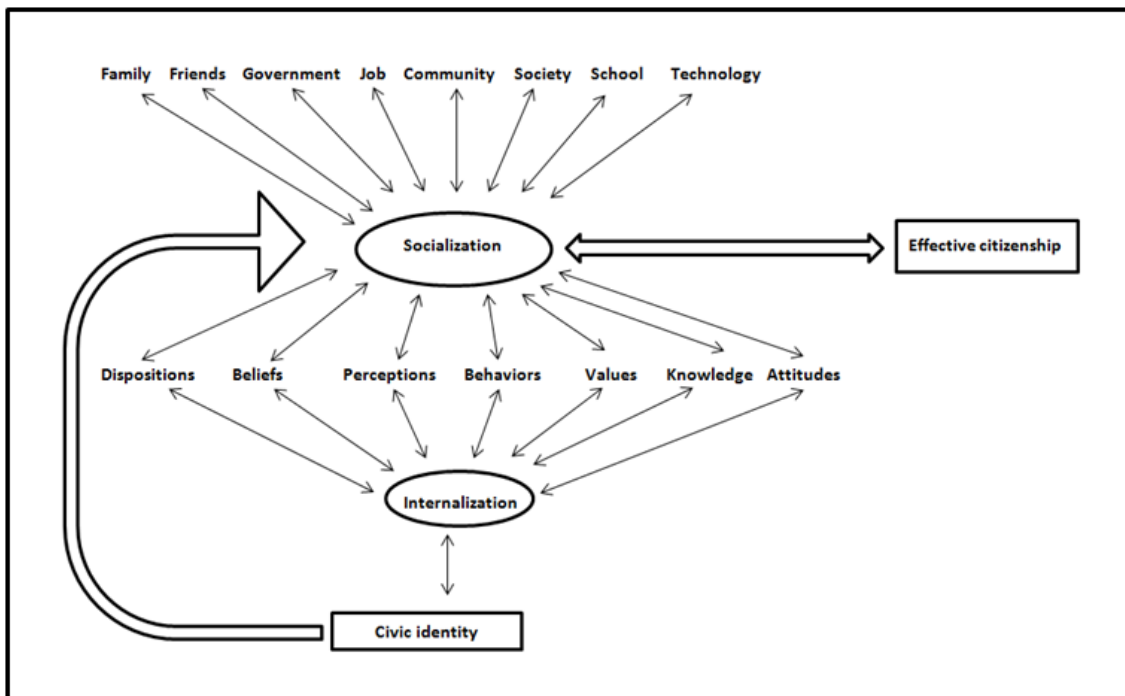
forums). Civic identity is similar to and includes the concept of political efficacy but is more than just a political attitude or feeling. Political efficacy, a feeling that “one’s political action has an impact on the political process and that one’s place within the political system can bring about change” (Levy, 2013, p. 2), is an essential component of civic identity because it serves to motivate and focus civic engagement and action. Figure 3, as shown below, simplifies the democratic citizenship concept.



**Figure 3: Levy’s (2013) Factors Influencing Political Participation Model**

Colby and Daniel (1992) explain that civic identity development drastically occurs during the ages of 18-22 when the individual leaves the home and encounters multiple perspectives without an adult to mediate and define the moral domain. The young adult has a developed brain that can process complex cognitive tasks and begins to test their moral identity in various social interactions. Moral identity is a component of the civic identity, but civic identity is the notion that one belongs to a community to which he/she feels a sense of responsibility to be an active member in both the present and future (Youniss and Yates, 1999). A graphic representation of

the conceptual model ultimately guiding my study is shown below in figure 4. From my observations as a teacher and researcher, I have found that the influencing factors affecting students’ personal qualities (dispositions, beliefs, behaviors, values, knowledge, and attitudes) are mediated by socialization experiences (e.g. discussions). Once these personal qualities are internalized they become stronger or weaker as they are challenged by others through socialization experiences. Most importantly, the objective of developing a robust civic identity is for present and future civic engagement in political and civic arenas. Civic engagement depends on a well-developed civic identity and socialization experiences. In other words, “social identity acts as an interpretive framework for social action” (Ainsworth, 2001, p. 3).



**Figure 4: Conceptual Model Informing this Research Study’s Direction and Purpose**

## **Assumptions**

Several assumptions, based on theoretical and research literature, are implicit in this current study:

1. Virtual high school social studies curriculum can be written and delivered in a manner that prepares students to become active, caring, and productive citizens in their communities (in the present and future).
2. Civic identities can be constructed, enacted, and/or revealed in online social studies courses' discussion forums which will guide their present and future civic engagements if the virtual courses and discussion forums are structured according to best practices.
3. Discussions are the essence of democracy and a necessary element for the construction and enactment of new knowledge and civic identities.
4. Online social studies education is a different dynamic than face-to-face social studies education and should be executed in a distinct fashion.

## **Definition of Terms**

There are several operational definitions of concepts, which are essential to the understanding of this study. They are outlined below:

1. Discussion: The act of two or more people exchanging ideas in speech or writing for an intended purpose. More specifically, it is a process of building, interpreting, and modifying representations of reality based upon experiences with reality and confirmed or negotiated with others in speech or writing (Lee & Chin-Chung, 2011). Identity is a discursive creation (Childers, 2006) and comes into being through language.

2. Asynchronous discussion forums: A space created in online courses for the purpose of meaningful discussions that are organized into threads (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997). The teacher or administrator will use asynchronous discussion forums as a teaching and learning tool to allow students to communicate with one another around a specific topic(s). The forum may have time constraints only in a sense of when the forum should come to a close for grading purposes. In this study, the discussion forum will be used as a conduit for constructing, enacting, and/or revealing civic identities.
3. Civic identity: Evidence or indicators in one's actions or speech that reveals his/her multifaceted and internalized character in relation to one's community (Rubin, 2006, 2007). In this study, the language used to describe or reveal students' connection and place within their community, civic knowledge and skills, activities that unfold within the discussion forum (e.g.: negotiation of values), and other indicators of the civic identity will be collected and analyzed.
4. Best practice: A thoughtful, informed, responsible, 'state-of-the-art' teaching method (Zeleman, Daniels & Hyde, 1998). In this study, a structured course with effective assignments/activities according to student needs and curricular goals is a best practice. Put simply, an organized and properly structured virtual social studies course will positively affect individual student and the collective learning experience, student attitudes, relationships and interactions, and identities.
5. Civic engagement: Participating in the political process and civic life (e.g. volunteering) (Miller, 2009) for the betterment of the community and a democracy. In this study, the social studies education goal of a student building, enacting, and

committing to a strong civic identity will perhaps lead to present and future civic engagements.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, this study risks researcher bias because I am the researcher, content writer, and instructor of the five social studies courses that are examined. Moreover, I also participate in the discussion forums along with the students throughout the school year. Yet, Richards (2009) reminds us that “a good research design will always take into account what is already known and researchers don’t have empty minds; they have strong values and commitment to their topic (p. 23). Qualitative research depends on the knowledge, skills, and insights from the researcher to generate new findings (Patton, 1990).

Discourse analysts are “interested in the little stories of how language manifests itself and how the discourse and social practices affect individuals” (Neale, 2011, p. 140). The interest in the ‘little stories’ is the culprit for the second limitation. The second limitation is that this study employs purposeful sampling as it is a narrow case. The data collected in this study may not truly represent online high school social studies courses in other districts throughout the United States and may not be used for generalization purposes. Patton (2002), however, emphasizes the importance of utilizing purposeful sampling in qualitative research because researchers should not have concern with generalizability but for the comprehension of a phenomenon in-depth. This present study is a unique and narrow case, but may be useful to the academic community as it could translate to other school districts to the extent that they resemble the school district and/or social studies courses being investigated.

Another limitation is that the interpretation of the discussion forum threads is subject to researcher subjectivity and hermeneutics within the data analysis. More importantly, this is a

high inference study as I am assuming that the students' language-in-use has any relation to their civic identity construction and/or presentation. Qualitative research, however, places significance on subjectivity as it is an "essential part of human communication that cannot be done away with or controlled" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 27). Fairclough (2003) rejects the "concept of objectivity and writes that there is no such thing as an objective analysis of a text and that there is no analysis that is not biased by the subjectivity of the analyst (as cited in Neale, 2011, p. 146). Guba and Lincoln (1994) deem that qualitative research is interested in multiple interpretations of reality because one interpretation of reality does not exist.

The fourth limitation is the length of time (one school year) that I collected the data. This one year time period may not be a sufficient time frame for accurately understanding how the construction and/or presentation of civic identity transpires within discussion forums. Also, the data that I collected was purposefully sampled and some discussion threads were omitted if they did not meet the information-rich criteria. The omission of certain discussion threads may affect the true representation of students' language-in-use as it relates to civic identity construction and/or presentation via asynchronous discussion forums. Qualitative researchers, alternatively, forfeit validity and reliability to fully understand the phenomenon holistically as they inquire into the minds of the participants (Patton, 1996).

The last limitation is the question of whether or not students' language-in-use in asynchronous discussion forums and the concept of civic identity construction and/or presentation can have an effect on one another (or correlate). The students' civic identities may have formed elsewhere and have no correlation to discussion forums or there may not be signs of civic identity presentation. Discussion forums may not foster any changes in one's civic identity or reveal the effects thereof. In effect, discussion forums may only be a space to share stories,



experiences, and thoughts in a manner that is non-transformative. However, qualitative research is not intended for predicting what may transpire in a natural setting (as in quantitative research); rather the objective is to understand the meaning of a situation brought forth by the participants (Patton, 2002).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this discourse analysis is to understand how students present their civic identities and conceptions of democratic citizenship through weekly discussion forums in five online high school social studies courses in Florida. The examination of students' language-in-use with regard to civic identity presentation is a crucial element for virtual social studies instructors to consider when attempting to understand how young people are civically and politically connected to their communities in a digital age.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

“A man who reviews the old so as to find out the new is qualified to teach others.”– Confucius

### Introduction

This past September 17th marked the 225th anniversary of the signing and enactment of our U.S. Constitution. September 17<sup>th</sup>, Constitution and Citizenship Day, is a national holiday where we “reflect on the importance of active citizenship, recognize the enduring strength of our Constitution, and reaffirm our commitment to the rights and obligations of citizenship in this great Nation” (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2012, para. 5). When we ‘reflect’ upon our rights and responsibilities, we may see common themes and characteristics arise. The common themes and characteristics of active citizenship are constantly in negotiation due to continual changes within society; however, the essence of citizenship has not transformed dramatically over the last 225 years.

The word citizenship originates from the Latin word *civitas*. There are, in fact, two meanings of *civitas*: (1) the “functioning body of persons and institutions constituting a politically organized community of state and (2) the concepts and values of citizenship that impart shared responsibilities, common purpose, and sense of community among the citizens of the political order” (Bahmueller, 1991, p. xix). During the late Roman Republic, Cicero referred to the social body (*cives*) as those bound together by law who held responsibilities and rights (Smith, 1875). Throughout history, the term has expanded in meaning according to its context. In the U.S., for instance, the embodiment of citizenship has not altered profoundly over the last

225 years but the contexts that citizenship rights and responsibilities are learned has indeed changed. Much of where Americans learn citizenship, or what it means to be a 'good' citizen, occurs in our nation's schools but recent technological advancements have pushed our society and schools to alter their traditional context of social experiences.

Certainly, the aims of education have shifted along with societal changes; however, education follows in society's shadow. Early American educational aims focused on students becoming "hard-working, literate, temperate, frugal and good planners. The school was not expected to cure social ills, only teach academic skills" (Noddings, 1988, pp. 216-217). Industrialization, immigration, distribution of wealth, and other unexpected social changes (e.g. Civil War) before, during, and following the Progressive Era cultivated a social welfare and social improvement agenda for the schools (Ross, 2006). Following WWII and the Cold War, the U.S. was ready for a 'back to the basics' approach as math and reading levels were failing to keep up on the global scale (Byford & Russell, 2007). Scholarship during the 1980s that reported declining civic engagement levels of young people throughout the U.S. encouraged educators to turn their attention back to the importance of civics within the educational system (Owen, 2004).

Since the 1990s, the U.S. educational system has been on a standardized testing agenda to ensure school districts are in alignment with state curricular frameworks (Ross, 2006). As much as educators would like to think that schools are on track for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need to turn our attention to N.C.L.B., the New York's Regents Examination, or the S.A.T. These standardized tests assume that intelligence is measured according the memorization of fragmented facts and largely disregards cultural, critical thinking, authentic, or technologically based inquiries. Generally speaking, standardized tests do not include an assessment of the social studies. If the

goal of social studies education is for civic engagement, expecting students to vote, participate in community activities, or show concern with current events, then educators must provide opportunities where young people are engaged in meaningful, democratic exercises connected to the community (Owen, 2004). Political scientists believe in similar approaches like offering students “experiences in politically active communities, teaching skills necessary for political action, engaging students in political discourse, and offering students experiences in collaborative pluralistic contexts (Beaumont, 2011, p. 217).

### **Citizenship, the Social Studies, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum**

In this study, the core mission of the social studies curriculum is to act as a medium in the development of civic knowledge, skills, and competences necessary for civic engagement. The broad concept of citizenship will be focused on “the good of the individual” (e.g. specific skills and attitudes) and “the good of society” (e.g. volunteering and voting) (Boebeck, 2007, p. 2). ‘Good citizens’ are viewed as being personally responsible, active in their community, and seek to eradicate injustices and problems in our democracy. The characteristics or constructs of what encompasses a ‘good citizen’ may not come into fruition overnight or through direct teaching methods, instead, it is an ongoing and lifelong commitment and engagement learned through indirect methods. For Westheimer and Kahne (2004), a good citizen encompasses the following qualities and characteristics, as shown in table 1.

As the world becomes more and more interconnected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to technological developments, the average citizen begins to develop into a significant and active player in domestic, and perhaps global issues. The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education (2009) notes that “within the context of core instruction, students must learn the essential skills for

success in today’s world; such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration” (p. 1). The following themes should be encompassed into daily instruction:

- Global Awareness
- Financial, Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial Literacy
- Civic Literacy
- Health Literacy
- Environmental Literacy
- Media Literacy

**Table 1: Constructs of Citizenship**

	<b>Personally Responsible Citizen</b>	<b>Participatory Citizen</b>	<b>Justice-oriented Citizen</b>
<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acts responsibly in his/her community</li> <li>Works and pays taxes</li> <li>Obeys laws</li> <li>Recycles, gives blood</li> <li>Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts</li> <li>Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment</li> <li>Knows how government agencies work</li> <li>Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes</li> <li>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</li> <li>Knows about social movements and how to effect systemic change</li> </ul>
<b>SAMPLE ACTION</b>	Contributes food to a food drive	Helps to organize a food drive	Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes
<b>CORE ASSUMPTIONS</b>	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures	To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question and change established systems and structures when they reproduce patterns of injustice over time

Accordingly, the National Council for the Social Studies (2013) position statement on *Creating Effective Citizens* states that “citizens in the twenty-first century must be prepared to deal with rapid change, complex local, national, and global issues, cultural and religious conflicts, and the increasing interdependence of nations in a global economy” (para 4). Even further, Hatcher (2011) asserts that colleges and universities across the U.S. expect students to reflect on “four broad essential learning outcomes for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world: knowledge of

human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practice skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning (p. 81).

### ***Teaching 21<sup>st</sup> Century Civic Education***

The teaching and learning of citizenship within the social studies curriculum, to Parker (1996), is a process rather than a product. Yet, much of civic education within the social studies curriculum focuses on increasing civic knowledge and providing civic engagement opportunities (e.g. service learning). Service learning provides students the opportunity to provide meaningful service to their school or community with a structured learning and reflection element (Wade, 2001). Additionally, research on civic education mostly covers civic knowledge and engagement but does not focus on how indirect, daily experiences (in and out of school) affect students' understanding and perceptions of citizenship (Miller, 2009).

An effective social studies instructor provides an environment that allows students to understand the difference between a democracy full of direct participation in civic life and a democracy full of spectatorship. Those who participate in civic and political life hold strong civic dispositions and commitments for the greater good. For instance, some of the civic dispositions include: civility, individual responsibility, open-mindedness, toleration of diversity, and loyalty to the nation. Civic commitments to democratic values and principles include concepts like popular sovereignty, Constitutional government, justice, equality, truth, and patriotism (Bahmueller, 1991). These democratic values and dispositions are, however, typically learned and enacted in indirect fashions (e.g. discussions, debate, or service learning projects).

Phipps (2010) explains that social studies programs emphasize three essential components: “command of subject-matter knowledge, demonstration of various democratic skills, and development of and commitment democratic dispositions for the common good” (p.

1). These three essential components are prudent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as “our civil society is weakening as social divisions are rearranging institutions, resulting in more Americans living in isolation from one another” (p. 2). Social studies instructors, according to Parker et al. (1998), should incorporate six ethical questions/issues into their curriculum or daily activities (e.g.: discussions):

1. What should be done in order to promote equity and fairness within and among societies?
2. What should be the balance between the right to privacy and free and open access to information in information-based societies?
3. What should be the balance between protecting the environment and meeting human needs?
4. What should be done to cope with issues of population growth, genetic engineering and children in poverty?
5. What should be done to develop shared universal values while at the same time respecting local values?
6. What should be done to empower learners to secure an ethically-based distribution of power for deciding policy and action on the above issues? (p. 153).

Butts (1988) provides a helpful table for teachers when emphasizing democratic concepts that mirror the Roman Twelve Tables. Butt’s twelve elements of democratic civism table is comprised of six rights (*pluribus*) and six obligations (*unom*). Butts recommends that the

inclusion of the twelve democratic principles within teachers’ daily instruction will foster and inspire the development of virtuous and good citizens (see table 2).

**Table 2: Butts (1998) Democratic Civism**

UNUM		PLURIBUS	
The Obligations of Citizens		The Rights of Citizenship	
Corrupted Forms of Unum	True Forms of Unum	True Forms of Pluribus	Corrupted Forms of Pluribus
Law & Order	Justice	Freedom	Anarchy
Conformity	Equality	Diversity	Unstable Pluralism
Authoritarianism	Authority	Privacy	Privatization
Majoritarianism	Participation	Due Process	Weak on Criminals
Misinformation and Half Truths	Truth	Property	Property Rights Above Human Rights
Xenophobia and Ethnocentrism	Patriotism	Human Rights	Cultural Imperialism and Forced Assimilation
		Democratic Civism	

***Civic Education and Democratic Posterity***

Dewey (1938) saw traditional schools emphasizing “subject matter for the study of facts and ideas so bound up with the past as to give little help in dealing with the issues of the present and future” (p. 23). Dewey (1916) warned the scholastic masses about “subjects being accepted as appropriate educational material simply because they have become customary to teach and learn” (p. 116). Simply put, Dewey sees no greater danger for our democratic posterity than teaching and learning subjects, like the social studies, because it is a customary tradition. To illustrate, the *Huffington Post*’s most recent article concerning the state of social studies education (February 8, 2013) specifically mentions a concern for the lack of Civics instruction in schools throughout the U.S. The concern derives from limited data and research about current



Civics instruction, learning, and assessment outcomes in K-12 public and charter schools. It appears as if Civics has transitioned from the center of social studies education to an undocumented and perhaps insignificant aspect of the curriculum. Ferguson (2013) asserts that today's "individuals are hamstrung in understanding their own rights and the rights of others".

Kahne and Westheimer (2003) also argue that civic education and "democratic priorities are more rhetorical than substantive" (p. 35) due to deleterious educational reform actions (e.g.: NCLB). Democracy, for Dewey, is "dependent upon the use in forming a course of study of criteria which are broadly human" (p. 106). He views education as being futile if tailored for utilitarian measures but an education with the aims of social interest and betterment through a scientific approach will aid in the continuity of social life.

Through the recent storm of terrorist attacks, school shootings, economic recessions, religious discord, and ethnic cleanings, an academic subject that focuses on the nurturing of informed, active agents (not passive) who seek solutions to the horrors that continue to plague humanity is needed more than ever before. However, given the wide scope of the social studies, the vast amount of approaches, values, and purposes to the curriculum (Ross, 2006) causes disunity among social studies aims. Boebeck (2007) claims that one approach to the social studies curriculum is "ensuring the maintenance, perpetuation, and important reform of civil society and democracy to promote youth civic identity development so that young people may develop into active, engaged citizens" (p. 10).

Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997) find that the most important factor predicting civic engagement across time and space is the degree to which an individual is successful in forming and maintaining a robust civic identity. However, the quandary that is currently permeating the field is the ways in which virtual social studies instructors should be guided in terms of assuring

that their students are successful in developing, enacting, and maintaining a robust civic identity necessary for lifelong civic engagement commitments and duties. Online social studies best practices remain unclear and ambiguous when current and past research proposes for teachers to provide students with “hands-on training for future civic participation” and “give opportunities to practice democratic governance” (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. 425) when virtual students are socially isolated and disconnected from their traditional community.

To structure the remainder of this chapter in an organized and clear manner for readers, I will spend considerable time discussing the history of distance education and the history of the social studies curriculum as context for the discussion of best practices. I will then attempt to merge best practices in each field to create best practices for online high school social studies since research is lacking. Following the best practices section for online high school social studies pedagogy, I will highlight the nature of discussions in relation to democracy and civic identity development. Lastly, I will critique past research that focuses on civic identity development and education. Once again, the overall purpose of this study is to understand how civic identity is developed, enacted, and/or revealed through discussion forums (or socialization experiences) in online high school social studies courses. This topic is prudent for the academic community and our democratic society to consider when understanding and improving how ‘good’ citizenship develops and is fashioned in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Evolution of Distance Education**

Distance education is not a new phenomenon in the world of education but is gaining more attention than ever before. The explosion of new technologies, shrinking incomes, educational budget cuts, and demand of 21st century knowledge and skills as prerequisites for job performance are the factors influencing the increasing enrollment numbers in distance

education programs worldwide. Distance education is defined as the “separation of teacher and learner, influence of an educational organization, use of media to link teacher and learner, two-way exchange of communication, learners as individuals rather than grouped, education as an industrialized form” (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2004, p. 4). Holmberg (1989) states that distance education entails the pedagogical and learning activities in the mental and “affective domains of an individual learner and a supporting organization. It is characterized by non-contiguous communication and can be carried out anywhere and at any time, which makes it attractive to adults with professional and social commitments” (as cited in McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2004, p. 4).

The history of distance education begins with the emergence of correspondence courses during the early nineteenth century. A correspondence course was an alternative and less costly method of gaining a higher education in Europe and the U.S. The University of Chicago offered correspondence courses to those students who could not afford residency. Instructors would mail students print materials with limited face-to-face meetings. Starting in the mid twentieth century, radio and television offered a fresh way to learn the material in correspondence courses. The British Open University was one of the first locations where the radio was used for spreading information to learners that were separated from their teachers (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2004). Private groups also had interest in correspondence courses, such as the Carnegie Foundation, that raised funds for the A.I.M.S. project and provided radio and television instruction to off campus students (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Then in the 1980s, teacher shortages and attention toward the rural educational dilemma brought forth a surge in alternative education programs (commercial courses) where students could have access to a formal educational program without attending face-to-face meetings in Texas and Wisconsin. However,

the popularity of television and audio instruction within distance education programs declined as students were not able to challenge or add their ideas to the content, communicate with others, ask questions, and have a meaningful learning experience. In fact, research in the late twentieth century overwhelmingly suggests that audio and visual learning had negative effects on the learning process due to the one-way conversation approach (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2004).

By the 1990s, the proliferation of distance education programs throughout the U.S. was unstoppable due to the introduction of the World Wide Web as a teaching and learning tool. The 107<sup>th</sup> Congress unequivocally decided to place distance education as the focus of their administration by noting that “the internet is perhaps the most transformative technology in history, reshaping business, media, entertainment, and society in astonishing ways. There is no going back; the traditional classroom has been transformed” (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2004, p. 3). Yet, much of the use of the Internet for the first 15 years was a passive experience as learners merely viewed or stored content (Rosenberg, 2012).

By 2002, distance education became a possibility for all students through the H.R. Bill of 1992 and the Internet Equity and Education Act of 2001. Students were granted access to educational loans to pay for online courses and a myriad of states had the opportunity to offer distance education programs with full credentials (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2004). In fact, a few years prior to the enactment of the Internet Equity and Education Act of 2001, the first full-time, K-12 online school opened its virtual doors in Florida in 1997 (FLVS, 2013). The Florida Department of Education awarded two Florida school districts, Orange and Alachua counties, “Break the Mold” grants to create a virtual high school for students in Florida with unmet educational needs. In 1997, its first year of operation, there were only 77 students enrolled but within one decade, enrollment expanded to more than 70,000 students (Mackey & Horn, 2009).

K-12 virtual schools (public and private) continue to increase in number and size each year. For instance, more than half of all states have students taking distance education courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Virtual K-12 schools are not a trend ready to go out of style anytime soon due to the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational vision of providing accessible learning to all (Ayas, 2006). Online schooling will to remain a high demand product as educational budgets continue to decrease and credit recovery options along with A.P. courses offerings diminish in local school districts (International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 2012). However, a question that continues to surface is whether or not virtual courses are as effective on academic achievement as traditional face-to-face courses (Zydney, deNoyelles, & Seo, 2012).

### **Best Practices for Online Instructors**

Merryfield (2003) recognizes that online social studies teachers naturally find themselves placed in the mix of an exciting and student-centered environment where students take ownership of their learning unlike traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms. The traditional face-to-face instructor is responsible for acting as the primary content deliverer and the composer of daily learning. The face-to-face teacher is considered a ‘gatekeeper’ where he/she permits the passage of information, curriculum, and activities into their classroom (Thornton, 2005). The type of classroom climate that a teacher manages determines the level of gatekeeping. For example, a classroom enriched with technology may reveal lower levels of gatekeeping as the students have access to copious amounts of information and digital sources that can be shared in a discussion. Conversely, a classroom that appears poorly funded and only has a few textbooks may appear to have higher levels of gatekeeping as the curriculum, activities, and resources are directed by the teacher.

On the other hand, an online instructor acts as a facilitator of learning and a medium between the content, technology, and student. Successful online courses produce a student-centered environment where students are able to take charge of their learning experience by choosing the time, pace, and space (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). The online learning experience can be effective and personalized for students' learning needs and preferences with a student-centered and engaging design. There are, however, many instances where online instructors and courses are ineffective in their delivery methods. Unfortunately, scholarly research and professional development for best practices for subject specific online instructors is lacking which can prevent distance education programs from receiving notable recognition (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black, & Preston, 2008) or to continue negative virtual educational trends. Most online educators appear to have lower levels of gatekeeping as students have access to limitless resources through the internet and the open nature of discussion forums allows students to share information discovered through personal research.

### ***Transition in Pedagogy***

Early distance education studies argue that teaching online is vastly different than teaching in the face-to-face classroom. Oliver (2001) maintains that a transition in pedagogy must occur when stepping into the virtual classroom because educational aims shift from a teacher-centered method to a student-centered. Teachers become facilitators to allow students to make meaning of content and media in the online setting (Salmon, 2000). In essence, media can serve as a conduit between preceding and new knowledge constructed in e-learning courses. Driscoll, (2012) explains that situate learning theory suggests that learners create meaning through a process of encoding in a particular cultural system. Providing complex learning

environments for students to engage in the learning process allows learners to reflect on “what and how they are learning” (p. 41).

Another variance from the face-to-face to virtual classroom is that the online learning context is one in which students become a member of a knowledge culture, not simply a training culture. Students become skilled researchers and explorers of new content (Rosenberg, 2012) as they navigate endless resources and information. Students cannot become skilled researchers alone though; instructors should serve as a learning coach and guide the research process (Rossett & Hoffman, 2012). E-instructors must help students locate accurate and meaningful resources while fostering the proper learning environment for the development a curious and critical mindset.

Virtual instructors must also, according to DiPietro, et al. (2008), hold a solid comprehension of current technologies and sustain a comfort level with their online courses. The course must be organized, user-friendly, offer a plethora of activities, include clear guidelines and expectations for the students, and embrace a mixture of high and low level thinking processes. Seok (2007) states that course designers should ensure that their students are always engaged in authentic critical and higher-order thinking pursuits. Put simply, students must have opportunities to examine, problem-solve, or make decisions based on real-world scenarios. The instructional design that undergirds these best practices is referred to as A.D.D.I.E. This acronym stands for: analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate. A.D.D.I.E. is an instructional design that places students at the center of the learning process guided by learning goals that are measurable (Branch & Merrill, 2012).

Miller and Hutchens (2009) suggest that educators adapt their courses around student learning styles, become cognizant of legal requirements in an online environment, offer

synchronous and asynchronous methods of communication, and maintain a high level of interaction with each student. Learners will expect for their instructors to have an organized and meaningful course with minimal errors. Students will become upset if they feel the course is a waste of time and irrelevant to their personal lives. Thus, instructors must act as an ‘orchestrator’ of the technology and content for organized and progressive learning experiences (Chute, 1999). All too often, instructors are “swayed by the bells and whistles embedded in a fancy software package and do not consider what the learner can receive and handle as a part of the learning process” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 96).

Schlosser and Anderson (1994) classify skills that online instructors must hold in order to pedagogically succeed in distance education programs:

- Understanding the nature and philosophy of distance education
- Identifying learner characteristics at distant sites
- Designing and developing interactive courseware to suit each new technology
- Adapting teaching strategies to deliver instruction at a distance
- Organizing instructional resources in a format suitable for independent study
- Training and practice in the use of telecommunications systems
- Becoming involved in organization, collaborative planning, and decision-making
- Evaluating student achievement, attitudes, and perceptions at distant sites
- Dealing with copyright issues

(as cited in Sherry, 1996, p. 14)

As noted previously, online educators attain the role of a facilitator and transition from the center of instruction to an intellectual guide in the learning process. No longer are instructors



the sole deliverer of the content as students have access to unlimited material via the Internet. Thus, e-instructors must specify the learning goals, expectations, directions, and outcomes in a lucid manner to ensure each student is learning in the most efficacious fashion.

### ***Attention to Online Course Design***

Invariably, one of the most pressing issues in distance/online education today is the quality of e-learning courses and experienced virtual instructors (Wallace, 2003). In fact, Nash (2012) stresses the importance of instructors assembling their courses as a living document that can be “easily modified and updated to meet changing needs because content can be shared, replaced, and reused” (p. 291). Using outdated, erroneous, unsatisfactory content and assignments, semester after semester, is a practice that should not take place in the ever-changing virtual world.

The aesthetics of a course is also prudent for learner engagement and comfort levels. The utilization of colors, pictures, different text features, and banners in online courses are known to make students feel that the course is worthwhile. A general orientation, a space for the instructor to display their biography, and an icebreaker for student introductions aids in the social presence of an online course. Social presence is the “degree to which a person is perceived as real in communication that is conducted via the use of some form of media” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 30). Learner satisfaction and social presence or a “sense of belonging to a community is correlated” (p. 31) in numerous studies. Moreover, spaces for announcements, course guidelines and expectations, weekly or daily content access, discussion forums, and other course tools should be thoughtfully laid out in alliance with the course syllabus.

Course design and quality are key elements in the success of an online course but so too is the quality of communication and social interactions (Sargeant et al., 2004). Discussions in an

online setting are imperative as social interaction is lacking. Critical thinking, reflection, social interaction, validation, and reinforcement are all facets that take place in discussions. A variety of questions should be asked in a prompting manner to usher in rich discussions. A deep exploration of a topic will also provide a student-centered and highly participatory discussion (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). In addition, crafting a welcoming and caring environment for discussions supports the development of an online community.

It is the instructor's duty to reach out to students who are not active in online social interactions to bring them back into the online community (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Virtual instructors must offer opportunities for interactions in the following ways: student-student, student-teacher, and content-student. The instructor should be present on a daily basis to make certain that a proper comfort level is sustained for each student (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). The facilitation of these social interactions is one of the most important skills to achieve (Lee & Hirumi, 2004) because the construction of new knowledge by means of social interactions is an empowering experience (Seok, 2007). For example, Web 2.0 technology drives students to develop their ideas as they "consult others' work and collectively determine the next steps based on gaps in their knowledge" (Driscoll, 2012, p. 40). Web 2.0 tools serve to "maximize the collective intelligence of the participants" involved (Anderson, 2012, p. 300) inside and outside the virtual classroom. Utilizing Web 2.0 technologies, therefore, functions as a "gateway to lifelong learning opportunities" (p. 305).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, intelligence is no longer viewed as the mastery or memorization of content but the evidence in skills and dispositions that can be transferred into the real world. In order for students to gain skills and dispositions necessary for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a space to communicate with the content, instructor, and classmates is imperative. Just as students

congregate in the traditional school, students in virtual school must have the same option. Discussion forums, small group work, Elluminate sessions, computer games, and Web 2.0 activities are excellent examples of how an online community dynamic can be fostered. An effective virtual instructor is, however, present daily to provide feedback, act as an academic coach, and a facilitator of the course discussions.

### ***A Constructivist and Student-Centered Learning Philosophy***

The active, student-centered, and collaborative experiences found within e-learning courses align with constructivist theories. Constructivist learning approaches provide a theoretical underpinning for e-learning course design, structure, and processes. Embedding learning activities in everyday life experiences is crucial for the constructivist aims of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When students connect the learning they gain in their courses with daily life, according to Palloff and Pratt (2007), it provides a “deeper sense of meaning for the participants where they can possess knowledge and apply it to other contexts” (p. 167). Students take an active role in the evaluation of other students’ and their own progress in a structured manner. Students become reflective practitioners as they continually negotiate and share new knowledge with past knowledge in social environments.

Piaget and Vygotsky theorized that learning is based on the notion that “people are active knowledge seekers powered by innate curiosity”, thus, the learner constructs meaningful knowledge (Ayas, 2006, p. 18) with others, new experiences, and prior knowledge. Palloff and Pratt (2001) highlight essential questions that online instructors should incorporate within their courses for purposeful facilitation:

- How were you as a learner before you came into this course?
- How have you changed?

- How do you anticipate this will affect your learning in the future?

(pp. 6-7)

On the other hand, behaviorist theories view learning as a process of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the student. In the field of social studies, the battle between behaviorist and constructivist pedagogies is still an on-going pursuit. The traditional, industrial model of lecture and reading of the textbook approaches are visible in copious social studies classrooms throughout the U.S. (Marker, 2006). Yet, discussion-based, problem-solving, and technology infused social studies classroom exists concurrently. To understand the current state of the social studies, we must first understand its roots.

### **A Brief History of Social Studies Education**

The term “social studies” was coined during the Progressive Era as a curriculum incorporating history, civics, economics, and sociology. The aim of Progressive Era education was essentially social betterment; consequently, the social studies curriculum was instilled to mirror those aims (Hertzberg, 1980). The Progressive Era was laden in government corruption, large waves of immigration, and unequal distributions of wealth which embraced a calling for an academic discipline to address the nation’s concerns. Educational ‘aims talk’ during the late nineteenth century endured a transition from the perception that the child was an ‘empty tank’ ready to be filled with knowledge to an active player in the learning process where context and meaning was a necessity (Thornton, 2005).

### ***The Birth of the Social Studies***

The pressing social issues of the time required a current and future generation of problem-solvers and care-takers of the state to ensure democratic posterity. The emergence of social studies curriculum in secondary schools occurred due to several factors in the late

nineteenth century. The first major factor was the birth of professional societies, like the American Historical Association, established in 1884, that generated a “committee to investigate the status of history in schools” in 1889 (Bragaw, 1993, p. 48). The second major factor was the university transition from the ‘classics’ (Greek, Latin, and Math) to the ‘moderns’ (History, English, and Science). A discipline that “broadened the collective mind” seemed ideal for the time since the goals of secondary education was college preparation and social education (Hertzberg, 1980, p. 10). The Committee of Ten recommended four years of History for high schools: ancient, European, English, and American history (Ravitch, 2003).

Ultimately, the factor that solidified social studies as a subject in secondary schools, rather than History just being History, was the 1916 N.E.A. report. The Committee of Seven contended that students need to “understand that society is in movement, that what one sees about him is not the eternal but the transient, and that the process of change virtue must be militant if it is to be triumphant (Hertzberg, 1980, p. 14). The commitment to history or civics alone was not enough for students to gain a critical, scientific, open-minded, or curious mindset. The influence of John Dewey’s philosophy and fresh perspectives from the “new historians” pushed the Committee of Seven to define social studies as “those whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups” (p. 26). Ravitch (2003) perceives the influence of the early twentieth century on the evolution of the social studies as the shifting emphasis from the study of history to good citizenship. In addition, the emphasis on concepts/generalizations over rote memorization of facts, inquiry-based learning, and moral education caused a decline in the time spent on history (Hertzberg, 1980).

## *Post World War Era*

Following both world wars, the 1950s society became concerned with the state of education and society in general. The backlash on the social studies curriculum was a result of the launching of Sputnik, the Korean War, the Purdue Public Opinion Poll, curriculum failures, communist fear, (Byford & Russell, 2007) and the horrors of the Holocaust. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement, JFK and MLK assassinations, and other social issues acted as the impetus for change in the social studies curriculum (Bragaw, 1993). As a result, the academic subject in charge with preparing youth for various civic duties and responsibilities was simply failing to ‘get the job done’ in the eyes of countless Americans.

According to Byford & Russell, 2007, the “Office of Education, along with the National Science Foundation and various private donors funded 50 content specific projects from 1960 to the early 1970s to reform the social studies” (p. 38). Students were given the option to study historical topics in depth rather than superficially memorizing a breadth of historical facts. Inquiry-based learning approaches and the introduction of multimedia in social studies classrooms were far different from the traditional historical, teacher-centered methods of learning. The “new social studies movement helped to establish the principle that affective concerns relating to significant beliefs, attitudes, and values should have a place in social studies classes” (Byford & Russell, 2007, p. 46). The 1970s and 1980s social studies curriculum was fixated on the personal development of students’ civic competences, skills, and dispositions. Moral education and non-traditional topics were new aspects of the curriculum (Brophy, 1990).

However, a plethora of national research studies and reports throughout the 1970s and 1980s (e.g.: Fernandez, 1975 and Haladyna, 1979), the Bradley Commission (1987), and *A Nation at Risk* (1983) seemed to cause a “back to the basics” shift in education, especially the

social studies. For example, the Bradley Commission reported that 50% of students in high school do not study world history and 15% do not study American history. There was a widespread concern that students were not getting exposure to the roots of American government, diverse and global perspectives, and changes within society/democracy. Social science methods and basic skills were also not practiced in classrooms (National Council for History Education, 2011), instead mostly passive, teacher-centered methods were used.

### ***Social Studies Today***

Currently, social studies is a core academic subject in high schools but the aims and best practices oscillate according to various intellectual camps. Thornton (2005) deems that the social studies have never “reached a consensus” on what the field exactly is (p. 10). The National Council for the Social Studies is the largest organization of social studies educators and supporters, established in 1921, and continues to serve as a guide for countless social studies teachers. NCSS (2013) defines social studies as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (para. 3). Within each specific discipline, effective social studies teachers include the studies of the following themes within their yearly lessons:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environments
- Individual Development and Identity
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption
- Science, Technology, and Society

- Global Connections
- Civic Ideals and Practices

(para. 6).

In a standardized testing, yet technologically-based virtual realm, the social studies academic community supports a variety of best practices. A question that is the culprit of various best practices is whether or not social studies is a process or a product? Or could the aims of education be the culprit since we are still trying to figure out whether education is for the purpose of “preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, an instrument for transforming culture, or a means for individual development.” (Taba, 1962) or all three?

### **Best Practices in Traditional Social Studies Classrooms**

NCSS 2013) states that the primary mission of social studies education is “to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (para 1). This implies that social studies teachers should encourage a balance of information acquisition and active reflection and participation in the learning process. Duplass (2006) suggests that social studies teachers should allot instructional time for students to gain the necessary facts, concepts, and generalizations as background knowledge. Once the new information is introduced and familiar, students should apply the information in different contexts and processes, which Duplass terms: *procedural knowledge*. Students should, for instance, use the new information to “draw inferences and conclusions from primary documents” (p. 11) by “employing basic skills and executive processes to understand the problem” (p. 12). Ideally, a social studies teacher should focus on student development of informational knowledge, procedural knowledge, and basic skills



acquisition in a balanced manner throughout the year to meet the goals of NCSS and their state's standards. As Brophy (1990) points out:

Social studies instructors should teach students to be reflective citizens who possess knowledge of a body of facts, concepts, and generalizations concerning the organization, understand, and development of individuals, groups, and societies; also, they understand the process of hypothesis formation and testing, problem solving and decision making. Competent citizens possess skills for collecting data systematically and accurately, identifying and using reference sources, processing and interpreting data, and organizing information chronologically and spatially, they also possess social skills for group participation, communication, observation and multicultural understanding. Concerned citizens are aware of their rights and responsibilities, possess a sense of social consciousness and well-grounded framework for deciding what is right and wrong, and have learned how to identify and analyze issues and suspend judgment concerning alternative beliefs, values, attitudes, and cultures (pp. 374-375).

### ***Examples of Best Practices***

The variance in social studies teaching methods, comes from the variety of pedagogical perspectives in each discipline of the social studies and the influence of personal teaching philosophies. Consider, for example, an American government teacher that has a multi-cultural perspective that is passionate about character education. A world history teacher with a global perspective that emphasizes problem-solving current global issues in their classroom or a economics teacher that has a social justice perspective and a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational approach to teaching via technological means. Darling (2006) views social studies as a subject laden in moral/ethical commitments. Teaching students methods toward understanding their own ethical

commitments to their communities and to the world is a prudent goal. The examination of current events, problem-solving activities of global issues, role-playing scenarios to elucidate particular values, and time for student or group reflections are authentic methods to social studies instruction. No matter the pedagogical perspective or approach, Duplass (2006) claims that a daily “big idea” or objective, activities that push students to think critically, multiple and varied learning strategies, in-depth rather than superficial coverage of topics, and the implementation of several informational resources are necessary components of solid social studies lesson plans.

The National Council for History Education (2012) supports the following best practices:

- Incorporate multiple strategies in the classroom.
- Create a curriculum that displays relationships among historical events and periods while engrossing instruction around “modes of thoughtful judgment”.
- Present diverse perspectives in classroom activities and tasks.
- Utilize primary and secondary sources.
- Create assessments that are individual and/or group where historical thinking is assessed.
- Allow students to engage in historical arguments (e.g.: debates, discussions, essays).

N.C.H.E. (2012) and Duplass (2006) seem to have similar best practices, however, the issue does not lie in what best practices are defined or agreed upon, it is the degree to which teachers are to increase or decrease instructional time spent on specific best practices. In simpler terms, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) state that social studies teachers should decrease the amount of instruction time spend on the following:

- Memorization of facts

- Reading about citizenship participation rather than practicing citizenship participation
- Lectures
- Textbook reading, worksheets, and test taking
- Teaching unexciting historical topics or one dominant cultural heritage

Lectures, textbook reading, and videos are passive approaches to learning social studies concepts. When students only “memorize the information given by their teachers, they memorize a plot line and don’t know how to apply the information to appreciate what they have learned” (Mansilla & Gardner, 2008, p. 14). Similarly, Brophy (1990) argues that students who are exposed to these strategies alone simply learn to only memorize content rather than make connections, ask questions, or understand multiple perspectives. Teacher-centered strategies in moderation are permissible, albeit supplementary approaches to social studies instruction that should also be utilized. In fact, Fisher (2007) found that eighty-five percent of students recommended the active learning environment over other forms of instruction. It should not be surprising then that students tend to learn best when cognitively challenged and actively engaged (Bickford, 2010). Not only is active learning successful in terms of learning gains, it is successful in maintaining a comfortable, enjoyable, and engaging learning environment

Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) posit that teachers should spend more time:

- Encouraging in-depth studies of topics in social studies
- Inquiry and problem-solving strategies about global issues
- Decision-making exercises that links students to their school, community, country, and world.

- Cooperative learning strategies as a means of active learning

The problem with addressing best practices in the degree to which teachers need to do more or less of “something” causes issues in the national social studies community due to the wide-range of teachers’ philosophies and perspectives, school make-up, state mandated testing, and available resources in the classroom.

### ***A Meaningful Social Studies Curriculum***

The consensus that continues to surface throughout the literature is the notion of ‘meaning making’. As Cornbleth (2002) writes: “Meaningful social studies teaching refers to teaching for learning and critical thinking that incorporates diverse perspectives for the students beyond memorization of content” (para. 1). It is what Dewey (1938) maintained as engendering a connection between the child, curriculum, and society.

One trouble is that the subject matter in question was learned in isolation, it was put, as it were in a water-tight compartment. When the question is asked, then, what has become of it, where has it gone to, the right answer is that it is still there in the special compartment in which it was originally stowed away. If exactly the same conditions recurred as those under which it was acquired, it would also recur and be available. But it was segregated when it was acquired and hence is so disconnected from the rest of experience that it is not available under the actual conditions of life. It is contrary to the laws of experience that learning of these kinds, no matter how thoroughly engrained at the time, should give genuine preparation (p. 48).

Essentially, young people “learn most effectively and enthusiastically when material is connected to their personal experiences and aspirations” (Thornton, 2005, pp. 51-52).

All of the best practices suggested thus far have not mentioned, however, the use of technology in the classroom. Technology will serve as the key medium to bridge this gap between school and society as presaged by Dewey (1916, 1938). Never before in the history of education have we been closer to finding a solution to connecting the dichotomy of school and home life. With the advent of online schools, companies, social organizations, and commerce, a 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen may not have to step outside their home. Thus, reality is transitioning into the virtual realm more and more every day and the area between the physical and virtual world is becoming hazy. An individual may even wonder if citizenship is gradually transforming into e-citizenship or a hybrid of the two. If the aim of social studies education is essentially learning how to be an active member of a democratic society, the chief association of men (Dewey, 1916), in what ways can students develop and practice the skills necessary for active citizenship in a virtual domain?

