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With the Web's Help, Civics Lessons Run Deep

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Educators have long embraced the transformative nature of online resources for their students, and one way educators are using online tools is to increase their students' awareness of social and political issues. Kids can connect with their peers, family, and other students around the world to learn more about specific issues, hear different viewpoints, and debate sensitive political and social issues. Here are a few key tools educators are using to facilitate this new brand of civic education.

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Waywire: Video Sharing With a Purpose

One of the newest entrants in this realm, open in public alpha, is **Waywire.com (https://web.archive.org/web/20130918073056/http://www.waywire.com/)**. On this video social network, co-founded by Newark, New Jersey Mayor Cory Booker, users can create their own news feeds, sharing video from news organizations, web services, and their own video cameras. The site's ultimate goal is **to give youth a voice on issues that matter to them. (https://web.archive.org/web/20130918073056/http://www.waywire.com/public/about)** Educators can use the service to collect related resources in a central location for in-class and out-of-class viewing, and students can use it to create their own class projects. The ability to mix your own video with Internet video is a great way to ensure that kids are creating original work while synthesizing related information.

Because Waywire is still new, it hasn't made its way into a lot of classrooms yet, but its potential there is limitless. Like Storify and Pinterest, Waywire allows users to curate a bulletin board for their social networks to follow. An early member of Waywire, Texas-based autism therapist Kelli Gill has mainly used the service to explore her personal

needs. "Some individuals with autism are drawn to visually stimulating aids to better assist them in sequentializing ideas, and creating a structure or routine to facilitate learning," she says.

Skype: Connecting Kids to Real-World Issues

Of course, tools don't have to be new to be a great way to broaden student awareness. Kader Adjout, global history department chair at Beaver Country Day School outside Boston, uses **Skype (https://web.archive.org/web/20130918073056/http://skype.com/)** to host video calls with students all over the world. He loves the power of Skype to connect the students in his school with kids like them in a manner that mimics face-to-face communication. In one discussion with students in Afghanistan, he says, students forgot they were separated by time and space and got into a strong debate about the Taliban's role in Afghan society. One of the BCDS students had a family member serving in the U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan, and was shocked when one of the Afghan students expressed support of the Taliban, he says. The students didn't end the debate agreeing, but they and their classmates all heard a different perspective on the issue—one they never could have gotten by just talking and reading amongst themselves.

In another call with students in Egypt, the BCDS students learned how the Egyptian students participated in Arab Spring political protests that day, and then left the call to go back to the demonstrations. This call, Adjout says, made a historical event real for his students. When the class later watched news coverage of the demonstrations, they had a personal connection. Some students even stayed in contact with the Egyptian students and shared updates as they received emails.

Adjout tried other technology tools before Skype—most notably blogs—but he never saw a real increase in student engagement until the video calls. Students look beyond their textbooks to prepare for calls, he says, reading stories from foreign newspapers and searching web resources. The calls have also "pushed them to think differently about where the information comes from," he says, increasing their level of critical thinking and ability to catch writer and media outlet bias.

Youtopia: Rewarding Civics and Activism

Not everything can happen online, though—and that's where **Youtopia.com (https://web.archive.org/web/20130918073056/http://www.youtopia.com/info/)** comes in. It allows teachers to reward students for socially conscious and civic-minded actions on- and off-line. This subscription site, which has been out of beta for only three months, allows students to collect points by logging their activities, then trade in those points for rewards, such as iPods, T-shirts, stickers, or custom treats, such as a classroom pizza party. Teachers can set the rewards they think will motivate their students. Jacqueline Von Edelberg, Youtopia's director of strategic partnerships, hopes that teachers will begin to offer rewards that speak to kids' intrinsic motivations, such as a week at a local dance school or a lunch with a local civic or business leader.

"The goal is really to change required [service learning] into inspired action," says Von Edelberg, whose book, "How to Walk to School," documents her work revitalizing her neighborhood school in Chicago. Von Edelberg wants kids to be rock stars because of how they make their community a better place—not just for their academic, athletic, or other talents. When kids do something good for their community, she says, Youtopia gives them the opportunity to reflect and say, "Hey, that made me feel good, and it made other people feel good, too," and then to share it on Facebook or Twitter to get positive feedback from their teachers and peers. Consistent rewards for this type of activity, she says, can be a bridge to lifelong activism and civic engagement.

(https://web.archive.org/web/20130918073056/http://twitter.com/jenroland).

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