### **Best practices for Virtual High School Social Studies Instruction**

Doolittle and Hicks (2003) find that the use of technology within the social studies curriculum is correlated with higher motivation levels and positive attitudes toward the social studies. Doolittle and Hicks encourage social studies teachers to use technology as an instrument for authentic, inquiry-based learning so students can gain multiple perspectives and resources. Virtual field trips are examples of authentic, inquiry-based activities that social studies teachers can implement into their courses because virtual fieldtrips are engaging, student-centered activities.

### ***Student-Centered Activities***

Once again, twenty-first century students are at the center of learning in the online social studies classroom and they must feel empowered as learners. One method of empowering

students is allowing them to become critical consumers and producers of virtual resources and content. A digital documentary is an example of indirectly teaching students how to sense empowerment over their learning and become a consumer and producer of knowledge. A digital documentary is a “historical account that draws upon primary source images and incorporates a voice-over narration to explore some facet of history” (Hammond & Ferster, 2009, p. 40). Essentially, history becomes a first person exploration rather than a passive third person account.

Another interactive, inquiry-based activity that social studies teachers are embracing are webquests. Webquests are inquiry-based activities that have an introduction, doable task, supportive websites to complete the task, a thorough description of the process, guiding questions or step-by-step directions to accomplish the task, and a meaningful conclusion. Students fundamentally act as detectives to solve a scenario according to the topic/task assigned. VanFossen (2009) states that a webquests is a “powerful tool for developing critical thinking and a useful example of problem-based learning strategies” (p. 105).

Teaching social studies in an online setting is exciting because history comes alive in ways that the typical classroom cannot routinely experience. Geography instructors can access interactive maps (e.g. *Google Maps* or *Google Earth*) or G.I.S. for rich analysis of human-environmental interactions over time and space. American government instructors can infuse I Civics.org computer games into their courses to boost engagement levels on otherwise dull topics (e.g. how a bill becomes a law). Economics teachers can offer stock market simulations (e.g.: *Investopedia*) and *Google Finance* projects as an authentic connection to the real-world scenarios. World history instructors can provide student access to thousands of hours of Holocaust survivor testimony with *iWitness*. American history teachers can access interactive

timelines (e.g. History.com) and virtual tours (e.g. Virtual Williamsburg) to place students at center stage of their historical experience.

The virtual social studies teacher has unlimited access to primary source documents with *The Library of Congress*, *Project Gutenberg*, and the *Digital Archives*. Student-centered presentation tools like *Prezi*, *SlideRocket*, *Glogster*, and *Animoto* allow students to personalize and make meaning out of the social studies content. Students have access to multiple and global perspectives of current social issues with *CNN*, *FOX*, *MSNBC*, *Google news*, and the *Tween Tribune*. The options to enrich a virtual social studies curriculum to accommodate student needs, create authentic connections to the real world, and satisfy NCSS and 21<sup>st</sup> century educational goals can easily occur with the proper use of the endless resources that the Web offers.

However, the issue does not lie in the ability for a social studies teacher to have access to the endless resources; it lies in their ability to curate the curriculum and endless resources in conjunction with student needs, readiness, and interests. For instance, countless webquests from Zunal.com have broken URL links, do not have authentic and higher-order thinking questions/processes, and do not meet the needs of all teachers' students. Consequently, a curating e-instructor may decide to create their own webquests or encourage their students to create a webquest as a collaborative activity. Moreover, a plethora of virtual tours/fieldtrips do not have a specific task and many students do not find purpose of meaning in the activity without proper guidance from the instructor.

### ***Transition from Facilitator to Curator***

The bulk of scholarship on the role of a virtual instructor is primarily labeled as being a facilitator. The instructor acts as a facilitator because online learning is self-directed and decisions about learning are that of the students' (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). In essence, the online

instructor is present to organize and design the course, maintain an online community, provide support and assessment to students, and guide students along their academic journey. For social studies educators, I believe that the word facilitator is not the proper term to use for such a humanistic and complex subject, but the word curator is more suitable. Curator is typically used in context of a manager or overseer of a museum or the caretaker of a cultural heritage association. The Latin word *curare* translated into English means “to take care” (Merriam-Webster, 2013). The common responsibilities of a curator include the following:

- Carefully and methodically acquires artifacts for the museum or institution.
- Examines and checks the authenticity of the artifacts prior to displaying them.
- Organizes and guides the public through the museum/institution’s tour or workshop.
- Lectures and/or conducts research about the current artifacts.
- Protects and preserves the artifacts.
- Maintains records and catalogs the artifacts.
- Networks with professionals in the field to publish and/or attract attention to the museum or institution.
- Manages the museum/institution staff and daily operations.

In context to a virtual online high school social studies course, I view the typical responsibilities of a curator as the following:

- Carefully and methodically acquires artifacts and resources to meet curriculum expectations, course design effectiveness, and execution of daily activities.



- Examines and checks the authenticity of the artifacts and resources prior to implementing them into their course due to student learning needs and student readiness.
- Organizes a meaningful, 21<sup>st</sup> century course that is easy to navigate, yet, is still rigorous.
- Stays current with new technologies and researches the latest trends and issues in social studies and distance education.
- Maintains course records (e.g.: attendance and student learning progression trends).
- Is organized, proactive, and professional with daily operations.
- Maintains effective communication with students, parents, and stakeholders (e.g.: emails, phone calls, discussion forums, Elluminate sessions, etc.).
- Guides students through the learning process and provides an authentic connection between the content and the real-world application.
- Ensures students have flexibility in their learning (e.g.: realistic due dates on assignments or alternative choices in learning activities).
- Fosters a caring relationship with their students to support an online community and ensures that students feel welcome and an asset to the course.
- Meets 21<sup>st</sup> century, NCSS goals of social studies education, and their state's standards (e.g.: implement discussion forums in their courses to encourage the development of democratic, authentic, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills).

- Utilizes multiple and appropriate teaching strategies. Ensures that students will engage in discussions, group work, critical thinking tasks, and activities that require reflections.

An effective online high school social studies teacher holds all or most of the curating responsibilities above, based on experience and an analysis of literature in the two fields. All too often, I have witnessed virtual high school teachers transferring their face-to-face classroom best practices into the online environment. They do not consider the difference in the learning environment and do not adapt their pedagogy according to the shift. A virtual instructor lacking curating skills assigns online textbook reading with lower-order thinking questions every week and believes it is a virtual learning experience since the book can be read online. This one-dimensional pedagogical approach does not consider the necessity of an online learning community and engaging, meaningful, collaborative, and multifaceted learning experiences.

Social studies curators are able to implement the social studies new content in a variety of formats, allow students to reflect and apply the new content in a multiplicity of designs while learning the latest technologies, and provide a space for discussions for students to connect with others and make meaning out of their learning experience. Curators also maintain a solid content and research knowledge base to continue improving their practice.

Paulo Freire (1970) places a high degree of prominence on the impact that discussions make in classrooms and throughout society. In fact, Freire views education as a liberatory practice (if structured correctly) where students and teachers collaborate with one another to unveil and unpack reality in a critical manner to re-create knowledge. Discussions are another important facet of an effective virtual social studies course.

### *Freire's Vision of Discussions*

Freire (1970) posits that the pathway toward achieving social justice is through a liberatory education that helps students develop a critical, caring, authentic, democratic, and curious mindset. The foundation to the acquisition of these mindsets is possible if dialogical teaching approaches are employed within the classroom. Dialogical teaching, according to Freire, is an approach that embraces discussions, effective communication, the sharing of real-world experiences, the critique of reality, and the recreation of new knowledge for social justice and eradication of oppression. If “reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation” (Freire, 1970, p. 75), we need our present-day students to be concerned citizens and willing to take action with the current state of reality.

Societal transformation cannot occur unless praxis (reflection and action) is mastered. Students cannot achieve praxis without the maturation of their own social identities and progressive socialization opportunities to construct their own philosophies, positions on social issues, and values. In order to transform reality for the improvement of society, specified goals within reality must be reached. Since most individuals in the United States are citizens (members of a state), it is their duty to participate in the political system to improve society and protect the freedoms and liberties that every human is entitled. But where did this notion of democracy and desire to communicate derive? According to Dewey (1916), the desire to associate is a part of our human nature.

### **Roots of Socialization: The Association of Men and Democracy**

A society, in its broadest sense, is an association of men living in a community of common traits that were discovered through experiences and established through communication. What the community “must have in order to form a society are aims, beliefs,

aspirations, and knowledge” (Dewey, 1916, p. 6). Communication “ensures participating in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions” (pp. 6-7). “Consensus demands communication” (p. 7) and “all members of the group must have equable opportunity to receive and take from others, if not, some are educated into masters and others into slaves” (p. 48). In other words, a functioning society is one that places communication, a common bond, and equal opportunities as the centerpiece to their association.

Democracy, to Dewey (1916), is an association of living based on effective communication and not just a form of government. Democracy is not separated from civic life but a united process of inquiry where decisions are based on all citizens and not just the powerful majority. Moreover, Noddings (2012) views democracy as a “process that is under continual scrutiny, revision, and creation” (p. 37). In fact, Toqueville (1884) fervently wrote of the phenomenon of American associations, given the diversity and vastness of the country. He saw that the U.S. had an “extreme skill with which the inhabitants succeed in proposing a common object to the exertions of great many men, and in inducing them voluntarily to pursue it” (Heffner, 1956, p. 198).

Toqueville (1884) observed Americans communicating, connecting, and working together on everything, in civic and political life, which was not in the same tradition of the British and French. Americans, according to Toqueville, held “the highest perfection of art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires, and have applied this new science to the great number of purposes” (Heffner, p. 199). How a diversified democratic nation held such a central and strong national bond in various associations through a communicative experience did not seem like an aspect of reality.

### ***Schools as the Tool for Individual and Societal Advancement***

The connection of diversity, equality, and communication in a large country was not unthinkable for philosophers, like Aristotle and Plato, who were concerned with higher ontological matters. A true society, according to Aristotle, “must stand for something, it must establish and discuss the good it seeks” (as cited in Noddings, 2012, p. 65). Plato spoke of the ideal society which was organized and stable where each inhabitant was acting in accordance to their natural talents that added to the collective advancement or goals that the society targeted. The duty of the educational system was intended to help individuals become enlightened to their natural abilities and skills and teach them how to apply them in the real-world. Plato also emphasized the danger in social classes determining the value or status of the individual in society. Social advancements become stifled when individuals are not free to discover their natural aptitudes and utilize them. The primary step in emancipating all men is to free them from “internal chains of false belief and ideals” (as cited in Dewey, 1916, p. 52).

Man’s continual adjustment to nature (as nature is inevitable and unpredictable), is also another essential feature of the nature of man (de Button, 2000). So too, must schools continually adjust to society by means of mirroring the life activities. At the basic level, societies expect the function of education to “preserve and transmit cultural heritage, act as an instrument for transforming culture, and a means for individual development” (Taba, 1962, p. 18). The end for education should be the production of informed, active, and an enlightened citizenry to ensure a continuity of societal stability and advancements. The conduit for democracy to function and formal education to produce effective citizens is through communicative experiences. In fact, Dewey (1916) thought schools should be structured in a democratic fashion where students practice the most paramount form of associated living.

## **Democratic Processes and Life-Long Learning**

Education, for Dewey (1916), “must first be human and only after that professional” (p. 106). The social studies is the one subject in school that captures the “spirit of man” and allows students to understand the human potential and function within this universe. It offers a substance of the human past, and knowledge of the breadth of human possibilities. Subjects like science and math answer the “what” and “how” in life but the social sciences offer the “why” and the overall significance to the human experience. As Crotty (1998) argues, the social sciences and natural sciences depend on human consciousness and should be a combined rather than separate study.

Freirer (1970) proposes that we need to reflect upon certain situations and intervene because we are connected to the world. When we encounter new situations in our lifetime, we change our environment and culture. As a result, new challenges arrive but humans have freedom of thought to be creative in all of our endeavors. Thus, “humans should take charge as subjects and not mere objects of their own history. They should see that situations are capable of transformation and struggle against obstacles by being critical” (p. 152). The oppressed may not remain oppressed if they break the mental chains, seek change, and are committed to life-long learning.

### ***Outlining Effective Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

The purpose of democracy, according to Dewey (1916), is to ensure “the continuance of education by organizing the powers that ensure growth and the inclination to learn from life itself is the finest product of schooling” (p. 31). The social studies curriculum is a perfect fit to Dewey’s vision of the purpose of true schooling because it focuses on the association of men in relation to the world. Dewey wrote that “while history makes explicit human implications and

geography natural connections, these subjects are two phases of the same living whole, since the life of men in association goes on in nature as the material and medium for development” (p. 120). History and geography, for instance, can enlighten students to find their connection to humanity and the earth as humanity is studied in the past and present forms. Social studies passes the traditions of our complex society to open up new doors of opportunities for progress and advancements that were not possible in the past. Therefore, social studies is a necessary subject to assist students in becoming enlightened to their own talents, finding their connection to the earth and its people, and applying the talents and knowledge to the limitless global possibilities.

The “extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies the means necessary” is the value of education (Dewey, 1916, p. 32). If educators wish for current students to become effective citizens, life-long learners, and enlightened to their potential, then the social studies curriculum should act as a flexible medium toward achieving this ‘end’. Thornton (2005) suggests that the social studies curriculum should serve the “interests and aptitudes of students, the demands of social living, and contemporary scholarship” (p. 47). In this sense, social studies teachers should use the curriculum as a proxy for societal change (Taba, 1962) through democratic processes and indirect teaching methods via dialogue.

According to Gandin and Apple (2003):

Freier and Vygotsky believe that students learn best when they are free to control their own learning that liberation is neither abstract nor romantic. Teachers cannot liberate pupils from society or from the constraints of social transactions. But they can remove the artificial controls of traditional schooling. They can encourage pupils to enter freely into speech and literacy events, authentic social transactions in which language is a tool

for communication. Children must hear their words, follow their explanations, understand their frustrations, and listen to their logic. Teachers should move students from knowing how, to knowing about conceptual knowledge (p. 59).

Having students engage in critical reflections about the current state of the globe and communicate about their reflections are essential for effective citizenship. AmeriCorps (2001) states that effective citizens are those who have knowledge of their community and country, recognize the problems within their communities and country, and know the responsibilities and rights of citizens. Effective citizens also have the skills necessary for taking the information about their communities and country and take action. Finally, effective citizens uphold and execute democratic values, attitudes, and dispositions to find solutions and take action with other citizens in the community.

As one can observe, an effective citizen does not require a perfect S.A.T. score, need to recite each president of the United States in chronological order, describe in detail the process of lawmaking, or memorize the Constitution verbatim. The twenty-first century, constructivist, and information producing model will encourage students to become researchers, critical thinkers, informed and active citizens within their communities, problem-solvers and decision-makers, enlightened to their natural talents, and life-long learners and activists for social change.

### ***The Communicative Experience***

Toqueville (1884) asserted that “nothing in my opinion is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America” and the “science of association is the mother of science, the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made” (Heffner, 1956, p. 201). If educators do not allow students to learn indirectly through an environment that



supports the communicative experience, they will not achieve to the levels that are competitive on a global scale. Students cannot progress, advance, or make the proper learning gains unless the attention is turned to the social studies. However, social studies remains a low priority because it is not a standardized tested subject and does not receive adequate funding (Griggs, 2010). Once the attention turns and support toward the social studies is committed to (like math and science), students may start the process of understanding the world in a holistic manner and find where their natural aptitudes can be exercised and valued.

Democracy is associated living, according to Dewey (1916), therefore, students must learn indirectly by associated living experiences. Democracy is more than voting, knowing current events, or going to the local town hall meeting once a year. It is membership of a community dedicated to social progress and societal ends (e.g. the good life). History and geography, for example, provide the context, details, and background necessary to understanding human nature (associated living experiences). The two disciplines within the social studies curriculum show students how to intellectually and morally live (and not live). History and geography may reveal areas in ourselves, others, or societies that must change or areas that we should focus our attention toward as a means of capturing the beauty of life. Social studies education should help students cultivate a critical mindset to encourage an ideal state and once the ideal state is reached, possibilities for progress may be endless because there will not be any significant barriers preventing real advancements. It will not be a case of, which social class one was born into that determines their value, but the value will lie in the talents that one engenders and engages for greater societal advancement.

Communication is the very element that the social studies, and perhaps all aspects of the curriculum, should focus on, to continue living the associated life. The communicative

experience will foster the development of new ideas, spark transformations within society, and support a stable democracy in the future. The social studies curriculum in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should include research and discussions about societal changes, inspire students to develop and practice the necessary skills and values that employers require, push teachers to provide instructional time for in-depth research to allow a flexible and emancipatory curriculum, and encourage a greater connection to the community to bridge the gap between school and real life. If social studies is taken more seriously and the 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum is reformed for associated living experiences, the more likely it will be that a rise in civic engagement, individual and societal advancement, and life-long learning commitments will occur. For Counts (1952):

The most genuine expression of democracy in the United States has little to do with our political institutions: it is a sentiment with respect to the moral equality of men: it is an aspiration towards a society in which this sentiment will find complete fulfillment. A society fashioned in harmony with the American democratic tradition would combat all forces-tending to produce social distinctions and classes; repress every form of privilege and economic parasitism; manifest a tender regard for the weak, the ignorant, and the unfortunate place the heavier and more onerous social burdens on the backs of the strong; glory in every triumph of man in his timeless urge to express himself and to make the world more habitable; exalt human labor of hand and brain as the creator of all wealth and culture; provide adequate material and spiritual rewards for every kind of socially useful work; strive for genuine equality of opportunity among all races, sects, and occupations; regard as paramount the abiding interests of the great masses of the people; direct the powers of government to the elevation and the refinement of the life of the common man; transform or destroy all conventions, institutions, and special groups

inimical to the underlying principles of democracy; and finally be prepared as a last resort, in either the defense or the realization of this purpose, to follow the method of revolution (pp. 40-42).

As Counts (1952) points out above, the most genuine expression of democracy is not just found in its political processes but is also found in its everyday, civic and social experiences. Ensuring freedoms, liberties, and a world devoid of injustices, requires individuals who are committed, willing, and knowledgeable toward preserving our democratic nation.

The “development of good citizens has been the major focus of education since the early days of the republic and fostering citizenship remains an avowed purpose” (Phipps, 2010, p. 1). A good citizen is one that holds moral and intellectual knowledge. ‘Good citizens’ are considered civically-minded which is a “person’s inclination or disposition to be knowledgeable and involved in the community, and to commit to act on a sense of responsibility as a member of that community” (Hatcher, 2011, p. 88). Civic-mindedness and civic engagement are guided by an individuals’ civic identity which is influenced by the culture or social atmosphere that it takes part in. Various social identities are not, however, predetermined but created within a community (Kitade, 2012) by and through language-in-use.

In the next segment, we will turn our attention to the etymology of discussions and discourse as it is the channel for identity construction. Discourse is an important concept to this current study because it is used to “create a coherent social reality that frames a sense of who people are” (McGowen, 2002, p. 41). Essentially, language within discourse frames individuals’ identities.

## **The Important Role of Language**

The term *discourse* refers to the meaning making of concepts and experiences in language. It is a linguistic mode of representing knowledge (Agbaria, 2011) which can only be verified, have significance, or become known if it is exchanged with another individual. This exchange of discourse can be viewed as a discussion where two or more individuals are involved (Hess, 2004a). Discourse “presumes social content, cultural norms, and cognitive processes, and encompasses more than just speech and writing” (Lee & Chin-Chung, 2011, p. 326).

### ***Talking Through Rather than Talking About***

Yilmaz (2008) explains that knowledge is “not passively received from the world or from authoritative sources but constructed by individuals or groups making sense of their experiential worlds” (p. 162). In the context of social studies, students become players in a knowledge-building community where they “work toward goals of collective knowledge advances, and treat ideas as real things that can be improved by means of discourse” (Niu & Alast, 2009, p. 5). The final objective for students when taking part in knowledge-building opportunities or discussions is not necessarily just the comprehension of new concepts, but to make meaning of the concepts within the community to solve a relevant problem.

A major issue with social studies education is the surplus of abstract concepts which makes it tedious and irrelevant to students’ lives (Zhao & Hodge, 2005). However, providing opportunities for students to hold meaningful discussions that explore new and relevant concepts may eradicate the abstract nature of the content and ensure that real-world/authentic discourse transpires. Occasionally the abstract nature of historical content may exist but “if students learn to analyze distant issues, they will be able to analyze current ones” (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 2). The point is for students to exchange ideas while learning new, democratic concepts as

means of taking an active role in their learning experience and lives as a citizen in a diverse democracy.

Discussions in the social studies classroom have the ability to “explore the content covered within the class and to reinforce the lessons of democratic life as the process of discussion itself unfolds” (Flynn, 2009, p. 2051). “Talking through” rather than “talking about” are two very different concepts because civic discourse is a type of conversation that leads to the development and practice of civic competences (McMurray, 2007). In any case, discussions and democracy depend on a group of individuals who collectively engage in social interactions where diverse perspectives and interpretations of objects (material and non-material) within the community assist in the construction of knowledge and reality. In other words, reality is seen as unknowable and uniform because all perspectives are valid due to the presence of multiple perspectives.

Therefore, reality is constructed through “creative and interpretive work of the mind with the physical world” (Paul, 2005, p. 46). However, “participants use language to construct realities, rather than to represent objective, literal reality” (McGowen, 2002, p. 34). Language allows individuals “to do things and be things” at different times and places for different purposes (Gee, 2011a, pp. 2-3). Language “gets its meaning from the practices within which it is used” (p. 5). In essence, the development, use, context, and form of language can affect reality.

Online social studies instructors utilize discussions to provide students with a social environment (since students are physically separated from other students and their teachers). Discussions allow students to practice democratic processes and gain opportunities to use critical thinking skills (Rossi, 2006). Zydney et al. (2012) consider that “feelings of social disconnectedness are often the most cited reasons for students’ dissatisfaction in their online

courses” (p. 77). However, if an online course can achieve cognitive presence, learning will be effective and rewarding. Cognitive presence is “the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001, p. 9).

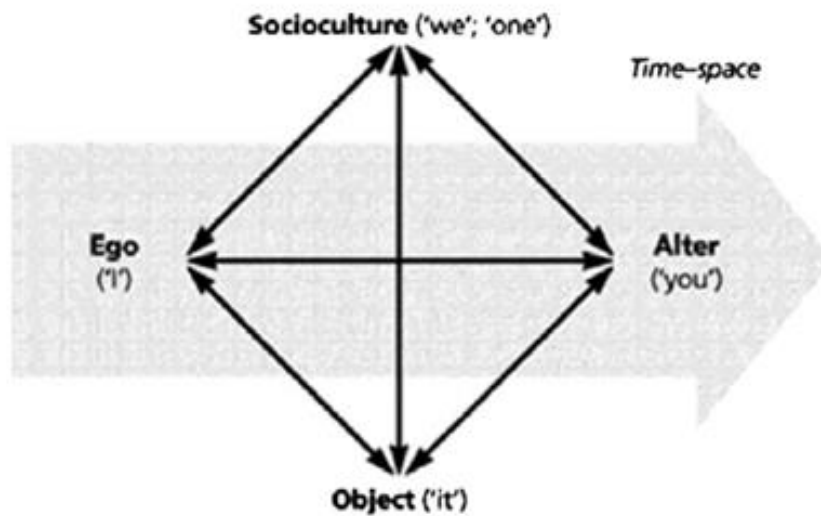
The review of literature for language studies may make this dissertation topic too broad; however, it is important to provide some detail about language, as it will be the basis of this study’s analysis. Once again, this current study is a discourse analysis of language-in-use in online high school social studies courses’ weekly discussion forums. The unit of analysis will focus on the construction or presentation of students’ civic identities within the forums.

### ***Unpacking Language***

According to Love (2004), language “is a matter of creatively endowing certain phenomena with semiotic significance in order to operate relevantly on the world in accordance with the exigencies of an incessant flow of unique, real time communication situations” (p. 532). The “unique flow of real time communication is a first-order activity” (experiences in the world) and “sociocultural inscriptions and norms are second-order activities” (Zheng, 2012, p. 535). The diamond model (as shown in figure 5) represents language as a “micro-neural process and large scale muscle movement and between the identity of an individual and the larger social-moral context in which the agent acts” (Hodge, 2007, p. 601).

From a discursive perspective, “language is central to the social construction of reality. Discourse both constructs and is constructed by identity and societal structures” (McGowan, 2002, p. 18). Within online discussion forums, a student will use language as a medium for conveying a particular norm, behavior, value, or idea. Crisco (2009) theorizes that a student:

Composes and interprets text while engaging in an analysis of cultural codes operating in defining his or her subject position, the positions of the audience, and the constructions of the matter to be considered. These functions are in dialectical relation to each other, so that the writer must be engaged in complex decision-making in shaping the text. Therefore, a student learns to read and challenge the construction of knowledge as s/he finds their own position in the conversation (p. 35).



**Figure 5: The Diamond Model**

Young (2000) maintains that citizens construct their identities when confronted with situations, experiences, perspectives, and behaviors that are unfair, unequal, or unlike them. Students “develop their identities through changing their perspectives and developing their knowledge in relation to or as a result of their action” (Crisco, 2009, p. 45). With those notions considered, one can assume that the questions, issues, and language utilized within discussion forums affect the construction, portrayal, and/or enactment of a student’s civic identity.

## *Language on a Mission*

Burch (2009) believes that teachers should also emphasize the use of *parrhesia* within discussions. *Parrhesia* is an ancient Greek word meaning “frank speech and telling the truth as one sees it. It can help facilitate the development of both intellectual courage and democracy as a way of life” (p. 71). *Parrhesia* has been employed as a form of liberatory speech throughout history because it engages a critical mindset of “questioning, interrogation of reality, the care of self, open mindedness, and a willingness to revise” (p. 72). Saxonhouse (2006) elaborates by noting:

The Athenians eulogized free speech as a practice that allowed them to express an egalitarianism that rejected hierarchy and restraints of a reverence for superiors or for the past. To speak freely was to uncover and thus to question what has been and to ignore the restraints of status (p. 14).

In terms of social studies education in particular, *parrhesia* encourages students to “develop the courage to express one’s true beliefs and thus enact one’s freedom” (Burch, 2009, p. 74).

Kitade (2012) perceives language socialization to be language “used as a set of conventions for creating a social context that mediates between four dimensions: actions, stance, social identity, and social activity” (p. 66). In other words, our language assigns specific meaning to our behaviors, relationships (Fiol, 2002), and identity within our social reality (McGowan, 2002). Similarly, Zheng (2012) views language as a “way of gaining access to both the physical world of time, space, and objects and to the social world of people” (p. 534).

Vygotsky (1964) theorizes that language is a mediator of cognition that shapes the development of one’s identity. Thus, it is essential for online social studies teachers to take the language used



within their courses' discussion forums seriously as it can shape, reveal, and/or enact a student's civic identity.

In the virtual classroom, specifically, teachers and students have two options to engage in discussions: asynchronous and synchronous. A few examples of synchronous discussion tools include *Google Chat*, *Blackboard Collaborate*, *Facetime*, and *Skype*. Asynchronous discussions forums are communication tools that do not require instant communication in real-time, whereas, synchronous forums are held in real-time (Hou & Wu, 2011). Asynchronous discussion forums “encourage students to apply knowledge and develop higher order thinking and understanding” (as cited in Wilen, 2004a) while making meaning of ideas and concepts. Yet another quandary lies within the execution of proper methods of developing and facilitating asynchronous discussions in online high school social studies courses.

### **Developing and Facilitating Discussions in Asynchronous Forums**

Asynchronous discussion forums “enable groups that are separated in time and space to engage in the active production of shared knowledge” (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997, p. 410). They are at times more desirable than synchronous discussions because “students have extra time to respond to discussion topics which allows for deeper levels of thinking” (Hou & Wu, 2011, p. 1460). Students have the choice of when and where they choose to participate in the discussion offering convenience and a flexible lifestyle (Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008). Research shows that students include more in-depth solutions for problem-solving scenarios and deeper reflections in asynchronous rather than synchronous discussions (Lee & Chin-Chung, 2011). Students have more time to examine multiple sources, share resources with other students in a collaborative manner, analyze the questions or scenarios posed within the forum, and think deeply about the content (Merryfield, 2003). A few benefits of engaging students in critical

thinking tasks are the “acquisition of deep and meaningful understanding as well as content-specific critical inquiry abilities, skills and dispositions” (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 2).

### *Student Considerations*

Introverted or taciturn students tend to have higher participation levels in asynchronous rather than synchronous discussions because they can voice their opinions without anxiety or interruption. Moreover, students do not have to worry about correct word pronunciations or ridicule from other classmates. English as a Second Language (ESL) students tend to participate in online discussions more often than they would in the traditional classroom (Beckett, Amaro-Jiménez, & Beckett, 2010). Merryfield (2003) recommends that the online asynchronous discussion forum “acts as a veil to protect people as they reveal, question, and take risks” (para. 37) that they may not otherwise do in a traditional face-to-face classroom.

In a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom, students typically answer discussion questions directly to the teacher and do not engage in a discussion with their peers. However, in asynchronous discussion forums, students are motivated to embrace the discussion with one another (Vess, 2005) as the virtual teacher does not have the major role in the discussion. These highlighted benefits as well as a plethora of others are the very elements that make up the popularity of this form of instruction. For instance, Vess finds that students’ language becomes more syntactically refined through discussion forum participation.

According to Snyder (2008), students’ practice of writing complete and complex sentence structures are more frequently utilized than in face-to-face classrooms. Traditional classrooms most often utilize oral communication in discussions which do not provide in formalized writing processes. Content knowledge may also improve in online discussion forums as students are required to employ vocabulary words in their posts, comment on other students’ posts using

evidence from the content, and respond to various scenarios using the content as a catalyst for their solutions. Many students may even become better writers and readers as they proofread their responses before posting and typically need to read a large number of threads to ensure an active role in the discussion. Shaw (2012) perceives past research as showing that the “strongest indicator of student performance in an online course was the use of asynchronous discussion forums” (p. 112). Even as equally important, Vess (2005) finds that learning gains are higher in asynchronous discussions than in traditional face-to-face discussions due to higher participation rates and exposure to higher-order thinking processes.

Although there are numerous benefits to asynchronous discussions, there are also some pitfalls. Lee and Chin-Chung (2011) state that many asynchronous discussion posts can be off-topic/irrelevant or fall short of a comprehensible structure. Lee and Chin-Chung suggest that students believe asynchronous discussions are not as welcoming and meaningful as face-to-face discussions. The flexible lifestyle (e.g.: learn anytime and anywhere) that asynchronous discussions offer can add to its weaknesses because students become frustrated when the discussion process is too slow (Flynn, 2009). The lag time between posts can prevent a discussion from being an on-going and meaningful experience. This in turn, prevents strong social bonds between students or a strong learning community that traditional classrooms seem to engender via discussions (Vess, 2005).

Vonderwall et al. (2007) argue that if a student does not exhibit metacognitive processes and internal motivation, they will not be able to assess his/her own learning and growth. If this is the case, the student will not find meaning in their course, may become frustrated, and possibly “shut down”. When students shut down, the learning community bond may weaken and the collective asynchronous learning environment may be jeopardized. Without the right degree of

participation, rich and meaningful discussions will not develop. If rich and meaningful discussions do not exist, a virtual community will not develop.

Kanuka and Anderson (1998) posit that students “construct knowledge in online learning environments through social interchange and a discord discussion” (as cited in Penny & Murphy, 2009, p. 812). Discussions are “considered an essential element of human learning, particularly for distance education” (Palmer, Holt & Bray, 2008, p. 847). It is undisputable that “language, in the form of conversation, is central to the advancement of knowledge and practices in any society” (Lee and Chung, 2011, p. 326). I selected asynchronous discussion forums as a research focus because it is the most powerful online communication instrument (Love & Isles, 2006) and the most utilized discussion format in online schools (Penny & Murphy, 2009). In the next segment, I highlight how an online instructor should develop and carry-out discussions.

### ***How to Organize and Execute an Online Discussion***

According to Gee (2011a), engaging in discussions “through our words and deeds have talked to each other throughout history and in doing so, it has formed human history” (p. 35). Effective discussions are not “only an instructional strategy but also an outcome of instruction” (Flynn, 2009, p. 2,028). Discussions are spaces for students to share their experiences, construct new knowledge, and feel like an important member of the class. Due to the fact that students in online courses can feel socially disconnected, teachers should make it a priority to create interactive learning experiences for their students (Zydney et al., 2012). Teachers should also consider several elements when developing a discussion for their online high school social studies courses. Henning, Nielson, Henning and Schulz (2008) maintain that a “well-designed discussion will satisfy the following conditions: the topic will be arguable, located within their students’ knowledge base, and educational in purpose” (p. 122). The topic selected by the

instructor or students should welcome diverse perspectives, include a problem-solving element, and offer opportunities for critical thinking and scaffolding. Discussions should also include real-life problems where students can deepen their thinking on the particular topic at-hand. After all, social studies is full of problems and controversial issues so structuring the discussion where the proper questions are asked can open doors for stimulating and thought-provoking discourse exchanges.

The purpose of discussions, once again, in a social studies classroom ought to be the development of civic knowledge and critical thinking skills (e.g. problem-solving and decision making), the opportunity for students to connect previous and new concepts in a deeper fashion, and knowledge of how to participate in the political process (Wilen, 2004). Students should feel free to ask questions, offer diverse insights, and take an active role in the learning process (Flynn, 2009). When a teacher is open to a democratic classroom style where discussions are encouraged, it shows how that teacher has a strong sense and purpose about why and the ways in which social studies should be taught (Barton & Levstik, 2004). When citizens attempt to understand each other and communicate effectively, it can be the remedy for a broken democracy (Habermas, 1989).

Henning et al. (2008) offer four other options for structuring a discussion: “responding to a problem, responding to an observation, responding to a narrative, and reflecting on classroom activities” (p. 123). Using real-world problems and/or authentic questions as the catalyst for a discussion can bring forth a rich learning environment (Shenghua & Ottendorfer, 2011) because students can only debate on topics as far as they understand them (Billig, 1996).

Hartoonian et al. (2007) encourage teachers to implement four democratic principles or values tensions as the foundation for discussions in a classroom to foster effective and dynamic

discussions. These values and principles are: laws vs. ethics, private wealth vs. common wealth, freedom vs. equality, and unity vs. diversity. Using these topics/values as underlying assumptions or as a foundation for discussions will spur rigorous and insightful debates while respecting and/or understanding both sides of the issue. For example, “laws help us govern and ethical principles that guide behavior are not always in harmony. But the dissonance and tension can lead to change, a better legal system, and a good society” (p. 246). Ethics and laws are at the root of the majority of social studies content which can be a directing force in how students mold their arguments in a discussion. Moreover, the “quest for cultural unity is inconsistent with democracy if it does not also recognize the rich diversity of our increasingly pluralistic society” (p. 244). As in any debate or discussion, there is never one correct answer but how one comes to know what they know (Flynn, 2009) while respecting contradictory ideas is the key to a good discussion.

Sawyer (2006) states that “knowledge and learning are often properties of groups, not individuals” (p. 191). Discussions can be a student or teacher led activity where they begin with a “series of recall questions and then gradually shift to questions that require for students to apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate” the elected concepts and resources (Henning et al., 2008). The preliminary question is recommended to be open-ended in nature as a way to draw students into the discussion and for students to feel a sense of ownership of the content (Zydney et al., 2012). If a teacher does not ask open-ended or authentic questions it may be difficult to engage in a discussion if the questions elicit one correct response (Hess, 2004a). Through my online teaching experience thus far, I noticed that some students will have higher participation levels if the discussion topics are broad, yet, other students will have higher participation levels if the topics are narrow. Eventually, what I found to work well was the mesh of both ideas.

Each week I post a broad discussion topic and optional prompting questions for those students who do not know what to write about.

Another best practice is the use of primary sources. Primary sources may lead to multiple interpretations that entice multiple perspectives and on-going debates (Flynn, 2009). Analysis of primary sources includes higher-order thinking questions which generate higher numbers of posts and student participation levels (Gerber et al., 2005; Zydney et al., 2012). The employment of Socratic questioning by an instructor in a discussion forum reveals an increase in higher-order thinking skills and student participation (Zydney et al., 2012).

Before teachers (or students) pose the discussion questions, clear guidelines and expectations should be elucidated. Online learning can bring forth a great deal of ambiguity; thus, teachers must provide clearly written guidelines and expectations to their students (Southern Regional Education Board, 2006) to avoid student confusion, disruptions, and frustration. It is a best practice to require a minimum and maximum number of posts to prevent other students from feeling overwhelmed and to keep discussions from going off-topic (Zydney et al., 2012).

From my experience as an online high school social studies teacher, students may not feel prompted to engage in an on-going discussion unless the directions specifically state that they are required to comment or pose a question on a classmate's thread within the forum. Deadlines for discussion expectations should be clearly stated to ensure a proper pace for the in-depth discussions. Speaking from experience, I noticed that when I did not post due dates for each expectation, students would wait until the very last day or minute to meet all the requirements and the discussions were fragmented and lacked a meaningful experience. I also post clear netiquette guidelines for my discussion forums to ensure that tolerance, empathy, ethical

behaviors, and so forth are exhibited. Students should feel safe to express their views and ideas without the fear of ridicule. Hartoonian et al. (2007) postulate that well-designed discussions reveal respectful dialogue where arguments are based on evidence, not emotions.

### ***Assessing Online Discussions***

When teachers prepare a rubric to assess student learning within the discussions, the teacher can choose how they wish to structure it according to their course design, student needs, and so on. A rubric is a form of assessment used to spell out the teacher expectations, learning goals, and provide feedback to the students (Penny & Murphy, 2009). Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) posit that rubrics have a positive effect and encourage the development of more meaningful discussions. Best practices for creating a rubric for discussions should include students' display of content understanding. In other words, a teacher should assess the students' answers and responses to the various questions. As in any assignment, the teacher should have a specific grading scale or method in mind to check for understanding, the use of academic sources, and application of prior knowledge.

The grading rubric (see table 3) provided by Jones (2012), is an example of how a teacher may decide to evaluate a student's participation in a discussion forum according to how reflective a student is or is not within their initial discussion post and interaction posts with other students. The teacher may or may not choose to assign a numeric value but rubrics can be a helpful guide when assessing students' knowledge within a discussion forum and for providing guidance for students during the discussion. The teacher's expectations, guidelines, and assessments are "significant factors in how well students learn" (S.R.E.B., 2006, p. 3). More importantly, the assessment shows a teacher how and what the students are learning (Angelo & Cross, 1993).



**Table 3: Jones (2012) Discussion Rubric**

Levels	Criteria
Reflective Practitioner	<p><u>Clarity:</u> The language is clear and expressive. The reader can create a mental picture of the situation being described. Abstract concepts are explained accurately. Explanation of concepts makes sense to an uninformed reader.</p> <p><u>Relevance:</u> The learning experience being reflected upon is relevant and meaningful to student and course learning goals.</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> The reflection moves beyond simple description of the experience to an analysis of how the experience contributed to student understanding of self, others, and/or course concepts. Analysis has both breadth (incorporation of multiple perspectives) and depth (premises and claims supported by evidence).</p> <p><u>Interconnections:</u> The reflection demonstrates connections between the experience and material from other courses; past experience; and/or personal goals.</p> <p><u>Self-criticism:</u> The reflection demonstrates ability of the student to question their own biases, stereotypes, preconceptions, and/or assumptions and define new modes of thinking as a result.</p>
Aware Practitioner	<p><u>Clarity:</u> Minor, infrequent lapses in clarity and accuracy.</p> <p><u>Relevance:</u> The learning experience being reflected upon is relevant and meaningful to student and course learning goals.</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> The reflection demonstrates student attempts to analyze the experience but analysis lacks depth and breadth.</p> <p><u>Interconnections:</u> The reflection demonstrates connections between the experience and material from other courses; past experience; and/or personal goals.</p> <p><u>Self-criticism:</u> The reflection demonstrates ability of the student to question their own biases, stereotypes, preconceptions.</p>
Reflection novice	<p><u>Clarity:</u> There are frequent lapses in clarity and accuracy.</p> <p><u>Relevance:</u> Student makes attempts to demonstrate relevance, but the relevance is unclear to the reader.</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> Student makes attempts at applying the learning experience to understanding of self, others, and/or course concepts but fails to demonstrate depth and breadth of analysis.</p> <p><u>Interconnections:</u> There is little to no attempt to demonstrate connections between the learning experience and previous other personal and/or learning experiences.</p> <p><u>Self-criticism:</u> There is some attempt at self-criticism, but the self-reflection fails to demonstrate a new awareness of personal biases, etc.</p>
Unacceptable	<p><u>Clarity:</u> Language is unclear and confusing throughout. Concepts are either not discussed or are presented inaccurately.</p> <p><u>Relevance:</u> Most of the reflection is irrelevant to student and/or course learning goals.</p> <p><u>Analysis:</u> Reflection does not move beyond description of the learning experience(s).</p> <p><u>Interconnection:</u> No attempt to demonstrate connections to previous learning or experience.</p> <p><u>Self-criticism:</u> No attempt at self-criticism.</p>

Jone's (2012) rubric is intended for a face-to-face classroom and should be modified according to a virtual teacher's expectations. Participation and responses to other students' posts is an element that may appear in a virtual discussion rubric. A teacher may also include discussion etiquette within the participation section of the rubric. Discussion etiquette includes anything in terms of their behavior when interacting with the content and other students (Wilén, 2004). Did the student exhibit a positive attitude, tolerance, empathy, an ethic of care, constructive responses, and effort to find/suggest a solution? (Refer to appendix B and C for discussion forum examples and a rubric example).

### ***Ensuring Authentic Discussions***

If the discussion topic is controversial or elicits strong emotions, a teacher should explain the multiple perspectives and the evidence and emphasize the importance of tolerance, ambiguity, and personal interpretations. Prior to executing discussions, it may also be wise to have students role-play where they take-on different perspectives, hold a small group pilot discussion to gauge readiness, implement argumentative assignments where they can acquire proper debate skills, and allow students to practice bracketing their emotions while replacing them with facts on the controversial topics (Pace, 2003). Teachers should not skirt around controversial issues because civic competence calls for individuals to face complex issues (Adler, 2008). "Understanding the relationships between culture, power, and worldview is fundamental to the development of perspective consciousness" (as cited in Merryfield, 2003, para. 19).

The "most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. Teachers who know their subject content, know how to teach it, and can meet their students' learning needs, will be successful in raising student achievement levels" (S.R.E.B., 2007, p. 3). The structure of the

course, interaction and communication among participants, and learner autonomy are also “key variables to consider in distance learning” courses (Vonderwall et al., 2007, p. 322). An online instructor should act as a facilitator or coach in order to assist the students in the learning process since students hold an active role and are physical separated from other students and their teachers. The goal for an online high school social studies instructor when assigning an asynchronous discussion forum for their course is to monitor, assist, and provide feedback to students; not to dominate the conversation. Effective discussions rely on a social community where the construction of knowledge is a collaborative effort (Wilens, 2004a).

McMurray (2007) argues that “meaningful discussion should be promoted in a manner to ensure that learning is occurring, beliefs are substantiated by evidence, and minority opinions are protected” (p. 49). Discussions can, at times, cause a rise in emotions, variance in perspectives, and a controversial climate. Virtual social studies instructors must continually monitor forums to prevent dissent or negative environments from taking root. However, the beauty of a discussion is that students are “exposed to ideas different from their own and cognitive dissonance is created that requires them to reassess their current set of beliefs” (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004, p. 545).

Furthermore, teachers should show their presence in the discussion by adding constructive feedback, additional information, or posing questions to deepen the discussion. Teachers should “respond in a non-judgmental way to students’ ideas” and allow them to make their own decisions or construct their own knowledge without too much influence and guidance (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 3). In Hess’ (2004a) study, only 20 percent of students believed their thoughts and contributions held significance took part in discussions. As a result, Hess advises instructors to ensure students’ contributions play a significant role in the learning process

and to prevent one student from dominating discussions (Zydney et al., 2012) or any instances of bullying/negative behaviors. Countless discussions fail because only a few students participate or monopolize discussion.

Wilén (2004a) suggests that students will participate in discussions more often if the teacher encourages student-to-student interactions because students will feel as if they have more freedom in their conversations with each other. Threaded discussions allow students to contribute and mold the direction of the discussion on a particular topic each time they respond (Vess, 2005) causing students to feel as if they had a significant contribution to the discussion.

Through my experience as a virtual social studies instructor, I find that my students feel important and participate more frequently when I create a discussion thread during various weekly discussions for positive reinforcement. I also tend to leave comments or ask questions on students' threads if their classmates do not interact with them or if a thread is going off-topic, I will participate to steer the conversation back on course.

### **The Purposes of Discussions in Online High School Social Studies Courses**

If the purpose of social studies education is for students to become active citizens who hold civic competences and values in a democracy, the social studies instructor should monitor discussions in a way that directs students toward this goal. As stated above, there are many directions a teacher can take the discussion, whether it is problem-solving, decision-making, or a Socratic style of discussion. The end goal, however, should be the practice of developing civic competences and skills necessary for lifelong civic engagement.

Accordingly, Saxe (1997) states that students should have a meaningful voice in community affairs or public issues. They should learn how to appreciate diversity, respect laws and ethics, hold social obligations, and make decisions for the greater good. Dewey (1916)

viewed education's purpose as teaching for democracy. He saw that teaching students to solve issues with people whose opinions were different from their own was the capstone to a good education. Brophy (1990) finds that social studies should inculcate students with cultural values and award students with opportunities to engage in critical thinking tasks. White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, and Davis (2007) postulate that social studies education should encourage civic responsibility where students learn to understand their rights and the mechanics of our government.

### ***Civic Engagement as the Ultimate Goal***

According to Ehrlich (2000),

A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimension of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate (p. xxvi).

This end goal for students to achieve civic competences as a basis for civic engagement should be the driving force in a social studies teacher's daily routines. However teachers wish to structure their discussions, their end goal should be for the assessment of civic competences, skills, and dispositions. Analyzing students' discourse exchanges within their discussion threads can be an ideal indication of whether or not students are developing prudent civic competences and skills. A teacher could measure whether or not his/her students are applying their civic knowledge and making connections to new knowledge or discoveries. Civic competence is necessary for civic engagement and civic engagement is necessary for the posterity of our democracy.

Online social studies teachers have a duty to ask authentic questions that push students to find solutions or alternative perspectives (Wilén, 2004a) as means of preparing them for their futures in a diverse and interdependent world (Hahn, 2001). “Modern democratic societies depend on the ability of citizens to take part in reasoned discussions with those whose opinions differ from their own” (Barton & McCully, 2007, p. 1) and practicing the mechanics of democracy in the classroom may accomplish the goals of social studies education. Although we must realize that citizens “serve as the countervailing force to inform or check on the state; the role of the citizen is to be loyal to the state and to criticize its actions because the people are both the state and governed” (White et al., 2007, p. 229). Hence, social studies teachers need to structure their discussions within “the conditions under which students want to contribute to the discussions” otherwise participation levels may be insufficient. As Wilén (2004a) suggests, engaged citizens are educated citizens.

### **Discussions as a Channel for the Construction of Civic Identity**

Typically, social studies teachers aspire to see their students develop into caring and active citizens. Assisting students toward the acquisition of civic competences and skills necessary for civic engagement endeavors are also necessary for the development of civic identities. The concept of civic engagement has several definitions but in this study, the concept will be take meaning as Ehrlich (2000) describes:

A means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes (p. vi).

Young people, nonetheless, cannot take part in democracy without a solid civics knowledge base and sense of duty to others within their community. Civic identity is a much more complex concept than political efficacy because a robust civic identity is more than feelings, perceptions, and actions that one engenders within a democracy. A civic identity is not a uni-dimensional or predictable way of being; it is ultimately characterized by our sense of duty and who we are as authors of our ever-changing democracy.

### ***Education for Democratic Citizenship***

Civic engagement is one's connection to their community through values and actions such as, voting, practicing democratic values, engaging in political discussions, following current events, and taking an active role in the political process (Barton & McCully, 2007). A requirement for civic engagement is for citizens to become informed and active in the political process (Wilén, 2004a). A prerequisite of civic engagement is civic competence. Civic competence is the "knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required for students to be active and engaged participants in public life" (NCSS, 2013, para. 2).

Social studies teachers should engross students in the learning process actively through various methods according to Brophy (1990). However, the most paramount formula for students to gain ideal civic competences is through "applying their knowledge to authentic scenarios, examining civic values, engaging in discussions, problem-solving and making decisions on civic affairs, and participating in community activities" (pp. 371-399). Discussions encourage students to take concern for and participate in issues that are prudent to the blossoming republic (Wilén, 2004a). Henning, Nielsen, Henning, & Schulz (2008) suggest that discussion-based teaching allows students to feel empowered that they can have an impact on the government and therefore, is correlated with civic engagement endeavors.

Education for democratic citizenship calls for students to take part in discussions where diverse perspectives are considered and respected (Foster & Padgett, 1999). As an example, the Latin phrase “*E pluribus unum*” which appears on the great seal of the U.S. means “out of many, one”. This phrase reveals how important it is for teachers to educate their students on the mechanics of good discussions where multiple perspectives are respected as a means of celebrating and preparing for participation in a diverse democracy (Hartoonian, Van Scotter, & White, 2007).

### ***Defining Social Identity***

Moore-Cox (2011) points out that researchers “have characterized asynchronous course discussions as a means for students to present their identities in online courses” (p. 15). For this study, identity is defined as:

An emergent construction, the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants must make situationally motivated selections from socially constructed repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others (Bauman, 2000, p. 1).

An individual’s identity “forms in negotiation with other people, other texts, and other discourses” (Crisco, 2009, p. 38). Identity is “informed by social location and formed through action” (p. 39). In fact, Benwell and Stoeke (2006) describe the first recorded definition of identity from the year 157 as:

*Identitie*, meaning the quality of condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration, absolute or essential sameness, oneness. It appears that the notion of identity as a unified internal



phenomenon has its roots in the word's etymology and the everyday meaning has not changed much since its first use (p. 18).

In context to the current study, when individuals respond to a particular issue posed within a discussion forum (social location), their stance may reveal portions of their civic identity. The discourse exchanges which are full of ideas, goals, or behavioral objectives, are elements of a particular action. It is important to note that "social positioning does not construct identity but instead creates the conditions for identity formation" (p. 39). In addition, Thurlow (2006) conceives that:

Identities result from prior beliefs and experiences, ongoing interactions, and the retrospective process of sense-making that individuals use to reconcile changes in their social, organization identities. Thus, new identities take form and exist as they are put into language and organizations (p. 17).

A plethora of researchers have discovered that "students' identities can have a profound impact on the way they participate in science classrooms" (Brown, 2011, p. 684) which more than likely transfers into the social studies classrooms. When providing students opportunities within discussion forums to interact with one another on problems with our democracy, they learn how to use the virtual space to acquire new knowledge, problem-solve or make decisions on key issues, consider with multiple perspectives, and develop moral and political commitments.

### *The Construction of Civic Identity via Discussions*

In the context of the educational realm, a student's civic identity gradually develops or is enacted overtime through socialization processes within the classroom. For that reason, I view education as a sociocultural initiative where students gain knowledge through socialization experiences. Moore-Cox (2010) posits:

The mind is constituted by culture and culture is constituted by mind, then the goal of education is learning through a co-constitutive process. Education is culturally situated co-construction of meaning by a group of individuals to impart the knowledge in the culture and to enact, advance, or maintain that culture (p. 29).

Wenger (1998) also postulates that education “in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities: exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state” (p. 263). In terms of a civic identity, the connection to one's community is a major facet. Thus, teachers should provide students with opportunities to construct, discover, enact, and refine their civic identities in the classroom with consideration to their connection to their community so that a lifeline for civic engagement commitments is established. Moreover, Keeter, Zukin, Andolina and Jenkins (2002) argue that individuals who hold a sense of responsibility and connection to their community are actively involved community members in political and civic endeavors.

According to Parks (2009), civic identity development is constructed through multiple interactions with individuals and the community. The key to a successful program aimed at increasing youth civic engagements and civic identity development are not simply found in the physical interactions alone but in the emotional and mental systems as well. Simply put,

efficacious programs focusing on increasing youth civic engagement and civic identity development levels should also consider students' voices. Students' voices can be anything from the feelings, attitudes, and perceptions that students may have about democracy, their communities, and their roles within them. Furthermore, a young person's belief that they can have an impact on their community (civic efficacy) and a sense of duty to other individuals within the community (social responsibility) are two democratic attitudes that are associated with civically engaged youth (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012).

White (2012) conceptualizes that a precursor to extraordinary civic engagement levels is a well-developed civic identity that emerges through various socialization experiences. Much of the educational process, nevertheless, focuses on the acquisition and progression of a civic-mindset, civic skills, and civic knowledge since they can be measured. The combination of a civic-mindset, civic skills, and civic knowledge represents a developing or developed civic identity. In this current study, I will focus on how socialization within the classroom affects the development of a civic identity instead of the factors that attribute to successful or unsuccessful civic engagement practices.

Atkins and Hart (2003) claim young people with strong civic identities must (a) have a thorough understanding of their community, (b) become an active member in their community, and (c) uphold democratic virtues (e.g.: tolerance of diversity and commitment to civil liberties). Students who typically participate in precarious behaviors and/or have low civic engagement levels, according to Parks (2009), are not actively involved in their community and do not use their time wisely (e.g.: play sports or hold employment). Llewellyn, Cook, Westheimer, Molina, and Suurtamm (2007) caution teachers and the academic community to consider other forms of civic engagement endeavors that are non-traditional. For instance, Parks' (2009) multiple case

study, entitled *Writings on the Walls: Graffiti and Civic Identity*, found that adolescent graffiti artists in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada do not engage in this art form as a means of committing vandalism; rather, it is their way of maintaining a relationship to their community.

Within the virtual classroom, an instructor may observe a student's civic identity development as the student reveals particular aspects of their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through their language-use in discussion forums. Examples of such language-in-use include students "organizing and persuading others to take political or social action, navigating the political system, consensus building toward the common good, listening to diverse perspectives, and forming positions on public issues" (Hatcher, 2011, p. 85). These few examples may be indicators of an individual's civic identity development or presentation as they use their words to enact their identity. Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus (2012) determined, through a synthesis of existing literature, that civic engagement "both stems from and enables identity development" through participation in civic activities where new roles, relationships, and skills are negotiated and formed" (p. 529).

Hatcher (2011) views civic identity as "related to both intellectual and ethical development which includes critical thinking and empathy for others, and is a deliberately chosen and repeated aspect of self" (p. 85). Effective citizens must encompass numerous civic virtues and embrace core democratic principles (Moore, 2012). However, socialization or an individual's participation in an organized group is crucial to the development of one's civic identity. Therefore, guaranteeing that online high school social studies courses are full of authentic, ethical, diverse, and meaningful dialogical learning experiences is fundamental for the development and/or enactment of students' civic identities. Civic identity may not hold meaning

unless it is constructed, negotiated, and enacted by communicating with other individuals. Gee (2011b) considers that:

We are all members of different cultures, social groups, and institutions, and have different sorts of roles and relationships. In each of these, we have to talk and act so as to be recognized as having the right or an appropriate identity. When we act and speak as a particular type of person, that is, in a socially recognizable identity, we act and speak specific types of these. There are multiple ways of being an African-American, a gamer, an executive, or any other identity. Some scholars do not think any such core unified identity really exists though some people feel that have one. Other scholars feel that we humans actively create our core identity by the way we tell stories of our lives and what we have to say about who we are to others and to ourselves. And what we say about who we are can change in different contexts and across time. At the same time, it is clear that our sense of having a body and mind that is ours and that moves across all different sorts of contexts is part of our sense of having a unified, core identity. In discourse analysis we are not concerned with the core self (p. 106).

Language is used to construct identities for individuals throughout an array of contexts, purposes, and uses. In addition, individuals may simultaneously construct identities for others. Time and again, individuals will use the identities they are constructing for others to progress the work they are doing on their own identities (Gee, 2011b). Thus, the ways in which individuals associate, behave, and communicate in their communities are simply external representations of their internal civic identities (Childers, 2006). According to Brown (2011) “there is a void of empirical knowledge in research that implicates the relationship between language and identity

as a central contributor to academic performance” (p. 681). Although Brown does not highlight the relationship between language and identity as a contributor to civic engagement, I deem that academic performance is an important gauge of how teachers can view their students’ development of civic knowledge and civic skills. Although, when individuals are online “they can be multiple; a different person, each time they enter cyberspace; playing with identities, taking apart and rebuilding in endless new configurations” (Benwell & Stoeke, 2006, p. 245).

### **Critique of Preceding Research In Relation to this Current Study**

Stenton (2003) posits that the “that the ability of the researcher to relate his or her findings to an existing body of knowledge is a key criterion for evaluating works of qualitative inquiry” (p. 69). In this final section of this chapter, I will review and critique prior research studies that provided inspiration and a pathway toward the creation of this current study.

### ***Teaching for Active Democratic Citizenship through Technology Use***

Maguth’s (2009) study entitled, *Investigating Student Use of Technology for Informed and Active Democratic Citizenship in a Global and Multicultural Age*, examines methods in which purposefully sampled students’ (N = 12) use of technology correlated with their perceptions of democratic citizenship. This five month qualitative research study investigates twelve Midwestern high school social studies classrooms use of technology as it relates to active citizenship processes and learning processes involved. Maguth collected data through semi-structured student, teacher and parent interviews, classroom observations, and online-threaded discussions.

Findings, through a qualitative interpretive framework, suggest that there is a “relationship between digital natives’ use of technology and their perceptions of democratic citizenship, and that students’ use both mediates and complicates their gaining the skills,

understandings, and attitudes necessary for informed and active democratic citizenship in a global and multicultural age” (p. ii). While the findings of the study and limitations (e.g.: limited timeframe and narrow case) did not inspire my study’s full direction, Maguth’s review of literature on the impact that technology has made on the social studies classroom provided guidance to understanding various aspects of the computer-mediated virtual social studies classroom.

### ***Construction of Civic Identity via a Service Learning Project Abroad***

Nickelson’s (2011) study, *Exploring the Development of Civic Identity: Stories from a Service Learning Project Abroad*, studies the lived experiences of ten students from the Washington D.C. area that participated in a three week, summer service learning program. This qualitative study employed ethnographic and phenomenological methods where interviews, observations, and examination of students’ journals were used to determine how the ten students revealed and enacted their civic identities during the three week service learning program in Zambia. Nickelson determines that more research is needed to understand the construction of civic identity in one’s home country but reflection and civic action are necessary components when constructing and enacting a civic identity.

This study is helpful in providing literature of civic identity development and the importance of a civic identity to a democratic participation but the unrealistic nature of attempting to understand how civic identity is constructed in a three week service learning project abroad does not benefit my study’s direction. The transferability of this study does not seem possible as a small number of young people have finances or opportunities to study abroad or how temporary service learning projects correlate or have an impact one’s domestic civic identity.

## ***Factors Affecting Civic Identity Development in Elementary Students***

*Civic Engagement in the Upper Elementary Grades: An Examination of Parent and Teacher Practices and Children's Civic Identity* investigates elementary students' civic identities and how socialization processes and adults (in and out of school) have a relationship with students' civic outcomes. White's (2012) study is designed to cognize: "1) child and family characteristics associated with civic outcomes in middle childhood; 2) the extent to which parents' humanitarian values and civic beliefs (social and government trust) are associated with children's civic identity and the ways that parents share these values/beliefs with children; and 3) the types of civic activities used by teachers in the upper elementary grades and the extent to which teacher practices are associated with children's civic outcomes" (pp. ii-iii). Students in grades 4-6 (N = 407), their parents (N = 388), and their teachers (N = 22) were surveyed in seven schools in Southern California.

Results of this multiple case study suggest that students who hold a desire to associate with others and students who come from a low income family are indicators of individuals whose civic identity is in development. Parents who fervently supported philanthropic values and were trusting of others revealed greater civic outcomes among themselves and their children. Teachers described using a variety of authentic, civic activities in their classrooms and service learning opportunities that were connected with student's social commitments to others. White's (2012) study provides signs that parents' civic identities and engagements alongside academic opportunities to develop civic identities (e.g.: by way of service learning experiences) are significant to children's civic outcomes in late elementary years.

White's (2012) study has several limitations. First, African American students were underrepresented and the majority of the students came from a suburban area in Southern



California. Second, approximately half of the students were foreign born and the immigrant experience may affect civic identity construction or future civic engagement endeavors that are unknown in current research. Thirdly, the data collection occurred in one time period and when attempting to fully understand civic identity construction, data collection must take place over an extended time period until data saturation is met.

### ***Changes in Civic Identity over a 50 Year Period***

Childers's (2006) *Cowboy Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Civic Identity Among Young Americans*, is a qualitative interpretivist study of youth civic identity over the past fifty years. Childers's determined through a review of literature that major societal changes affect young people's civic identity construction and he wanted to cognize the trends and patterns in civic identity construction throughout modern American history. To answer the four research questions posed, he examines seven high school newspapers from four decades throughout various regions of the United States. Childers does not conduct interviews and relies solely on the analysis of the school newspapers to determine how civic identities have changed in four major ways throughout the past fifty years:

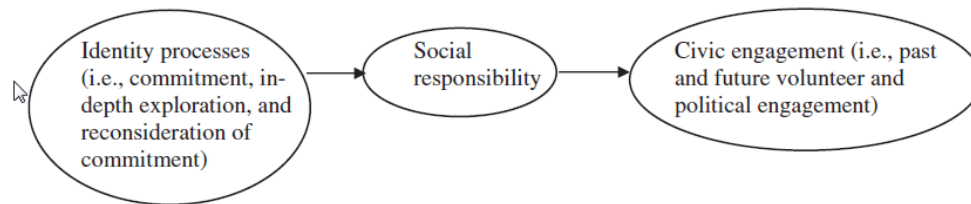
(1) *cosmopolitan flaneurs*, losing connection with the local as they have come to locate community at the national and international level; (2) *removed volunteers*, finding a sense of civic engagement in the acts of donating and volunteering while eschewing traditional forms of political participation; (3) *protective critics*, taking a decidedly negative stance toward the mediated spectacle of politics; and (4) *independent joiners*, coming to see most political issues as private matters and only joining groups for self-interested reasons (p.viii).

Childers's (2006) concludes that young people today have embraced a form of *cowboy citizenship*—"somewhat homeless, somewhat distrustful, and resolutely independent" (p. ix). This study expanded my knowledge in terms of some insightful trends/themes in civic identity construction throughout American history but this study holds some limitations. A major weakness is Childers's claims as to what civic identity encompasses for today's youth. Childers should have examined additional sources or conducted interviews to strengthen his findings and interpretations of the form of current civic identity instead of solely relying on school newspapers. Also, how a small and select group of journalist students write the school newspaper does not necessarily reflect how students perceive their place, role, and connection to their communities.

### ***The Relationship between Identity and Civic Engagement***

*Identity and Civic Engagement in Adolescence* investigates the relationship between identity and civic engagement in Italian youth, ages 14-20. Participants were 392 high school students throughout Eastern Italy that completed a self-report questionnaire measuring identity, volunteer engagement, political engagement, civic efficacy, aspirations to contribute to community, and social responsibility. The preliminary data analysis is a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) attempting to determine age and gender dissimilarities among the variables being measured. The results indicates a "significant main effects of both genders (Wilks'  $\Lambda = .79$ ;  $F(10,379) = 10.13$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .21$ ) and age (Wilks'  $\Lambda = .91$ ;  $F(10, 379) = 3.56$ ;  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ ) were found, whereas the gender by age interaction was not significant (Wilks'  $\Lambda = .98$ ;  $F(10, 379) = 0.80$ ;  $p = .63$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ )" (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012. p. 525). A person-centered approach and variable-centered approach is also used and Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus determine that achieved adolescents held high levels of civic efficacy,

volunteered regularly, and had aspirations to participate in their community. Figure 6 (below) portrays the other finding that identity formation and civic engagement correlate through a social responsibility mediating variable.



**Figure 6: Schematization of Hypothesized Model**

The findings of the study also indicate that the “attitude of social responsibility is a potential mechanism by which higher order identity processes are related to community-oriented civic engagement” and “the active reflection on current commitments seems to be the key identity process that might promote civic engagement” (p. 529). Although the study held a sound process and an adequate literature review, the participants were sampled from higher socioeconomic schools with a low number of minority students causing a reliability issue. Additionally, the questionnaire is not provided in the study so readers cannot determine whether or not the questions were appropriate for the study’s goals. Crocetti, Jahromi, and Meeus (2012) argue that “civic engagement might attend to identity development and promote in-depth exploration characterized by reflective thinking and mindfulness” (p. 531) but do not attempt to observe or interview students in experiences where they are engaged in reflective thinking activities.

### ***Determining Active vs. Inactive Adolescents in Civic and Political Life***

Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, and Alisat (2007) were interested in examining the reasons behind active and non-active adolescents in community and political domains. Students in their final years of high school completed a political and community activities survey, alongside a parent and peer interactions, identity development, and adjustment survey. *Community and Political Involvement in Adolescence: What Distinguishes the Activists from the Uninvolved?* employs a cluster analysis of the variables measured in the surveys and the results reveal four distinct groupings of adolescents: Activists, Helpers, Responders and Uninvolved. “Test-retest reliability was .58 ( $N = 333, p < .0001$ ). Validity of the scale was assessed by correlating the YII total score with the Youth Social Responsibility Scale (YSRS). The correlation between the YII and the YSRS was .33 at Time 1 ( $N = 871, p < .01$ ) and .23 at Time 2 ( $N = 326, p < .01$ )” (p. 747).

Comparisons show “several differences among the groups in terms of parent and peer interactions, identity development, and adjustment, with the Activists and Helpers showing more frequent discussions with parents and peers, more advanced identity development, and better adjustment than the Responders and Uninvolved adolescents.” (p. 741). Family and peers play a significant role in developing adolescents’ community and political involvements and civic identity. When focusing on the identity variable alone, the results of the study cannot conclude whether or not a well-developed identity correlates with civic engagement. Perhaps civic engagement merely assists in the construction of positive results in young people’s lives.

### ***Typology of Civic Identity***

Rubin’s (2007) *There’s Still Not Justice’’: Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts* studies how civic identity is negotiated and constructed

in diverse youth (with consideration to racial and socioeconomic characteristics). This critical and interpretive qualitative research study is composed student interviews (N = 20) and observations of four New Jersey public high schools’ classroom discussions (N= 80). Rubin’s findings “suggests a “typology” of civic identity that runs counter to prevalent views of the civic engagement of urban, minority youth” and schools can either “hinder or encourage development of engaged, action-oriented civic identities among students from various contexts” (p. 449).

**Table 4: Rubin’s (2007) Typology of Civic Identity**

Students’ experiences in relation to the learned ideals of the United States		
	CONGRUENCE	DISJUNCTURE
Students’ attitudes toward civic participation	<p>ACTIVE</p> <p>Quadrant I: Aware <i>Change is needed for equity and fairness</i></p> <p>These students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— have experienced congruence recognize their privilege and are aware that disjunctures exist for others</li> <li>— have learned about injustice in school or from family, but not through personal experiences</li> </ul>	<p>Quadrant II: Empowered <i>Change is a personal and community necessity</i></p> <p>These students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— have experienced disjuncture</li> <li>— believe in their ability to use the system to bring about justice</li> <li>— know about civic rights and processes</li> <li>— have been encouraged to critique</li> </ul>
	<p>PASSIVE</p> <p>Quadrant III: Complacent <i>No change is necessary, all is well in the U.S.</i></p> <p>These students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— have experienced congruence</li> <li>— support preservation of the status quo</li> <li>— do not know about or recognize disjunctures experienced by others</li> </ul>	<p>Quadrant IV: Discouraged <i>No change is possible, life in the U.S. is unfair</i></p> <p>These students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— have experienced disjuncture</li> <li>— express deep cynicism about the possibility of using the system to make changes</li> </ul>

While this study has many strengths, the limitations pose serious issues. First, Rubin (2007) does not disclose the interview questions, observation notes (audit trail), or explain triangulation methods. The student observations and interviews took place only on two occasions: two class discussions (N = 80) with purposefully sampled post-discussion interviews (N = 20). The conclusions of the study may offer helpful information when executing my study but the patterns and themes of the student’s civic identity from two observation days (in one

state) may not lead to significant findings applicable to the complete social studies academic community. My current study will, however, provide the academic community insight into civic identity construction as I will observe and investigate students' discussion forums from five courses in one school year (natural setting), several methods of triangulation will be employed, and an audit trail will be provided.

### ***Students' Conceptualizations of Civic Identity***

*Civic Identity Development: A Study of How Students Conceptualize and Operationalize Civic Engagement at an Independent School* is a mixed-methods study of high school seniors (N = 88) at one school in New Orleans, Louisiana through interviews and open-ended survey. Miller (2009) purposefully sampled students to understand how their life experiences (in and outside of school) shaped their civic identities. The study also examined how the students conceptualized citizenship in relation to their lives.

The results of the study show that the students have thin conceptualizations of civic engagement and the majority of their civic identity development occurs outside of school. Miller (2009) argues that teachers should place higher priorities on providing instructional time spent on authentic, civic experiences necessary to civic identity development. Most importantly, teachers should acknowledge shifts in the meaning of citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and diverse backgrounds of students. Thus, Miller recommends for an increase in classroom discussions and technology use to ensure positive civic identity development necessary for civic engagement endeavors. This study provides a myriad of insights that will guide me along my research process in many ways. Essentially, the benefits of this research study significantly outweigh the few limitations. Also, Miller held three roles in the research process: researcher, co-teacher, and

head of the school while still adhering to a rigorous, reliable, and trustworthy study. In my research study, I will have three roles as well: researcher, teacher, and curriculum writer.

### ***Civic Identity Development and Extracurricular Organizations***

*Maintaining Civil Society and Democracy: Examining the Role of Youth Development Organizations in Promoting Civic Identity Development* is a longitudinal study of surveys from 4-H participants in the eighth grade (N= 1,890) in 16 states. Through a review of literature relevant to the study, Boebeck (2007) analyzes students' civic identity development in relation to four categories that correlate with the phenomenon: social capital/social trust, pro-civic attitudes, civic knowledge and skills, and civic engagement. An exploratory factor analysis to test this four-factor model of civic identity development along with a prediction model determined that youth who participate in extracurricular organizations have higher scores in the four categories than young people who do not participate in extracurricular organizations.

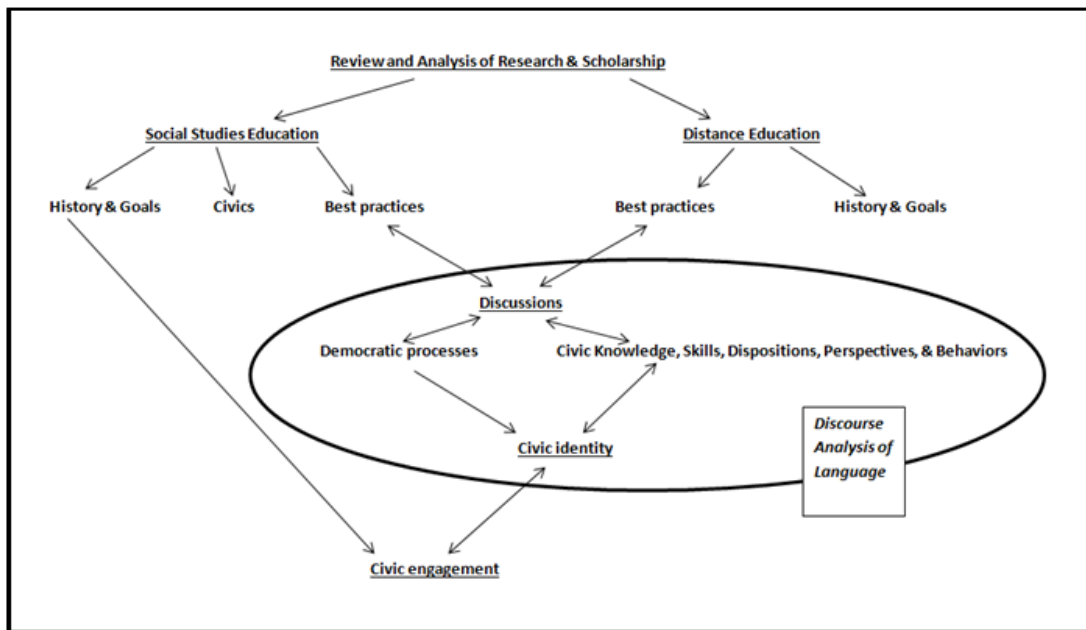
Boebeck (2007) also measured for the impact of “gender, race, and socioeconomic status on the factors of civic identity development” (p. ii). Results suggest that “gender significantly predicted the outcome variable for all of the civic identity factors and for civic identity overall, while race was a significant predictor for five of the civic identity factors and for civic identity overall” (p. iii). Socioeconomic status, time length of 4-H membership, and gender did not predict any of the outcome variables.

There were, however, several limitations: the “non-representative nature of the sample, the limited number of items available for measuring civic identity, and the inability to distinguish between different 4-H delivery modes” (p. iii). Nevertheless, the results of the study offer insights into the measurement of civic identity among young people and the impact that 4-H has

on civic identity. Boebeck (2007) recommends for future research to longitudinally investigate civic identity development and participation in other contexts

**Summary**

This extensive literature review unpacked the history and nature of distance education and social studies education as context for the greater issue: understanding and analyzing high school social studies students’ language-in-use within discussion forums as it relates to the construction, presentation, and/or enactment of civic identity. Attention toward civic identity development amongst our nation’s youth is crucial as civic engagement seems dependent upon well-constructed civic identities. Figure 7 below provides a general overview of the review of the literature that informs the qualitative research method: discourse analysis.



**Figure 7: Conceptual Model of the Review of the Literature**

Counts (1932) saw democracy of the past as the “chance fruit of a strange conjunction of forces on the new continent” and the democracy of the future as the “intended offspring of the



union of human reason, purpose, and will”. The “conscious and deliberate achievement of democracy under novel circumstances is the task of our current generation” (p. 40). In other words, harnessing indirect teaching methods that encourage students to become agile, active, caring, and competent citizens for the longevity of a stable democracy is the spirit of social studies education, both online and face-to-face. The interdependent and complex world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents us with new challenges that require a citizenry who are eager to find solutions to complex issues and seek new knowledge routes.

A student-centered learning environment that online education engenders, leaves researchers with a duty to recognize how students learn most effectively and the implications thereof. Understanding how students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century view their place within society and their roles as citizens is necessary for the academic community to cognize. Education for democratic citizenship through a technological medium presents a myriad of challenges and ambiguities as democracy requires direct participation. However, as society becomes more and more dependent on technology and indirect methods of communication, the government and our educational system must mirror those changes. The mirroring techniques in the educational sector are lagging behind societal changes and attention toward these aims is essential.

Through the review of literature, providing a safe space for students to express their views and opinions, problem-solve and make decisions in a collaborative manner, and work toward new collective knowledge pursuits is the essence of an authentic and democratic online social studies course. Just as democracy is full of variety and disorder, so too is our educational system; however, the ways in which individuals negotiate, communicate, and work toward collective wisdom is the foundation to growth and stability. Examining the pitfalls, ambiguities, and knowledge gaps of our educational system will lead us closer toward achieving various ends

within our democratic, societal, and educative realms. For this study, particularly, the end is examining how an online educational environment plays a role in helping young people develop a robust civic identity that may positively impact their lifelong civic engagement endeavors. Fundamentally, for democracy to continue to succeed we need more participants and fewer observers, yet, further research is needed to cognize how this end can be achieved.

### **Chapter 3: Method**

“Good educational research is a matter not only of sound procedures but also of beneficial aims and results; our ultimate aim as researchers and educators is to serve people’s well-being” (Hostetler, 2005, p. 16).

Zellig Harris (1952) is recognized as the first scholar employing a discourse analysis in a research study. Harris was interested in examining the meaning of language use beyond its ‘face-value’ and the connection between linguistic and non-linguistic activities (Paltridge, 2012).

The view of discourse as the social construction of reality sees texts as communicative units which are embedded in social and cultural practices. The texts we write and speak both shape and are shaped by these practices. Discourse, then, is both shaped by the world as well as shaping the world. Discourse is shaped by language as well as shaping language. It is shaped by the people who use the language as well as shaping the language that people use. Discourse is shaped as well by the discourse that has preceded it and that which might follow it. Discourse is also shaped by the medium in which it occurs as well as it shapes the possibilities for that medium. The purpose of the text also influences the discourse. Discourse also shapes the range of possible purposes of text (p. 7).

Discussion creates social identity by outlining “groups, group’s interests, their position within society and their relationship to other groups” (Ainsworth, 2001, p. 3). In other words,

social identities are constructed through language-in-use and the way individuals expose their thinking, values, and feelings ultimately shape who they are in relation to others and the social milieu. ‘Meaning’ is essentially grounded in negotiation and constructed within social experiences between people of different backgrounds who share or pursue a common objective (Neale, 2011).

This study employed a qualitative method with a discourse analysis of five online high school social studies courses’ discussion forums throughout one school year. A discourse analysis is an appropriate method for this current study as Gee (2005) suggests that “discourse analysis can be revealing about the identities, relationships, and actions behind language” (pp. 11-12). As a result, this retrospective exploration fit well with the discourse analysis method as I studied the language used within asynchronous discussion forums to understand how the construction, presentation, and/or enactment of civic identities occurred.

The research questions that guide this study are as follows: (1)What does students’ language-in-use in the discussion forums of five online high school social studies courses reveal about the construction and/or portrayal of their civic identities? (2) How do the interactions of virtual students that transpire within the discussion forums affect the formation and portrayal of their civic identities? I approached my data collection in a phenomenological fashion as a way to prevent my preconceived notions and assumptions from skewing the data collection and analysis. Of course all researchers hold preconceived notions, but I bracketed those assumptions and preconceived notions as much as possible so they did not cloud my observations when themes and signs of civic identity construction, demonstration, and/or enactment emerged. I also routinely engaged in data workshops with faculty and colleagues to “defend” both the data selected for examination and the results of my analyses.

## Participants

It is important to note that the focus of discourse analysis is for the researcher to better understand:

How participants use language to construct identities and relationships and it involves the study of language-in-use in order to identify regularities and patterns in language with the ultimate aim to show and to interpret the relationship between the regularities and the meanings and purposes expressed through discourse (McGowen, 2002, p. 33).

When selecting the research location, the researcher must first consider the most suitable location that will provide “naturally occurring texts and tasks as data” (Ainsworth, 2001, p. 5).

Due to the fact that I conducted a discourse analysis of existing text produced in a virtual discussion forum, I did not have direct informants in my research study, *per se*. Rather, I collected and analyzed data (language-in-use) from discussion forum threads within five online high school social studies courses in Florida from the 2012-2013 school year. This virtual school is run and funded by the county’s school district and is composed of part-time and full-time high school students. The students in the virtual school provide an appropriate sample for this study since the students generally reflect the ethnicities and socio-economic statuses represented in their neighborhood schools. Also, there is no “typical” virtual student; students are fulfilling their state-mandated online graduation requirement, dually enrolled with the local colleges, sick or having surgery and need to continue their education from home, work full time during the day and attend school at night, or simply wish to learn at home instead of in a regular school setting, because of bullying, religious convictions, or other family circumstances

The five social studies course descriptions which are collected and noted below as provided by the Florida Department of Education (2013):

**World Cultural Geography:** The World Cultural Geography course, typically taken as an elective social studies course in grades 9-12, primary content emphasis pertains to the study of world cultural regions in terms of location, physical characteristics, demographics, historical changes, land use, and economic activity. Content should include, but is not limited to, the use of geographic tools and skills to gather and interpret data and to draw conclusions about physical and human patterns, the relationships between physical geography and the economic, political, social, cultural and historical aspects of human activity, patterns of population growth and settlement in different cultures and environments, the interaction between culture and technology in the use, alteration and conservation of the physical environment, and the interrelationships and interdependence of world cultures.

**World History:** The World History course, typically taken in grade 10, consists of the following content area strands: World History, Geography and Humanities. This course is a continued in-depth study of the history of civilizations and societies from the middle school course, and includes the history of civilizations and societies of North and South America. Students are exposed to historical periods leading to the beginning of the 21st century. So that students can clearly see the relationship between cause-and-effect in historical events, students should have the opportunity to review those fundamental ideas and events from ancient and classical civilizations.

**United States History:** The United States History course, typically taken in grade 11, consists of the following content area strands: United States History, Geography, and Humanities. The primary content emphasis for this course pertains to the study of United States history from the Reconstruction period to the present day. Students are exposed to the historical, geographic, political, economic, and sociological events which influenced the development of the United States and the resulting impact on world history. So that students can clearly see the relationship between cause-and-effect in historical events, students should have the opportunity to review those fundamental ideas and events which occurred before the end of Reconstruction.

**Economics:** The Economics course, typically taken in grade 12, consists of the following content area strands: Economics and Geography. The primary content emphasis for this course pertains to the study of the concepts and processes of the national and international economic systems. Content should include, but is not limited to, currency, banking, and monetary policy, the fundamental concepts relevant to the major economic systems, the global market and economy, major economic theories and economists, the role and influence of the government and fiscal policies, economic measurements, tools, and methodology, financial and investment markets, and the business cycle.

**United States Government:** The United States Government course, typically taken in grades 9 or 12, consists of the following content area strands: Geography, Civics and Government. The primary content for the course pertains to the study of government institutions and political processes and their historical impact on American society.

Content should include, but is not limited to, the functions and purpose of government, the function of the state, the constitutional framework, federalism, separation of powers, functions of the three branches of government at the local, state and national level, and the political decision-making process.

While the content of these five social studies courses' may differ, the ultimate goal of each course is similar: to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge for lifelong active and informed citizenship.

The discussion forums sampled from the five social studies courses as explained above were created by the researcher, who is also the teacher and curriculum writer. Each week throughout the 2012-2013 school year, students completed a series of tasks located in modules (Appendix A). One of the tasks each week was to complete a discussion forum posting related to the weekly theme (Appendix B). For example, in US History during the Gilded Age unit (week 6), students were asked to answer this discussion question: "Was Andrew Carnegie a hero or the opposite thereof?" Students were required to examine multiple sources and answer the discussion question in a few paragraphs with evidence to support their claims. Students were also required to comment or pose a question to a classmate's thread and to acknowledge comments posted by fellow classmates' to their thread as well. This particular discussion forum equipped students with social studies content knowledge of the Gilded Age, critical thinking skills when analyzing and synthesizing multiple sources and defending their arguments to the discussion question, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills of collaboration and communication when discussing this topic within the forum. Below the surface of their responses, students also discussed the



responsibilities of citizens in a democracy and various social issues during the Gilded Age as they related to current ones.

Because of my close connection to this study as the teacher, curriculum writer, and researcher in this study, it is essential for readers to understand my background, roles and activities. I am a full time, online high school social studies teacher who plans, creates, and implements the weekly learning activities and discussion forums for the five social studies courses examined in this research study. I contact my students each week via Elluminate sessions, phone calls, and emails to provide praise, encouragement, and feedback, unlike the traditional classroom where the teacher can perform these routines face-to-face. Our virtual school operates in the same fashion as the other schools in the district: we have two 18 week semesters with midterm and final exams. Grades are based on a 100 point scale and our virtual students obtain their high school diploma from their regularly zoned (neighborhood) brick-and-mortar schools. As stated previously, students have the option to take courses on a part-time or full-time basis throughout their high school career.

Prior to teaching at the virtual school, I taught at a local high school for four years. The move into the virtual classroom was a challenging transition but my previous brick-and-mortar teaching experience and knowledge gained through my instructional technology graduate courses at the University of South Florida provided guidance for this new role. The best practices in the literature as highlighted in chapter two influenced my teaching practices, especially the weekly discussion forums. Not only did I create the discussion forum topics, I also participated in the discussion forums as part of my normal instructional routine. I did not dominate conversations but I was, however, a present and active participant. (This assessment was confirmed by colleagues and research supervisors who reviewed transcripts of the discussion forums.) When

conversations within the discussion forums needed guidance, lacked detail, or required assistance for various reasons, I fulfilled the learning needs as a facilitator would but did not take over the discussions. I would insert comments or ask questions to encourage further and more elaborate responses, offer praise and support, and act as a moderator.

As the researcher of this study, I employed a discourse analysis to look at the greater meaning, significance, interactions, relationships, and identity formations that took place within these discussion forums. I looked beneath the surface to understand how discussion forums affect students' learning experience and identity construction in this online realm. For Gee (2011a):

In discourse analysis, we gain information about a context in which a piece of language has been used and use this information to form hypotheses about what that piece of language means and is doing. In turn, we closely study the piece of language and ask ourselves what we can learn about the context in which the language was used and how that context was constructed” (p. 20).

### **Data collection**

A retrospective study, typically found in the medical field, uses existing data that was originally intended for purposes other than research (Hess, 2004b). The discussion forums collected are archived data sets originally intended for normal instructional routines. Gee (2011b) writes, “when we do discourse analysis we are often dealing with data after the fact, when a communication is over. Thus we have to reconstruct the context as far as we can.” (p. 19).

According to Wood and Kroger (2000), discourse analysis concentrates on language-in-use instead of the language users. With that being said, the data in my study are discourse samples of the discussion forums from the five courses taught in the 2012-2013 school year. Students were expected to meet the following expectations in the discussion forums each week (see table 5).

**Table 5: Weekly Discussion Forum Expectations**

- **Post:** Student will post appropriate and in-depth answers/statements for the weekly discussion topic by Wednesday of each week.
- **Interact:** Students will ask a question and/or commented on one classmate's discussion post (minimum) by Saturday of each week. Students will also reply to comments or questions posted within their original thread by Saturday of each week.
- **Monitor:** Students will continue to interact and engage in rich discussions throughout the week on their thread and fellow classmates' threads.
- **Proper Netiquette:** Students will be respectful, collaborative, and an active contributor to the construction new and collective knowledge each week. It is an expectation for students to use proper sources when supporting their arguments, maintain appropriate grammar, and stay on-topic for our weekly discussions.

The weekly discussion forums contained a debatable topic with several prompting questions and helpful resources for defending their stance on the discussion topic. To fully understand the

presentation of civic identity in the discussion forums, the selection of the data was carefully planned. The criteria for choosing the courses from which to gather my data were:

- The five online high school social studies courses are located within one Florida school district. The school district is where I am employed so I can have full access to the discussion forums' threads for courses I am assigned.
- The five courses selected will represent different ages (grade levels) to capture the online high school social studies experience in a holistic manner. (Courses include: World Geography, World History, American History, Economics, and American Government).
- I collect data from discussion forums from my own online high school social studies courses to ensure uniform measures and conditions. This decision was made for consistency and reliability. Collecting data from other virtual schools' courses may harm the purpose of this study as conditions may be inconsistent across settings.
- The data collected is archived data from normal instructional routines in the five courses from one school year. Thus, this study is a retrospective examination of the archived data.
- The discussions threads that I choose are full of rich detail and interactions so that meaningful themes can emerge. I did not choose discussion threads with insufficient interaction and discourse exchanges as they did not capture a sufficiently rich sample to support an effective discourse analysis.

As Gee (2011a) notes, "it is up to the analyst to decide how narrow or broad the transcript must be" (p. 117). Taking many qualitative research perspectives into consideration, I decided to employ the purposeful sampling because it leads to information-rich cases as a way to illuminate the exact inquiry being analyzed (Patton, 2002). I collected

"information-rich discussion forums from the 36 discussion forums of each of the five courses from the 2011-2012 school year. An "information-rich thread" was defined as having two or more participants engaged, since the definition of discussion is the exchange and meaning making of information and opinions between two or more individuals (Abaria, 2011).

Using this initial definition, I collected over 400 discussion threads in late June of 2013 and discovered a large number of these discussion threads in the first round of data collection did not provide sufficient richness to merit a substantial discourse analysis. As a result, I revised the criteria for a "rich discussion thread" so that the discussions had to contain at least four posts where two or more participants were engaged in detailed discourse exchanges that followed the course guidelines and were on-topic to the weekly discussion topic. In addition, the original author of the discussion thread had to acknowledge comments within the forums from their classmates. Even if a discussion thread had four posts and two or more participants, a discussion that seemed fragmented, off-topic, and lacked knowledge exchanges intended for learning gains within the course, was not included as an information-rich sample. For instance, I observed discussion threads with more than four posts and several participants but the participants left comments that did not elicit rich discussions or signs of collective knowledge construction. Examples of 'dead end' language exchanges were phrases such as; "great job," "I agree," "very interesting," or "I liked reading your post". While these phrases are necessary at times, the excessiveness of phrases that did not invite further knowledge exchanges were not helpful for this study's goals. Thus, I omitted discussion threads in my analysis that did not contain information-rich exchanges.

After thoughtful consideration and several meetings with my dissertation supervisor, I collected, in total, 133 discussion threads or 55,422 words for my data sources during the months of July through August of 2013, reflecting student postings from the 2012-2013 school year. After I collected the data, I changed the students' names to pseudonyms, and omitted specific sites in the community or names that may jeopardize anonymity.

Once I finished this process of data cleaning, I entered the data into *Atlas.ti* (I will discuss this program in the next section). I did not include any forms of student identification because the purpose of this study was not intended to follow specific students throughout the school year, but to understand how civic identity is constructed, revealed, and/or enacted within a natural, virtual setting: the discussion forum.

Although the purpose of the forum was not to track individual student changes over time or compare students to classmates or in different courses, I did create two discussion forums during the school year that encouraged students to reflect on (1) their views of civic identity (e.g. importance or insignificance), (2) what their civic identity meant to them, and (3) how they perceived their civic identity would impact their futures (or not). The two discussion forums where students reflected and discussed their views of civic identity was a form of member-checking typically used in the data verification process. Explicit student expressions of their perceptions, reflections, and viewpoints on their own civic identity construction and/or enactment were important in helping to establish a connection between their posted "language in use" and their actual, stated views of their civic identity formation. This approach was supported by Hussein (2009) who argues that researchers must often create triangulation methods for their particular study in order to neutralize potential weaknesses or gaps in interpretation (Hussein, 2009).

## Data Analysis

The discourse analyst looks for “patterns and links within and across utterances in order to form hypotheses about how meaning is being constructed and organized” (Gee, 2011a, p. 128). Hatch (2002) describes data analysis as:

A systematic search for meaning and a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data. (p. 148)

I selected information and interaction-rich discussion threads from weekly discussion forums within the five social studies courses over the 2012-2013 school year and read the data very closely while sorting and coding the data from the months of September 2013 to January 2014. I did not include discussion threads in my data collection and analysis that did not warrant meaningful discourse exchanges (See the appendix D for examples). Including discussion threads that did not reveal helpful material to answer my research questions were not included in the analysis.

Data collection in discursive research, according to Nikander (2008), is “always followed by a time consuming period during which the researcher is immersed in the materials by thoroughly reading and rereading” (p. 13). The reading takes place in various stages as the researcher observes the variations and patterns (diachronic or synchronic) within the transcript.

To ensure data management accuracy, I used of the qualitative computer program, *Atlas.ti*, to organize, sort, read, and analyze the extensive data collected in this study (Creswell, 2007). *Atlas.ti* has a variety of tools to assist qualitative researchers in their studies such as, coding, sorting, and annotating the data. The amount of data generated in qualitative research can be overwhelming for novice researchers if data are not managed appropriately (Miles and Huberman, 1994). I read the data multiple times until patterns and themes emerged. I focused my attention on the language used within the discussion forum to understand when, how, and in what ways civic identities are constructed, presented, and manifested.

Language, according to Gee (2011b), is used to make people “construct pictures in their minds for many different purposes. We speak and put pictures in people’s heads because we want to make things happen in the world. We want to do things and not just say them” (p. 73). Gee encourages discourse analysts to ask a variety of questions when examining the data, such as:

1. What socially recognizable identity or identities is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognize?
2. How does the speaker’s language treat other people’s identities?
3. What sorts of identities is the speaker recognizing for others in relationship to his or her own?
4. How is the speaker positioning others?
5. What identities is the speaker inviting them to take up? (p. 110).

Gee’s (2011b) general discourse analysis questions were considered as I read my extensive data sets as well as discourse analysis questions that I constructed as they applied to my study. The



discourse analysis questions listed below are a few examples of how I attempted to understand the presentation of civic identity in the discussion forums:

1. What topics are these virtual students discussing that may indicate a relationship with their community?
2. What topics are these virtual students discussing that may exhibit their perceptions of democratic citizenship?
3. In what ways do students interpret and understand active democratic citizenship?
4. How do students interact with other classmates, content, and the teacher when multiple perspectives or debatable topics arise?
5. What reactions and interactions occur in the discussion forums during current event analyses?

I did not use an analytical tool to guide the measurement or detection of civic identity construction and/or enactment because there is not one available at this time; however, the NCSS (2013) effective citizen indicators provided guidance when I analyzed the content of student expression in my collected data sets. These characteristics of effective citizens (as shown in table 6 below) kept me grounded and offered boundaries for understanding signs or indicators of the construction, demonstration, and/or enactment of civic identities within the discussion forums during data analysis. A conceptual model for this notion, as created by Bentley (2013) can be viewed in appendix E.

**Table 6: Effective Citizen Indicators**

- Embraces core democratic values and strives to live by them.
- Accepts responsibility for the well-being of oneself, one's family, and the community.
- Has knowledge of the people, history, and traditions that have shaped our local communities, our nation, and the world.
- Has knowledge of our nation's founding documents, civic institutions, and political processes.
- Is aware of issues and events that have an impact on people at local, state, national, and global levels.
- Seeks information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions.
- Asks meaningful questions and is able to analyze and evaluate information and ideas.
- Uses effective decision-making and problem-solving skills in public and private life.
- Has the ability to collaborate effectively as a member of a group.
- Actively participates in civic and community life.

The constant comparative method was employed during data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). This method is a non-linear analytical process where the researcher oscillates between the raw data and the researcher's field to collect information about a specific concept that was coded into categories and hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Raw data sets are analyzed through the practice of memos and coding and as new data sets are collected. Evolving themes are then compared to formerly established themes and information previously coded. Corbin and Strauss (1990) explain that the researcher performs inductive and deductive processes during data analysis to challenge emerging categories with new data. The new data collected was examined to detect if there are any fluctuations in emerging categories/patterns. The researcher used the patterns and variations of the patterns to provide direction to the data and aid in theory and category creation.

Wood and Kroger (2000) argue that during the analysis stage, the researcher should not "apply categories to participants' talk; rather, they should identify the ways in which the

participants themselves actively construct and employ categories within their talks” (p. 29). For that reason, I analyzed the data in a manner that allowed the text and context to ‘talk to me’ while being aware of any inconsistencies (van Dijk, 1993). I worked back and forth between the text and concepts (Putnam, 2005) to ensure that I accurately identified the themes and patterns that emerged from the data. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) recommend for researchers to move from the raw text to the research questions in small steps and sort significant text into folders of repeating ideas. It is important that researchers reduce the transcripts into manageable pieces to find relevant text that will answer the research questions. Once the researcher is finished with the coding process, he/she will organize the folders of repeating ideas into larger folders composed of reoccurring themes. In my first phase of data analysis I had 340 codes and 270 pages of notes; and by my second round of data analysis I had modified themes and categories and narrowed it down to 51 pages. In the final round of data analysis, I had approximately six pages of noteworthy conclusions and observations.

To guarantee reliability and trustworthiness after I coded the data, I met with my dissertation supervisor to discuss my findings. After our meeting, I spent a month re-reading, coding, and analyzing the data with a different outlook than I had before (my 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of analysis). In November 2013 I met with three additional experts in the field to assess my coding and patterns/themes that I identified after my second round of data analysis. The three experts were given various segments of the collected data to code and analyze and compare with my codes and themes as a means of testing my interpretations of the data. Expert panels are utilized as a method of triangulation and for reliability measures because the researcher engages in meaningful discussion about the study with experts to gain insight and feedback that is crucial for detecting issues or inaccuracies in the data collection and analysis (Keele, 2011). Lincoln &

Guba (1985) view “peer briefing and the use of external auditors as means of enhancing the credibility of a study by assessing whether the findings resonate with others not connected with the study” (as cited in Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007, p. 26). Once I collected the expert panels’ feedback, I conducted my third and final round of data analysis and met with an additional three experts in the field to gain insights and build reliability. This final examination by the three experts in January 2014 helped me realize that I had hit the data saturation point and it was time to begin writing my conclusions.

Good qualitative research aids readers in “understanding a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing (Eisner , 1991, p. 58). The quality of a study requires the right degree of triangulation techniques that coincides with the study’s purpose. Triangulation is a notion, derived from navigational science, encompassing “two or more sources to achieve a comprehensive picture of a fixed point of reference” (Padgett, 2008, p. 186). Creswell (2007) defines triangulation as the use of “multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (p. 208) in research. Thick description, for instance, is a concept in qualitative research where the researcher provides “deep, dense, detailed accounts” of a phenomenon with consideration to the context in which the phenomenon transpires (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Creswell and Miller (2000) point out that:

The purpose of thick description is that it creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feelings that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study. Thus credibility is established through the lens of readers who read a narrative account, and are transported into a setting or situation (p. 128-129).

Shenton (2003) also perceives that thick description can promote credibility as it provides readers with a broad and factual picture of the research process to justify the study's findings. Throughout the study, I provide a thick description of the entire research process, including any issues that arose.

### **Measurement Quality**

According to Golafshani (2003), triangulation “may include multiple methods of data collection and analysis, but does not suggest a fixed method for all research. The methods chosen to test the reliability of a study depend on the criterion of the research” (p. 604).

Reliability in quantitative research occurs when the degree to which a measurement remains the same overtime in comparison with analogous studies or conditions. However, in qualitative research, reliability is regarded as:

The extent to which a study's findings can be replicated given like conditions. In qualitative research, the terms dependability and consistency are a better fit because there are never any like conditions to a phenomena in situ. The task of the researcher in qualitative research is to describe the data well enough and explain his or her analysis of the data thoroughly enough to allow the reader of the study to concur the findings given the data collected, the results make sense, and are consistent and reliable (Moore-Cox, 2010, pp. 85-86).

Qualitative researchers' primary measurement quality goal should be their “ability to convincingly show how they got there, how they built confidence, and how their research method was the best possible account” (Richards, 2009, p. 152). Validity is a term used in quantitative research; however, qualitative researchers are more concerned with transparency,

communicability, and coherence. This current research study will provide measurement quality in the following ways:

- **Coherence and Dependability:** I have described my conceptual and theoretical frameworks in chapter 1 and they will continually stay tied to my research questions during data collection and analysis. Staying grounded and connected to my theoretical and conceptual frameworks and to my research questions will illustrate dependability and consistency (Miles and Huberman, 1994).
- **Organization:** I was organized and orderly in my data collection and analysis with the assistance of the *ATLAS.ti* software (Wood & Kroger, 2000).
- **Trustworthiness:** To promote trustworthiness, I have disclosed the process of the data collection and my relationship to the study as I am the researcher, instructor, and content writer of the five social studies courses being examined. I also built trustworthiness by including six other researchers as expert panelists during my data analysis phase. Quantitative researchers, on the other hand, try to distance themselves from the research but qualitative researchers are directly involved and immerse themselves in the research process as much as possible (Patton, 2002). Thus, the credibility of the researcher is an important aspect to consider in a qualitative study as the researcher is a key instrument in the data collection and analysis stages (Patton, 1990).
- **Bracketing:** I immersed myself in the data and bracketed my preconceived predispositions as much as possible to prevent researcher biases from affecting the trustworthiness of the study. Throughout the study, I wrote my experiences, emotions, and thoughts in a researcher journal. Ortlipp (2008) states that when

researchers have self-reflective journals, the journals help them examine “personal assumptions and goals and clarify individual belief systems and subjectivities” (p. 697) that may jeopardize the credibility and reliability of the study.

- **Transparency and Transferability:** I promoted transparency and transferability by providing rich detail in this chapter and subsequent chapters. The rich, thick detail is intended for the readers to conclude if the study’s outcomes are transferrable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Communicability:** I aided to the completeness and trustworthiness of the study by providing an ‘audit trail’ (Shenton, 2003). The audit trail includes any inconsistencies or problems that arise during the study. Also, I will continue to be as descriptive as possible to paint a clear and honest picture for the reader to understand the phenomenon in its natural setting.
- **Dependability and Confirmability:** Marshall and Rossman (1995) explain that confirmability occurs when a researcher outside of the study can confirm the findings. Confirmability aids in measurement quality to ease the subjective nature of qualitative research by involving other researchers in the analysis. In this study, I utilized an expert panel of six researchers within the field of social studies education.

## **Ethical Considerations**

There are ethical considerations that I adhered to in this study even though I did not have participants directly involved. To ensure the privacy, protection, and anonymity of the students

whose discussion threads and posts were collected in this study, I used pseudonyms as I stated in the data collection section. When students revealed information that may have identified them, I omitted any and all information that may have jeopardized their anonymity. For example, if a student included a particular structure or establishment from the local community in a discussion thread, I omitted the particular structure or establishment from the transcription to ensure the full anonymity and protection of the participants.

In addition to these practical ethical decisions, the study was designed to reflect adherence to IRB and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act requirement, specifically, that archived data collected in the routine instructional process may be used for research purposes only if full anonymity is preserved. These ethical and legal considerations were sufficiently broad to use these archived data in order to investigate the formation and presentation of civic identity in a discussion forum through descriptive, qualitative analytical approaches, but did not permit the identification of research participants for comparisons over time, between groups, or through other inferential means.



## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Discussion Forums as a Democratic Laboratory**

"I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man."--Thomas Jefferson (1822)

#### **Introduction**

Throughout this chapter I discuss the themes and findings that emerged from my analysis of 133 discussion forums from five online high school social studies courses during the 2012-2013 school year. In order to preserve the integrity of the students' comments, they are presented here in unedited form—complete with errors. To avoid disrupting the flow of the students' ideas, conventional notation of errors in quotations [*sic*] is not included. Moreover, to ensure the highest degree of anonymity, I provide pseudonyms in the form of Student A, Student B, Student C, and so forth during theme presentation where participant tracking is not necessary. However, I provide pseudonyms for six students (Cecilia, Stella, Jewel, Zuri, Martin, and Stephanie) during theme four where participant tracking was possible and necessary. Finally, I use bold font in student quotes as a way to bring the reader's attention to significant phrases, instances of identity presentation or the act of internalization, and the display of emotions.

During data analysis, I examined the 133 discussion forums from five online high school social studies courses' to understand in what ways students' language-in-use symbolized their internalized civic character in relation to their community. This chapter is structured according to four major themes that emerged from the data: (1) Students as proud protectors of the greater

good, (2) students as reality analysts, (3) external manifestations of civic identity, and (4) discussion forums as a playground for civic identity development. Each theme and finding will be explained in detail throughout this chapter but a brief version of the findings as they connect to the research questions are shown in the table below. In order to make the results more accessible and readable, the findings are presented in narrative form that summarizes and reports the most noteworthy aspects of student comments rather than a large number of student comments themselves. However, appendix F has complete discussion thread examples representing each theme and sub-theme that are not in a narrative format. The only changes made to the discussion thread examples in appendix F was the omission of the students' names for the purpose of maintaining participant anonymity. Table 7 below provides a brief summary of the findings or major themes as they relate to the research questions.

**Table 7: Summary of the Findings with the Research Questions**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Findings</b>
<p>1. What does students' language-in-use in the discussion forums of five online high school social studies courses reveal about the construction and/or portrayal of their civic identities?</p>	<p>a. <u>Utilitarian</u>: Students' language-in-use reveals the notion that students are proud protectors of civil rights and social justice.</p> <p>b. <u>Reality analysts</u>: Students tend to critique societal norms and are moral agents yet tough critics of society and the government simultaneously.</p> <p>c. <u>Prospective good citizens</u>: Students display similar perceptions of effective 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship and their civic identities are at different developmental stages. Students are directly or indirectly civically engaged or display concrete plans for their future civic engagement.</p>

**Table 7 (Continued)**

<p>2. How do the interactions of virtual students that transpire within the discussion forums affect the formation and portrayal of their civic identities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Student postings in the discussion forums reveal civic identities clashing as well as the construction of friendships, critical thinking skills development, and changes in student perspectives.</li></ul>
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**Theme 1: Proud Protectors of the Greater Good**

The data collected from the discussion forums reveal students’ desire to speak out against social injustices, the importance of protecting civil rights in a democracy, an appreciation for diversity, an ethic of care for the less fortunate, and the value in being an upstander. An upstander refers to individuals who are “willing to stand up and take action in defense of others” and to protect them from injustices (Holocaust Memorial Resource & Education Center of Florida., 2014, para. 2). The discussion forums each week served as a safe place for students to express their opinions, critique reality, and construct their civic voices. This opinionated and candid critique of reality exposes an important characteristic of their civic identities: the importance of feeling free to express perspectives on social issues as a method of protecting the greater good. From the standpoint of a researcher, I was surprised to see how aware these students are about the status of our world, how they are such progressive thinkers, and how they desire a world based on equality, freedom, and social justice. These virtual high school students desire change for the greater good of our country and the world and they are proud to expose instances from the past and present that do not cater to this utilitarian notion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, utilitarian refers to the school of philosophy advocated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill which generally holds the view that the morally right action is the action that produces the most good (Driver, 2009).

### *Appreciating Diversity and Condemning Discrimination*

During an open discussion about the cultural diversity of the United States in the World Geography course, students express excitement and an appreciation for the assortment of ethnicities present in the U.S (see appendix F, exhibit F.1). Student A, who initiates the discussion, points out several benefits of diversity by highlighting the fact that “The US is very diverse! Some examples of its diversity would be the different types of restaurants, the food in grocery stores (ethnic food isle), the people you see in the streets who all look different, the different churches and places of worship as well as religion, and the different clothes people wear.” Student A also exposes some of the problems that have been associated with diversity throughout history by stating, “People sometimes discriminate against others because they're different and cause hate crimes. A common problem is the stereotypes people have against those who are Latino or Hispanic.” Finally, Student A points out that Hispanics are typically labeled as Mexicans and fit a specific stereotype, like eating tacos on a daily basis.

Student B replies with a supporting statement saying that she loves being a part of two cultures as she is American and Mexican/Christian and Catholic. In Florida, there is a diversity of ethnicities and religions so students may encounter identity confusion with a particular culture at home and a dissimilar culture at school or in the workplace. However, this discussion thread example shows that students see themselves with multiple American identities that do not have one definition or appearance. Student C continues the conversation by revealing contemporary stereotypes for the Hispanic community by explaining that many Americans label all Hispanics as Mexicans. Student C is not Hispanic but does not appreciate rude comments about this Hispanic culture and finds that many people act with ignorance toward those of different nationalities.

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT C

**It's really ironic that you mentioned most people think if your Hispanic your automatically Mexican,** Because we just got a new manager as my work and my friend who works with me is Hispanic and looks it. So the new manager automatically started talking to her in Spanish (more like Spanglish) and asked her how long she's been in America for... she was born in Florida and doesn't even speak Spanish. And she's not Mexican. **Very offensive and rude of him to stereotype,** needless to say nobody really likes him much -\_-

Student B then misinterprets the conversation slightly and is frightened that she may have offended someone when referring to her family members as Mexican even though they are, in fact, Mexican. Student B says “Oh, I hope I haven't offended anybody because I've said 'Mexican' quite a few times, but the part of my family is actually from Mexico, so that's the only reason I've said it. But, I can totally understand it being ignorant”. However, Student A and the teacher reply to Student B’s post by saying that the comments were not rude and to not worry about it. The interaction in this discussion thread and other threads throughout the school year show that students are careful with their words and try to not to offend anyone, are empathetic with those of diverse nationalities, and speak out against stereotypes and bigotry. In general, the interactions that take place are respectful, mature, and cooperative. I will discuss the respectful and mature nature of discussion forums in a future segment.

Reflecting on the trends from the 133 discussion forums analyzed in this study, it appears as if these students embrace multiple and complex identity structures. Students find stereotypes, specific cultural molds, uniformity and assimilation as practices of the past, and the more

complex or varied one's identity is, the more unique the individual may appear to their peer group. For example, during the same discussion topic but in a different forum, the students have a similar conversation as in the previous discussion thread example. Student A and her classmates celebrate complex American identities and diversity.

3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

**Just walk through your local grocery store. You will see varieties** of different foods, different items, most importantly, different kinds of people. **So many cultures have been brought before us today, it's a common thing to see.** My family celebrates the regular holidays known to us. (Christmas, Thanksgiving, etc.) **We also get to be apart of the Mexican holidays, because it so happens that part of our family is from Mexico.** So, we celebrates quinceañeras on their side. There have been problems with diversity, such as slavery, **but we've found ways to overcome it.**

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT B

**You made a good point about the different foods** in the grocery stores. There is even a whole isle just for ethnic foods.

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

**Yeah, it's amazing when you realize diversity really is every where.** Oh, and the ethnic food aisle just happens to be one of my favorite aisles.

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT B

**Even though my parents are Americans they both grew up in Panama** and it is cool to go down the ethnic food isle and find things that you can find in Panama.

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT C

**Aw you are Hispanic like me yay hahaha** and oh my gosh I love the ethnic food isle, that's where I sometimes get my Japanese candy (Pocky Sticks)

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

**Well, sort of, lol.** My birthdad's wife is mexican, and they had a child, which is my half brother. So, he's half-mexican. (I was adopted by my aunt and uncle when I was seven. But I still keep in contact with my birth parents. My birth dad is my mom's brother, so either way, we would have been related. If that made any sense.. **I obviously have a complicated family tree, haha.) But yeah, we got to take on some of their traditions. It's really great!** Oh, and I'll have to try Pocky Sticks sometime soon.

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT C

**Oh okay haha I always get confused with family trees and such but either way you are still Hispanic** And yes you should, Pocky Sticks are delicious and have some different flavors. Now I feel like I'm advertising lol

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT D

**Good analogy** about the grocery store foods!

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

Thanks!

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT F

**Im Puerto Rican** and we celebrate quinceaneras on my dads side too, your literally the only other person I know that does too! **I have a lot of Hispanic friends but all their culture has pretty much been 'americanized' so that's pretty cool!**

Re: 3.4 Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

**That's awesome that you celebrate them, too!** I haven't been to one yet because most of the family is younger than 15, **but I'm super excited to see it happen.** I also have a friend who is having one this coming year, can't wait!

These students simply embrace diversity in their everyday lives and the discussion forums. As a result, students use the discussion as a catalyst to share their personal stories, feel empowered by their unique at home practices, and bond with one another. Also noteworthy is the fact that a very concrete space – the ethnic food aisle – provided part of the motivation for the discussion. Perhaps it is because it is an experience they have in common, or it may be a safe way to start and join a potentially volatile conversation. In any case, it certainly provoked a lot of conversation.

During a discussion about Muckrakers in the United States History course, a student acted as a modern day Muckraker and broadcasted issues surrounding immigration and debunked the stereotypes about Hispanic culture. Student A posts a lengthy reaction to the discussion topic



by explaining how our history is based upon immigration and diversity but the American populace has taken a step backwards because we currently perceive immigration and diversity in a negative light. She also denounces Hispanic culture stereotypes and defends the American dream and their honor with several examples.

America was created by immigrants who came to the "New world" in hopes of a better life, for them self's and their families. Everyday more and more immigrants come to United States of America hoping for the same thing. **Well it seems that Hispanics are usually the ones that come in a persons mind**, but to be more specific Mexicans are the most know immigrants. This is probably because they are next door to us. Many states like Arizona passed bills saying that if you are not a US citizen you should be deported back to where you from. **Yes, they broke the law** by coming to the United States illegally, **but many are saying that "The Mexicans/Immigrants" are taking the American jobs**, what exactly are these immigrants doing? Well, they work long hours in the hot sun picking up the fruits, and vegetables we love, as they get older their backs start to hurt more and more. They don't just work in the hot fields, but they also work in our favorite restaurants washing dishes, **and doing all the heavy work a average "American" can't do**. They are everywhere, doing the hard work for cheap pay, while they put their jobs before their health. **They didn't come to the United states to take any ones job, they came here because they are willing to do anything to get money because their Country does not give them what America gives them. I don't know about you but i would not like to** work in a field, washing dishes, and carrying heavy stuff that will damage my back. But if we don't do these jobs, who will? The immigrants.

Student A's words are powerful in the excerpt above as she pinpoints several examples about stereotyping Mexicans and using them as a target to blame for high unemployment rates. Student A is articulating her opinion but at the same time building a civic voice that honors and supports the Hispanic community. Many Hispanics reside in this geographic area of Florida and thus many students come from a Hispanic background. Students who initiate discussions that support Hispanic rights and wish to see less discrimination tend to be Hispanic, but their non-Hispanic classmates still agree and support the points brought forth in the discussions. Student A concludes her discussion post by inserting comments about American values: tolerance, appreciation for diversity, cooperation, integrity, and strong work ethic.

**Remember that in order to become something big today you need to** go to school, and get a career, something the immigrants can't do. These people are helping America, not destroying it. We are all the same, yes we have different skin color, different ethnicity, some may be richer than others, but at the end of the day **we are all human beings** at the end, and immigrants look the same in the inside as we do, they are not aliens.

Student B agrees with Student A and writes that immigrants are not stealing jobs from Americans because they are fulfilling voids in the workforce by accepting jobs that a typical native-born American would not desire. Student B proudly says that Americans just need a scapegoat for problems but she also wants to expose how wrong and destructive this blaming mentality is for most Americans. Student B then defends immigrants' dreams to come to America for a better life and Student C agrees with his classmates about immigrants fulfilling voids in the workplace and denounces the ignorant argument that immigrants are stealing jobs

from Americans. The conversation concludes with Student A thanking her classmates for a great discussion; the use of exclamation marks and happy face emoticons gives the impression that she feels that her civic voice and opinions were respected and heard.

This discussion thread example and others throughout the year show that students have a passion for critiquing reality and desire an understanding of the complexities of history. Student A above used the discussion forum as a site for building her civic voice around social issues that she is concerned with. The support provided by her non-Hispanic classmates (whether she knew their ethnicities or not) gave her the confidence to continue speaking her mind. This discussion appeared to be successful with the cooperation and respect exhibited by the students, the construction of Student A's civic voice, the exchange of values, and the exposure and critique of social issues. Unfortunately, the students do not provide specific evidence to support their claims. The reason I wrote the word "unfortunately" is because many of the discussion forums analyzed in this study reveal a lack of evidence based on suitable resources and research. At many points, it appears that students make claims based on emotion or faulty information. The next example discussion thread shows an argument based on emotion and incorrect knowledge.

Students in the United States History course discussed McCarthyism during week seven of semester two and had several options for tackling the topic (e.g. McCarthyism and its implications or a critique of McCarthyism in general). One student chose to compare McCarthyism with current immigration issues in the U.S. This student begins the discussion by saying that Americans are naïve to current events about the Hispanic culture, especially the mistreatment of Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. Student A uses the discussion to expose her view of the truth behind the unfair treatment of this community by saying:

**They are trying to lock up** each and every one of them, **torture them** in jail, and then deport them back to their country. **This is tearing families apart**, many people are put in jail because they do not carry their papers around, or left them at home, they are put in jail until they further notice.

Student A finds that most Americans are not aware of the mistreatment of immigrants because she thinks that Americans are afraid of immigrants like they were of communists during the Cold War era. According to Student A, “This reminds me of McCarthyism because Senators, governors, mayors, and etc. are discriminating immigrants. Not all immigrants are bad people, they came to America for the same reason pilgrims came here hundreds of years ago, for a better life.”

Student B is outraged and thinks that most immigrants are much more successful than many native-born Americans and should not be deported or mistreated. He thinks that deporting, jailing, or bothering immigrants that are hard-working and not causing problems is unproductive and damaging for our country. Student B sees value and benefits of having an assiduous workforce and using our tax dollars for other endeavors. Student A’s subsequent comments reveal that she feels her points are respected and she continues to build her civic voice with added comments about this topic. For example, she says “Yes exactly! They just came here to work and feed their families. We shouldn't treat them like animals if they aren't doing anyone any harm.” Student C agrees with the points made in the discussion thread but does not explain why.

As I read the discussion, I was curious about what the students think about illegal and legal immigration procedures and consequences. I praised the participation in the discussion but

also wanted to see if there is a loophole in students' values and opinions on this topic by asking the question below: "Should illegal immigrants (if they are discovered to be so by authorities) have to go through a longer citizenship process than immigrants that enter legally?"

However, the students hold strong to their beliefs of equal treatment, regardless of citizenship status, and clarify that America was founded by immigrants. Thus, the data presented above show that students are confused about how our history operated in a dissimilar fashion from our current environment. Americans continue to celebrate our past based on immigration but a contemporary stance seems to be that current immigration is viewed negatively and causes cognitive dissonance for many students. The students, however, see the mistreatment of hard-working immigrants and desire change in the future in terms of more humane immigration policies and immigrant civil rights.

These brief discussion thread examples represent many other similar discussions that reveal a notion of an appreciation for diversity and denunciation of stereotyping and mistreatment of various groups within the U.S. These virtual high school students appear to have a vision for the future of America that is free of stereotypes and that includes and encourages cooperation among diverse groups, promotes respect for one another, and grants freedom to live the 'American dream'. The pattern of supporting diversity and condemning discrimination appears to be significant piece of their civic identities because a large number of the students frequently mold their discussions around this notion.

### ***Defenders of Civil Rights and Autonomy***

The protection of civil rights is a major focus for high school students when we discuss various topics across disciplines throughout the year. Students want to protect their civil rights and autonomy to prevent the government from controlling citizens and dictating how we, as

Americans, choose to live our lives. These students are social creatures and believe that they need these rights so they can freely express themselves. They also desire the protection of civil rights for an array of reasons as they apply specific rights to specific instances, but the reoccurring theme of having definite rights is to prevent tyrannical control. For example, during a Bill of Rights discussion in American Government, I asked (1) what right students thought was the most important and if anything should change, (2) if our virtual school needed a Bill of Rights, and (3) if treatment of the students should be different among grade levels. Student A explains that she is satisfied with the Bill of Rights and how our virtual school operates but would like to ensure that no one gets away with online bullying. She also believes that the most important right is the freedom of speech but it takes her classmate to extract the reason why.

Student B asks Student A why she thinks our lives would be different without the first amendment Student A explains that she would not be able to express herself in an assortment of ways like the ability to critique the government, present her opinion to her classmates and friends, practice her religion, and so on. The other students agree with student A's points and describe how important it is to express themselves because it is in their nature to "speak their minds" and to "feel heard". For example, Student C said, "I also agree that if we did not have guaranteed rights, this country would be in more of a mess than it already is. I also, would include the no online bullying if we had a bill of rights for our virtual school."

In this discussion, Student A condemns online bullying because bullying is the act of controlling someone else through a variety of nefarious means (in this case, online). This online bullying concern is not a surprise because the majority of these students' social interactions take place online. However, the reoccurring pattern with these students is that they do not like the idea of another person taking control their freedom and their right to live a happy life. This data

set and other data sets indicate that these students have the urge and need to express their opinions, communicate freely and candidly with others, and be free of control from anything that suffocates civil rights or the pursuit of happiness.

In another example from a World Geography discussion where students presented their research projects on an issue in the Middle East, a student shares a Prezi presentation about women's rights. This student uses women's rights violations in the Middle East as a catalyst for discussing these violations that occur all throughout the world and even in our own backyard (See appendix F, exhibit F.2). This student has a desire to see change occur for women all over the world and even in countries that present the image of an egalitarian populace but show otherwise with their actions. According to student A, "Women all over the world are receiving a lower paycheck for the same job a man does. I even read an article about how many women take less breaks than men and still earn less." Student A's slideshow and this discussion post contain evidence that these unfair practices actually occur and she utilizes the discussion forum as a venue to uncover the social injustices against women worldwide to her classmates.

Support is shown by her classmates by praising her effort on the presentation and by furthering the discussion with comments that condemn discrimination against women. Student B in this example is a male and he proudly proclaims that women should receive the same pay as men, which exposes again--how progressive these high school students present themselves to be. Student A responds to Student B,

**I wonder how they even get to the thought, "Oh, just pay her a little less, it'll be fine."? Gender discrimination and selfishness is the beginning of this.** With jobs being harder to find today, I've seen less women be able to get in at all. **Now, I don't know if this is for the same reason...But, it might just be.**

Student C is astounded about this issue that takes place in our nation and others nations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and questions why it would make any sense for someone to be judged according to their looks or body composition. Student A brings the discussion to a close by expressing her disgust for the glass ceiling and her desires to see this cultural norm be changed in the near future.

Reflecting on the discussion threads after-the-fact shows me that these students find civil rights suffocation, discrimination, and stereotyping as methods of preventing real social progress. Making assumptions about individuals prevent the workforce from being at its most productive level because there are many qualified applicants who are denied positions over other “normally” qualified candidates that may not work as hard. Through the use of discussions about civil rights and social “norms,” students are able to understand the ills of these norms and thus redefine how society should operate.

Following the World War I unit in the World History course was the World in Crisis 1919-1939 unit and the discussion for that week was entitled “Current Uncertainties around the Globe”. The students were instructed to find a current event that elicited an uncertainty and relate the event back to the lesson. In this particular discussion, Student A chose to focus on the topic of gay marriage. This student believes that gays should be able to marry and no one should judge them but God. This student does not agree with gay marriage but supports everyone’s right to be happy and have equal rights. The gay rights issue is then compared to women’s rights of the World War I and post war era.

This article about the Supreme Court decision **has a lot of similarities to what occurred** in World War I with women’s rights. **Back then women had no rights** they weren’t



allowed to vote, or work. They were supposed to stay home and have children and care for their husband and houses. **They fought for their rights by going on strike and the same thing is happening today. Gay people want to have the same right** has straight people meaning they want to have a family and get married to the person they love.

This student also believes that with time, Americans will progress to become more accepting and that gays will have full rights like everyone else. Her final opinion in this post explains that this current generation cannot imagine a life like their parents or grandparents' generation and that future generations will not understand our society in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that is currently unaccepting of people from 'all walks of life'.

Student A's classmates agree and Student B explains that, "People shouldn't judge people just because they're choosing to be gay or act a different way than other people, it is up to them what they want to be. And like you said leave the decision up to God!" The data from this discussion thread shows that these students express support for equality, freedoms, and human rights (even if they do not agree with them). These students do not desire an American populace or system of government that controls or suffocates anyone's civil rights. The utilitarian nature of these students is very apparent throughout the 133 discussion forums, and they believe that our ability to achieve a more equitable society is dependent upon a current and future generation of upstanders.

### *Upstanders*

During the South Asia unit of World Geography, students were instructed to find and discuss a current event in South Asia that illustrates something about the current status of the region. One student found an article about a young Pakistani schoolgirl who was protesting the

right for girls to get an education and was later shot in the head by the Taliban. The purpose of Student A sharing this story was to commend Malala Yousafzai for her bravery and courage to stand up for the cause that she was passionate about. Student A writes:

Malala Yousafzai attends her first day at Edgbaston Highschool in Birmingham. Malala was the **Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot in the head by the Taliban after campaigning for girls' rights to education**. She has been recovering at the Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth's hospital. She is so happy to be on her feet, going back to school, learning. **I am so thankful that she is alive! I think she was very brave to stand up for girls' education where she lives. She took a stand to fight for what she believes in.** It is truly amazing.

Student B gives the impression that she is inspired by Malala's heroic act but feels that there is a lack of upstanders in the world and that we need future generations of upstanders, not just bystanders. Student C explains, "I really hope other women step up to make a difference, as well. I would love to see women's rights changed for the better in Pakistan." Student D, who is a male says, "It's good to hear that someone is fighting for women's rights in Pakistan." Patterns of hopefulness for the future will be discussed in later segments but these students' desire for social change and the eradication of social injustices cannot occur without upstanders and those who support upstanders.

The next example discussion thread about upstanders occurred in American Government and the discussion topic was about the characteristics of good citizens (See appendix F, exhibit F.3). Student A describes a good citizen as being self-less, caring, and active with charities and community events. A good citizen does not have to do anything major but does something that

they are passionate about, even if it is minor. Student A stresses that every little thing that citizens do adds up and has a domino effect on our nation and democracy. The story of a little girl who was throwing starfish back into the ocean one-by-one was used as an analogy to represent this upstander mentality and behavior. The little girl from the story as described below (who was throwing each starfish back into the ocean one-by-one) symbolizes those brave and caring individuals who make a difference to one person or one community as the driving force for change and a better tomorrow.

**I liked the story** from one of the links Ms. McBride posted **about a little girl who started throwing starfish back in the water after they washed up on the beach.** It was right after a storm had come past so the whole beach was covered and a man came up to the girl and **told her that she can't make a difference** the whole beach is full of washed up starfish and **instead of giving up right there after a negative comment,** she picked up a starfish and threw him back in the water saying **"I made a difference to that one"** after that the man started throwing them back and more and more people helped throwing them back and all of the starfish were put back in the water!! **I just thought it was a cute story** about this little girl trying to save this animal. **She really did care and didn't let anyone convince her to stop!**

Student B and C agree with Student A's viewpoints and explain that a good citizen does not need to make an enormous difference; they just need to make a difference and do what they think is right. For example, Student B says, "I'm glad someone was growing her up to be strong-minded, and caring. It was really precious how she said, "I made a difference to that one!" She made a difference to the man, and it had an amazing domino effect." The students support the

notion that a good citizen does not need to listen to what other people say and tries to attempt goals that may seem unreasonable or a waste of time to others. The discussion concludes with student C and A discussing how good citizens behave and they all seem to agree that treating others respectfully is another important characteristic of a good citizen. For example, Student C says, "I agree with your description of a good citizen, it's simply put the old "do unto others, as you would have them do unto you". The golden rule is exactly what a good citizen does and is." Student A responds by saying, "Yea, that really is the golden rule. But sometimes you're just not going to be treated the way you want to, but you shouldn't give up on being nice and a good citizen but just let it go."

These example discussion threads surrounding the notion of an upstander are a noteworthy part to students' civic identities because this upstander attitude and way of being is the first step in implementing changes in American culture. The students appear to believe that it only takes one voice or one person to stand up for what is right and the domino effect could result in significant change. However, knowing what is right and doing what is right are two different things. Students appear as if they know the difference between right and wrong, they exhibit solid moral complexes (as highlighted in an upcoming section), and desire a world free of injustices.

### ***A Heart for the Needy, Children, and Animals***

I will describe students' civic engagement experiences in a forthcoming section but I want to spend time highlighting a recurring pattern in the students' language about compassion for the needy, children, and animals. There were several students that were concerned with environmental issues throughout the year but the overwhelming majority of students were typically focused on helping the needy, children, and animals. The concern and support for

education was another reoccurring pattern but it was usually woven into their other discussions by emphasizing the importance of education for social advancement and for the stability and prosperity of our democracy.

During a discussion forum in World Geography that focused on problems in students' local communities along with their connections to their communities, a student discloses her religious connection to her community and future volunteer desires (See appendix F, exhibit F.4). Student A describes her current connection to the community through her missionary work, "Well right now, I go door to door trying to help people understand their Bible better." She also explains that she stays informed about the world and her community via the radio and newspaper; she does not mention any web-related sources. Student A then downplays the importance of an educated citizenry by saying, "I think our country would be the same whether or not our leaders were educated- it's not like they have full power over anything." However, she quickly changes her outlook after Student B (and eventually Students C and F) stresses the dangers of an uneducated populace.

Student A is very involved in her community through her missionary work but she shows a desire to be more involved by volunteering at animal shelters: "I wouldn't mind helping at an animal shelter or anything working with sick kids or even kids with disabilities. As of right now, I just babysit for my family while they work to support our family and like I said before just helping other people to try and understand their Bible better." Students B and C express an interest in volunteering at animal shelters as well. In fact, Student C explains that a friend of his family runs a pit-bull shelter in Hawaii.

Interestingly enough, Student A wants to help animals because they do not "have a voice." What does she mean by this statement? It appears as if Student A and other students

value free speech or freedom of expression, freedom from oppressive control, and the desire to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate. The less fortunate can be, in this instance, animals, children, or those at an economic disadvantage that lack resources or the capability to achieve the ‘good life’ without the assistance of others. The conversation continues with Student A and D debunking pit-bull myths by focusing on oppressive owners that force these dogs to become vicious. For instance, student D states “Every dog depends on its owner. Any dog could become vicious.”

Toward the end of the conversation Student A also mentions the desire to help sick or disabled children at the local hospital in order to make a difference in children’s lives that doctors and nurses may not fulfill. According to Student A, “I’d love to help some kids, even if it’s just going to the hospital and playing some games with or making them laugh or making them feel good- I think that is just as important as getting the proper treatment!” It is unknown if Student A will volunteer at a hospital or animal shelter with her busy missionary and virtual school schedule but the desire to help the less fortunate seems to be another important element in her and other students’ civic identity.

The discussion comes to a close with Student C and F concentrating on Student A’s initial comment about the insignificance of an educated citizenry. Student C mentions that our nation depends on informed decision-makers because any decision made by our leaders will affect the lives of a large number of citizens (negatively or positively). Student F explains that citizens depend on their leaders to make proper decisions which are based on information and knowledge. These students’ civic identities suffer partial identity confusion in terms of the role of the government because they ideally want a “laissez-faire” relationship with the government

when referring to civil rights and freewill but simultaneously desire direct government intervention when (social) problems are at the center of attention.

In the American Government course, students imagined they were Florida legislators and had to choose problems to solve in their districts. In this discussion example, Student A focuses on welfare and education to assist those who are less fortunate. Student A expounds on the importance of education as the stepping stone to an efficacious future and the cure for social disproportion, or better yet, the cure for all social issues. Student A also points out that:

**The reason I chose these two selections** was because welfare does so much for people, it helps them so much. People can have food and insurance with welfare. **I think it's really important because** currently it's hard to get a job especially when you have kids, which is most of the reason why people have welfare in the first place. **The reason that I chose public education was because it gets you so far in life** if you work at it. Education in general gets your mind off of stress and is just needed. It gets you to college, it gets you a job, it gets you to not be on welfare in the first place. Public education has so many perks. I think the other options were just as important as these ones, **I just think these two things have a lot to do with the result of the other ones.** If that makes sense! **Hahaha!**

Quite possibly this student sees the benefits of welfare because she comes from a home that depends on it. Student A is able to analyze the pros and cons of welfare through her personal observations and has drawn the conclusion that welfare is an important cushion for those in a situation requiring temporary assistance. Ultimately, Student A deems that an education and strong work ethic is the cure for social inequality but she wants to voice her

opinion on the importance of everyone having equal access to an education and temporary assistance while chasing their dreams. These students think that the ability to achieve one's dreams or reach their highest potential is possible only if resources are equitable and obtainable to all.

During a discussion in World Geography, students shared their Southeast Asia vacation plans and one student stated that she would love to travel to Cambodia and see the French colonial architecture and donate money to Camkids, a Cambodian charity for children. This student explains that Cambodia is a poor country and there is a surfeit of orphans that need to be cared for. Student A seems emotionally connected to children and yearns to help this charity's cause as she states, "I love children, seeing their smiles. I would hate for any child to go through hard circumstances, and I want to be there for them and fix it. If I could at least help one child, I would love it." While this study cannot determine whether or not Student A will follow through with her plans to help the Cambodian children, the data do show that these students present themselves as caring and as having compassion for children and the less fortunate.

Student B exhibits high emotion levels when discussing disadvantaged children. For instance, "I always feel so bad when someone loses 1 parent, but these children lost everything and half the time they don't know how to take care of themselves because they are so young." Student B believes that the world would be a better place if individuals with resources could donate some of their time or money to help children in need. Student A agrees with Student B's ideas and provides detailed examples for achieving this goal, "It really would be amazing if everyone were to at least take care of one child, whether it be sending some money or food every few weeks, or adopting. Then, these children could grow up knowing that someone loves them." Student C jumps into the conversation and shows her support and willingness to assist because



children who are happy and smiling give her a sense of purpose and a goal to aspire toward.

The data provided in this example discussion thread indicates that these students find value in the structure of a loving family, the importance of children's needs being met, and the significance of global teamwork to help others in need. They find it almost unfathomable that people do not feel the duty to help out children in need and accept starving and orphaned children as a norm that cannot be changed.

### ***Theme One Summary***

The students' language-in-use from the 133 discussion threads analyzed in this study revealed a utilitarian civic identity and social justice mentality. The students' concerns over the protection of civil rights, needs of the less fortunate, the condemnation of discrimination, and a call for more upstanders in society indicate a protector of the greater good element within their civic identity. These students also value freedom of expression and are eager to expose immoral acts that occurred in the past and continue to occur in present times in order to seek solutions for a better tomorrow. A distinct characteristic of an effective citizen, according to NCSS (2013), is one who "embraces core democratic values and strive to live by them" (para 5). The discussion threads highlighted in this first theme confirmed the important effective citizen characteristics for many of these students which may represent elements within their civic identities. It is unclear whether or not the students fully believe and support their arguments from the discussions in their daily lives or if they make certain claims to please the teacher and readers of the forums. These students may also assert politically correct statements in the forums because they think they will receive a better grade or they do not want to encounter conflict. Nevertheless, the students' arguments within the discussion forums show their desire to redefine American democracy and society but uphold democratic values.

Many students did, however, neglect to provide evidence alongside their arguments which showed claims based on emotion and incomplete or improper knowledge. Moreover, the solutions or decisions engendered in the discussion forums lacked an acknowledgement of the complexities of various social issues. At times, I observed negative societal and governmental perspectives being constructed when students did not sufficiently understand a discussion topic and as a result, empowerment feelings subsided. Two major components of being an effective citizen or having an achieved civic identity are an expansive historical and political knowledge and skills base along with a solid moral compass. Many of these virtual students show a strong moral compass but lack knowledge on various discussion topics. This is no surprise that students, ages 14-18, are still cognitively growing and slowly learning the complexities of societal and political conditions.

In the next segment, I describe the second theme that represents another feature of students' civic identities: reality analysts.

### **Theme Two: Reality Analysts**

Another major element of students' civic identities is their impulse to critique society and the government. This desire to continually question norms and reality in general are recurring themes in the discussion threads analyzed in this study. Their reality analyst identities showed a passion for deconstructing and speaking out against what they consider to be unjust societal norms and seeking change for the greater good while developing their personal moral characters. A complicating factor in the formation of their reality analyst identity is their continuing habit of making assumptions about societal norms based upon their relatively limited experience or their immediate surroundings.

### ***Strong Critics of the Government***

Students tend to find government decisions and operations in conflict with their values and philosophies of democratic operations. In the United States History course, students discussed their opinions of the Cold War era and the majority of the students overwhelmingly expressed anti-war sentiments. In this example, Student A perceives the government as corrupt and bellicose even though most Americans desire peace:

**You know I always wondered why America always felt the need to be in wars, like the Vietnam war. America did not have enough reasons to send our troops to an unknown territory, and have hundreds and thousands of them killed, sick (mentally and physically), and injured. Yeah you shouldn't quit, but if can't find the light at the end of the tunnel you should consider turning back if it includes lives on the line. America is to me the strongest countries in the world, we have always been the bigger man by helping poor countries, but American governments feel like they always have to win (wars), but they have to face that they can't always win, and they have to learn to lose.**

Student B agrees with Student A's viewpoints and it appears as if these students wish violence and wars did not exist at all. Moreover, Student A's comment that the "U.S. needs to learn to lose" is interesting because it appears as if she thinks the U.S. bullies other countries and always instigates wars. These students report being patriotic and love being American; however, they do not understand why the government always wants to be involved in foreign affairs. Since these students do not agree with war and the government is continually involved in conflicts abroad, they lose trust and faith in the government for operating in a way that is contrary to what they believe citizens desire.

During a United States History course discussion where students compared and contrasted 1960s society with our current lives, Student A explains how the 1960s was a toxic era due to the status of the economy and the Vietnam War but finds our nation to have only marginally improved since that time. Student A critiques the government's inability to keep our economy stable and is displeased with the incessant wasteful spending abroad for wars and interventions. Student A says:

Many Americans have jobs and are living within their means and contributing to the economy but there are **still allot of people out of work or in a ton of debt**. Gas prices are high and the overall price for goods like milk is high too. **America is fighting other countries battles and wasting money** "rebuilding" them.

Student B then points out that the government seems to take care of other countries even though the U.S. is full of social issues that must to be solved first. It appears from the data in this and other discussions that students have an immediacy mentality where their focus rests on their current surroundings or priorities from their spheres of influence. For example, Student B thinks the government should focus on problems in America and solve them first before the government takes action on any global issues.

In other discussions, the immediacy mentality is apparent when students express the notion that solving problems in their local community is of more of a concern than broader social issues plaguing the entire United States. Some students have a desire to find solutions to social issues abroad but may feel overwhelmed with the complexity and distance of these problems from their everyday lives. The complexity and distance of the problems may cause them to tackle problems that are closer in proximity and less convoluted. There are students, like Student

C in the discussion example below, that do not base their arguments on this immediacy mentality and judge the severity of issues, regardless of geographical boundaries, as the basis for responsiveness. Thus, with a convincing argument and compelling evidence by other students, the immediacy mentality expressed by some may soften (as shown below).

Re: Week 8 by STUDENT B

**I'm glad you see it that way**, that the **government is taking care of other countries when they should focus first on our country, it's a shame** that they are feeding other countries when they have a lot of starving mouths here..

Re: Week 8 by S STUDENT C

**We're spoiled compared to** those countries though.

There are **countries that need it more than we do here.**

Re: Week 8 by STUDENT B

**I guess you're right**, the reason why people here are homeless and such is because people don't try hard enough to get a job, and they let their credit cards max out :/

Re: Week 8 by STUDENT C

Exactly.

Re: Week 8 by STUDENT A

When I say America's wasting money rebuilding countries I'm talking about places like Iraq.

**Here are a couple news articles talking about how much was wasted and how many civilian lives were lost.**

<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/03/06/too-much-taxpayer-money-was-spent-in-iraq-for-too-few-results-report-finds/>

<http://macedoniaonline.eu/content/view/22922/61/>

**I'm all for helping other countries with hunger, corrupt governments, and all that but I don't think America should invade a country to help.**

Re: Week 8 by STUDENT B

**I guess you're right.**

Re: Week 8 by STUDENT C

**I get you now.** Thank you for clarifying. Great research and post.

At the end of the discussion, Students D and E post thought-provoking prompts when they explain that debt prevents societal progress. Student D says, "I agree in today's time we are at a pause due to the debt the people suffer from." Student E follows with this statement, "I agree. We can't progress very far because of all of this debt we have piled up over the years." It is unfortunate that the discussion came to a close and we did not have time to continue the conversation following Students' D and E comments because it could have ushered in some rich

opinions by students (and additional rich data). A discussion in the virtual classroom typically comes to a close at the due date and the students begin the next weekly discussion. In some ways, it is similar to a discussion in a face-to-face classroom that may be cut short due to the changing of the classes and a relentless bell schedule.

This topic of discussion from the example above is one of the root causes of frustration for students because they cannot understand why the U.S. military budget is one of the highest expenditures even though the federal deficit is high and education is underfunded. Moreover, students are not able to recognize any benefits of war and thus exhibit low levels of trust and confidence in the U.S. government for choosing to engage in non-defensive wars abroad.

On the other hand, this decline in confidence and trust in the government appears to stem from a lack of both information and government disclosure about intentions abroad. During a discussion about public opinion and war from a World War II unit in the World History course, Student A discusses the fact that she supports soldiers but not the act of war (See appendix F, exhibit F.5). However, if a situation like World War II occurred, she feels that going to war would be necessary to keep Americans safe on the home front. The student in the discussion thread articulates her need to be privy to some information behind the United States involvement in foreign affairs but does not need to have every detail. This student and others in this discussion thread partially believe that too much information could be dangerous to the stability of our nation as certain groups may not be able to handle it. For example, Student A states, “I think they worry that telling us too much would bring us to even more chaos. It is always better to have some information than none. Too much information, however can cause trouble depending on the group of people.”

This discussion example sends another message as voiced by the students about their desire and need to understand the complexity of history and current global affairs. It may even be seen as a call for less of a partisan version of historical events and more in-depth explanations of these events. Such coverage would appear to be beneficial to the civic identity and cognitive development of these students and would conform to their own expressed desires about the amount of information they want. They do not need to know every detail about wars, genocides, and other historical atrocities, but they do need to understand enough about these concepts to learn about the mistakes of the past and to have sufficient background information to recognize the causes and effects of current events. Clearly, some of the discussion threads presented in this dissertation thus far reveals a lack of knowledge or a shallow comprehension of the complexity of history and historical events. Students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have endless information at their fingertips but seem more skilled in finding information than they are at putting it together into coherent and consistent positions.

During a discussion early in the semester in the American Government course, students analyzed causes and effects of revolutions (from the past and present). Student A believes that a revolution is not going to take place in America anytime soon because it would be futile; the “army is too strong and the government is not be choice anymore.” Student A believes that other countries that are experiencing social difficulties will revolt because it is the only way that major change can occur. This data reveals this student’s a lack of knowledge of how our government operates which leads to a dearth of trust, confidence, and desire to be involved in democratic practices in the future.

Student B chimes in with a comment opposing Student A’s, “I disagree with you, all you have to do is vote on Election Day”. This shows me that Student B is equipped with some



knowledge of the structure of the government and reveals his faith in the current operations and future of our democracy. Student A responds to his comment by explaining that our votes do not count on Election Day because the government chooses who will be the future leaders. Students C and D find student A's arguments convincing and their posts contain language that elicit similar notions: the government is corrupt, the people do not hold the power, and the people must rise up soon and fix this venality before it is too late. For instance, Student C says:

**I agree with you on, well, everything. We know the government doesn't like to listen to us anymore,** so we have to get in their face for them to hear us. They are just about as stubborn to get what they want, as we are to get what we want. **But, the government will hear our outcry, and have to fix it. Otherwise, we will be the ones going down...**

As the conversation comes to a close, Student E wants to know who the next president will be because the presidential elections were taking place at the time. Student A proudly states that no one knows who the president will be because the government officials already in office are still deciding and their votes are the only ones that count. Student F leaves the final comment of the thread and agrees with the points made thus far and explains that the government does more than they reveal to the American people. Student F believes the government distorts the truth to the American people and from the appearance of this statement, she means that the government should not be trusted.

In this Information Age, students have endless information at their fingertips and they may feel that in an information-rich environment, they are entitled to *all* information, even information about government operations and its future intentions. When disclosures of government secrecy, misrepresentation and downright lying occur, many of the adults in their

realm of experience appear to feel betrayed, powerless and disconnected. This is one of the ironies that emerges from this discourse analysis: the confusion that exists between students' patriotism and faith in the American Dream described earlier and their distrust of the government.

The students face confusion when it comes to government involvement in public matters, the economy, and global decisions made for the nation. Some students do not want government control and some students want less control, but there has not yet been a single discussion in which a student wants *more* governmental control. These students do not like the idea of control and mismanagement of tax revenue but they do understand that a government is necessary to ensure stability. For instance, during a discussion in the United States History course, a student writes that he wants less governmental control but does not want to eradicate all control. The reason he would like less control is that he sees issues with our welfare and taxing systems and desires future reforms for the sake of the middle class. According to Student A, "The government now is trying to control and regulate everything where most of the time it is not needed." Student A observes that American living is easier for the poor than the middle class because the middle class does not receive government assistance and has a higher tax burden than the poor class. Student A also views our welfare management system as ineffective and would also like to see more responsibility placed on the upper class to rid some of the burdens of the middle class.

Student B agrees with Student A's argument for less government control but points out the compulsion of some government control to prevent chaos from unfolding. Student B explains that without government control, the U.S. could end up in a situation similar to Mexico's instability dilemma. In Mexico, chaos has continually erupted into violence and

government corruption is advanced by the drug cartels' overarching power. Student B enlightens her classmates on the topic with:

**You're right!!** I mean there are times where we struggle and we need the help of the government, but **we cannot take it away completely because then our country would be messed up** like mine (Mexico) they have no control what's so ever. **Rich people are so greedy in so many levels**, all they think of is them self's, they should pay more taxes than we do!!

Student C acknowledges the importance of some government control in order to protect small businesses against monopolies in the United States and Student C provides evidence to support her argument.

Government involvement actually helps small business. **Without government regulation big companies (monopolies) would take over and crush small business**, in turn smothering the economy. For example: in the city of Chicago, Walmart (big company/monopoly) is banned because it would hurt the small businesses. If it weren't for government regulation Walmart would have take over the small businesses of Chicago and weakened the economy. **So we need some government regulation in order to mediate the power of monopolies.**

Student A finds a flaw in the evidence provided by Student C and decides to research the topic further. Student A finds that there are some complications with the story but agrees with Student C about the hazard of monopolies rising up in the U.S. Student C apologizes for the misrepresenting of information but maintains the point that the government does get involved in

the economy when it encounters threats to economic stability. This discussion example also shows that at least some of these students check facts via independent research before they believe them to be true. Student A does not feel that the information that Student C provides is accurate and decides to research the facts more thoroughly. Students in this discussion prove to conduct independent research to support their arguments and also to challenge the ideas and arguments of others. This behavior is consistent with their expressed desire for more government disclosure of pertinent information and more access to facts on which decisions and arguments are based.

### ***Placing Society under the Microscope***

Students are not only strong critics of the government, but they are strong critics of society as well. For example, during a New Deal discussion in the United States History course, Student A discusses the notion of current government involvement in our economy. In the example shown below, Student A feels the government is too involved in the economy and is not responsible for the direction and consumption of our tax revenue. He finds military spending to be wasteful and thinks that we need to turn our attention towards job creation and other important programs. Student B seems disgusted by the government's lack of responsibility to the public and thinks it is obvious where the funds should be directed: education and job creation, not war. Student A and B's discussion posts reveal a lack of in-depth understanding of the topic but at the same time, they engender plausible arguments about improper government spending. Student B mentions that, "The government spends more money on military stuff than they should. If anything they should use that money on schools or to help make jobs here and not send our money to allies in other countries."

Following Student B's response, Student A decides to shift the focus from critiquing the government to critiquing the American people, "If you've been around the local area, you'd know that this generation is getting messed up." Student A sees his current generation as being "swag" and "yolo" and the cure to this ignorance and superficiality is a better education system. The term "swag" means a teenager who is obsessed with labels and current trends and "yolo" was a phrase coined in hip-hop songs from 2010 and stands for 'You Only Live Once'. This Y.O.L.O. phrase quickly turned into a lifestyle trend that encourages teenagers to live life to fullest even if it means taking risks. Student A is annoyed with other teens that act like superficial followers and are afraid to be unique. Student B responds to the "swag/yolo" comment by saying that she became so irritated with the lack of individuality of teens that she found virtual school a better fit than the traditional classroom. Student B says:

**I mean i know what you're talking about** because I went to 2 different high schools in our area of FL for my first 2 years of high school, **everyone is too worried about their appearance and they always follow** what rappers do or say, instead of doing their own thing.

Student A then explains that he hopes that future generations will not be the same but Student C is more interested in discussing government involvement than the "swag/yolo" generation. Student C asks, "What ways would you suggest the government make our current situation better? Do you believe there is a permanent solution? If so, what would your solution be? I agree with your opinion of the government being too little involved." Students A and student B (and possibly other students) were unable to continue the discussion because Student C posted the questions a few hours prior to the discussion closing.

Student A's and B's frustration with the present-day "swag/yolo" cohort made me realize the reoccurring pattern of an appreciation for uniqueness and individualism. This pattern does not surprise me because a myriad of discussion threads focused on anti-bullying, anti-oppression, the importance of upstanders, and tolerance of diversity. In fact, it is one of the major consistencies that evolve through all of the discussion threads in all of the courses.

Countless students throughout the school year discussed issues in American culture that they disapproved of. The negative feelings about society exhibited throughout the discussion forums were woven in at various times. For example, during a discussion about the causes of the current fiscal cliff in the U.S. History course, one student displayed revulsion toward American consumer culture. In the excerpt below, Student A perceives mainstream Americans as careless spenders who are materialistic and compulsive. "People spend money they don't have. They take advantage of credit cards, loans, etc. The media promotes this, always wanting you to buy the latest gadgets, clothes, etc. and then telling you they're outdated right after you buy it." Student A also deems that we would not have experienced the latest economic recession if Americans learned from the mistakes of the past (e.g.: The Great Depression) and changed their financial habits. She also quotes a Bible verse to support her argument about the bad choices that Americans continually make. Suggestions for societal improvement were provided which shows a desire for this student and others to make more informed financial decisions when they are adults.

**People are just dumb, I'm sorry,** they have no common sense. (Jeremiah 10: 23, "...It does not belong to man to direct his own step...") **I apologize for insulting humankind and then quoting a scripture, those two things aren't supposed to go together in one sentence, but it fit, lol.** Solutions? Spend less money? Aha. **Only buy things you need**

**with money you already have.** If you want a toy, save up for it and buy it after paying your bills on time. ('Toy' means anything you like but don't necessarily need, basically)

Her classmates agreed with her post and continued the conversation by speculating how homeless people get into their situation. Student A's classmates did not make fun of her for quoting scriptures within her discussion post which shows respect and tolerance for diversity or at least for western scripture. Moreover, Student A seems to understand the difference between a want and a need which again, raises a question about whether expressions of belief and values during the formation of civic identity in a virtual classroom will, ultimately shape future behavior. Presumably, these comments indicate that, as a minimum, they see financial mistakes of previous generations as a valuable lesson learned.

During a discussion about Reaganomics in the United States History course, students analyzed multiple sources and attempted to determine whether or not these economic policies were successful or unsuccessful (See appendix F, exhibit F.6). Student A explains that it was neither successful nor unsuccessful because the Tickle Down Theory and policies of stimulating the economy worked but in favor of the wealthy. Student A comments:

This doesn't necessarily work as intended though, because wealthy people don't spend much of their money, **that's why they're wealthy, they save it.** Taxing the wealthy less just puts more money in their pockets, less money for everyone else. Another aspect involved was encouraging saving and discourage spending. **But of course, no one listens when they're told** not to spend money. And for an economy to cycle properly, there must be spending and obtaining money, including things that may not be a particular necessity. Obviously, giving more money to people that are already rich isn't going to

work- common sense. **So, an important lesson to learn from this is that people are greedy, so if anything, more money should be taken away from the rich, so that it can be distributed evenly throughout the poor and middle-class.**

Student B agrees with Student A's perspectives and connects it back to presidential campaign advertisements that she must have viewed during the presidential election a few months prior; "That is exactly what Mitt Romney wanted to do!! He wanted to cut the rich people's taxes! For what? They have enough money, they should give a tax break on the middle and lower class!" Student C joins the conversation by wishing that the U.S. did not have social classes, but Student B disagrees because life would be boring if everything was perfect. However, Student A disagrees with Student B because she believes in a future that is perfect (as promised by God) and that would not be boring. Student A provides Bible verses to support her argument about a perfect future. Students C and D explain that this discussion topic was confusing for them and they were thankful for Student A's help in understanding the concepts. The discussion concludes with Students F and G explaining how the rich are greedy and do not need to continue getting richer and changes need to occur to prevent the middle class from disappearing. The demographics of these virtual students are diverse but the majority of these students are lower and middle class. Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that the students identify government policies that support the interests of the rich as unfair and the upper class as greedy. Furthermore, these students seem to respect Student A's religious beliefs and do not argue with her views or bully her.

**I can understand that thinking, I used to think the same thing.** Especially when I first learned about the Bible's promise of eternal life on a perfect earth. As a kid I would think,



'man that could get boring.' But of course the Bible also says that God will 'satisfy the desire of every living thing.' (Psalms 145: 16) and there is so much to learn, that even living forever we will never learn it all (Ecclesiastes 3:11) So yeah, life in this world would probably get boring, but in the **new world that God promises we would never be bored**, He guarantees it ;)

The discussion comes to a close as several students posted that the topic was a difficult concept to understand and they were thankful for Student A's discussion because they were able to understand it more easily with her descriptions. For example, Student C said, "Nice discussion. His policies were kinda confusing, thanks for making them easier to understand." Student C's comment about confusion with the lesson was important because it showed the value of students discussing difficult concepts with one another. Students who have advanced understanding of certain concepts than their peers can essentially teach their classmates what they learned from the lesson in a way that a teacher may not be able to. In this situation, the teacher was unable to teach Reganomics to her students in a way that was easy to understand so a more advanced student mediated the learning experience.

A recurring pattern in student's language throughout discussion forums was their views on the excessive laziness and selfishness within the general public. During a discussion in the World History course about the Industrial Revolution and its effects, Student A perceives that technology is partially to blame for the societal down spiral in productivity and authenticity.

According to Student A:

**Technology is also contributing to** laziness, poor communication skills, anxiety, and relationship problems. **People rely so much on technology**, and this generation doesn't

seem to know how to live without it. Six years ago I played outside with a neighborhood's worth of kids every day. Now you never see kids outside at all, they're all inside playing video games, watching TV, and texting. This also keeps people out of shape and contributes to obesity. When you're sitting around in the house watching TV or playing games, you're inactive and probably snacking because... that's just what watching TV makes you do. **The only way people know how to communicate is through electronic means.** People say things on Facebook that they wouldn't say in person. People would much rather text you what they're thinking than have a real face-to-face communication. Then in person contact becomes awkward and unmanageable.

Student A seems to have negative views in terms of the nation's response to this technological wave. While she is not entirely wrong in her assumptions, she is not entirely correct either. Her post provides a good example of generalizations about the nation formed by her direct observations and a limited sphere of experience. It is not a surprise that she has these views of society and the current generation because with, the exception of her missionary work in the community, it is necessary for her to interact with her peers. The one attention-grabbing comment that she made was about people communicating differently online and via text than face-to-face. Is she saying that people have two different identities; one identity online and one identity face-to-face? If this is the case, it makes me wonder how different these students' communication and interactions would be in the face-to-face classroom and how different students' language-in-use in terms of representing their civic identities would appear in the face-to-face classroom. That is an issue to be discussed in recommendations for future research.

During a discussion in Economics, students reflected on the mixed market economy unit and a student writes that she learned a new term; self-interest. She then uses the discussion as a floor to critique the selfish nature of individuals through her own observations. The two students below acknowledge that they have more to learn about Economics and the role of the government but they seem excited to fill in the gaps in their knowledge as the semester unfolds.

3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT A

This week I learned the term self-interest. I thought it was just greed but maybe they are not the same thing. **It seems as though a lot of people nowadays are only into self-interest.** "If I donate to this cancer foundation what do I get in return? Knowledge of helping people with cancer? Not worth it." **In order to get my brother to do anything he has to be bribed because** if he gets nothing then it's not worth it to him and just a waste of time and energy he could be using to play a game. You know I always thought laissez faire was some other important man in history, but apparently not! I like this doctrine and agree to the government not imposing in the marketplace. **To me the government is some corrupted thing that people use as an excuse to not look for a job. I don't know why... There's actually a lot I don't fully understand about it... yet.**

Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT B

I totally agree with you, people are only into self-interest these days! **I don't know a lot about our government either** but I'm excited to learn new things.

While these two students are not entirely incorrect, it would have been beneficial to provide more evidence of their self-interest assumptions with sources other than their personal

observations of their immediate surroundings. Their comments about not fully understanding how the government operates reveals this open-minded nature that is willing to change their perspectives as the semester continues and they gain more knowledge. As the school year progresses and students both learn more material and interact with students with dissimilar opinions, cognitive dissonance appears throughout these discussion forums as students change their minds, their identities appear to clash, and they admit that they are conflicted with two or more perspectives on an issue.

In an American Government discussion about current events, a student discussed a recent Senate bill that granted mercy to juveniles serving life sentences, essentially giving them a second chance. One student mentions that these juveniles should write thank you letters to these politicians for creating legislation in their favor and another student responds with:

That would be nice and would make the officials and governors feel good about the bill they just signed over if they wrote a letter of thanks to them. **The likeliness of that happening though is pretty slim, people are just so selfish and only care about themselves these days**, although one who was super appreciative of the second chance would be grateful.

As you can see from the excerpts above, these students tend to critique society in a negative manner at times but they quickly change their tone when discussing positive current events stories, scientific advancements, civic heroes, and successful charity events. This change in perception will be discussed in an upcoming segment along with civic identity clashes.

In short, these students are very opinionated about the workings of the government and they wish to see the mismanagement of tax revenue, unresponsiveness nature of the government,

the secrecy of government, the unsupported decisions by citizens for U.S. continual foreign affairs involvement, and so forth, come to an end. The students' act of placing society under a microscope is their method of expressing their opinions or venting about societal pet-peeves, their way of reflecting on mistakes of the past and present in order to make more informed decisions, and their approach to testing or confirming their morals with their peers.

### ***Moral Agents in Training***

It became apparent very quickly that these discussion forums served as a think-tank for moral discussions (or moral development) while students simultaneously used the forums as a venue to bond, socialize, and learn their social studies concepts (See appendix F, exhibit F.7 for an additional discussion representing this sub-theme). Having an opinion or certain perspective on various issues throughout the world requires moral development and reasoning based on the developed (or developing) values and morals. For instance, during a discussion from the Crusades unit in the World History course, a student connected this period in history with a current event. In the discussion example below, Student A provides a brief summary of the Muslim hajj (pilgrimage) to Saudi Arabia and mentions that much of the violence in the Middle East comes to a standstill during the week of religious festivities.

Millions of Muslim pilgrims converged on Wednesday for the **preparation of the hajj pilgrimage**. There are going to be around 3.4 million people attending this year's pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia circling the Kaaba, Islam's holiest shrine found in the grand mosque at Mecca's heart. Other Muslim pilgrims will be going to Mount Arafat to spend the night on the rocky desert hill before a long day of praying to start off the hajj. Many People who have experienced the pilgrimage say that it's almost like the political and sectarian conflicts no longer divide the Muslim world. The pilgrims say that this year

their praying for the unity among the Umma, meaning “mother”, referring to the Islamic community. The men wear seamless white terrycloth garments to symbolize the equality of mankind. On the other hand the women wear long loose clothing, and cover the hair in the traditional headscarf. The pilgrimage comes as a civil war rages in Syria, threatening to tear apart one of the Middle East’s most diverse nations. Over 30,000 people have died. In Myanmar, Muslims have been attacked by Buddhists. **The hajj is one of the few times Shiite Iranians and Sunni Arabs come together to pray peacefully.**

This student teaches her classmates about this global event and a moral discussion unfolds about religious conflict. Student A is indirectly conveying the importance of peace, respect for others, cooperation, empathy, tolerance, integrity, and care by stating that, “The problem is that places in the Middle East let religion come in between the unity. The solution in my opinion would be to set aside their differences and come together like they do at the pilgrimage.” Students B, C, D, and E agree with Student A’s viewpoints and continue to add comments that support and foster the development of morals and values to the discussion thread for the rest of the class to read. These students tolerate diversity and believe that peace is possible if people are able to set aside their differences for a common goal and do the right thing. In the example provided by Student A, the common goal is to participate peacefully in the hajj once a year and perhaps turn the annual peaceful and cooperative behavior into a norm for the rest of the year and beyond.

This discussion thread example about the hajj and many of the other discussions that were analyzed reveal the expression of complex morals and values. There are several cases of what students say in the forums and how they act in the forums that can be linked. For example,

the students continually show their support for diversity and tolerance for individualism in the discussions and, according to their online behaviors in many of the forums, I can confirm that tolerance and appreciation for individualism is very much a part of their civic identities. Two discussion threads provided in previous sections displayed a student citing Bible verses to bolster her arguments. Her classmates did not make fun of her or scorn her for her faith. Another discussion thread provided in this dissertation showcased a student and her religious connection to her community through missionary work. Several of her classmates supported and praised her efforts and did not ridicule her. These few examples demonstrate that much of what the students say in the discussion forums translate into their daily dispositions, at least in an online classroom setting.

### ***Theme Two Summary***

This second theme highlighted students' analytical nature and fervor for questioning reality. The data collected in this study show students' strong criticisms of the government and society as a method of exercising their morals and questioning societal structures. Students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have access to more information than generations of the past and what students do with all this information influences their morals, ability to make decisions in the future, and their expectations and trust of societal and governmental operations. It is clear that these students reveal NCSS' (2013) effective citizen characteristic #7: "asks meaningful questions and is able to analyze and evaluate information and ideas." The students also partially meet characteristic #5, "is aware of issues and events that have an impact on people at local, state, national, and global levels," and partially meet #6, "seeks information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions" (para. 5). The reason I mention the partial satisfaction of criteria #5 and #6 is that the students demonstrated an

immediacy mentality clouding their understanding of the world and their lack of sound evidence in support of their arguments prevents the full satisfaction of the two criteria. Students' civic identities are still developing at various rates, but the need for students to see how current events affect life at the local, state, and national levels, along with the necessity to consult multiple resources to make informed decisions and arguments, are civic identity growth targets.

In general, students seem to hold a negative view of society and the government due to their limited understanding of the complexities of global realities and government operations. It is unclear whether or not the current event discussions make students feel civically and politically more or less empowered, but what is clear is their desire to express their opinions about the necessity of social change.

### **Theme Three: External Manifestations of Civic Identity**

Childers (2006) postulates that an individual's opinions and behaviors represent outward expressions of their inward civic identity. Throughout the school year, students continually expressed their opinions and revealed patterns of behavior through their language-in-use which indicates important details about their civic identities. The objective of this study was to examine patterns in speech as a means to understand how students identify both their roles and impacts on society as U.S. citizens, not measure the development of their civic identities over time. If this generation of students is going to be our future leaders, it is imperative to understand what students envision our future nation to look like, especially in the civic arena. In this segment, I discuss students' conceptions of effective citizenship, technology's impact on our 21<sup>st</sup> century populace, and students' civic engagement stories. These categories that emerged are vital to include in this dissertation because students' perceptions of what good citizens are may reflect their internal calling to be more involved (now or in the future) via their computer or in



their community. The list below is a brief summary of students' ideas and definitions on what characteristics and behaviors good citizens encompass.

- Caring
- Educated
- Active in the community
- A problem-solver and decision-maker
- Eager to help others/ Team Player
- Selfless
- Optimistic
- Obeys laws
- Intrinsically Motivated
- Cyber-citizen
- Does good deeds without expectations of anything in return
- Upstander
- Willingly donates time/money
- Holds strong morals, values, and virtues
- Positively inspires others
- A good citizen can be anyone!

### ***Conceptions of Effective Citizenship***

One of the most consistent finding across grade levels was the students' definitions and examples of effective citizenship. During a discussion toward the end of the semester in each of

the five courses, students were instructed to describe their thoughts on what they believe a good citizen is in a democracy. Their responses to these discussion forums elicited similar results: good citizens come in a variety of packages but are typically altruistic, aware/educated, active, intrinsically motivated, law-abiding, and optimistic. Moreover, these exemplary citizens inspire those around them and cause a domino effect of continual good deeds.

For example, a student in American Government states that, “A good, caring citizen is someone who is very giving, humble and looks for the good in people and just does all they can for their community and those who live in it.” A classmate responds to her definition with, “I agree with your example of a good citizen. Most of the time the good citizens are the ones who help their community grow.” These students find selflessness as the essence of good citizenship because their posts during this discussion forum and throughout the school year emphasize the importance of helping others, doing good deeds without the expectation of anything in return, and making decisions based on the greater good.

In the Economics course, student A provides his definition of good citizenship by stating:

**I believe a good citizen is someone who** provides or takes part in their community, they follow the laws and they do everything they can to keep things safe and healthy for a country/community. A democracy depends on active and caring citizens to survive because of how much freedom they give the community. **With freedom comes responsibility**, you still have to take care of yourself and the people around you.

Student A’s description of a good citizen is similar to many other students’ descriptions but I was intrigued with the emphasis he places on the duty of citizens to maintain their community and follow laws. The amount of freedom the country provides its citizens comes with the tradeoff of

more responsibilities. This student sees an effective democracy full of citizens who are cooperative, law-abiding, and eager to help the community in a variety of ways to ensure its preservation. Conceivably, this student's perceptions of good citizenship may reflect elements of his civic identity and may translate into his civic attitudes and behaviors in the near future.

A student in World History also stressed the importance of citizens working together and being dedicated to the maintenance of their community. According to Student A:

**A caring and active citizen looks like any other person. They can be anyone** from the neighbor next door to the manager of a department store to the mayor of a city. A democracy requires these active and caring citizens to maintain and improve on the community or country. **Their support and commitment keeps a democracy functioning.**

The student's comment above about a good citizen not fitting a specific mold was intriguing because this pattern was present in many other students' posts too. The previous Economics student's comments about the importance of teamwork, cooperation, and commitment to the community were excellent points but the student in World History expands on the topic a little further by writing that a good citizen could be anyone. I consider this concept to be important because many students may feel disempowered by stories from history books of leaders and historical figures who accomplished prodigious endeavors that the average individual would be unlikely to achieve.

Students need to discuss civic heroes from their local communities or good deeds engendered at the local level that have influenced their civic identity development. When students are able to perceive that good citizenship is feasible and worthwhile, students' civic

engagement levels could increase both now and in the future. However, when students continually focus on endeavors that are extraordinary and, perhaps, unreachable, they could possibly be discouraged from even attempting any civic activities. Ironically, the portrayal of the exceptional heroes found in most history books may, in fact, discourage civic engagement by students. Finally, it appears that students want to feel like a valuable player in whatever they do but that it takes both guidance and support from others as well as some intrinsic motivation training to keep them engaged. The notion that a good citizen can be anyone who helps those in need through charities and volunteering also reflects this selflessness foundation to effective citizenship as stated below by Student A in the U.S. History course:

**Now, active citizens go extra miles** to make sure all is well in their community. They help people in need, and even our environment and animals! **They are going to encourage people and inspire them.** These people will donate to fund helpful causes and not just money, their time! Time they could be spending doing something that would be more beneficial to them, instead they spend their time on helping others in need. If we did not have these citizens the world would be in ruins! Why? Who's going to feed and care for the poor? The hurt and abandoned animals? Our environment? The future of mankind? We are really lucky. **Everyone has been helped by someone they don't even know. I hope they appreciate it, I do.**

Student A identifies stable democracies as entities of citizens who are aware of their surroundings, try to solve problems, and take care of the environment and those in need without expectations of anything in return. Most importantly, Student A indirectly mentions how good citizens inspire those around them and a domino effect of good citizenship occurs (See appendix

F, exhibit F.8). This mentality appears contagious and every good deed matters in the eyes of these virtual students.

Through a deeper analysis of the discussion forums, the students exhibit that they have good citizenship knowledge, skills, and values. (The discussion of civic skills will come at a later segment in this dissertation.) Civic knowledge, skills, and values are important features of one's character and identity so it is safe to assume that these students are developing their civic identities through practice in the discussion forums and in their daily lives.

Another discussion post in the World Geography course reveals similar notions to the previous discussion threads mentioned thus far but this particular student's post provides concrete examples of a good citizen.

A good citizen is someone who is **involved with his or her community. They look for opportunities to offer a helping hand.** They don't have to be a **known donor**, they could be the kid who picks up trash around the neighborhood, the one who fetches the newspaper for someone who is older and can't walk to the end of the driveway to pick it up. You may never know his or her name, but they're still a big part in helping the community. A democracy depends active and caring citizens for so many different reasons. Active, caring citizens do plenty of things, such as obeying the law, voting in elections, donating to a charity, participating in local events. **If people didn't do these things, the country would fall apart.**

A student in the U.S. History course provides concrete examples of a good citizen but also offers a real world example of someone who she thinks is a good citizen,

**A good citizen is someone who cares.** Somebody who picks up a piece of trash off the ground when they see it, someone who is careful not to hit a squirrel with their car, someone looks out for others interests, someone who helps others in need, someone who is kind to everyone and does not discriminate. **People that are good citizens are active.** They don't just sit around inside their house on their phone all day. They're out and about, either caring for themselves, their home [yard], their family or friends, or even contributing to the community around them. **The best modern example of a good citizen that I can think of is my dad.** He devotes nearly all his time to helping others. He cares for us- me, my brother, my stepmom - while also being there for the members of our congregation. He's always there to provide assistance or advice to us or our friends and family. He makes himself available to preach voluntarily, while also working for a living. He stepped down from a high position at work to devote more time to teaching and helping people.

This student's father appears to be altruistic, optimistic, caring, aware, and intrinsically motivated. The father makes a difference in their family, church, and community and seems to have influenced his daughter's civic identity as she consistently reveals solid morals and democratic beliefs in the course's discussions. Moreover, this student is active in her community through her missionary work. This example goes to show that having a good role model and not feeling disempowered by unreachable civic goals or negative news can make a lasting and positive impact on a young individual.

An additional student provides a real world example of a good citizen in the World History course by illustrating that a good citizen is,

...someone who takes part in their community regularly. They participate in elections, and do regular volunteer work. **I like to consider my grandmother as a good citizen** because even at the age of 82, she volunteers at our local church doing whatever she can. Democracy depends on active and caring citizens because that's exactly what a democracy is.

One of her classmates responds to the discussion post with, “Your grandmother sounds wonderful! There should be so many more people out there like her that support their communities too.” The student responds back to the comment by saying, “She really is wonderful and the funny thing is how many older women just like her volunteer their time at our church. It would be nice if younger people could help out too.” Another classmate replies with, “Wow, so much respect for your grandma! She shows that anyone can volunteer no matter the age.”

Once again, the pattern of everyone having the ability to be a good citizen and the variety of packages that good citizens come in while holding similar characteristics (like selflessness) continues to resurface. I was intrigued by the last two comments about the need for more adolescents to help out and get involved. These students see the lack of civic involvement from young individuals within their communities but do not utilize the discussion as a venue for sharing their civic engagements stories either. It does make sense, however, that most volunteers are older since they are retired and have the time to commit but these students see the need to for more adolescent engagement as well. In fact, a student in the United States History course provided a solution to get more adolescents civically involved by writing:

Well a good citizen is always there for the people who need help, like example little things like holding the door for the elderly "or anyone for that case", not doing drugs, nor being disrespectful to people around us... **But I can honestly say that kids our age today** are the opposite's of good citizens, they are more rude than ever before. **But it takes one person to make a difference!** I think that there should be more scholarships like bright futures to encourage kids our age to do more volunteer work and be nicer to the world!!

There are other ways to encourage students to get more involved but in the virtual school setting, students have to think of non-traditional ways. In a typical brick-and-mortar school, students are civically involved with their community through service learning projects, clubs, sports, and school fundraisers or events. In the virtual realm, there may be fewer of the traditional civic engagement opportunities but the one stable solution as provided by Student A above is better access to scholarships that support the local community for all students (virtual and brick-and-mortar). Students' comments about the need for more adolescent involvement could represent their civic identities' convictions to be more involved as well.

The final discussion post that I will highlight in this segment came from the United States History course where Student A describes what a good citizen looks like while explaining how difficult it is to be a good citizen in reality.

An active citizen is one who has the main goal, or at least the high priority **of helping others, with or without promise of reward.** Those who take pleasure in the success of their fellow men/women. **Intrinsic motivations** (motivations that come from feelings, not materials) would tend to drive an active citizen. This is especially important in a



democracy, as those tending to seem like good people can take advantage of this visage and use it to gain power over others, legally. It seems that, more and more, people tend to drop these values in favor of ones that further their own advancement (or that of those associated with them). The base survival instinct may work well for animals, **but it doesn't allow for the creation of the quality of environment that is possible from humans.**

According to Student A above, the selfishness of human nature and hunger for social power prevent every human from being good citizen. Student B agrees with the post and says, “Good post, I agree. It does seem like many people now care more about themselves benefiting than anyone else. I'm sure economic trouble could cause this though. What do you think about that?” Student A replies to Student B’s response with, “It doesn't seem to have to do with any single factor. Whether for survival, or not, humans tend to prevent a common good.”

This student thinks that humans inevitably prevent a common good. He does not believe that we can blame social inequalities and issues on one factor but it is in our nature as humans to be selfish and create an imbalanced reality. This discussion post was the only skeptical, in-depth analysis of effective citizenship and its implications; all the other discussions seemed full of hope for the future of humanity and our democracy. However, a skeptical mindset as presented by this student in the previous discussion is not necessarily a negative characteristic because it reflects a certain independence of thought and reflects what may have been acquired through personal research and multiple sources.

In the next segment, I will discuss how technology has impacted citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in ways that makes citizenship appears dissimilar to the traditional methods of civic participation.

### *Cyber Citizens*

Throughout the school year, students continued to describe and discuss countless possibilities of active citizenship via the internet. Due to the virtual nature of their social interactions and learning environment, it comes as no shock that their discussions about effective citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century encompasses technology as the medium toward achieving this end. For example, a student in the Economics course discussed an article about a Video Game Marathon that was,

...played for 24 hours where gamers raised money to help families pay for their children's medical treatments. Each gamer hoped to raise \$2,000. With all of the boys that play non-stop video games as it is, **I think this is a good way to use it for a charity.** With the economy down and parents out of jobs, **I always found it so sad** that children have to suffer or let cancer or diseases defeat them because the medical treatment they need to survive is too expensive for their parents to be able to afford.

Her classmate was moved by the story and shared an analogous story,

**Thats so sweet! This remind me of** a little boy who was ill and a foundation (make the make a wish foundation or something similar) met up with him to make his dream of creating his own video game come true. It turns out the game was so successful that they made it an app you could download for like \$2 **I think**, and all the proceeds went to him!

Student A responded to her classmate with, “Wow that's awesome! Yeah, I thought this was a cool story because why not turn boys hobby into a good cause!” This discussion demonstrates that, in the eyes of contemporary students, effective citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be widespread and reach across geographic boundaries for a common goal. Most importantly, technology allows us to ignite our passions and put our talents to good uses in ways that were unthinkable in the past. The idea of turning a hobby or interest like video gaming into an effective citizenship method is now possible only via technology. This cyber citizenship philosophy may encourage more individuals to get connected to their communities without leaving the comfort of their homes or without participating in a civic event that does not match their interests or talents.

A student in the World Geography course presented an example similar to the Video Game Marathon charity but was about a Twestival charity event.

**I found a news article** that was talking about a "Twestival" which would be a Twitter event that raised money and awareness for the charity: water. This took place on February 12, 2009 (not very current) and 250,000 dollars was raised and provided clean water 17,000 people. That's a huge accomplishment if you think about it; granted there are way more people in need of water but you have to take it one step at a time, I guess.

**Maybe there will be another 'Twestival' and even more money will be raised.**

The Twestival charity was comparable to the previous video game example because citizens used technology, and in this case social media, to raise money for people in other countries that do not have access to clean water. This student goes on to explain other ways that people practice cyber citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by writing, “Technology has become so popular and

resourceful that it's really amazing what you can do. Just by texting in, calling in, tweeting or facebook you can donate money and either they charge your phone company or your credit card.” This student makes the possibilities of cyber citizenship appear endless and simple as she mentions all the different methods that people can choose from.

During a discussion in the American Government course, Student A provides examples of charities that individuals can easily donate with a simple text message (See appendix F, exhibit F.9). According to Student A,

Back in 2010 when Haiti was struck with the devastating Earthquake that took lives, homes, food and clean water and left them with shambles and sickness, you can probably recall seeing the commercials to text a number and donate money. **I remember seeing them** on all the award ceremonies with celebrities encouraging the donations. The profit was titled "Text to Donate" and this was phone companies partnering up with charities such as the Red Cross which allowed users to text a specified number for a donation of the users choice. Since texting had become so popular they used that to their advantage to help raise money to provide relief. When you text the number it created an automatic donation was given, whatever money you chose to give would be added to the user's monthly cell phone bill. **We still see many cases of this where they want you to call and donate to save a dog's life or to donate to the children in Africa or to give someone in need clean water.**

Her classmate responds to the discussion post by writing,

Texting is such a big thing here, it was a great idea to think of "Text to Donate" numbers and lines. **I am so thankful they have created a way for people to easily help those in**

**need.** We are such a generation of technology, many people will see the ads. It will get to the hearts of givers and doers, and they will want to help those in need. **It is definitely a great thing to do!**

Another classmate jumps into the conversation and comments on the fact that technology is ubiquitous and gives those who have the resources endless options to help others in need. This student continues her argument by saying,

Why not give other people the chance to get help, from the people that actually have the money, and actually have time to text a number, to save somebodies life. **It would probably be 8 dollars a month, and your saving somebody in need,** somebody that is sick and needs desperate help. We would not know what this is like, we have hospitals everywhere, insurance to help pay for it, cell phones to call the paramedics, working ambulances to take us to the hospital that is well funded to help make us better. We have no idea what it is like, so maybe Americans and other countries should think about giving, and not all about receiving. **Giving is the best gift. So why not start now?**

Student A then responds, “Some people are on time crunches, or have a difficult schedule at work and with their family but with texting, it's simple and takes 2 seconds which is enabling more people to give!!” Student A also goes on to explain her desires to be civically involved:

**I think I would donate it to a children's charity,** just because my heart breaks whenever I see a bald little girl or boy living in the hospital because of cancer or leukemia or whatever tragic illness he or she may be going through, really. These

diseases are just so horrible and deadly. The child's entire family is effected and the child's life can't be "normal"- it's just sad from whatever angle you look at it from.

Student D joins the discussion and comments about the fast paced nature of our 21<sup>st</sup> century nation. “People in america are so fast paced, that they need cell phones and computers to do things, and better cars. We can make a change if we all took the time to do something progressive.” The notion of time as a major factor affecting citizens’ engagement levels made me consider the students’ frequent comments about their desires to be active citizens but their lack of comments about their actual civic engagement experiences. The data appear to reveal that the students have the mindset and desire to help their communities but they simply do not have the time due to their busy schedules with school, work, family or other responsibilities. I am convinced that many teens would love to make a difference in the lives of the needy, children, or animals but do not have the time or resources to achieve this end. (In the next segment I will discuss students’ civic engagement descriptions.)

In the example discussion below, Student A illustrates how average citizens can become or be active cyber citizens through day-to-day activities that do not require major planning like the Twestival, Video Game Marathon, and Text-to-Donate charities.

**I think technology can help with** social change in many ways. There are many blogs that people speak their mind and donation websites that help people with causes. Many people make videos of their stories and personal experiences with bullying, harassment, and even racism. **This allows people to get their message out and for others to relate.** For instance there are many videos of celebrities speaking against bullying, which

influence **other people to think about** judgment and take a step to help others. Please see the attachment to view the example video.

This student indicates that celebrities have power when using social media to spread messages about issues because they have countless followers on social media sites.

Student B replies to this discussion post by saying, “I think it's great that even celebrities speak out and try to stop bullying and harassment. It's such a serious problem that's happening and it needs to stop.” Student C also comments, “I think you're right about how celebrities promote different causes. They can draw attention to a lot of different issues because so many people look up to them.” Student D then explains that she did not know there were blogs and social media sites where people share their personal story with others as a way to vent or cause social change. Student A adds to the discussion that, “Technology helps spread ideas and opinions faster than by a textbook or newspaper. People make their organizations online because so many people are on the internet. This means they reach more people making it easier to solve social issues.” Finally, Student E brings the conversation to a close by saying, “I agree and I think Facebook and YouTube are the best places to get info.”

Not only do these students provide detail about ways of becoming or being a cyber citizen, they also mention how technology can be used as a medium to spread information and ideas faster than any other source. Students also perceive that celebrities hold much power in the virtual world due to their large number of followers. Celebrities, in essence, have a duty to make social change for the better given their natural command of social media. Moreover, Student E's comments that the best places to receive information are through web 2.0 sites like Facebook and YouTube and not informational sites constructed by professionals (e.g. .gov or .edu). It appears

from this discussion thread that students will practice their cyber citizenship in the web 2.0 arena but their virtual school teachers are the ones who direct them to the informational and news websites to build content knowledge. Because having solid content knowledge and the ability to discern accurate from inaccurate information are necessary foundations to successfully function in the web 2.0 domain, it remains to be seen if students are critical consumers of web 2.0 information, or if the status of the presenter (e.g., a movie star) trumps critical evaluation of the information itself.

### *Civic Engagement Testimonies*

A significant piece of effective citizenship and one's civic identity is the act of being civically engaged. Civic engagement can transpire in a variety of ways but the most common examples of civic engagement are volunteering, donating to or creating charities, voting, political participation (e.g. attending a town hall meeting), following the laws and making responsible choices (e.g. recycling), and performing good deeds (e.g. helping your neighbor). Three categories emerged from my analysis of student comments about civic engagement: indirect civic engagement, direct civic engagement, and future plans for civic engagement.

During a discussion in the Economics course about the use of technology for social change, Student A discussed her indirect civic engagement through online gaming. The student mentions that her previous English teacher allowed the class to play online games for charity each week.

One year in middle school I had an **english teacher** that would let us play games (learning games) on half days. She had tons of games in the classroom but if we wanted, we could play online crosswords games. **The crosswords would donate to a charity whenever we completed one correctly.** How much they donated depended on the



difficulty of the crossword. One cool thing they did though that I remember is that you could pick the charity you wanted to donate to from a list of options. **I think it was particularly for schools** and they had other categories like math and science as well. Anyways I can't remember the name of the web site but here's one that's similar. Charitii.com. I think this is a great stride in technology for social change. There are a lot of computer games like this out there but what really stood out was that it was for students. So if schools everywhere had a 'game day' they could generate so much money towards these charities and **really make a difference!**

Student B reacts to the discussion post with, "That is really cool...I hope that all schools would let their students do this! It would be such a great help to the charities". Student A replies, "I agree, I feel like it's not advertised enough, like not enough schools know about this!" Student C joins the discussion and comments,

I think that's a really cool idea, and **I like how you can pick the charity** you want to donate to **because it gets more people involved** in order to contribute to all different ones. That makes it such an **easy way** to donate to charities because the game is used for entertainment, and learning and **with no cost to play!**

The discussion concludes with supporting statements from classmates and Student A's final comment, "The picking your charity choice was my favorite part too. Then you can make it personal. For example, I choose to help animal shelters because I love animals. There's something for everyone!"

A discussion from the World Geography course showed a student discussing a similar website, Freerice.com. Gamers answer trivia questions and for every correct response, a grain of rice is donated to fight world hunger. Student A describes her indirect civic engagement by saying, “To help those who are hungry, I just spend approximately 45 minutes sending rice to people in need.” Student B asks, “Did it cost any money to do? That’s awesome!” Student A replies, “Nope! Just go to Freerice.com and answer a bunch of questions. I do this when I’m bored because I like to feel like I made a difference in the world” and closes with a smiley face emoticon. The discussion concludes with Student C’s comment, “That’s really cool and it seems easy to do.”

These two discussion thread examples represent an indirect form of civic engagement by the students. Students are playing video games, doing something that they love, at the same time they are donating to various charities. These students are not directly involved in their community through traditional civic engagement activities, but they are still active participants in helping improve their world. They feel like they are making a difference which is the most important element for continual action. Moreover, during a discussion in the Economics course, a student mentions:

Ways to raise money for fundraisers have become so creative and **I think its cool when people do things different like** this because it makes raising the money much easier. **I worked at Dairy Queen** before and they raise money for the Children's Miracle Network and we had a month where we were selling the dollar balloons that go towards the charity and you would not believe how hard it is to raise money by just asking people to donate a dollar!

This is another example of ways that students are indirectly involved in the betterment of their community: through their jobs, school, or extracurricular activities. In this case, the student worked for Dairy Queen, which partnered with Children's Miracle Network to raise money for an important cause. This student may have not raised money for this charity or another charity if she had not been employed by Dairy Queen, but her employment provided an opportunity for a kind of community contribution of which she was proud. A student in the American Government course shared her indirect civic engagement through her school Pharmacy Technician program.

**I actually volunteer** at our local hospital on once week in the pharmacy for my internship hours in my pharmacy technician program, **I think its just so fun to help them** because i know they have a lot of work to do every day **and it just helps when they have extra people doing extra things** so they have time to do the most important things first. I absolutely love it there.

This student is required to volunteer at the local hospital once a week but she knows that her time is needed and appreciated by the other pharmacists. This student is indirectly involved in a civic engagement activity because her school program requires the volunteer hours. Similar to the employment example above, fulfilling a requirement for graduation provided an opportunity for this student to make a meaningful contribution as well. She didn't set out make a civic contribution, but do so nevertheless by fulfilling her school obligations. These students feel like they are making a difference and they feel some intrinsic value in what they do even though they may not attempt these actions on their own. The good news is that when students are involved in

activities for social betterment, they are thankful for the experience and seem to take pride in what they do.

The second category for virtual students' civic engagement activities are those directly involved in the process. Those students who are directly involved in traditional civic engagement endeavors are, most often, the students involved in a church. The majority of the students are not old enough to vote and thus cannot yet get involved in politics, but they are directly involved in the civic realm through their churches. For instance, during a discussion about history repeating itself and lessons learned in the United States History course, a student posted her views on the importance of respect for others. She explains how history continues to repeat itself and uses segregation as an example. Student A thinks segregation was such a horrible concept but many groups today (e.g. immigrants and the LGBT community) are still fighting for equality and civil rights like African Americans did during the Civil Rights Movement era. She then describes a valuable experience with church in Tallahassee in the recent past.

I remember 2 years ago I went to Tallahassee (with my church, and different church's all over Florida) in the senate office, I went with hundreds of Hispanics, and **different types of races to protest against deportation and separation of immigrant families**, the best part was that it was exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. did because we did not have a violent protest, we had sit ins, and we prayed to go and we asked him to touch their hearts and to stop breaking families apart.... The coolest part was that after weeks of protesting they did not pass the bill to deport random people on the street like Arizona did.. **I thought I'd share this with you guys(: Just to prove to you guys that history does repeat it's self.**

Student B responds to the post with, “I couldn't have said it better myself. (: I completely agree about the rights. I am so glad and happy for those people to finally have the equality they longed for and dreamed of” and closes with a smiley face emoticon. Student A replies, “Thank you! And thanks to all those people who risked their lives trying to get the freedom for their children. I think it was a really cool experience, and I would do it again!!” The discussion concludes with student C’s comment, “It's a shame that people don't see how wrong they will be about denying these people their rights 10 years from now. They will someday realize that they're on the wrong side of history.”

Student A had a meaningful civic engagement experience. She went to Florida’s capital city with a large group and peacefully protested against legislation that was damaging to immigrants in Florida. The protest was so successful that the legislators backed down and rewrote the legislation in favor of immigrants and the best interests of the Floridian populace. This student found the experience to be a significant event that showcased the power that the people have in this democracy and the importance of active citizenship.

In another discussion in the U.S. History course, the students were instructed to describe their civic identities. Student A shared her missionary work in her local area as a vital piece of her civic identity.

Right now, **I'm contributing to the community by preaching.** The world does scare me but I find comfort from the Bible's message and it settles me. It holds a wonderful promise for the future and advice on how to live our lives best today. **My desire is to share this information with as many people as I can. I have noticed that people** who apply Bible principles are happier, cleaner, nicer people- they don't litter, they don't lie or

steal, they have better relationships with other people, and even though they are aware of the crime, etc out there, they're happy because they know it will all be gone soon. **In the future, I hope to** expand my activity in the preaching work. I would like to move to another area (city, state, country; wherever the most help is needed) and possibly learn another language so I can reach more people.

Her classmates were impressed with the volunteer missionary work and offered their support. For example, Student B commented, “I love how you enjoy preaching, it just makes me think about how teens today don't read the bible, or even think about god and what not. I'm glad you are spreading the good word” and closes with a smiley face emoticon. Student C said, “That's pretty cool what you do. I have also seen the Bible change people for the good and they're always positive and nice to be around.” Student A concluded the discussion by saying, “Thanks. Yeah, I love seeing that change in people, especially in myself.”

Student A's student engagement with her missionary work was quite different from the previous student's peaceful political protest with her church. However, both activities affiliated with the church (mentioned in this section) are important because churches are pervasive social groups that have played, historically, an important role in improving society through various means. Whether churches target social inequalities and peacefully assemble to instill change or members of the congregation make small changes in their local communities, these students do see them as a venue for meaningful civic engagement.

Another student from the World Geography course provided examples of making meaningful strides within her community with her church and was proud of the work because it was her way of showing God's love to others (See appendix F, exhibit F.10).

Last summer, we had an outreach with our youth group and we would go to a park or local area and hand out free water bottles and candy bars **just to show God's love**. We also picked up trash and did some yard work in a neighborhood, then had a big cook-out where we painted kids faces, made animal balloons, everything you could think of. **It was an awesome experience!** Other than that, we've volunteered many times at Bright House fields and raised money for camp.

Student B seems inspired by this story and comments with, "I'm glad you had a good experience with that! I'd really love to expand my share in volunteering once I'm all finished with school."

Student A responds to Student B's comment with, "That sounds like a great plan to expand in volunteering once school is out, it will definitely give you more time." Student C joins the conversation and explains that she would love to volunteer for an animal shelter and shows support to Student A. Student C continues with, "The world would definitely be a hopeless place if people didn't help out in small yet important ways. And I think it's great that you and your youth group do these nice and fun things." Student A leaves a final comment by writing, "I'm so glad there are people getting out and helping their communities, whether its just something small or even a big help. I'm really glad we have an active youth group that does these things, I just love it!"

These students who are connected to their churches and volunteer their time in various direct ways for the greater good seem to be highly motivated and appear to draw a sense of satisfaction and reward from their affiliation with other, like-minded people. Whether students are engaged directly or indirectly, they all reveal gratitude for the experiences and report feeling like they made a difference.

For those students who did not share their civic engagement stories or provide a detailed explanation about their service, it does not mean that they are not directly or indirectly involved in their communities; they simply may have chosen to focus their discussion posts on future or planned civic engagement endeavors. For example, in the World History course, Student A describes her desires to be engaged in the future by utilizing her artistic talent and reporting her recent attempts to volunteer for an animal shelter.

**I would love to work for** different sorts of supportive charities, especially charities that I can enter art work to earn money for others. If we did not have active citizens who cared about our community, everything would be much more violent and terrifying than it already often is. **I have looked into volunteering** for multiple animal shelters, but they were all booked up with staff! Even though I didn't get the chance to help, it's good that there were many people with the same goal.

Her classmates read the discussion post and wanted to help her reach her goal to volunteer at an animal shelter. Student B replied with, "I don't know where you live, but the local non-profit pet rescue shelter here in the north part of the county loves volunteers. I've done it there before." Student B does not explain the reason behind the volunteer work so I am not able to determine if this civic engagement experience was due to scholarship requirements or for her own civic identity fulfillment. Student A appreciates the advice from Student B and says, "I live in the northern part of the county, so I will check that out! Thank you so much!" Student C adds a supporting comment by saying, "I wish you luck on finding an animal shelter that is looking for volunteers. You seem to be really caring and a lot of drive. You'll do great!" Student D leaves the final comment of the discussion thread by offering advice for Student A to find an



animal program that needs volunteers by writing, “I want to volunteer for the ASPCA because I love animals and think that we have a responsibility to make sure that pets are cared for and have a loving home! Did you try the ASPCA because they have a summer program?” Student A did not respond to the question prior to the closing date of the discussion but it appears that this discussion thread provided her and other readers some helpful tips on where to volunteer in the local community.

When students discuss their previous, current or future civic engagement activities these virtual conversations appear to breed inspiration to those who are disconnected, supply support and ideas for those who are on the verge of engagement, and provide a venue in which to showcase and express excitement about their civic engagement achievements. For example, during a discussion in American Government where students were discussing what active citizenship looks like, Student A focused on the importance of volunteering.

**There are many, many places to volunteer at.** Such as our local hospital, you can help out the family and staff or raise money through fundraisers. There are all kinds of opportunities to help them out, I think it sounds pretty fun. **I would love to volunteer sometime soon, I think it could be a lot of fun.** It sounds like a great commitment, too!

Sometimes these virtual conversations promote bonding between and among students. This discussion about volunteering at a hospital touched the heart of a classmate who had a special connection to the local hospital. Student B comments with, “Our local hospital would be a great place to volunteer. Since I was a premature baby, my family said I spent 5 weeks of the beginning of my life there. My parents said that we were blessed!” Student B’s candor about his past inspired Student C to share his personal story as well, “That must have been awful, I was

born with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck so i almost died but the doctor saved my life.” Student B replies back by saying, “My parents said it was hard on the family but I am here and happy to be!” Student A then responds with, “My youngest brother was born with the umbilical cord around his neck 3 times. Doctor saved his life too with an emergency C-section. And I'm glad the doctor saved your life! I could only imagine how your mother felt.”

Student C could not relate to the stories that the other students were sharing but he did display a conviction for helping children by saying, “I love baseball and play baseball. I try to help younger kids play the game as well. I might volunteer one day to be a coach for a high school. Just thinking about it though.” Student A reads student B’s post and sees that he is just considering volunteering and she decides to encourage him to actually commit to his desire by writing, “That would be a wonderful opportunity, and I'm sure the kids would love it! It would make a great goal to reach in the future. Good luck, if you choose to do so!” Student D explains, “I always used to want to be a nurse to the children with life threatening illnesses, just to try to bring some happiness to them during such a dark time.” Another student joins the conversation and is curious what type of volunteering Student A would be interested in at the hospital by typing, “I definitely think volunteering at our local hospital would be amazing and totally worth it. Is working with kids the only thing you would like to do? Like working with a program that supports a certain illness?” The discussion comes to a close with Student A’s response to Student E’s question with this statement:

I would be happy to work in any of the fields, and working with kids would be an extra special thing. **Maybe I would like** to work with the kids who are suffering with cerebral palsy, because I too, was born with the slightest case. Thankfully, it wasn't anything too major. **But, I would love to help those that weren't as lucky.** That'd be really cool.

The bonding experiences revealed in this discussion as well as the inspiration for other classmates to get involved occurred in many discussion forums throughout the school year as well. Students used the forums to socialize, inspire, support, and connect with one another while embracing the goals of the social studies program – to prepare effective, contributing citizens.

Before I bring this section to a close, I want to highlight that some students factor civic engagement into their future career plans, such as Student D mentions in the previous discussion thread. During a discussion where students attempted to describe their civic identities, a student in the U.S. History course discloses his plans to be a lifelong active citizen through his future career. This student also points out the importance of an educated citizenry, especially the importance of educated leaders. Student A below sees education and good morals as a foundation to what makes a country powerful and successful. Countries with leaders that are uneducated, make the wrong decisions, and have a corrupt system are doomed for failure.

**After I graduate next year I am going to** sign up for Clearwater PD's Americorps program and do that while going to college. **From what I've read and heard** I will work with the community and side by side with police officers solving problems. Once I get my associates degree and police certification **I want to become a police or sheriff** somewhere around here **so I can work with, help, serve, and protect the people of the community I grew up in.** And if we didn't have caring citizens, our country would probably look something like Syria or Iraq if we did not have leaders that were educated. Luckily **most countries that have educated leaders like America, Canada, Australia, etc are way more powerful than** those countries who have leaders who don't negotiate and kill innocent people.

His classmates support his future career plans and instigate a conversation that focuses more on bonding than effective citizenship. For example, Student B jokingly writes, “Lol, hey when you become a police officer, don't pull me over!!! I promise I'll drive safe!” Sometimes in the virtual world, these students need the discussion forum as a social outlet to feel a connection to their peers since they do not receive social interactions like they would in the brick-and-mortar setting.

Another student explained his future plans in the same discussion but in the World Geography course:

**I will help my country by serving in the military and fighting for the place I call home.** I will also vote when the time comes. If we didn't have people who cared our country probably wouldn't be what it is today. We wouldn't have the freedoms that set us apart from other countries. The world would be **chaotic and more dangerous if leaders weren't educated** and didn't know how to negotiate. Some ways that people I know have helped out is being in the military. My brother has been in the Navy for almost 4 years fighting for our country making sure it stays safe so we can have the freedoms that we have. Does anybody have anyone in their family that has served or is serving in the military?

His classmates seem impressed with his future plans to serve in the military. Student B asks, “How are you serving in the military? And I don't have family members in the military.” Student A responds, “I joined the Army. I leave after I graduate next month.” Student B thanks

him by writing, "Thank you. I appreciate your service to our country." Student C brings the discussion to an end with his comment, "That's very commendable!"

This student finds honor through his military service and plans to vote when he is old enough. He sees the military as the direct protectors of our civil rights and freedoms while indicating that soldiers have a unique role in protecting our nation. The intrinsic motivation to serve in the military may come from his family history but this does not mean he would have chosen a different route to serving his country without the influence of the family. These stories of civic engagement endeavors as shared by the students represent the variety of ways that citizens can be active in their community. In their view, good citizens do not fit a specific mold but embraces their environments, talents, and interests in a manner that helps improve their communities.

### ***Theme Three Summary***

Consistently, the data show that the virtual students' civic engagement has not reached their desired or anticipated levels. Because there is no commonly accepted taxonomy or developmental model for civic engagement, it is not possible to determine a student's "ideal" civic identity status or development. Similarly, there is no right or wrong amount of civic engagement activity that these students are expected to perform. What the data does suggest is that some students are indirectly or directly involved in their communities while other students are still formulating and planning their goals (for short term or lifelong civic engagement endeavors). NCSS (2013) explains that an important characteristic of an effective citizen is one who actively participates in his or her community. Some students lack the active citizen piece to their civic identity while some students are (indirectly or directly) quite active in their community. Students who may not desire a traditional, face-to-face civic relationship with their

community appear quite aware that they can research options to become civically involved through social media or various technological means, and are frequently encouraged by their virtual classmates to do so.

This third theme also highlighted students’ definition of what a good citizen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be and, not surprisingly, given their expressions of the importance of individuality in other forums discussed earlier, the consensus was that a good citizen does not fit a particular mold. The notion that empowered students was that a good citizen does not have to achieve exceptional endeavors and that every good deed (no matter the size) makes a big difference. The students explained that technology’s impact on society has made good citizenship easier and more effective. Lastly, the data showed that these students find civic engagement as imperative for our democratic strength, and students who have participated in such civic engagement activities expressed the desire to participate again because they felt that they made a significant difference in their communities. Table 8 below provides examples of students’ direct and indirect civic engagement endeavors.

**Table 8: *Examples of Direct and Indirect Civic Engagement Activities***

<b>Direct Civic Engagement</b>	<b>Indirect Civic Engagement</b>
Environmental clean-up	Playing charity computer games
Peaceful protests	Charity work through employment
Volunteering at an animal or homeless shelter	Volunteering because of a school program or scholarship requirement
Inspiring others/preaching	Speaking out against societal injustices in discussion forums (e.g. bullying)

#### **Theme Four: Discussion as a Playground for Civic Identity Development**

Theme four presents students' interactions and responses to discussion forums as a social playground where their civic identities, outlooks of reality, and virtual friendships are tested and confirmed at various times. Data collected in this study show that students reveal fluctuations in their civic identity development, changes in their perceptions of reality, critical thinking and content knowledge progressions, and mature and respectful bonding experiences throughout the discussion forums.

##### ***Civic Identity Clashes***

A few students throughout the school year appeared to experience civic identity clashes which reveal the kind of identity confusion Erikson and others report is common in adolescent development. The current study did not seek to pinpoint the myriad causes of the identity clashes that appear in the discussion forums but it appears from the texts that the students could experience a change in perspectives because of a family member's or friend's opinions, their interactions in the discussion forums with their classmates, independent research or new learnings stemming from their virtual courses, or because social media may have influenced their thinking individually or collectively.

A student in the American Government course, that we will call Stephanie, swiftly revealed an identity clash resulting in a positive development. In a matter of three weeks, this student changed from presenting a hopeless and removed civic identity to one that is more connected and concerned. For instance, Stephanie expressed comments in the beginning of the semester like, "In my personal opinion, I do not believe our votes count, I believe the government knows who will be president way before we vote." Three weeks later she suddenly makes comments to her classmates such as, "Well just remember, voting is a right, as well as it is

a responsibility, you don't have to vote, but a lot of people do! I just think it's a good conversation starter, you learn new things when you get into a good conversation about the government." She continues to explain how she talks to her family about politics all the time and if she could vote in the upcoming presidential election, she would choose Obama over Romney. The rest of the semester showed Stephanie as an active participant in the discussion forums as a concerned, aware, informed, caring, and civically active student. There is no apparent reason for her civic identity change or growth, but from a teacher's perspective it was exciting to see this positive change in Stephanie using the discussion forum as a lens to observe the change.

After analyzing the U.S. History course, I saw an identity clash emerge from a student that we will refer to as Jewel. The entire school year, Jewel revealed a heart for the needy and had a strong civic voice for social justice with a noticeable disruption in the middle of the year. At the beginning of the school year Jewel seemed moved by the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie and perceived the rich as having a duty to give back to the poor. For instance, Jewel stated:

Carnegie was a really giving and good person to give his money away like that, **I feel like he didn't even think about it**, he saw people that needed it, and gave it to them. **I wish all rich people** would do that then there wouldn't have so many starving kids!

Then all of a sudden in the middle of the school year Jewel changed her tone of compassion and empathy for the needy into something more cynical. During a discussion about the fiscal cliff and the sequester, Jewel's classmate discussed the ignorance and materialistic nature of U.S. consumer culture. The student also mentioned that the homeless are homeless because of poor financial choices and financial mismanagement. Jewel responds to her classmate with:



People abuse their credit cards.. **And you are so right on how it's the homeless fault they are homeless**, they spend their money on beer and cigarettes rather than on food or bills); **I hate how my mom gives money to every homeless person she sees..**

Jewel's cynical attitude toward the needy (or homeless) quickly changed again and toward the end of the semester she seemed to return back to her empathic and compassionate identity. For example, in a discussion about students' civic identity explanations, Jewel illustrates her future desires to be a philanthropist and make someone proud.

**I know what it's like to go to sleep at night hungry**, because when I was younger (like 4) my parents could not bring home enough money to feed my brother and I, when they did bring home some food they gave up their food just so that my brother and me could eat. I know what it's like not to have toys to play with, or to want something that your parents can't afford because they can barely bring food to the table. So when the day comes and I have a great career **I want to dedicate the rest of my life to being a philanthropist**, I want to give money to people who need it, I want to travel the world and feed mouths who have not eaten in days, like Africa, Mexico, Greece etc. I want to give back to the world, my mom's dreams were to be a philanthropist but she did not finish school so she wasn't able to get a good paying job. I want to be someone's role model when I get older... **I want to make someone proud!**

If Jewel wants to be a philanthropist for the needy, does this include the homeless? It would appear as if this is the case and Jewel had a change of heart between the middle and end of the semester. Quite possibly she could have used the previous discussion forum as a place to vent

her confusion over homelessness since she observed her family in severe economic disadvantage, perhaps from the abuse of credit or some other poor financial decisions. And did her family get help, or does she attribute their financial recovery to her parents' own hard work ethic? Or, could it be that she was simply responding to peers who were critical of the homeless in a fairly typical adolescent manner: by submerging her own beliefs temporarily and simply agreeing with them?

Nevertheless, it appears that the discussion forums helped her work through her identity confusion and return to her more philanthropic viewpoints. For example, after she posted her discussion about wanting to be a philanthropist one day, her classmate replies with, "Never heard of a philanthropist till now, I wanna go look that up. I love your ambition, I think you will help a lot of people one day!" Jewel responds to her classmate with, "I didn't know there was a special word to it until we talked about Andrew Carnegie and many people like him this year. I want to be like Oprah too but better, lol." It appears from her comments that she was inspired to be a philanthropist by her mother, the course content about civic heroes, and the discussion forums to enact or develop her philanthropic civic identity. Her inspiration to do something good had a domino effect because her classmate joined the conversation and said:

That is very noble of you! **I wish there were more kind-hearted empathic people like you in the world. I understand the feeling of want to make someone proud and being their role model.** I am team captain of one of the teams on my roller derby league, as well as one of the oldest girls there. Recently, there have been a lot of younger girls joining our league(8-11 year-olds) and **I feel like I have an obligation to set an example for them.** I not only want to teach them how to play roller derby, but to become strong

girls with great sportsmanship and leaderships skills that they can apply to their everyday lives. I want to make them proud!

A student in American Government also showed an identity clash when focusing on the topic of education. Throughout the school year, a student who will be referred to as Zuri discussed the importance of education for the stability of our democracy, for individual advancement, and as a cure for numerous societal ills. During a discussion where students pretended that they had a voice in federal budget decisions, Zuri focused her attention on more funding for education. For example, Zuri claims that:

**People in the United States need more education**, not every one went to school when they were young, so why not give those people the chance to actually learn a few things, or even get a GED. It's better than having nothing at all, and not knowing anything about your own country. There are a lot of people who never got the chance to go to school, whether it be lack of funding, or no transportation, or even having mean parents.

The importance Zuri places on education and the funding of education are what any teacher would hope for, but the identity clash occurs when we look at Zuri's grade in the American Government course. At the same time Zuri preaches about the importance of education, her grades were consistently sub-par and her transcripts showed several course failures. Why would this student support the educational system and speak about the importance of it for the posterity of our democracy when her actions in real life do not seem to reflect her internal views? Maybe she wants to fix the system so it works better for students like her; or, perhaps, she has learned what kinds of postings will gladden a teacher's heart. Regardless of the reason for what appears

to be incongruence between her public presentation and her private academic behavior, it is worth noting that it is the “presentation” of her public persona that is important in this case. Unless students know her well outside of the virtual school, they have no way of knowing how she actually performs in an academic setting, as they might if they were classmates in a brick and mortar setting. All they know about Zuri is what she presents to them in the online forum.

### *Changes to Student Perceptions*

If students did not reveal major civic identity clashes, they could still reveal an instance where they changed their perspective on a topic or issue. The changed perception may not have caused a significant shift in their civic identity development but it is worth noting how discussion forums and the interactions that transpire within the forums affected the students’ thinking and perceptions of reality. For example, during a discussion in the Economics course about the pros and cons of capitalism and communism Student A writes:

From what I have learned/understand (?!) to me communism seems like a good economic system because it discourages greed and spreads wealth to a range of people instead of to just one. But then again the government is involved... **maybe I'm wrong though and the government is actually a good thing. Oh well gotta keep learning stuff to figure it out.**

This student expresses confusion over the Economic concepts but reveals an open minded attitude that is accepting of other viewpoints and further discussion on the topic (See appendix F, exhibit F.11). Student B comments with:

**I'm more in favor of capitalism,** but weather were living under capitalism or communism **its not going to be the same system in our lives as it is explained in the**

**theories.** I agree its good to discourage greed but I think in this day with all the money some people already have lived with we will never see an end to the greedy people... **I think people make the government out to be really corrupt and sometimes** it can be bad but could you imagine a life without government? There would be no structure or rules for everyone which seems to be a worse direction to go in than following the government. Being new to getting involved in all of this (**Because I turn 18 and can vote this year**) I think that people are way too stuck on the mistakes in the past made and right now any president is going to be blamed for the stuff thrown at him when he is elected, but Obama is making trying to bring us to a better place as is Romney (even though I'm for Obama... some people agree with Romney's plans the way I agree with Obama's) **whats your opinion on the whole thing?**

Student B explains that Economic systems concepts in textbooks and the original intentions of communism and capitalism appear different in reality. She finds capitalism as a better economic system and explains the importance of some government intervention into the economy for the protection of citizens against unrestrained greed. Student B also explains that she is going to vote in the upcoming presidential election and shows some indecision about who she is voting for. She even invites other viewpoints as well.

Student A then responds to the comment from Student B:

**I was talking to my brother yesterday** about the whole communism vs. capitalism thing and he also thinks that capitalism is much more realistic. **You definitely changed my mind.** I guess communism is pretty unrealistic since we've came this far but now I see it

probably wouldn't be possible anyways. **I really wish I could have started learning about the government at a younger age...**

The response that Student A provides does not indicate a drastic change in her civic identity, it shows a willingness to consider other's viewpoints in her family and her classmates before making a decision. Interestingly enough, Student A expresses disappointment in her lack of political and economic knowledge and she feels that she should have learned these concepts a while ago considering her age and the current elections. Student C joins the discussion and leaves this comment:

**Well its never too late to start! I wish I did too** and I'm sure I don't know much more than you do... I just recently started getting involved with the election going on right now. I see how people think communism is a good system to live under, especially for someone who wants constant stability, there are many pro's to it and it seems like a much easier life, but personally I'm just someone who needs a purpose to what I'm doing. **If I knew I'd be given a job with the same money everyone else made I would have no motivation to graduate high school and go to college to make something of myself.** Everyone has their own personal motives and I that's what formed my opinion on preferring capitalism over communism.

These students in this discussion thread exhibit a desire to learn complex economic and political concepts at a younger age so they can be knowledgeable and prepared to make informed decisions when they become adults. In this case, these students are either 18 or about to turn 18 and do not feel prepared to vote in the upcoming elections or engage in a conversation about

critical issues that the American people are concerned about during the presidential campaign. Most importantly, these students reveal a notion that they are open to divergent viewpoints, eager to discuss democratic concepts, and display a conviction to be informed and active citizens.

During a discussion about globalization in the World Geography course, a student wrote, “World trade is an example of globalization. World trade stimulates economic growth and creates peace between nations. However, world trade can be destructive and also result in exhaustion of natural resources.” Student B did not think about the negative consequences of world trade until she read her classmate’s discussion. She pondered the topic more in-depth and adds:

Saying the world trade can result in exhaustion of natural resources **is an interesting thought I haven't heard before**. In a way I agree- not so much that it results in an exhaustion of the natural resources but more that it results in a dependence on them because it is easy. **America is so dependent on the importing of oil** because it's our main source of energy and **while everyone worries that we will eventually run out you don't see the focus being on finding new replacements**. If we didn't have that luxury importing the resources then America wouldn't have as many and would run out much quicker, it would make finding the alternative replacements to these resources a bigger priority as well as put more focus onto it.

Student A’s discussion post intrigued Student B to think deeply about the subject and in doing so, she influenced Student A’s perspectives on the matter. Student A replies to Student B’s comments with, “Some seem to think that Americans think they are entitled to natural resources.

I guess it's a matter of opinion. You are right, we rely on importing oil too much. We need to look for ways to replace it!" Student B reads the reply and makes her final comment:

We do, but I think it will only be made a priority once we start really running out, **Which is why I found your thought interesting.** If we weren't able to import it would really cut supply and **we would already be looking at alternatives.**

Student A agrees with Student B's final comments about America's reactive (instead of proactive) approach to world trade and sustainability. These two students display a change in perspective about world trade during the discussion forum because they realized that world trade comes with multiple implications and that we need to start turning our attention, globally, to sustainable solutions to dependence on non-renewable natural resources.

In the U.S. History course, students discussed the nuclear arms race during the Cold War, and a particular student delved deeper into the topic by discussing current nuclear proliferation issues. Student A writes:

Some countries have nuclear weapons because some nations have bad intentions with such high powered and destructive weapons. Especially since North Korea is not in a war at the moment and has been threatening the United States. **Countries think they need nuclear weapons to protect themselves and also to take over other countries. I think nuclear weapons are good for the United States** but for other countries with negative intentions I do not believe it is right for them to be possessed.

Her classmate seems annoyed with Student A's belief that the United States can be trusted with nuclear weapons but countries like North Korea cannot be trusted. Student B replies by saying:



It's scary knowing that North Korea could attack us any day, at any place! **Right?**  
Hmmm... So it would be alright for America to have them but not the rest of the  
countries? **I think no country should have** them because that is just **not fair**,  
America and other countries use nuclear weapons to kill innocent people.

Student A then responds back with, “Right. But id rather have my power be better than any other  
country. Especially ones that have a dictatorship or an intent to over take our government.”

Student B disagrees with the statement again and replies with, “I think countries look up to  
America and try to do the same things as us, like creating nuclear weapons, and stuff. But it's  
fair if the rest of the world has them, or none of them do... Right?” Student A reads the comment  
and has a change of perspective and responds with, “Ok, I guess your right. It wouldn't be fair.”

The conversation concludes with Student C's comment, “A lot of great things have come out of  
the advances in technology, unfortunately easily making nuclear weapons isn't one of them” and  
closes with a frowning face emoticon.

Students' conversations and exchange of viewpoints appear to cause identity clashes,  
perspective changes on various topics, and fluctuations in emotions or reactions due to current  
events. For example, students seem generally optimistic about the world even though they can  
be tough critics. They realize that the world faces a lot of problems but they are confident that  
the problems will come to an end with a positive outlook and a caring and active citizenry.  
Comments that elicit a hopeful mentality appear like this statement from Martin in the U.S.  
History course, “I think one day we will all live together in one big society where nobody is  
looked at different for the color of their skin or the religion they believe in.” Or Cecilia's  
comment, “I know a lot of people are interested in the elections, people are wanting change and

they feel that elections coming up are the perfect time for the government to sit down and make a difference for the better.” Or Ginger’s statement, “I think America has learned from the bad things of the past and will learn how to improve the country even more.” Students, however, quickly change their attitude when discussing negative current events that cause trepidation.

For example, during a discussion in the American Government course, a student discusses how violence is a big problem both in the local area and even globally. Student A explains:

**I can't help but to think of the shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut.** How upsetting and sad this tragedy was, all of these innocent children and the parent's dropping their kids off at school like any other normal day until they get a phone call. Smart thinking to the teacher who put the children in the closet though. But they mentioned that this man who came into the school was mentally unstable and his mother had all of these weapons, a report also showed that he would play violent video games in the basement. **This could have been avoided if** the mother had taken precautionary steps by locking up these dangerous weapons having someone in the house with his condition. **People act in violence because** they are mad, depressed, bored or they just don't care.

Student B agrees with the discussion post and shows emotion to the topic by explaining:

**That made me feel terrible,** hearing about those kids at Sandy Hook. **I think that** kid that did this was not treated for his mental problems that were either hidden or he just didn't go to a doctor to be treated for it. There is a lot of violence in schools and

**everywhere and it is sad. You shouldn't have to worry** about kids going to school and getting killed; that's ridiculous.

Student C also agrees and adds, “I have a feeling some home school and virtual school rates are going to go up.” Student D writes, “I feel like the world has gone crazy, people killing people, terrorist attacks, and random acts of violence.” The conversation concludes with a few other comments about the correlation between violence and videogames. I decided to provide this discussion thread to show how students quickly transition from positive outlooks to more hopeless pessimism in discussions about negative current events (such as the Sandy Hook shooting).

In an open discussion about current events in the U.S. History course, Student A posts a discussion insinuating the dramatic nature of the media, “When you read the news the world seems crazy, society is about to fall, and you'll be blown up on the way to the store but when you actually walk outside and go somewhere it's just another normal day.” Student B responds to the post with, “That's true, we can't predict what will happen, like getting shot at or getting run over by a car.” Student C adds, “

And that's true about how when we're watching the news or whatever and we feel terrified just to leave the house, but we do it anyway without really thinking about the danger, because it's so normal. **Crime is everywhere**, we're used to hearing about it, and so when you go about your normal business, you don't think about it because it's not a threat until it happens. **You can't put your life to a halt** because of something you saw on the news, but yet you do **have to be aware of it and protect yourself** in simple ways.

Student A agrees by saying, “Yeah you just have to live your life and don't let your guard down.”

Student D joins the discussion and states:

**It really is scary what is going on in the world.** It is also really easy for many to think that nothing is going on in the world because when they look around all they see is calm. **That is why it is very important to be informed and up to date with the happenings of the world.**

Student E makes an interesting point with her comment, “Right?! lol, we honestly don't need to watch the news, Facebook, twitter, and Instagram are the ones who inform us.” Again, this goes to show that these virtual students obtain the majority of their information from social media sites, with the exception of some students who read news articles and when students learn through their online courses. The conversation concludes with student F’s comment:

**This world is crazy. I'm terrified** just to go into a movie theater (My favorite place!) let alone walk to work. **Sometimes it even scares me** just to be at home alone. And it's not only crime, but people in general are just rude, careless, arrogant.

The data collected indicates that discussions revolving around negative current events can have an effect on students’ outlooks of reality. Current event analysis is an important practice for students in their social studies courses; however, it appears as if these virtual discussions suggest that there must be a balance of positive current events in order to prevent permanent feelings of hopelessness and detachment. The reaction displayed in these discussion threads show students’ fears about the world and their hopelessness when discussing problems beyond their reach or even their understanding.

### *Critical Thinking Practice*

The data provided in this study thus far has exposed students engaging their higher order thinking skills at various times. The nature of discussion forums is argumentative, persuasive, and opinionated which ushers in critical thinking by the discussant and classmates.

During a discussion in the U.S. History course, students were instructed to determine the two most significant reasons for the onset of the Civil War (See appendix F, exhibit F.12). Student A, in the excerpt below, provides her reasoning for the discussion topic while displaying several higher order thinking skills: synthesis of multiple sources, analysis and evaluation of the information from the multiple sources, and an understanding and application of the new information to the discussion topic. Student A writes:

**The two reasons that I believe** caused the Civil War were the combination of the abolition movement and economics. As more knowledge about the cruelty and brutality of slavery started seeping out, more people started to oppose slavery. **Some of the events that exposed the truth about slavery** were the publishing of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, and the Dred Scott Case. The economy of the North was based on industry. With constant production and exportation of goods from these northern industries to other places (the south) which made the northern economy strong. Unlike the North the Southern economy was solely dependent on their crops that were labored for free with slavery. Any other goods they needed would be import from other places, one of them being the north. **Without slavery the southern economy would become extremely weak.** That is one of the reasons why the south really wanted to keep slavery.

Student B reads the discussion prompt and is curious what Student A thinks about this war occurring differently. Student B analyzes the possibilities of the Civil War occurring differently (or not at all) and the historical impacts of this phenomena while prompting her classmate to dig a little deeper.

**You're right about** how the south would become extremely weak with slavery. **I was trying to imagine** what would have happened if they let go of slavery and let themselves become weak. **I wonder if the war** would have still happened and if the future would have still turned out the way it did. **What do you think?**

Student C joins the conversation and answers Student B's question, perhaps intended for student A, "It is crazy to think about that. Maybe racial slurs wouldn't be around anymore, maybe other wars would have been prevented by people getting along. You never really know do you?"

Student C reveals her analysis of the situation and Student A adds her opinions as well, "If they let go of slavery there probably wouldn't have been a war and no debt to pay off! If that happened our history books definitely would have been different!" Student D then asserts, "I agree the minds of humans would still feel passion for the slaves even if they did believe they were different!" Student E concludes the conversation by saying, "I agree, if slavery was never in the south who knows how everything would of turned out to be today."

Students in this discussion thread are examining the reasons for the Civil War and speculating how our country may have been different if this war never occurred. Students are engaging their critical thinking skills as they speculate how society could have been different and whether or not the war could have been avoided. Contemplating different possible alternative routes of history (as shown in this example) engages students' critical thinking skills while

keeping them engaged in the conversation. Students also question historical events and determine the negative effects, using lessons of the past to guide better decisions for the future.

In the American Government course, students discussed how the media influences politics and public opinion. A particular student explained that the media and politicians work together to sway public opinion and used the N.R.A. and Kathy Gifford as an example. Student A writes:

**The mass media, especially television, plays a very important role in influencing politics.** In this example the National Rifle Association is trying to **persuade politicians to vote a certain way.** They bring in other politicians, like Kathy Gifford, to try to sway politician's viewpoints. Sometimes the media can be very one sided. Those paying for the advertisement are lobbying for politicians to vote for their cause. Sometimes they use celebrities to make their ideas seem more popular. Sometimes they play upon our sympathies by bringing in families of survivors or victims of a tragedy. **All these methods are used to sway our votes.**

This student reveals higher order thinking through a synthesis and analysis of resources, an evaluation of the current event, and an application of the current event to the discussion topic.

The teacher is impressed with the student's critical thinking skills practice and comments with:

**Perfect example!** Presidential elections show the biases in the media too.....one news network will show highlights of one candidate in a positive light and then another network will show the same candidate but in a negative viewpoint. **How do you think you will ensure that you won't be swayed by the media on certain issues/candidates when you are old enough to vote?**

The teacher is curious to know how this student will make informed decisions with consideration of the power of the mass media. Student A provides another impressive discussion post and also asks a critical thinking question to continue the discussion:

There are a number of ways that **a person can be sure that they are not swayed by the media** on certain issues or candidates. **First**, don't believe everything you see on television or in television ads. Do your own research on an issue or on a candidate. Look at a candidates past. Which way did he/she vote on certain issues. Try to find out who is backing that issue or candidate. This corporation or individual is paying large sums of money to have the candidate campaign for their cause. **Second**, it is important to read as much as you can about an issue or candidate. Read a variety of articles. **Lastly**, you can listen to political analysts who have already done a lot of the researching for you and see what they say. The bottom line is to use a variety of ways to make a wise decision.

**Question: Do you feel** that campaigning for candidates goes on for too long, costs too much money, and makes voters tired of listening to campaign ads?

Student A proves through three detailed reasons how he will be an informed voter in the future. He may have developed this awareness throughout the semester or from independent research during this discussion or through parental advice. Nevertheless, he shows in this discussion thread to have solid civic knowledge, skills, and values.

Student B reads the discussion and answers Student A's question with, "Yes because you can turn on the TV and see campaign ads for 2 or 3 months before an election and it is a huge



waist of money. I believe that money should go towards more structure things.” Student A seems interested in his classmate’s response and asserts:

**I definitely believe the money spent** on long election campaigns could be better spent on things like rebuilding our roads, bridges, airplanes, schools, and communities.

**Sometimes I think it would be better** if candidates were given a month in which to campaign and a limited amount of money would be given to each candidate to use to the best of their ability to make the best campaign. Now, **what did you mean by** "structure things"? Did you mean to put the money in buildings?

Student A also believes that campaigning is a big waste of money and the money spent on campaigning could go towards programs or charities intended for societal improvement. The discussion concluded with this comment because it was posted right before the due date.

The discussion threads in this section displayed impressive learning gains and critical thinking practice. Higher order thinking skills practice is imperative for virtual students because the majority of their social interactions, life decisions, and learning take place in this digital realm where a critical mindset is a priority due to the endless access to information and individuals on the web.

### ***Maturity, Learning from Each Other, and Bonding***

In this final sub-theme, I highlight other student interactions that affect and influence students’ civic identities and learning progressions. Looking back on the data collected, it appears as if these discussion forums acted as mini-democracies at times. Students respectfully debated, exchanged ideas, and interacted with one another while learning and building social bonds. I was surprised to see how mature the students’ interactions were in the discussion

forums as they politely disagreed, clarified their viewpoints to avoid misinterpretations, respected each other's viewpoints and lifestyles, and did not bully one another or act intentionally rude or immature.

These students also described, on several occasions, that virtual students are more mature than typical teenagers in the brick-and-mortar schools and the interactions that take place in the discussion forums confirm maturity in their presentation of their civic identities. For example, in the U.S. History course, Student A made this comment during a discussion about the Roaring Twenties culture, "I agree, kids are rebelling against their parents today like women were rebelling against men during the 1920s. That's one reason why I left regular school, I can't stand them. I feel that online students are more mature." Also, during an open discussion about student's opinions of discussion forums as a learning tool, Student B in the U.S. History class writes, "Yes, I absolutely enjoy the forums. I love being able to express my thoughts, receive feedback, view and comment on others opinions, and engage in actual mature conversations. Thank you for including these in our weekly routine, Ms. McBride!" Lastly, Student A in the U.S. History course chose to research about the War on Drugs and maintained a mature discussion about the controversial topic (See appendix F, exhibit F.13).

There were also times when students learned from one another in directions that I never intended as a teacher or researcher. For example, in a Microeconomics wrap-up discussion in the Economics course, a student described her frustration with scanning her assignments and uploading them (See appendix F, exhibit F.14). Student A explains:

The last several weeks, **the part that confused me** was having to scan papers back into the computer, in one document. **I decided to do all of my graphing on the computer instead.** It took a little more time to make the graphs on the computer but it would have

taken just as much time to figure out how to scan it all into one document instead of ten!

The elasticity formula confused me at first but then I got the hang of it after doing it a few times. I also feel more comfortable graphing the more I do it.

Student B responds to Student A's comments about making graphs and outright asks for specific directions on how to make them. Student A then offers some helpful advice:

Well if you're handy with Microsoft word **I know you can insert graphs** on there somehow. **But I personally just do mine in "paint"**. Its just like hand drawing it to me. Then I save the picture and go to 'insert' on Microsoft word and click 'picture' and then drag it to where the question is and resize it to scale.

Student D adds, "I have a Mac computer, so I use Pages and insert bold lines to make the graph and then I insert circles to make the point on the graph. The numbers on the outside I just type in a text box!" Student D joins the conversation and says, "I have a mac computer also, and can't figure out how to insert graphs.. Any tips?" Student A replies, "I just make the graph on Pages. Click on the green "shapes" button in the tool bar and add the lines for the graph and then the circles for the points on the graph. It's really easy! Hope that helps."

Not only do students learn content from one another and build social bonds, they are able to use discussion forums as pseudo study halls or tutoring sessions. I was impressed to see how willing students are to help one another as in this example above. There were many other examples of this type of discussion throughout the year but I provided one example to showcase the helpful nature of these virtual students and the unexpected interactions that unfold if discussions are student-centered and open.

The final discussion thread examples that I will present will reveal the various ways of that students bond. Students desire social connections with their classmates and those who engender 'bonding language' seem to be more active and engaged in the discussion forums throughout the school year. Examples that show a special bond taking place appear in statements such as Ceclia's from the U.S. History course where she responds to her classmate's reply to her initial discussion post, "Stella, thank you for your comment. Also You could have written about the same topic, I would not have minded, but thank you for being nice and not being a copycat lol. I emailed youuuu girl email me back!" During a discussion in the World Geography course, Terry engages in a conversation with several participants but seems to have a special reply to Student A and states, "I emailed you a response to this!" The language presented in these two statements reveal a friendship taking place outside of the discussion forum as a way to converse the discussion topic more in-depth and exchange meaningful, personal information.

Friendships and bonding also transpired at various times in the discussion forums throughout the year. For instance, in this example discussion thread below, students in the U.S. History course were instructed to analyze whether or not the military draft is a moral or immoral practice (at the end of the WWII unit). Student A posts her views on the discussion topic by asserting:

**I think that military drafting should be illegal**, because no one should be forced to go in war, and i think that going to war should be a volunteering thing because people lose their lives. If there were to be a **draft i think that the age limit should be 45**, because anyone above the age of 45 is old and they should not be sent to war and left to die out like that. **I think that the only reason that a military draft should exist** would be if a

country tried to invade our country, but besides that there is no reason to send half of our country to a different one and kill thousands of us.

Her classmate politely disagrees with some of her discussion post by writing:

**I agree with you as well. Nice Ideas! The one part I disagree with** was when you said "I think that the only reason that a military draft should exist would be if a country tried to invade our country". **I think it should be** outlawed period.

Student A reads Student B's response and replies with, "Yeah, because they would try and take over our land, and we should all join in to save our country." Student C reads the discussion thread and explains her partial disagreement with student A's post with:

**I partially agree with the last point-** the only reason I don't agree with the exception of if there is an invasion is because **I don't agree with war** at all, but it does make sense that in an emergency like that it sounds reasonable to have a draft for that reason only. Also, in regards to the second part of your answer to that question, that's an interesting point because **I think sometimes they send out more than enough soldiers** so then hundreds or thousands of people are dying/ being killed for no reason. 45 years old is definitely a good limit- I said 35 in my discussion post just because **I didn't wanna push it, lol.**

Student A then feels slightly “attacked” by her classmates as some of them are disagreeing with her. Student A responds to Student C’s lengthy reply by stating:

**Lol, everyone is making me seem like i'm a bad person** when i'm really not); **I said "IF"** ... But thanks girl!! Exactly, im not going to go die for no reason, there has to be a reason for me to sacrifice my life like that. **Lol**, maybe in between 35 & 45 maybe??!!

Student A uses her shorthand “LOL” comment to convey that she is not taking the criticisms too personally. Then she provides her clarification statement. Student C realizes that Student A is slightly offended and tries to remedy the situation with bonding statements, “I wasn't trying to say you are a bad person, I didn't think that at all. I understood you said 'if' and I agreed with you. You had a good response, you always do.” Student A immediately shows relief and that she feels support from Student C with her statement, “Aww, lol thanks(: Your responses are always on point too!!!(:” Student C even takes the initiative to try to start a friendship with Student A with this suggestion and the added emoticons, “Thanks :D ! If there's ever a partner project, we could collaborate ;)” Student A then replies to the suggestion with, “Lol, i know right!!! This is my first year in online school); soo i don't know what you guys do...” Student B replies, “Oh, I had a partner project in one of my classes I think last year, it's not very common but maybe Ms. McBride will see these comments and get an idea ;)” The conversation continues with more discussion about virtual school experiences and partner project ideas but I wanted to display this discussion thread as an example to show how friendships and bonding transpires in the discussion forums. Bonding is a crucial element to virtual school to keep students engaged in the learning process, feel supported by their classmates, and build essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills like appreciation for multiple viewpoints and cooperation.

### ***Theme Four Summary***

Theme four focused on the interactions and the effects of the interactions that transpired in the weekly discussion forums. Students' interactions with their classmates and course content appeared to affect their civic identities and both their attitudes and perspectives of reality in numerous ways. Some students presented significant changes to their civic identity throughout the year or changes to their democratic perceptions in just one conversation. Nevertheless, the interactions between classmates, content, and the teacher served as a mini-democratic laboratory where students engaged in higher-order thinking tasks and embraced democratic skills (such as decision making or building their civic voices). The discussion forums revealed many students meeting or coming close to meeting NCSS' (2013) effective citizenship characteristic #8: "uses effective decision-making and problem-solving skills in public and private life" (para. 5).

Students who revealed bonding language and a positive reaction to the weekly discussion forums seemed to appreciate the friendships and learning constructed throughout the school year. Finally, these virtual students displayed maturity and respect for one another in addition to critical thinking skills. These students clearly met NCSS' (2013) effective citizenship characteristic #10: "has the ability to collaborate effectively as a member of a group" (para. 5). It is my estimation that the discussion forums used as a learning tool in the five virtual high school social studies courses were successful in assisting students toward developing a positive civic identity, social studies content knowledge, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and virtual friendships.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to present major patterns and themes about the students' civic identities and the noteworthy interactions that transpired within the discussion forums. Generally speaking, I found that these virtual students treated the weekly discussion forums as

mini-democratic laboratories where they cognitively and socially wrestled with the social studies content, current event articles, and their classmates' and teacher's multiple perspectives. Each student responded to and interacted in the weekly discussion forums in a variety of ways: creating social bonds, developing/confirming their civic identities and personal sense of civic morality, learning new concepts and perspectives from their classmates, constructing a civic voice, sharing personal stories as a means of personal civic empowerment, and practicing imperative democratic skills (e.g. critical thinking and decision-making).

These students seemed to embrace the democratic processes of debate and deliberation in an effective and mature manner. Bole and Gordon (2009) point out that a strong democracy “requires the existence and exchange of ideological difference on the purpose and role of government, seeking consensus on solutions to common problems. The extremes of modern-day partisanship appear to highlight an inability for public servants to find common ground” (pg. 277). The ‘all-or-nothing’ partisan politics of our modern government prevents political unity and progress (Hill, 2006). However, these virtual students were, again, respectful in nature, embraced diverse viewpoints, supported one another’s arguments, and showed excellent cooperation skills in the weekly discussion forums.

Through the students’ use of the discussion forums, along with input from their classmates, teacher, and course content, they were able to develop and clarify their democratic values and perspectives gradually throughout the school year. Some students discovered a desire to help out the less fortunate or animals; some students inspired others to become more active in their community through their personal civic engagement stories; some students enlightened others about social injustices that ignited the construction of strong civic voices; and some students felt that they gained new knowledge and the discussion forums made their lessons hold



a purpose. As a result, the concept of ‘citizenship’ became less abstract as the students collectively maneuvered their way through various problem-solving and decision-making exercises in the weekly discussion forums that authentically, if virtually, prepared them for their current lives or future as informed and active citizens.

The majority of these students do not seem to reveal achieved fully developed and functional civic identity status due to their lack of advanced historical and political knowledge. However, many of these students wished they had learned more about our government and history at an earlier age. Nevertheless, having a solid historical political knowledge base is only a portion of an achieved civic identity and does not necessarily determine if someone can or cannot be a good citizen. I found that each student holds a complex and unique civic identity that is congruent with a talent, particular civic interest, or purpose. However, many of these students did not discover or act on their goals, aspirations, and civic action agenda due to a lack of motivation, resources, or practical opportunities. The discussion forums birthed a myriad of civic desires, goals, and self-discoveries but students were unable to fully implement or advance their civic commitments.

As a final point, the students shared their opinions about weekly discussion forums as a learning tool and almost every student seemed to thoroughly appreciate them. The comments below (in Table 9) reveal the benefits to implementing discussion forums in online social studies courses for a variety of reasons, such as , students feel a social connection to their classmates, students think that history comes alive and offers a purpose, and students authentically expand their learning through the interactions with divergent viewpoints.

**Table 9: Students' Opinions of Discussion Forums as a Weekly Learning Tool**

<b>Students' Opinions of Discussion Forums as a Weekly Learning Tool</b>
I do enjoy the weekly discussions because <b>it lets me put in my two cents</b> about the lesson were learning about at the time.
Yes, I think weekly <b>discussions made our history lessons come alive or have a purpose</b> . It was funny how often it seemed that our lessons were so similar to real life. It was a <b>good eye opener, and helped me look not just at the assignments differently</b> but also things that happen everyday. I think I liked the more recent discussions a little more because I was able to show how much I admire my grandmother and what she does.
I enjoyed using the weekly discussion forums. They were a fun and interesting way to see other <b>people's opinions on several different topics and helped to understand what our roles in society are</b> .
I enjoyed these weekly discussions on the forums. <b>It was fun for me to share my ideas</b> on the topics presented for each week. The <b>forums gave me the opportunity to connect with the other classmates with real world problems and collaborate</b> with them.
I love these discussion forums because it gives me the <b>honor to talk to other smart students like myself in our virtual school</b> (that are in the same class as me at least). <b>I am able to talk to kids my age because I barley have any friends lol</b> . The first thing I do when I login each day is check the forum because <b>I like to acknowledge people's comments</b> .

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Toward an Empowering Virtual High School Social Studies Curriculum**

“Do not train a child to learn by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.” --Plato

#### **Introduction**

To recap, chapter 1 was comprised of a general overview of the study, the research problem, rationale, purpose and significance of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, definitions, assumptions, and limitations. In the first chapter, I mentioned that the explosion of distance learning programs throughout the nation in the past few years, the absence of research supporting effective learning outcomes and best practices in online high school social studies programs, and a narrow comprehension of how civic identity is portrayed and enacted at a distance pushed me to examine these topics collectively. My research questions were twofold:

1. What does students' language-in-use in the discussion forums of five online high school social studies courses reveal about the construction and/or portrayal of their civic identities?
2. How do the interactions of virtual students that transpire within the discussion forums affect the formation and portrayal of their civic identities?

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature in which I attempted to provide context for the study. The topics examined in the second chapter were: Citizenship, the Social Studies, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum; Evolution of Distance Education; Best Practices for Online Instructors; A Brief History of Social Studies Education; Best Practices in Traditional Social Studies Classrooms; Best Practices for Virtual High School Social Studies Instruction; Roots of Socialization: The Association of Men and Democracy; Democratic Processes and Life-Long Learning; The Important Role of Language; Developing and Facilitating Discussions in Asynchronous Forums; The Purposes of Discussions in Online High School Social Studies Courses; Discussions as the Conduit for the Construction and Enactment of Civic Identity; and Critique of Preceding Research in Relation to this Current Study. This broad-ranging review of the literature connected the fields of distance education and social studies education as context for the greater issue: the development of civic identity as the potential driving force behind lifelong civic engagements.

Chapter 3 reported the discourse analysis methods and procedures utilized, including the sampling procedures, data analysis techniques, quality measurements, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presented the four themes that emerged during data analysis:

1. Students revealed utilitarian and social justice elements within their civic identities;
2. Students showed an eagerness to question and analyze society and the government;
3. The data revealed concrete instances of civic identity exhibition along with civic engagement testimonies; and
4. The interactions that transpired within the discussion forums were a vehicle for civic identity development.

This final chapter will provide conclusions, a discussion of the findings and recommendations for the social studies educational community, and researcher reflections. A summary of the study's research questions, major findings, conclusions and recommendations are presented below.

## **Summary of Study Results**

### ***Summary of Study Results, Research Question 1***

Research Question 1: What does students' language-in-use in the discussion forums of five online high school social studies courses reveal about the construction and/or portrayal of their civic identities?

Findings for Research Question 1: Three major themes emerged from the students' language-in-use that indicated how they constructed and portrayed their civic identities in relation to their understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship and the roles they are expected to play as "good citizens" in a democratic society.

1. Utilitarian: Students portray themselves with some pride as protectors of civil rights and social justice. Their stated beliefs and positions on issues reflect the liberal democratic philosophies that underpin many of the nation's founding documents and principles, and, as a result, the philosophical foundations of most social studies content.
2. Reality analysts: Students in the current study also tended to critique societal norms and portray themselves as moral agents. Their language reveals that they are tough (and sometimes inconsistent) critics of society and the government simultaneously. They see themselves as having a fairly firm grasp on current realities and, with few exceptions, have strong faith in their own assessments of social conditions.

3. Prospective good citizens: Students display many similar perceptions of effective 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship, although their individual civic identities at different levels of maturity and sophistication. Many students report that they are directly or indirectly civically engaged or display concrete plans for their future civic engagement.

Conclusion to Research Question 1: The major conclusion to be drawn from the findings above is that the majority of these students do not seem to reveal an achieved civic identity status or a very sophisticated or mature identity due to the lack of nuanced historical and political knowledge and a lack of specific civic goals and commitments. There are some students that could be perceived as having an achieved civic identity due to their active roles in their community through their religious endeavors or their future career pledges, but, for most, the civic identity they portray is still very much in its formative stages as indicated by their presentation of incomplete or inaccurate historical or political information in support of their positions and their absence of well-defined personal civic goals and aspirations.

Put very succinctly, the students in these virtual forums are very well intentioned, understand the fundamental philosophical principles and commitments that underpin democratic societies, but lack a sophisticated understanding about how to put these principles and commitments into practice in the real world that they inhabit. Many of their comments refer to their belief that “they” (usually not well defined) should do something different (such as feed the hungry, or distribute wealth more equitably), or that the government should take specific actions that are often beyond its legal authority or its political or fiscal capacities. In short, they know what they believe needs to be done to exhibit deep civic commitments, but they remain unsure about who should do them or how their goals can be achieved.

Recommendations Based on Research Question 1: Two distinct recommendations can be supported by the findings and conclusions reported for Research Question 1.

Recommendation 1: Virtual social studies educators and social studies educators in general, must focus on empowering the individual student with sufficient civic, historical, legal, economic and political knowledge to understand the subtle and often messy ways that civic engagement is acted out in a free and open society. This understanding is fundamental to understanding the complexities of citizenship as well as creating and portraying a complete, mature and well-informed civic identity. Up until this point, the social studies program appears to have instilled the values and beliefs normally associated with democratic life and citizenship, but have not produced a solid understanding of the actual mechanisms and levers of citizenship in a complex and diverse political democracy.

Recommendation 2: As part of the normal curriculum experience, students need to be provided with the time and guidance necessary for personal civic goal development. By turning their values, beliefs and commitments into concrete goals for social change or civic action, students will begin to understand the importance of being well-informed before making civic decisions, the significance of critical thinking and information consumption in a world awash in inaccurate and biased information, and the complexity of bringing about meaningful change in a diverse society. In essence, by establishing goals and plans for personal civic action, they will better understand what it is they need to know and be able to do in order to be effective citizens.

### ***Summary of Study Results, Research Question 2***

Research Question 2: How do the interactions of virtual students that transpire within the discussion forums affect the formation and portrayal of their civic identities?

Findings for Research Question 2: Data on student interactions analyzed in detail in Chapter 4 reveal four major effects on student language, socialization and performance.

1. Student civic identities clashed not only with those of other students, but sometimes within the postings of an individual student whose portrayal of him or herself as a civic being changed from earlier portrayals. Clashes between students were almost uniformly polite and respectful, but students did not hesitate to speak their minds or voice their opinions. Clashes between students were typically resolved quickly, with students backing off of extreme positions and statements or getting more information from other students or the teacher that encouraged them to moderate their stance. Identity clashes within students were usually resolved in a similar manner, often quite quickly, when they got more information about a topic and changed their mind.
2. Students used the forums to bond with other students and even create friendships. Often, these bonds were created or reinforced by personal stories about challenges and struggles that a student may have experienced that resonated with another student. Because the forums were public, when a student supported a virtual classmate emotionally, everyone saw it happen and other students would often join in to offer support as well. Ironically, because of the nature of the open discussion forum, these displays of emotional support were somewhat more “public” than a similar exchange might have been in a conventional classroom setting.
3. Although the forums were open and expression was quite unstructured, both the teacher and students held their classmates accountable for the quality of their critical thinking about issues and information. In some cases, students were challenged to explain something further and to elaborate on their thinking; in other cases, the quality of



student's thinking was challenged rather directly. Just as students are inclined to do in classroom discussions, they sometimes posted an idea or position before thinking it through very carefully. The criticisms were always polite and gentle, but they did require students to engage in a degree of metacognition and think about their own thinking.

4. One of the most notable findings in the discussion data is the extent to which students changed their perspectives about an issue or problem, most often because of their interactions with other students. Sometimes they were chided for their stance, but usually they were asked, "have you thought about this" or "have you considered this other viewpoint?" Similarly, students would conduct independent research and report their findings to the rest of the group as a way to get their virtual classmates to think about the issue differently.

Conclusions for Research Question 2: The findings for research question 2 support two important conclusions:

1. The discussion forums acted as mini-democratic laboratories in which students embraced and sometimes struggled with the 'mode of associated living.' In a relatively safe environment, the discussion forums gave students a chance to try out ideas and positions, allow others to react to them in a civil (and monitored) manner, and modify or change their positions in response to the arguments of other students or the discovery of new information. They became models of civil, civic discourse in which the focus was on ideas, beliefs and values rather than the personal characteristics and qualities of the speaker. Throughout this entire experience, which covered dozens of students and

literally thousands of posted words, there was never a single personalized, *ad hominem* attack or criticism leveled by one student at another

2. If social studies educators (both virtual and brick-and-mortar teachers) are to teach the ‘mode of associated living’ and engage in a democratic experiment, the curriculum needs to offer flexibility, openness for communication, freedom for students to interact with one another in a civil manner, and the opportunity for students to become enlightened to their civic and personal potential as contributing members of a democratic society. Despite their sometimes frustrating lack of content knowledge, students in this study demonstrated sophisticated online interpersonal skills and a sense of responsibility to support other students’ learning and development. The exchanges were almost universally polite, supportive, and, even when critical, focused on ideas and issues rather than personalities. In this study, these high school aged students demonstrated that they could learn from one another effectively and in a supportive, democratic community they helped to create.

Recommendation based on Research Question 2: These data and conclusions lead to one major recommendation for practice. Students in this study live and study in the communities in which they live. Many are not transported to a physical school location, so in order to make sense of their place in a democratic society and form a sense of their own civic identity as they study social studies content, they look to their immediate surroundings for evidence of effective citizenship (and social injustices). The examples they use to illustrate their conceptualizations of citizenship and civic identity come from their own, very real, experiences in their families, communities and other institutions that affect their lives.

These students' understandings of social studies content are enriched and made more authentic by their experiences in their communities, although, except for the online forums, there was no systematic opportunity to "debrief" those experiences with the guidance of a social studies specialist. This suggests that there needs to be a more authentic and planned connection between school, home, and community life in the K-12 setting so students are empowered through authentic experiences where they can practice their civic commitments and goals. Further, they must be given the opportunity to question, discuss and otherwise debrief their experiences in order to help integrate them with the content of the social studies that is necessary for life in a pluralistic democracy. In short, policy makers, schools, community members, and teachers must find ways to give students the opportunity to practice democratic citizenship prior to adulthood.

### **Author's Discussion**

Instead of focusing on the decline in civic engagement or the erosion of our nation's democratic virtues, I chose to focus on the ways in which students think, behave, and perceive themselves as important members of their community (and nation). Rather than focusing on what is lacking or wrong with our nation's youth, I decided to examine what students are doing now in the technologically-rich 21<sup>st</sup> century that may hold promises for our democratic future. The examination of students' language-in-use in five online high school social studies courses' discussion forums became the best avenue for understanding the representations of students' civic identities as they portray them to their classmates and instructor. The words and interactions that transpired within the weekly discussion forums revealed students' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, desires, and personal stories that were rooted in their unique civic identities.

The weekly discussion forums were written in an open fashion where students were given a broad (and sometimes controversial) topic to unpack. The weekly discussion topic was connected to the learning objectives but required students to apply their understanding of content, analyze sources or perspectives to make a decision or argument, and to respectfully communicate with their classmates. Since the discussion forums were structured around an open, controversial, problem-solving, or decision-making topic each week, the construction and testing of values naturally transpired as well. The discussion forums each week acted as a social outlet for students to create social bonds, learn content and multiple perspectives with each other, and attempt to understand the world and their role as positive agents for social change.

Table 10 (below) summarizes the elements that represent the virtual students' civic identities as suggested by the data collected and analyzed in this study as examined in the first research question. This study did not measure the degree to which students' civic identities developed against a (non-existent) standard model or taxonomy. Nor did it seek to assess the rate of speed at which their identities formed, or compare them to peers or even their own starting points. Instead, the purpose was to gain an understanding of how students perceive citizenship and how they present their relationship to their communities and nation.

The general decline in traditional civic participation (e.g. voting) over the last 30 years, especially in the young adult category, has caused increased attention to civic engagement research and various methods of promoting civic participation among our nation's youth (White, 2012). However, Bers (2008) explains that young adults are actively involved in politics and their community but in ways quite different from previous generations. The virtual students in this study discussed newer ways of being civically engaged through the use of technology, such as texting to donate to a particular charity and playing computer games for charity purposes.

Therefore, our national focus should not be centered on voter turnout statistics or standardized test scores measuring “citizenship” knowledge; rather, our focus should be centered on the future generation’s ability to be the responsible inheritors and authors of an ever-changing democratic script. Put simply, we need to stop regarding past traditions as indicators of our future; instead, we need to examine what students are currently doing, thinking, and feeling with consideration to citizenship, democracy, and American identity.

**Table 10: *Representations of the Virtual Students’ Civic Identities***

<b>Representations of the Virtual Students’ Civic Identities</b>
<p><b>Students....</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● respectfully embrace and tolerate diversity and multiple perspectives.</li> <li>● uphold civic morals and democratic principles. Speak out against societal injustices (e.g. stereotyping).</li> <li>● are dedicated to the full protection of civil rights and social justice.</li> <li>● are compelled to question social norms while analyzing controversial issues.</li> <li>● expect the government to work for the people and protect the interests of the greater good.</li> <li>● have many solutions and ideas for societal and governmental improvement.</li> <li>● enact inspiration and civic desires/goals (e.g. helping the less fortunate) during discussions of positive current events, civic heroes, personal civic action stories, etc.</li> <li>● are authors of 21<sup>st</sup> century effective citizenship (e.g. cyber-citizenship). They believe that every good deed in society can cause a domino effect and anyone can be a good citizen.</li> <li>● are cooperative learners, good communicators, and respectful to others. These students value self-expression, maturity, and friendship.</li> <li>● are directly and indirectly connected to their communities or have future civic engagement plans.</li> <li>● have varied levels of a historical/political knowledge and skills base.</li> <li>● are patriotic yet skeptical of governmental operations.</li> <li>● have limited spheres of experience/immediacy mentalities that influence their thinking, arguments, and perceptions.</li> </ul>

An achieved civic identity is one that has a fervent connection to a community where an individual feels compelled to be an active and informed member. Civic identity, in the context of this study, is an elevated sense of citizenship and something more powerful than simple notions of self-efficacy. A solid civic identity is achieved when an individual becomes an informed and caring citizen who is active in his or her community according to unique civic goals and natural talents or the needs of the community, and who commits to the notion of being a lifelong learner. The most vital factor in predicting civic engagement, according to Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997), is the degree to which an individual constructs and maintains a strong civic identity. The virtual students in this study revealed great civic potential and the discussion forums allowed students to learn, practice, and share their ideas and hopes for our nation and the world. Although their civic identities may not be fully formed yet, the discussion forums appeared to assist students in developing their civic voices, sense of democratic morality, and knowledge of our current global condition. Thus, equipping our youth with knowledge, skills, and the tools to achieve robust civic identities should be our ultimate focus as virtual high school social studies educators and researchers.

Reflecting on this dissertation, three years of teaching in the virtual high school, four years teaching in the brick-and-mortar classroom, and the numerous years studying social studies education and distance education literature has led me to this conclusion: a high school virtual social studies curriculum and course must be empowering. An empowering virtual social studies curriculum focuses on students' self-development while maintaining a rigorous, meaningful, open, and flexible design. Virtual high school students need an open and flexible curriculum where they can express their opinions, build their civic voice and civic identity, research topics

of interest to their lives as it relates to a democratic society, and reflect or test their new leanings and values with others.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Civic Identity Development as the Focal Point***

The attention on civic identity development as a goal of virtual high school social studies instruction is a promising target so educators can understand how students see themselves as important members of their communities and how they conceive of the obligations of democratic citizenship. The notion of civic identity as a focal point is not an addition to the social studies curriculum; it is something that offers an instructional purpose to teachers and their students. Once teachers understand that there is a greater purpose in their daily routines than helping students pass the yearly standardized test, this recognition may prevent teacher burnout, increase motivation and excitement, and improve practice. Once students feel that there is a purpose in every activity that they engage in, they will find motivation to learn and master tasks or skills for personal and community advancement.

Practicing social studies educators may not embrace a curriculum that is intended for lifelong civic engagement due to standardized testing demands, classroom management difficulties, a lack of resources and professional development, or because of various other reasons. Current teacher preparation programs should focus on helping pre-service educators learn ways to frame all their lessons, activities, and classroom interactions with civic identity development or empowering civic engagement preparation as the driving force behind instruction.

The data collected in this study shows that the virtual students embraced diversity, individuality, uniqueness, and finding one's unique purpose. They also expressed their desires to

help their communities according to their particular interests but did not discover or fulfill their civic potential because of the lack of guidance from adults in their lives about opportunities and strategies. Students who revealed civic identity achievement and were active in their community already discovered their purpose and knew what was expected of them due to a religious affiliation or a clear career goal. I find that the missing instructional ingredient is the time spent on empowering students to discover their individual meaning and uniqueness, set personal civic goals and aspirations, and employ their talents for their communities' improvement.

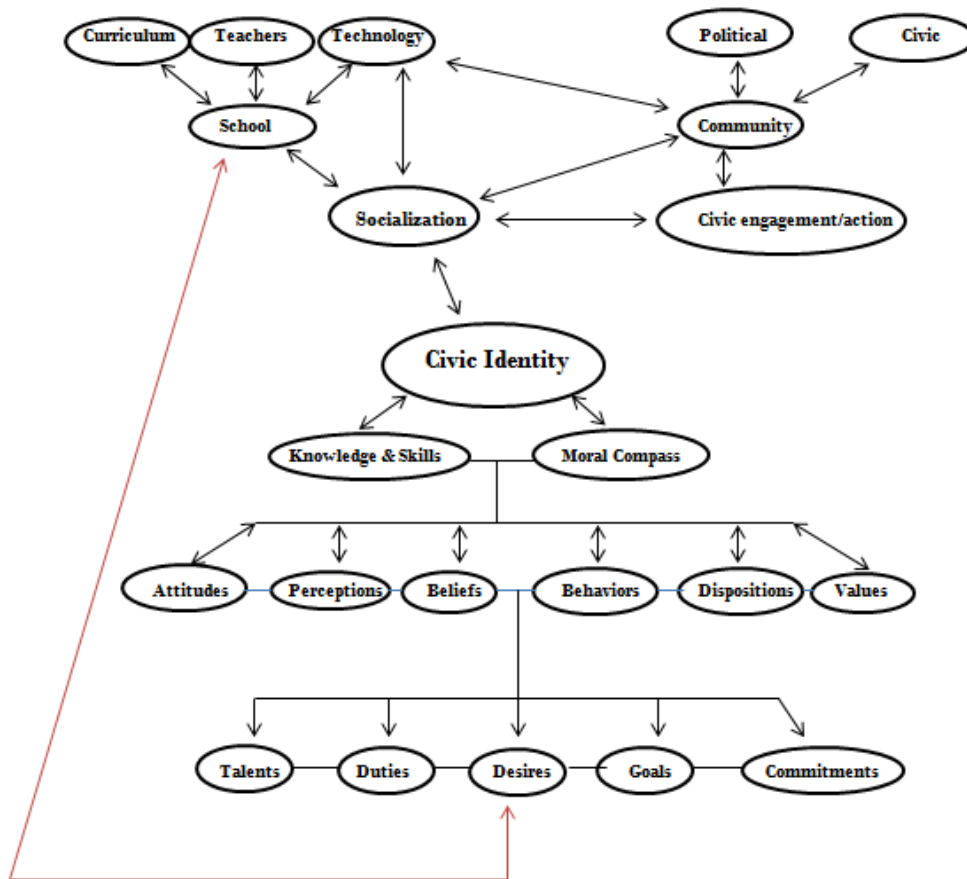
The conceptual model in the first chapter is similar to Figure 8 (below) but there is an addition of one's talents, desires, duties, goals, and commitments that stem from their values, perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes is the addition. The educational challenge is to help students form goals and commitments and utilize their talents to fulfill the duties of citizenship in a manner that is congruent with values, perceptions and beliefs.

Essentially, the data shows these virtual students have untapped civic potential and have a strong desire to make a difference in the world in their own unique ways. They were able to voice their concerns, civic desires, and ideas for social change in the discussion forums because the structure of the discussion forums was open and flexible.

It may be that educators are too concerned about potential or desired outcomes and not concerned enough about activating students' current energies and talents. Policy makers, teachers, and community members might be more successful in building civic engagement by helping students use their existing talents, civic goals, and commitments for personal and community advancement. When students feel like a valued member of their community and think that they can make a difference, they will most likely take action in current and future instances (Levy, 2010). In simpler terms, instead of looking only for ways that will prepare



students for their futures as active citizens, it makes better sense to treat them as important members of their communities now and empower them to take immediate action according to their interests, goals, and talents. If we are to teach the mode of associated living in a democratic environment, our schools need to: (a) offer flexibility for learning according to student interests, (b) provide openness for communication and collaboration, (c) structure experiences for students to build a relationship with their community and engage in democratic processes, and (d) offer freedom for the learner to become enlightened to their civic and personal potential.



**Figure 8:** *Civic Identity as the Focal Point of an Empowering Virtual Social Studies Curriculum*

### *The Call for an Empowering Virtual Social Studies Curriculum*

Social studies education is more than the teaching of historical facts and events, it is providing students the opportunities to analyze “human nature and basic moral values and issues that are central to the human experience” (Moore, 2012, p. 146). The emphasis of teaching students to be active citizens through traditional methods (e.g. voting, protesting, and serving on a jury) and neoteric methods (e.g. cyber-citizenship) is also a part of an effective 21<sup>st</sup> century social studies program. Another important element is giving students opportunities to develop decision-making skills as our democratic stability rests on citizens who make sensible, informed decisions. The list of effective social studies teaching strategies is rather expansive (e.g. problem-solving, discussions, historical inquiry, etc.) but the aim of social studies education is to prepare and encourage students to become lifelong caring, active, and informed citizens in our multifaceted democratic nation.

Social studies teacher education programs need to assist pre-service teachers in gaining the proper content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge that embraces a democratic 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching philosophy. Pre-service social studies educators need to understand that they play an important role in shaping the current and future generations’ social, economic, political, and moral complexes that will affect our collective democratic climate. Teacher educators must also understand that their job is to bestow the proper tools and knowledge that will encourage pre-service educators to become the gatekeepers of the kind of learning that will help assure a highly participatory democracy. In other words, social studies educators have a duty to prepare students for their roles as caring, informed, and active citizens which is a hybrid of values, content, and skills acquisition necessary for democratic prosperity. How educators prepare students to live, behave, and

perceive their democratic reality in school will directly affect how they live, behave, and perceive their democratic reality as adults.

The issue that social studies educators continue to observe is the absence of a particular set of methods for ensuring that students will remain politically and civically active throughout adulthood. There may not be a single remedy to this but a promising place to begin is with the individual student. Put simply, the curriculum should be focused on inspiring students to develop personal civic goals, empowering students to achieve their goals with opportunities and resources necessary for implementation, and encouraging the students to discover their purpose and talents for their communities' advancement.

An empowering virtual high school social studies curriculum is provided by a teacher who delivers and creates assignments, lessons, and social learning experiences around (a) meaningful knowledge and skills necessary for success in one's personal life and for our nation's democratic progress, (b) the development of civic morals and values, and (c) the formation of civic goals and commitments. Time spent on personal development through reflective writing, service learning projects, current event analysis, and controversial issues discussions are a few examples to making a social studies curriculum empowering. Youniss (1997) explains that one's civic identity construction is shaped by "the interaction of one's biological characteristics, one's own unique psychological needs, interests, and defenses; and the culture in which one lives" (as cited in Nickelson, 2001, pg. 29). Young people develop a sense of who they are as citizens of their nation and community as they interact with new ideas and experiences, develop and test their civic morals, and reflect on what sparks their interest and inspires them to achieve. In other words, virtual high school social studies courses should mirror our democratic operations. The notion of preparing students for their futures as active citizens through the development of skills

and content knowledge alone may need to be reconsidered. Our graduates have proven again and again that those understandings may be necessary but are not sufficient to prepare students for active citizenship. There needs to be a connection between school, home, and community life in the K-12 setting so students are empowered through authentic experiences where they can practice their civic commitments and goals.

According to Rossi (2006), the discussion of “public issues lies at the core of democracy” (p. 112). The correlation between the growth of democratic attitudes and an open classroom is high as students feel free to express their opinions. Implementing discussion forums, synchronous discussions via Blackboard Collaborate, and web 2.0 learning activities are among a few of the methods for turning a virtual social studies course into an open and democratic environment. As mentioned in chapter 4, I was surprised with the high levels of cooperation and bonding among the students as well as the impressive learning gains that unfolded as a result of peer-to-peer learning. The discussion of morals and values in a democratic society also unfolded naturally due to the open and free communication available in the discussion forums. For example, in appendix F, exhibit F.13, the students in the Economics course were free to discuss what they learned, found confusing, or what sparked their interest during the Microeconomics unit and the interactions that transpired in that discussion forum were a wonderful example of what occurred throughout the year; students taking the opportunity to support and help each other throughout the learning process. For traditional brick-and-mortar social studies teachers, implementing discussion forums for homework or extended instructional purposes may be beneficial as teachers may feel pressed for time due to standardized test preparation and other pressures.

Throughout the school year students used discussions to feel socially connected, construct their civic voices, and embrace democratic values. Overall, discussions consistently gravitated toward social inequalities, protection of civil rights and autonomy, and disapproval of immoral acts (e.g. bullying). The discussion forums were essentially utilized as a playground for the practice and development of students' civic identities. For example, during the Muckrakers unit, Student A wrote,

**Remember that in order to become something big today you need to** go to school, and get a career, something the immigrants can't do. These people are helping America, not destroying it. We are all the same, yes we have different skin color, different ethnicity, some may be richer than others, but at the end of the day **we are all human beings** at the end, and immigrants look the same in the inside as we do, they are not aliens.

Student A ignited her civic voice when discussing a matter that was controversial yet important to her as a significant member of her community. I saw her civic passions and hopes, engagement levels, and democratic values and morals dramatically increase during this conversation and others that followed. Fesmire (2003) argues that a civic identity needs instances of active reflection and a moral rehearsal where the students discuss how our society can improve. Throughout the entire school year, I found students naturally engaging in moral dialogue and embracing democratic values due to their social justice mentalities and protectors of the greater good character trait. The open nature in which the discussions were written and executed seemed to empower the students to take the conversations down paths that interested them or to topics that they felt compelled to address.

The Ancient Greeks perceived discussions as democratic deliberation which they considered the “talk we use to teach ourselves before we act” (Mathews, 2006, p. 93). Democratic deliberation, as Fleming (2011) writes, is the foundation for which our democracy thrives. Discussions are an empowering activity for students as they have the freedom to be independent thinkers, take charge of their learning by being active participants in the conversation, and have an opportunity to share their opinions with their classmates. For example, a student wrote:

Yes, I think weekly **discussions made our history lessons come alive or have a purpose**. It was funny how often it seemed that our lessons were so similar to real life. It was a **good eye opener, and helped me look not just at the assignments differently** but also things that happen everyday. I think I liked the more recent discussions a little more because I was able to show how much I admire my grandmother and what she does.

The interactions that transpired within the weekly discussion forums showed positive trends through students’ respectful and mature dispositions and high participation levels, the evidence of critical thinking, and values formation. I may have not seen these significant interactions taking place in the discussion forums if it were not for the deeper reflection and analysis of student data that occurred throughout my dissertation journey.

Discussion forums as a learning tool seemed to work in many areas, and may, in fact, help with several weaknesses in adolescent discussions: the students’ immediacy mentality, emotions interfering with their logical arguments, and lack of evidence to support their opinions. Because the forum postings could be thought through before being released to the rest of the class (unlike a more spontaneous utterance in a classroom), students can be encouraged to think

and deliberate before they write (or speak). In addition, feedback from other classmates, delivered without rancor or unkindness, can help them refine and make their arguments somewhat more mature and thoughtful.

Supporting arguments with evidence from reliable sources is an important skill for students to acquire for college and career readiness and for successful democratic living.

According to NGA and CCSSO (2010),

To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new (para. 6).

Not only should teachers empower students to conduct solid research, examine multiple sources, and provide credible evidence when making claims, decisions, or arguments, but it appears from the evidence collected in this study that other students in an online discussion forum will do the same things. In this technological era of access to endless information, students need to learn the skills of discerning the difference between credible and non-credible resources in order to bolster their claims, new knowledge constructs, and civic values. Not only is this an important skill to achieve for professional reasons, it is an important skill to achieve for the stability of our democracy. Again, citizens must have the knowledge and skills necessary for making proper decisions for our country. And the best place to learn it may be from a thoughtful and well-informed peer.

Current event analysis also became a key vehicle for the development and presentation of civic identity because effective citizens are knowledgeable about the current state of the planet and active in seeking solutions for global issues. Engaging students in current event analysis and participating in discussions about them turned our course into a democratic laboratory. When students engaged in current event analysis and discussions, they showed signs of the following characteristics of effective citizenship:

- Has knowledge of the people, history, and traditions that have shaped our local communities, our nation, and the world.
- Has knowledge of our nation's founding documents, civic institutions, and political processes. Is aware of issues and events that have an impact on people at local, state, national, and global levels.
- Seeks information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions.
- Asks meaningful questions and is able to analyze and evaluate information and ideas.
- Uses effective decision-making and problem-solving skills in public and private life.
- Has the ability to participate effectively as a member of a group (NCSS, 2013, para. 5).

Whether or not the students exhibited these six effective citizenship characteristics for one day or several weeks, current event analysis and discussion engaged students in critical thinking, collaborative reasoning, defending and upholding democratic values, and analyzing complex issues solutions.

An achieved civic identity is a “deliberately chosen and repeatedly enacted aspect of the self” (Knefelkamp, 2008, p. 3) where the individual is committed to lifelong civic engagement.



There were several students who revealed their lifelong civic engagement plans through military service, career choice (e.g. police officer), and religious activities. Some students were indirectly civically engaged through their school or work and other students simply discussed their desires to be involved in their community. I believe it is imperative for virtual social studies teachers to provide opportunities for service learning that accommodates the students' interests, civic goals, and/or natural talents. An empowering virtual social studies curriculum should offer time each week for students to reflect on their learning and to construct civic goals. The virtual instructor should help students find ways to discover their purpose and role as important members of their community and research ways to practice their civic plans and be active in their community.

Keeter, Zukin, Andolina and Jenkins (2002) reported that young adults, ages 18-25, believed that open discussions, debates, current event analysis, and service learning projects played a helpful role in encouraging them to be engaged citizens. Perhaps assigning a semester project where students are free to choose a method in which they are active in their community along with journal writing to reflect on the civic engagement activity could be an empowering activity. However, Wade (2001) warns that service learning projects can be futile if students do not consider investigating why the problem exists in society to begin with. Students need to examine the root cause of the issue as well as crafting solutions while taking an active role in improving their community. Giving the students the freedom to choose how to complete their semester service learning project around their interests, personal civic goals, or natural talents could assist them in finding a stronger connection to their community and thus augment their civic identity development.

Freire (1970) and other educational theorists reason that the driving principle behind our educational system should be self-development. If human beings have the power to construct

themselves, our educational focus should be empowering students in successful self-development endeavors (Kyle & Jenks, 2003). With this in mind, the teacher is not the imparter of knowledge but a team player in the co-construction of new knowledge. The student has the freedom to let his/her curiosity drive new knowledge acquisition and the student's democratic virtue comes in the form of critical thinking and democratic deliberation. Most importantly, the teacher needs to maintain good communication with his/her students to understand how they see themselves as meaningful citizens of their communities. The technologically-rich 21<sup>st</sup> century has made the notions of community and citizenship hazy and has blurred the geographic boundaries that used to define "community" for most of us. Teachers must find ways for their students to define their community and find their civic niche.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This dissertation examined students' language-in-use from five virtual high school social studies discussion forums as it relates to civic identity construction and/or presentation in order to understand how students participate and perceive their unique roles as important citizens in a democratic culture. This dissertation is a starting point for future research about civic identity development and the neoteric forms of civic engagement. Specifically, it establishes a method and a set of tools – discourse analysis in online forums and other asynchronous settings – that can be applied to other forms of online instruction in more controlled circumstances. In fact, the discussion forums appear to be the most viable way of studying this kind of issue (the presentation of civic identity) because of the nature of the record. The method used in this dissertation employed cutting-edge technology that allowed me to investigate the formation and presentation of civic identity which, until the advent of virtual discussion boards and virtual

classrooms, was not viable. In essence, it actually preserves the record of the discussion and can be tracked over time in ways that conventional classroom observations cannot.

Research in the area of civic identity and social studies education remains mostly untapped. Examining civic identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is imperative as the connection between technology and democracy continues to draw closer and closer. In order to make better curriculum decisions, it will be useful to understand differences in how individuals see themselves as important members of their community and engage in civic engagement as function of age, gender, ethnicity or other demographic characteristics.

The current study was not designed to track individual students' "growth" in civic identity and identity formation, so a future study will focus following several students in distance education social studies courses from various regions (capitalizing on my network of doctoral cohort member now distributed widely throughout the US) in order to compare their civic identity development over a longer period of time than one semester or year. Currently, there are no conceptual models or taxonomies for measuring civic identity development, so future research also needs to focus on creating a theoretical model or at least a common vocabulary for considering the developmental aspects of such identify formation. As a starting point, the Indiana University – Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) Center for Service and Learning (2011) has created a service-learning reflection rubric that considers the development of civic identity. Table 11 (below) reveals a glimpse of the possible ways in which future studies may be able to measure the construction or development of civic identity.

A longitudinal study with a large and diverse sample size that tracks civic identity development from adolescence to adulthood would also be a valuable future research study, especially if it can be linked to planned civic engagement efforts. Understanding how civic

identity develops, changes, or correlates with civic engagement would be a vital study as the process and impact that civic identity development has on civic engagement has yet to be examined.

**Table 11: IUPUI Service-learning Reflection Rubric**

1	1—Novice	2	3—Apprentice	4	5—Proficient	6	7—Distinguished
Self-Identity; Civic Identity (includes self-reflection on responsibility and personal commitment to service)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Simply restates the prompt</li> <li>* “Not my responsibility and I have no commitment to service”</li> <li>* Limited evidence of personal examination</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Expectation for involvement comes from external source or authority (e.g., faith, parents, teacher, clubs)</li> <li>* Commitment to service is based on compliance to external norms</li> <li>* States socially desirable position with little or no personal examination</li> <li>* States that “I can/will want to make a difference” without elaboration on complexities</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Commitment to service is derived from personal experience</li> <li>* Examines personal values and motivations to make a difference in society</li> <li>* Wrestles with difference between responsibility and personal commitment to service</li> <li>* Identifies personal frustrations, limits, barriers in addressing social issues and serving others</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Personal values clearly align with civic actions</li> <li>* Commitment to service is well-integrated into his/her self-identity</li> <li>* Demonstrates strong commitment to continued service involvement in their future</li> <li>* Endorses the responsibilities and active role of citizens in society</li> <li>* Describes optimistic yet realistic assessment of the personal impact they can have on social issues</li> <li>* Integration of personal abilities and limitations to address social issues and to serve others</li> </ul>

With consideration to the virtual realm, it is also important to determine if students’ civic identities in the face-to-face environment match their civic identities in the online world. In other words, do students behave (in the face-to-face world) according to what they say or how they portray themselves in the online world? While this is a matter that has concerned a number of scholars in instructional technology, it is particularly important in social studies because the virtual platform is not just a place to talk about civic engagement, it is also the place where much civic engagement is, in fact, acted out. Congruence of word and deed in this setting is particularly critical.

## **Researcher Reflections**

In order to help increase the rigor of this qualitative research study, it is imperative that I illuminate my roles in this study and any personal subjectivity or issues that may have affected the construction of this dissertation. To begin, when I entered my doctoral program in 2010, I had to choose a cognate but there was quite a selection. The area of instructional technology intrigued me because I have always loved experimenting with the latest technological gadgets and every time I incorporated technology into my classroom, I saw student engagement levels soar. After my first year in the doctoral program, I learned so many new concepts in the fields of instructional technology and social studies education and felt that my experiences at USF were extremely valuable.

During the summer of 2011, I came across a job posting for an online high school social studies position in my county. The idea of teaching at a distance was exciting and I decided to apply for the position. A week later I was notified that I was the chosen candidate and I left the traditional classroom for the virtual frontier. However, I was equipped only with rudimentary knowledge of how to be an online teacher and curriculum writer due to the few instructional technology courses that I took during the 2010-2011 school year. My first year teaching online high school social studies came with much trial and error but I did my best to adhere to the recommended pedagogical best practices in social studies education and distance education.

Our virtual school was composed of a handful of teachers and one principal. We did not have a pre-packaged curriculum or much guidance, but we knew that it was our job, as educators, to create a meaningful and rigorous online program for our students. By my second year in the virtual classroom, I believed that I developed into a proficient teacher, curriculum writer, and researcher in the fields of social studies education and instructional technology.

Teaching online sparked excitement and the desire to continually study and improve my practice. The virtual frontier that I encountered the year prior was starting to develop into a promising new instructional setting where students had access to a structured, flexible, and student-centered curriculum. One of my largest dilemmas was how I could meet the goals of social studies education in an online environment. The purpose of social studies education, however, is more than building content knowledge; it is a process of democratic living (Dewey, 1938). Dewey stressed the importance of teaching students content knowledge alongside values and skills development which are, in combination, necessary for successful democratic living.

If I was going to educate my students to become caring, informed, and active citizens, I needed to think unconventionally because there was not scholarship or guidance for me to teach democratic living and preparation in an online setting. This quandary was the inspiration for the birth of my dissertation. As I explained throughout my dissertation, the concept of discussions as a teaching and learning tool embraced Dewey's notion of democratic living and I felt that discussion forums would be the perfect venue for understanding how students perceive democratic citizenship. At the same time, however, I knew that observing students' interactions in discussion forums was nebulous and I needed to find a more precise unit of analysis. After several months of reading scholarship in the fields of social studies education, political science, and distance learning, I came across the concept of civic identity. Civic identity seemed to fit well with the direction of the dissertation as I was ultimately interested in how students understand democratic citizenship and their roles as important members of their communities.

I was unable to receive IRB permission to track individual students' civic identity development overtime but I did receive IRB permission (April 2013) to conduct a retrospective examination of student data from discussion forums the previous school year (2011-2012).

Again, I could not track individual students but this worked to my advantage because I found that having access to all discussion forums provided a wider range of data to collect and analyze. I was given IRB permission to access all the discussion forums throughout the 2011-2012 school year and I felt that I was able to have a deeper analysis and richer findings because the wide range of data. For that reason, I chose to collect and analyze my students' data from my school district only instead of student data from another virtual school in Florida. However, I could not access data from another virtual high school social studies teacher's courses in my school district because I am the only online high school social studies instructor.

As I stated in the recommendations for future research section, I was unable to measure civic identity development because I did not track individual students. Moreover, civic identity research is still in the beginning stages and more research is needed to understand the phenomena of civic identity development and its implications before we can begin measuring its development. Throughout this study, I let the data speak to me so themes could emerge. The themes that emerged seemed to represent how students understood democratic citizenship and their roles as important members of their communities. Thus, I came to the conclusion that their words and interactions that transpired within the discussion forums must symbolize their internally constructed civic identities. I hope that future studies will continue to build upon this dissertation and come closer to understanding why some citizens are engaged and some are not.

This dissertation has given me the opportunity to intellectually grow in more ways than I could have ever expected. This journey has pushed me to reflect on my virtual social studies teaching, curriculum writing, and future goals as a researcher and teacher. This study has inspired me to have a greater connection with my school/students and community in order to become an agent and play an active role in our nation's advancement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I can

proudly admit that I am a better teacher now than I was because of my seven years of teaching in both the brick-and-mortar and virtual setting and the knowledge and experiences that I gained during my graduate coursework and research. Prior to attending graduate school, I did not develop a robust teaching philosophy and my initial years of teaching could be viewed as survival teaching where I was still learning who I was as a teacher and experimenting with various pedagogical methods in non-systematic ways.

As I continue to finish more and more school years and continue to refine my practice due to current research or personal observation, I find myself in a very rewarding career. I no longer suffer from teacher burnout or encounter negative teaching experiences; I know my roles, purposes, and duties as a social studies educator because I am eager to learn, accommodate my students' needs, and serve my country through enlightening (both morally and intellectually) the future generations of our nation. In fact, I have constructed new teaching philosophies, personal civic goals, and plans for implementing an empowering virtual social studies program for the 2014-2015 school year. My students inspired me when they explained that all citizens have the potential to be great citizens because every good deed matters and has the potential to cause a domino effect. Lindquist (2002) argues that every individual has the desire to figure out how the world works and to understand their purpose in life. It is my mission as a social studies educator to carry forth Linquists' claim and constructing and executing an empowering social studies curriculum will be my personal and civic goal for the 2014-2015 school year.

## **Conclusion**

Citizenship is something that is more intimate than our legal status and the privilege to have freedoms and rights as outlined in the Constitution. Essentially, citizenship is a core identity as individuals “develop a sense of belonging to a country or community and adopt the



values that are endemic to their culture” (Owen, 2004, p. 1). The practice of citizenship rests on community member’s ability to understand and act on their civic responsibilities. Young people need to cultivate a robust civic identity so they can effectively participate in their community and play an active role in their community’s democratic advancement. Students need time for self-discovery and reflection to understand who they are as important members of their school, community, nation, and world. Policy makers, schools, and their surrounding communities have a duty to work closely with our nation’s youth to empower them and provide opportunities for authentic engagement in the democratic experiment. President Obama (2009) reminds us that “The strongest democracies flourish from frequent and lively debate, but they endure when people of every background and belief find a way to set aside smaller differences in service of a greater purpose”. Assisting students in the discovery of their civic purpose(s) to meet the needs of a greater purpose is the mission of an empowering social studies curriculum.

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**Appendix A**  
**Screenshot of Weekly Modules with Discussions (Economics class)**

**Week 14**

**The Federal Reserve**


**Due: Saturday, December 1**

 14.1 week 14 announcements from Ms. McBride

 14.2 Federal Reserve video clips & notes

 14.3 Federal Reserve webquest

 14.4 week 14 discussion

 14.5 week 14 assignment checklist

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## Appendix B: Weekly Discussion Forum Directions and Grading Rubric

### B.1.: World History

*Do you have trouble completing weekly discussions? Click [HERE](#) for a few helpful tips.*

**DIRECTIONS: PLEASE POST YOUR THOUGHTS AND OPINIONS IN AT LEAST 6 SENTENCES ON THE DISCUSSION TOPIC BELOW. IF YOU CAN'T THINK ABOUT WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT, ANSWER SOME OF THE PROMPTING QUESTIONS AND USE THE HELPFUL WEBSITES BELOW TO SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENT.**

#### **DISCUSSION TOPIC:**

**Christopher Columbus.....a hero or villain?**

#### **PROMPTING QUESTIONS:**

1. What positive effects did Columbus have during the Age of Exploration?
2. What negative effects did Columbus cause during the Age of Exploration?
3. What are your thoughts about Christopher Columbus?

#### **HELPFUL WEBSITES:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93ZpfOxaG9E>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFYQKNF13bl>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiWVE4bxbKA>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDBv1bscHtQ>

#### **DISCUSSION GRADING RUBRIC (200 points total):**

##### **200 points**

**A. Post:** You post appropriate and in-depth answers for the weekly discussion topic by Wednesday.

**B. Interact:** You ask a question and/or commented on a classmate's post before Saturday.

**C. Reply & support:** You monitor and reply to the classmate's wall to support positive and rich discussions no later than Saturday.

**D. Monitor & acknowledge:** You monitor, reply, and acknowledge comments and questions to your wall in a positive and in-depth manner no later than Saturday.

**150 points**= Met 3 of the 4 expectations

**100 points**= Met 2 of 4 expectations

**50 points**= Met 1 of 4 expectations

**0 points**= Did not meet ANY of the 4 expectations

**LATE DISCUSSION POSTS**= -25% (please email screen shots of late posts in a Microsoft word document)



## B.2.: American Government

*Do you have trouble completing weekly discussions? Click [HERE](#) for a few helpful tips.*

DIRECTIONS: PLEASE POST YOUR THOUGHTS AND OPINIONS IN AT LEAST 6 SENTENCES ON THE DISCUSSION TOPIC BELOW. IF YOU CAN'T THINK ABOUT WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT, ANSWER SOME OF THE PROMPTING QUESTIONS AND USE THE HELPFUL WEBSITES BELOW TO SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENT.

### **DISCUSSION TOPIC:**

**How the media influences politics/politicians, voters, and public policy.**  
*(please provide a news article or video clip to support your argument)*

### **PROMPTING QUESTIONS:**

1. How does the mass media influence politics? Explain.
2. Can you provide an example of an article that shows biases that may influence politics/politicians/voters?
3. Does the media do more harm than good on politicians, voters, and/or public policy?

### **HELPFUL WEBSITES:**

<http://www.cnn.com/POLITICS/>

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032553/ns/politics/>

<http://news.yahoo.com/ticket/>

### **DISCUSSION GRADING RUBRIC (200 points total):**

#### **200 points**

**A. Post:** You post appropriate and in-depth answers for the weekly discussion topic by Wednesday.

**B. Interact:** You ask a question and/or commented on a classmate's post before Saturday.

**C. Reply & support:** You monitor and reply to the classmate's wall to support positive and rich discussions no later than Saturday.

**D. Monitor & acknowledge:** You monitor, reply, and acknowledge comments and questions to your wall in a positive and in-depth manner no later than Saturday.

**150 points=** Met 3 of the 4 expectations

**100 points=** Met 2 of 4 expectations

**50 points=** Met 1 of 4 expectations

**0 points=** Did not meet ANY of the 4 expectations

**LATE DISCUSSION POSTS= -25%** *(please email screenshots of late posts in a Microsoft word document)*

## Appendix C

### Screenshot of Typical Weekly Discussion Forum Participation

Discussion	Started by	Replies
Discussion 11.4	[Redacted]	0
11.4 discussion	[Redacted]	4
11.4	[Redacted]	0
11.4 week 11 discussion	[Redacted]	7
11.4	[Redacted]	0
Discussion 11	[Redacted]	6
Discussion 11;	[Redacted]	5
11.4 week 11 discussion	[Redacted]	8
11.4 Discussion	[Redacted]	2
week 10 shout-outs	[Redacted]	2

*Note: The right column (above) is the amount of posts in one discussion thread. The middle column is the participant's name for that particular discussion thread. The left column is the name of the student's discussion thread.*

## Appendix D

### Examples of Information-Rich Discussion Threads

#### D.1.: Example 1

9.5 week 9 discussion

5.) If I could change the federal budget, I would change the way we spend our money, and use the money that we spend on stupid things like new piers and stadiums, and use it on building new schools, hospitals, homes for the homeless. I think this way because I really don't think we need to build a new baseball stadium, when we already have a perfectly fine one, or I would change the way that they use the money on new roads and highways, red light cameras, and other things tax already pays off. (tearing down a perfectly fine pier and building a new one when we already have one that people enjoy, we are already drowning in debt)

4.) If I were to run for congress, my three main campaign issues would be how we spend our money, what we need to fix instead of breaking something that's perfectly fine and building something new, and building new schools and hospitals. I pick these reasons because I believe they are the most important. What I could do to make these changes is to go and talk in speeches and explain to everyone that these issues are major, the government is spending money on things we do not need, yes it would be nice to have, but not in this time, we need to find people jobs, instead of building more things we do not need.

[Edit](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

Re: 9.5 week 9 discussion

I think you are on the right track. I feel that we are what my family says is a "disposable" society. If something is broken we trash it. But alot of times of times it is cheaper to rebuild instead of repairing.

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

Re: 9.5 week 9 discussion

I agree if you broke something its cheaper to get a new one.

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

Re: 9.5 week 9 discussion

I would be cheaper to rebuild, you are right. we should keep our things nice then! after all, our taxes DO pay for them!

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

Re: 9.5 week 9 discussion

I totally think you should be in charge of the federal's budget!! Haha. But seriously I 100% agree with you. The pier was fine sure if needed a few upgrades and fixes but fix them! The entire pier doesn't need to be tore down because of it, it would oost less to just fix it rather than building from scratch. The new field for the Tampa Bay Rays can cost anywhere between \$424 million and \$577 million is what they are saying. Where are they going to come up with that money?? The new stadium in Miami was a little under \$650 million, there is nothing wrong with Tropicana field. Half of the time those red light camera's don't work due to a glitch in the system. All of these things are wants not needs and like you said if you are going to spend the money on something spend it on something that will benefit people, our ecosystem or the debts.

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

Re: 9.5 week 9 discussion

we do not need a new pier or stadium, bottom line, waste of money! and I like the research you did to find out how much money all that costed, way more than I expected! Things take time to fix, like the economy, when we have a better economy, less war, and more jobs, then maybe we can have the money to have nice things, but until then, we cannot rush things, or we will be forever in dept.

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

Re: 9.5 week 9 discussion

we do not need a new pier or stadium, bottom line, waste of money! and I like the research you did to find out how much money all that costed, way more than I expected! Things take time to fix, like the economy, when we have a better economy, less war, and more jobs, then maybe we can have the money to have nice things, but until then, we cannot rush things, or we will be forever in dept.

[Show parent](#) | [Edit](#) | [Split](#) | [Delete](#) | [Reply](#)

Rate...

## D.2.: Example 2

**Discussion 12**

- 1.) In my opinion I think that it depends on the situation, because you should always help out a friend in serious situations that danger him or her, because what if something bad happened to you and you needed your friends help? But if they want to do something crazy for no apparent reason think that you have the right to chose what you want to do.
- 2.) I think that the long term consequences are that whenever you need help from another Country's they will laugh at you because you have a reputation of not keeping your word, and you will not get any help from anyone because of that.
- 3.) Loyalty is, and will always be important people, because it says what kind of person you are. If you are a loyal person and you always keep your word, people will trust you and people will like you. But if you are not loyal, people will not like you at all, you will get disrespected and you could be accused of crimes you did not do because of your mistakes.

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**Re: Discussion 12**

I totally agree with all of your responses, especially with your first response! If your friend is doing something that will harm themselves or others you shouldn't have to support them. Awesome post! 😊

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**Re: Discussion 12**

Thank you! Yes, you really aren't forced to do anything you don't want to do, unless you are threatened to do it :x

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**Re: Discussion 12**

You're welcome. 😊 Exactly! I hope that I'm or anyone for that matter is never threatened to something like that!

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**Re: Discussion 12**

Hahaha, Right? That's why we should never engage our selves with bad people.

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**Re: Discussion 12**

i agree with you on all your responses i basically said the same thing, loyalty isnt what you say its what you do and believe in !

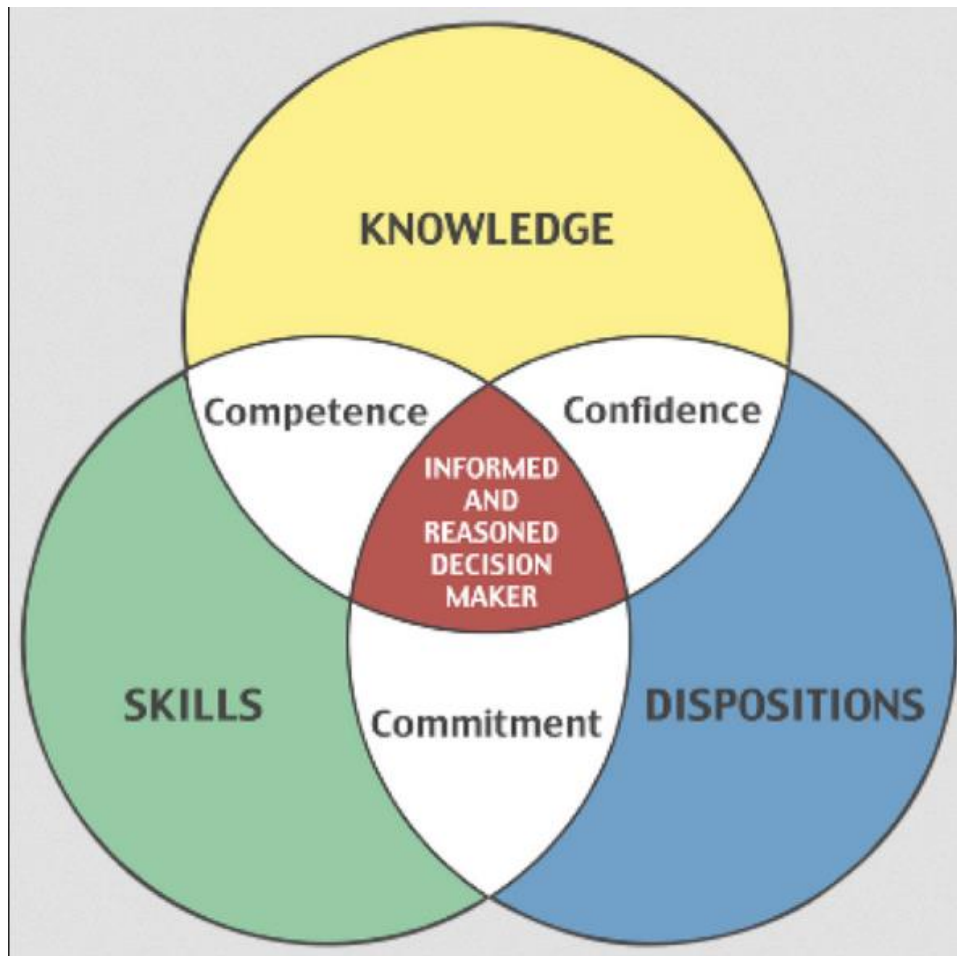
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**Re: Discussion 12**

Thanks(: Actions speak louder than words!

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**Appendix E:  
Effective Citizen Conceptual Model**



## Appendix F

### Chapter 4 Discussion Threads

#### **F.1: Theme 1, sub-theme 1: Appreciating diversity and condemning discrimination**

Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

The US is very diverse! Some examples of its diversity would be the different types of restaurants, the food in grocery stores (ethnic food isle), the people you see in the streets who all look different, the different churches and places of worship as well as religion, and the different clothes people wear. I'm Hispanic but my family here doesn't exactly have a very different culture. My mom watches her soap operas (haha) and she might cook some Hispanic food every once in a while but other than that we aren't too different. We celebrate most of the American holidays like Christmas (I'm more Christian than Catholic), Easter, And 4th of July.

Some problems that have arisen because of diversity are discrimination, hate crimes, and stereotypes. People sometimes discriminate against others because they're different and cause hate crimes. A common problem is the stereotypes people have against those who are Latino or Hispanic. Most would assume that if you're Hispanic you are automatically Mexican and eat tacos daily, which is ridiculously funny actually but it's still a problem.

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT B

Great analogies! That is pretty cool to be a part of two cultures, and I too, am more Christian than Catholic. So, we're kinda on the same page. I love celebrating the Mexican holidays with my birthdad's side of the family as well as celebrating the regular holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, etc.

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A

Thank you! It's great having 2 cultures

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT C

It's really ironic that you mentioned most people think if you're Hispanic you're automatically Mexican, because we just got a new manager at my work and my friend who works with me is Hispanic and looks it. So the new manager automatically started talking to her in Spanish (more like Spanglish) and asked her how long she's been in America for... she was born in Florida and doesn't even speak Spanish. And she's not

Mexican. Very offensive and rude of him to stereotype, needless to say nobody really likes him much -\_-

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A  
Wow, exactly my point! I hate stereotypes, it's rude and ignorant.

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT C  
Glad to know I'm not the only one who sees it!

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT B  
Oh, I hope I haven't offended anybody because I've said 'Mexican' quite a few times, but the part of my family is actually from Mexico, so that's the only reason I've said it. But, I can totally understand it being ignorant.

Re: Week 3 Discussion by Holly McBride  
No worries, Student B!  
Great participation in this discussion thread ladies!

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A  
Thank you Mrs. McBride!

Re: Week 3 Discussion by STUDENT A  
Don't worry about it Student B, you didn't offend anybody. You only said it because part of your family is from Mexico so it makes sense.

## **F.2: Theme 1, sub-theme 2: Defenders of Civil Rights and Autonomy**

6.4 Week 6 Discussion by STUDENT A

My slide show (attached) was on women's rights being violated. Mainly on the point that women all over the world are receiving a lower paycheck for the same job a man does. I even read an article earlier this year how many women, only taking one break and working the rest of the time, earn less than a man who takes up to two breaks and makes time to socialize.

Re: 6.4 Week 6 Discussion by STUDENT B

I liked your presentation and it was very creative. I have never used Prezi, but it looks like a very useful tool.

Also I believe if a woman is doing the same job as a man she should get paid the same.

Re: 6.4 Week 6 Discussion by STUDENT A

Thanks, it's really simple to use and it makes for an awesome presentation!

I agree, I wonder how they even get to the thought, "Oh, just pay her a little less, it'll be fine." ? Gender discrimination and selfishness is the beginning of this. With jobs being harder to find today, I've seen less women be able to get in at all. Now, I don't know if this is for the same reason.. But, it might just be.

Re: 6.4 Week 6 Discussion by STUDENT C

Awesome presentation!

I totally agree, that never even made sense to me to pay someone less than another person because of their religious beliefs, or the color of their skin or as your presentation was about what sex they are!

How could you base someone because of their looks??

Re: 6.4 Week 6 Discussion by STUDENT A

You know, I really don't understand why. But, it seems it's normal for women to be docked a little. Even with a female boss, they will still pay you less. They will find it weird if you don't, which really isn't right. It's as if they are under pressure from other companies, and they are looked down upon if they don't do what's "normal".



### **F.3: Theme 1, sub-theme 3: Upstanders**

17.5 week 17 discussion by STUDENT A

A good citizen is someone who puts others before them self. They want what is best for the community, children, animals, adults, parks, beaches, raises awareness, charities and fundraisers ect. but they physically do something. A good caring citizen doesn't have to do something that is major but it can be something small and local and I think it's just as important!

I liked the story from one of the links Ms. McBride posted about a little girl who started throwing starfish back in the water after they washed up on the beach. It was right after a storm had come past so the whole beach was covered and a man came up to the girl and told her that she can't make a difference the whole beach is full of washed up starfish and instead of giving up right there after a negative comment, she picked up a starfish and threw him back in the water saying "I made a difference to that one" after that the man started throwing them back and more and more people helped throwing them back and all of the starfish were put back in the water!! - I just thought it was a cute story about this little girl trying to save this animal. She really did care and didn't let anyone convince her to stop!

I think democracy depends on a big part on the active/ good citizens because these active citizens truly care about who will be president over the United States, or who will be the Senate, or who will be the Mayor or top Sheriff in the county so the protest and persuade people about why they feel this way. In the end, this has a big effect as to who would be the best candidate and most of the time who they are supporting may come out on top because they were convincing people to vote or not to vote for whomever.

Re: 17.5 week 17 discussion by STUDENT B

That was a really sweet story you shared. I'm glad someone was growing her up to be strong-minded, and caring. It was really precious how she said, "I made a difference to that one!". She made a difference to the man, and it had a domino effect, which was wonderful.

Re: 17.5 week 17 discussion by STUDENT A

I thought it was super cute when instead of just letting this guy talk her down she still did what she knew was the right thing to do.

Re: 17.5 week 17 discussion by STUDENT C

I agree with your description of a good citizen, it's simply put the old "do unto others, as you would have them do unto you". The golden rule is exactly what a good citizen does and is.

The story about one small child challenging grown ups to help the many starfish stranded on the beach is great, too.

Re: 17.5 week 17 discussion by STUDENT A

Yea, that really is the golden rule. But sometimes you're just not going to be treated the way you want to, but you shouldn't give up on being nice and a good citizen but just let it go. I know that's not what you're saying, but it's going to happen.

#### **F.4: Theme 1, sub-theme 4: A Heart for the Needy, Children, and Animals**

16.4 week 16 discussion STUDENT A

I get my information about the county by the local radio stations, the news and newspaper. I think the community here is pretty nice, everyone picks up after themselves and their dogs, mostly everyone is nice and respectable, looking for their neighbors and well being. I'm not saying it's crime free, it's just okay. Well right now, I go door to door trying to help people understand their Bible better. I wouldn't mind helping at an animal shelter or anything working with sick kids or even kids with disabilities. I think our country would be the same whether or not our leaders were educated- it's not like they have full power over anything. As of right now, I just babysit for my family while they work to support our family and like I said before just helping other people to try and understand their Bible better.

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT B

I would also like to help out at an animal shelter in the future. But I do think that country leaders should be educated because they could make wrong decisions based on poor knowledge. It's true that they don't have full power because of the rest of the government, but I think it could still lead to some problems.

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT A

I think it would be fun!

That's a good point, Student B. I didn't think of that- if they didn't at least have the basics how could they do anything either. And like you said if they didn't have proper knowledge they would probably make a lot of mistakes.

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT C

Working at an animal shelter is a great thing to do. One of my close family friends runs a Pit Bull rescue in Hawaii.

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT A

Right on! I'm all for helping animals and giving them a voice since they don't have one. I think pits have a bad rep to begin with, but if they are raised with a loving family that took the time to train them well they're just as good as any other dog in my opinion. However, if that dog is used for dog fighting, or isn't trained of course it's going to be vicious. All depends on the owner!

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT C

Every dog depends on its owner. Any dog could become vicious.

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT D

That's really awesome that you get out and witness to some people and help them with their bibles. I'm sure it really makes a positive difference in your neighborhood.

Also, helping at an animal shelter sounds like fun! As well as helping sick kids, I would love to volunteer in an organization that does that too!

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT A

Thanks Student C! It's really encouraging for both myself and whoever is up for talking ... I'd love to help some kids, even if it's just going to the hospital and playing some games with them or making them laugh or making them feel good- I think that is just as important as them getting the proper treatment!

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT E

I strongly disagree with the education of our leaders. If we have uneducated or poorly educated we wouldn't have a democracy anymore. As a nation we depend on our leaders to be well informed and capable to make an informed decision about everything that effects us as citizens. The better educated our leaders are the better we will be as a nation.

Re: 16.4 week 16 discussion by STUDENT F

I agree with you..... if nobody was properly educated then things wouldn't really be working out very well. We really do depend on our leaders so they need to know what they are doing.

## **F.5: Theme 2, sub-theme 1: Strong Critics of the Government**

10.4 Week 10 discussion by STUDENT A

I don't think "support" is such a good word for war; yet I always fully support our troops. I think most people feel that it is always best to not go to war, but then again it's an unrealistic hope. If we were going into war like in World War II, I think just to know that it is the only way to protect our country, would let me know that the war is often the only way to do this. I think it the worst situation for the US to go to war would be if the US didn't have the stability to profit themselves with weapons and utilities. War without people's consent could cause a large eruption of anger by civilians and outsiders alike. Many negative things could come from such a sudden war.

Re: 10.4 Week 10 discussion by STUDENT B

I agree with you 100% on the no consent of serving people would be really aggravated and cause an outburst.

Re: 10.4 Week 10 discussion by Holly McBride

Great post....do you think that is why the government doesn't tell the American people everything about foreign affairs?

Re: 10.4 Week 10 discussion by STUDENT A

Yes, I think they worry that telling us too much would bring us to even more chaos. Which, is pretty true, but it is always better to have some information than none. Too much information, however can cause trouble depending on the group of people.

Re: 10.4 Week 10 discussion by STUDENT A

Exactly, people should always be given an explanation or be at least somewhat informed of what is going on in their surroundings.

Re: 10.4 Week 10 discussion by STUDENT C

I agree. War has cause lots of destruction and chaos.

Re: 10.4 Week 10 discussion by STUDENT D

I like your post.

## **F.6: Theme 2, sub-theme 2: Placing Society under the Microscope**

Discussion 11; by STUDENT A

After some quick research, I've come to the conclusion that Reagan's use of 'Reaganomics' was not very successful- not entirely unsuccessful, but not entirely successful either- since the public opinion seems to be 50/50.

For instance, the trickle-down theory, in association with Reaganomics, was intended to get an increased money flow by taxing the wealthy less, leaving them with more money to use for investments, etc. This doesn't necessarily work as intended though, because wealthy people don't spend much of their money, that's why they're wealthy, they save it. Taxing the wealthy less just puts more money in their pockets, less money for everyone else.

Another aspect involved was encouraging saving and discourage spending. But of course, no one listens when they're told not to spend money. And for an economy to cycle properly, there must be spending and obtaining money, including things that may not be a particular necessity.

Obviously, giving more money to people that are already rich isn't going to work- common sense. An important lesson to learn from this is that people are greedy, so if anything, more money should be taken away from the rich, so that it can be distributed evenly throughout the poor and middle-class.

I mean... This is just what I understood from a few minutes of quick research (from the links provided, and my own research) I hope I'm not entirely confused, lol.

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT B

That is exactly what Mitt Romney wanted to do!! He wanted to cut the rich people's taxes! For what? They have enough money, they should give a tax break on the middle and lower class!

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT C

I wish there wasn't such a thing as rich, poor, middle- I wish everyone had the same amount of wealth, then we wouldn't even be discussing this

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT B

I think the same way! This might sound horrible, but life would be pretty boring if everything was perfect.. wouldn't it?

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT A

I can understand that thinking, I used to think the same thing. Especially when I first learned about the Bible's promise of eternal life on a perfect earth. As a kid I would think, 'man that could get boring.' But of course the Bible also says that God will 'satisfy the desire of every living thing.' (Psalms 145: 16) and there is so much to learn, that even living forever we will never learn it all (Ecclesiastes 3:11)  
So yeah, life in this world would probably get boring, but in the new world that God promises we would never be bored, He guarantees it ;)

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT B

No disrespect or anything, but didn't he also "say that the world was going to end in 2012"? Because my aunt is the same religion as you, and she was telling me the in 2011 that the world was ending "next year"...? I was just wondering, I mean I'm catholic, but the bible is hundreds and hundreds of years old, and people have been "re-writing it" over the years, and each time it is written, people change it up a little, like a rumor about someone at school, or in general. I believe in my saints and all, I just question it sometimes..

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT A

Mark 13: 32 "Concerning that day or the hour nobody knows," we don't predict when the day will come, we just look to Bible prophecy that fortells what the days would be like when it was near, but we don't know the exact time nor do we try to predict it. The bible we use, New World Translation, has been translated as accurately as possible directly from the original Hebrew and Greek translations.  
I don't mind your questions Glad to answer. Don't want to offend anybody.

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT B

That's true!! Thanks for explaining it (;

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT D

Great Job Student A. Also he confused me as well (:

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT A

Thanks. Naw, I was just saying that because I didn't feel confused and that's why I was concerned, I was hoping I understood it correctly is all, lol ;)

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT E

Nice discussion. His policies were kinda confusing

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT F

It was really unfair how they wanted to give tax breaks to the rich and let the average Americans take on the full load.

Re: Discussion 11; by STUDENT G

I agree that it was neither successful or unsuccessful- and I actually posted the same exact thoughts in my post... the rich do not need anymore money than they already have- they are greedy!! It should be distributed throughout the middle-class to make a more equal society.



## **F.7: Theme 2, sub-theme 3: Moral Agents in Training**

11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT A

I feel really bad for the Native Americans. They were just expected to leave their lands and culture to the 'Americans.' What is even worse is that the 'Americans' couldn't just leave them alone, they forced them to abandon their culture in order to adopt theirs. What is morally wrong about assimilation is that the groups of people lose their culture and are forced to gain a culture they didn't want. It is truly unfair and cruel.

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT B

This all happened because America wanted to expand... That's sad how they had to change their culture because America wanted them to be "American", but isn't American a "free Country"?

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT A

Back then America was on a free country for people of European descent and no one else. Could you imagine if someone tried to push the Europeans out of their land? They would be outraged. It's really messed up how they didn't try to put themselves in the Native American's shoes and try to imagine how they felt about what they were doing. It was a really hypocritical way of thinking. I am really glad that America has grown and is still continuing growing from that.

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT B

I know!! It would have been like if i pushed out of my own home!! America is getting better and better as the years pass, there is still discrimination, but i think eventually in the future everyone will get along.

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT C

You are right about the future, see my post in Student D's discussion in reply to Student A.

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT B

Yeah : hopefully one day in the future everyone can get along..

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT C

They will ;)

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT D

I agree. Good point about Americans just not leaving them alone, I wonder why America didn't leave them alone.

Re: 11.4 week 11 discussion by STUDENT B

Because America wanted to "expand"...

## **F.8: Theme 3, sub-theme 1: Conceptions of Effective Citizenship**

17.4 week 17 discussion by STUDENT A

Active citizens go extra miles to make sure all is well in their community. They help people in need, and even our environment and animals! They are going to encourage people and inspire them. These people will donate to fund helpful causes and not just money, their time! Time they could be spending doing something that would be more beneficial to them, instead they spend their time on helping others in need. If we did not have these citizens the world would be in ruins! Why? Who's going to feed and care for the poor? The hurt and abandoned animals? Our environment? The future of mankind? We are really lucky. Everyone has been helped by someone they don't even know. I hope they appreciate it, I do.

To anyone; Do you consider yourself an active/caring citizen? What do you personally do that makes you the citizen that you are?

Re: 17.4 week 17 discussion by STUDENT B

I consider myself a caring and empathetic citizen, though not in an obvious way. What I do for my fellow humans is help them out with problems that they can't tell to anybody else (things like advice on embarrassing things). Though I never tell anybody about anybody else's problems, hence the in-obviousness of it.

I call it "doctor-patient confidentiality".

Sadly, though, I never volunteer. I help more where I can observe results and adjust my methods to suit changing problems.

Re: 17.4 week 17 discussion by STUDENT A

It's still help though! It's important to have someone that you can talk to about your problems and completely trust. You can be an active caring citizen without volunteering.

Re: 17.4 week 17 discussion by Holly McBride

Great discussion!

Yes, you would be surprised how much of a difference you can make by just being a good listener to those who just want to "vent" about their problems. In a sense, being a good problem solver to your friends, family, and those around you is essentially volunteering. You are giving your time to listen and be supportive.

Re: 17.4 week 17 discussion by STUDENT B

True. Thanks.

### **F.9: Theme 3, sub-theme 2: Cyber citizens**

10.6 week 10 discussion by STUDENT A

Back in 2010 when Haiti was struck with the devastating Earthquake that took lives, homes, food and clean water and left them with shambles and sickness, you can probably recall seeing the commercials to text a number and donate money. I remember seeing them on all the award ceremonies with celebrities encouraging the donations. The profit was titled "Text to Donate" and this was phone companies partnering up with charities such as the Red Cross which allowed users to text a specified number for a donation of the users choice. Since texting had become so popular they used that to their advantage to help raise money to provide relief. When you text the number it created an automatic donation was given, whatever money you chose to give would be added to the user's monthly cell phone bill.

We still see many cases of this where they want you to call and donate to save a dog's life or to donate to the children in Africa or to give someone in need clean water.

Re: 10.6 week 10 discussion by STUDENT B

Texting is such a big thing here, it was a great idea to think of "Text to Donate" numbers and lines. I am so thankful they have created a way for people to easily help those in need. We are such a generation of technology, many people will see the ads. It will get to the hearts of givers and doers, and they will want to help those in need. It is definitely a great thing to do!

Re: 10.6 week 10 discussion by STUDENT C

You and I have similar summaries. This technology we have, is so broad and worldwide. Why not give other people the chance to get help, from the people that actually have the money, and actually have time to text a number, to save somebodys life. It would probably be 8 dollars a month, and your saving somebody in need, somebody that is sick and needs desperate help. We would not know what this is like, we have hospitals everywhere, insurance to help pay for it, cell phones to call the paramedics, working ambulances to take us to the hospital that is well funded to help make us better. We have no idea what it is like, so maybe Americans and other countries should think about giving, and not all about receiving. Giving is the best gift. So why not start now?

If you won a thousand dollars, what would you do with it? Would you help a charity, or give money to someone in need?

Re: 10.6 week 10 discussion by STUDENT A

I hate to say it, but a lot of people are just so lazy now a days that they don't want to drive all the way up and fill out the check to give to whomever so they don't because of all of that work but texting makes a huge difference and enables people who "weren't able" to donate the opportunity to do so now. Also some people were on time crunches, or had a difficult schedule at work and with the family it just didn't allow but with texting it's simple and takes 2 seconds enabling more people to give!!

I think I would donate it to a children's charity, just because my heart breaks whenever I see a bald little girl or boy living in the hospital because of cancer or leukemia or whatever tragic illness he or she may be going through, really. These diseases are just so horrible and deadly. The child's entire family is effected and the child's life can't be "normal"- it's just sad from whatever angle you look at it from.

Re: 10.6 week 10 discussion by STUDENT D

You do have a point.

Texting is a faster way to do things now in today's society. People in america are so fast paced, that they need cell phones and computers to do things, and better cars. everything is just a very quick pace. We can make a change if we all took the time to do something progressive.

## **F.10: Theme 3, sub-theme 3: Civic Engagement and the Virtual Student**

### 16.4 Week 16 Discussion by STUDENT A

I'm sure I will start voting when I get to the age and I would love to volunteer! I really want to volunteer over the summer at a local children's hospital or nursing home, even an animal shelter. I really want to be a good influence to my community in the future and I would love to see a change for the good.

Our country would be a really sad place if we did not have caring citizens, honestly. We already have so many people living out on the streets and many shelters that have financial troubles. If no one was looking out for one another and donating to charities, many people wouldn't have any hope. We'd live in a heartless, dark world. This is why we need people willing to help another, someone who can spare a couple dollars to a local charity, different events to make a change, it all makes a difference on the world we live in.

Last summer, we had an outreach with our youth group and we would go to a park or local area and hand out free water bottles and candy bars just to show God's love. We also picked up trash and did some yard work in a neighborhood, then had a big cook-out where we painted kids faces, made animal balloons, everything you could think of. It was an awesome experience! Other than that, we've volunteered many times at Bright House fields and raised money for camp.

Re: 16.4 Week 16 Discussion by STUDENT B

That's really nice! I'm glad you had a good experience with that! I'd really love to expand my share in volunteering once I'm all finished with school.

Good point, I'd hate to see what the world would look like if there weren't anyone who gave of their time and resources.

Re: 16.4 Week 16 Discussion by STUDENT A

That sounds like a great plan to expand in volunteering once school is out, it will definitely give you more time. 😊

Re: 16.4 Week 16 Discussion by STUDENT C

I also want to volunteer at an animal shelter. The world would definitely be a hopeless place if people didn't help out in small yet important ways. And I think it's great that you and your youth group do these nice and fun things.

Re: 16.4 Week 16 Discussion by STUDENT A

Yeah, I just couldn't imagine how horrible if the U.S. was that way. I'm so glad there are people getting out and helping their communities, whether its just something small or even a big help. Also, I'm really glad we have an active youth group that does these things, I just love it! ☺

## **F.11: Theme 4, sub-theme 2: Changes to Student Perceptions**

### 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT A

Well this week I liked the scatter game but my scores where horrible. The best time I got was 45 seconds! It could have used more color though. The video was pretty fun though and kept me interested in the context!

I learned of self-interest this week. I thought it was just greed but maybe they are not the same thing. It seems as though a lot of people nowadays are only into self-interest. "If I donate to this cancer foundation what do I get in return? Knowledge of helping people with cancer? Not worth it." In order to get my brother to do anything he has to be bribed because if he gets nothing then it's not worth it to him and just a waste of time and energy he could be using to play a game. You know I always thought laissez faire was some other important man in history, but apparently not! I like this doctrine and agree to the government not imposing in the marketplace. To me the government is some corrupted thing that people use as an excuse to not look for a job. I don't know why... There's actually a lot I don't fully understand about it... yet.

### Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT B

I totally agree with you, people are only into self-interest these days! I don't know a lot about our government either but I'm excited to learn new things.

### Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT A

From what I have learned/understand (!) to me communism seems like a good economic system because it discourages greed and spreads wealth to a range of people instead of to just one. But then again the government is involved... maybe I'm wrong though and the government is actually a good thing. Oh well gotta keep learning stuff to figure it out.

### Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT B

I'm more in favor of capitalism, but weather were living under capitalism or communism its not going to be the same system in our lives as it is explained in the theories. I agree its good to discourage greed but I think in this day with all the money some people already have lived with we will never see an end to the greedy people... I think people make the government out to be really corrupt and sometimes it can be bad but could you imagine a life without government? There would be no structure or rules for everyone which seems to be a worse direction to go in than following the government. Being new to getting involved in all of this (Because I turn 18 and can vote this year) I think that people are way too stuck on the mistakes in the past made and right now any president is going to be blamed for the stuff thrown at him when he is elected, but Obama is making trying to bring us to a better place as is Romney (even though I'm for Obama... some



people agree with Romney's plans the way I agree with Obama's) whats your opinion on the whole thing?

Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT A

I was talking to my brother yesterday about the whole communism vs. capitalism thing and he also thinks that capitalism is much more realistic. You definitely changed my mind. I guess communism is pretty unrealistic since we've come this far but now I see it probably wouldn't be possible anyways. I really wish I could have started learning about the government at a younger age...

Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT C

Well its never too late to start! I wish I did too and I'm sure I don't know much more than you do... I just recently started getting involved with the election going on right now.

I see how people think communism is a good system to live under, especially for someone who wants constant stability, there are many pro's to it and it seems like a much easier life, but personally I'm just someone who needs a purpose to what I'm doing. If I knew I'd be given a job with the same money everyone else made I would have no motivation to graduate high school and go to college to make something of myself. Everyone has their own personal motives and I that's what formed my opinion on preferring capitalism over communism.

Re: 3.3 week 3 discussion by STUDENT D

Why do you think your scores were horrible?

## **F.12: Theme 4, sub-theme 3: Critical Thinking Practice**

3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT A

The two reasons that I believed caused the Civil War were the combination of the abolition movement and economics. As more knowledge about the cruelty and brutality of slavery started seeping out, more people started to oppose slavery. Some of the events that exposed the truth about slavery were the publishing of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, and the Dred Scott Case. The economy of the North was based on industry. With constant production and exportation of goods from these northern industries to other places (the south) which made the northern economy strong. Unlike the North the Southern economy was solely dependent on their crops that were labored for free with slavery. Any other goods they needed would be import from other places, one of them being the north. Without slavery the southern economy would become extremely weak. That is one of the reasons why the south really wanted to keep slavery.

Re: 3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT B

You're right about how the south would become extremely weak with slavery. I was trying to imagine what would have happened if they let go of slavery and let themselves become weak. I wonder if the war would have still happened and if the future would have still turned out the way it did.

What do you think?

Re: 3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT C

It is crazy to think about that. Maybe racial slurs wouldn't be around anymore, maybe other wars would have been prevented by people getting along. You never really know do you?

Re: 3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT A

If they let go of slavery there probably wouldn't have been a war and no debt to pay off! If that happened our history books definitely would have been different!

Re: 3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT D

I agree the minds of humans would still feel passion for the slaves even if they did believe they were different!

Re: 3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT E

You're right about how the south would become extremely weak without slavery!

Re: 3.4 week 3 discussion by STUDENT F

i agree, if slavery was never in the south who knows how everything would of turned out to be today

### **F.13: Theme 4, sub-theme 4: Maturity, Learning from Each Other, and Bonding**

Presentation by STUDENT A

My presentation is about the war on drugs, please see my attachment. It is an important part of American history in many ways but one is it is still going on right now. The "war" has calmed a little but there are still violent drug cartels smuggling drugs into America.

Question: Do you think there is a problem with drugs in our local area?

Re: Presentation by STUDENT B

There's a problem with drugs everywhere, ha....and our local area, yes, maybe not as severe as some of the northern states, such as Rhode Island where drug abuse is the highest

<http://www.businessinsider.com/what-states-are-most-abusive-of-alcohol-and-illegal-drugs-2011-8?op=1>

Re: Presentation by STUDENT C

I feel like drugs are getting out of hand, and those states that legalized that one plant drug (I'm not allowed to say the name because my comment will not post lol) is only making things worse..

Re: Presentation by STUDENT A

Yeah I think legalizing it would make things a lot worse. You would have all kinds of fraud involving the "legal" sale of it it would have been easier just to keep it illegal. I do think that the punishments should be less though. Instead of a cop having to waste time arresting someone and writing a report for a small amount that cop should have the choice of destroying it and giving the person a ticket or warning.

#### **F.14: Theme 4, sub-theme 4: Maturity, Learning from Each Other, and Bonding**

Discussion 8 by STUDENT A

Microeconomics is an economic system that relies on markets to distribute scarce resources and determine prices. Microeconomics is important to new businesses, marketing, management, and Finance and Accounting. For new businesses, entrepreneurs have to have a basic grasp of microeconomic concepts. In marketing, people need to understand the basic concept of microeconomics to be able to set prices for products and decide which markets to sell those products. Managers need to know the concepts of microeconomics when making budget decisions. And last but not least, Finance people use microeconomics more than anyone else in business. They use microeconomics in order to forecast the future value of financial assets.

The last several weeks, the part that confused me was having to scan papers back into the computer, in one document. I decided to do all of my graphing on the computer instead. It took a little more time to make the graphs on the computer but it would have taken just as much time to figure out how to scan it all into one document instead of ten!

The elasticity formula confused me at first but then I got the hang of it after doing it a few times. I also feel more comfortable graphing the more I do it.

Re: Discussion 8 by STUDENT B

i keep trying to figure out how to make graphs on the computer. how do you do it?

Re: Discussion 8 by STUDENT C

Well if you're handy with Microsoft word I know you can insert graphs on there somehow. But I personally just do mine in "paint" Its just like hand drawing it to me. Then I save the picture and go to 'insert' on Microsoft word and click 'picture' and then drag it to where the question is and resize it to scale. Bonita's forum has a lot of great ideas on it to. You should check it out maybe those are better c:

Re: Discussion 8 by STUDENT A

I have a Mac computer, so I use Pages and insert bold lines to make the graph and then I insert circles to make the point on the graph. The numbers on the outside I just type in a text box!

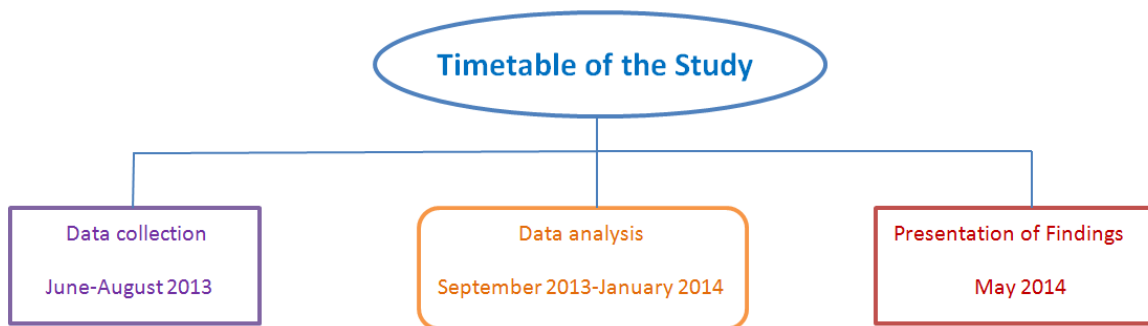
Re: Discussion 8 by STUDENT D

I have a mac computer also, and can't figure out how to insert graphs.. Any tips?

Re: Discussion 8 by STUDENT A

I just make the graph on Pages. Click on the green "shapes" button in the tool bar and add the lines for the graph and then the circles for the points on the graph. It's really easy! Hope that helps.

## Appendix G Timetable of the Study



## Appendix H IRB Approval Letter



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

4/10/2013

Holly McBride, M.A.  
Secondary Education  
4202 East Fowler Ave.  
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00011732

Title: Construction of civic identity in online high school social studies asynchronous discussion forums: A discourse analysis

Study Approval Period: 4/10/2013 to 4/10/2014

Dear Ms. McBride:

On 4/10/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol Document(s):

[Version 1, Holly McBride, March 25, 2013.docx](#)

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the process of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.116(d) which states that an IRB may approve a consent procedure which does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of

informed consent.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D.".

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board



### **About the Author**

Holly McBride is an online high school social studies curriculum writer and instructor in a large school district in Florida. She teaches virtual social studies courses (honors and regular sections), grades nine through twelve, which include: American Government, Economics, United States History, World History, and World Geography. McBride has three years virtual and four years face-to-face, high school social studies teaching experience. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Social Studies Education from Muskingum College and a Master of Arts degree in Secondary Social Studies Education from the University of South Florida. McBride is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of South Florida with a concentration in Social Science Education and a cognate in Instructional Technology. McBride has publications in *Florida Council for the Social Studies Trends and Issues*, *Learning and Leading with Technology*, *The Georgia Social Studies Journal*, *Oregon Journal of the Social Studies*, *The Social Studies*, and *The Ohio Social Studies Review*. In addition, McBride is actively involved in the academic community as she presents at international, national, state, and local conferences, such as: International Social Studies Society, National Council for the Social Studies, College University Faculty Association, and Florida Council for the Social Studies.