HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS’ EXPRESSIONS OF CIVIC IDENTITY: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION FORUMS IN AN ONLINE HIGH SCHOOL UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined a group of high school students’ discursive expressions of civic identity within asynchronous discussion forums in an online classroom. A better understanding of such expressions within these forums could provide schools with ideas for constructing curricula that promote the development of civic identity in their students. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the text from the asynchronous discussion forums in an online United States Government course. During data analysis, four major themes emerged: respect for the rule of law, respect for others’ rights, sense of civic responsibility, and critical thinking. The main conclusions drawn from this study were that most of the students possess many civic dispositions essential to civic identity, but they do not seem to possess a mature civic identity due to a lack of a strong civic and political knowledge base and a sense of civic purpose. The lack of a strong teaching presence in the forums may have affected the quality of the discussions. This dissertation makes three recommendations. First, schools should promote moral education across the curriculum. Second, schools should provide students with opportunities to participate in community service that is linked to the formal curriculum. Third, teaching training programs—both pre-service and in-service—should provide teachers with opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills they will need to teach effectively online.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents. We have all come a long way from a tiny mobile home on a dirt road in southeast Alabama to here. I could not have done it without your love and guidance. Thank you. I love you.
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I want to express my gratitude to the people who have helped to make this dissertation a reality. If not for your help I may not have completed it at all.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Identity is a multi-faceted concept that has been described in many different ways. The concept of identity is most often described as the personal traits, social roles, and group memberships that define one’s perception of self (Leary & Tangney, 2012; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). More simply stated, identity is “the everyday word for people’s sense of who they are” (Djité, 2006).

One of the vital developmental tasks of adolescence is forming a firm sense of identity (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) was the first theorist to suggest that forming a firm sense of identity is the primary developmental task of adolescence, one of the first to describe how the social world may affect one’s psyche; and the first to provide a framework that researchers could use to study identity development across the lifespan (Hoare, 2002; Karkouti, 2014; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012; Sokol, 2009). Erikson (1968) described identity as a “conscious sense of individual uniqueness” and an “unconscious striving for a continuity of experience” (p. 208) with a focus on commitments to roles, values, and beliefs (Côté, 2009).

Another important developmental task of adolescence is to become a contributor to society (Erikson, 1968; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Yates & Youniss, 1996). Individuals who make positive contributions to society feel connected to the communities in which they live and possess a sense of self that transcends selfish interests and motivates them to become active participants in their communities (Flanagan, 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2003;
Lerner, 2004). This sense of belonging to a collective, with a desire to contribute to its well-being, is described as *civic identity* (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kirshner, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Yates and Youniss (1999) defined civic identity as “a sense of who one is in relation to society and desire to be an active member in that society’s present and future” (p. 273).

**Statement of the Problem**

Democratic societies are sustained by engaged citizens who possess the requisite civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and are committed to the fundamental values and principles of democracy. A representative democracy like the United States can only work when citizens are well informed, actively engaged in their communities, and equipped with the skills of debate and compromise.

There is much evidence that many forms of civic participation have been on the decline in our society. Putnam (2000) empirically examined the steady decline of social capital in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century. Putnam (2000) provided a description of his idea of social capital:

*Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.* (p. 19)

Putnam (2000) and his team conducted a meta-analysis of three large data sets: The DDB Life Style data, the Roper Social and Political Trends archive, and 14 state-level measures of social capital and found a dominant theme:

*For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently,*
without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. (p. 27)

He found that this theme was consistent across seven different measures of social capital: altruism, civic participation, informal networks, mutual trust, political participation, religious participation, and workplace networks. He concluded that this phenomenon had undermined many forms of civic participation, which a strong democracy requires of its citizens.

Putnam’s (2000) findings are important because the social networks of social capital, particularly relationships with adult roles models, are thought to inspire civic identity in young people (Erikson, 1968; Toren, 1993; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss et al., 1997). According to Youniss and colleagues (1997), young people seek “transcendent” values that connect them to society. Working with adults provides young people with opportunities to learn about their culture and to evaluate customs and traditions embraced by older generations (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004). Such experiences are important because “each generation must take up the burden of renewing society and making history” (Youniss et al., 1997, p. 629). Flanagan and Faison (2001) summed up the importance of social capital for young people: “The values that we emphasize in child-rearing and that structure institutions and norms of social interaction will shape the political views and civic commitments young people will develop” (p. 4).

In 2013, the *Volunteering and Civic Life in America* (2013) report, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship, provided a comprehensive look at the state of civic engagement in the United States. The report showed declines in 16 of 20 indicators of civic health, including declines in civic engagement and volunteerism, over the 2-year period from 2011 to 2013. The report stated that in 2013, slightly more than 36% of American adults were involved in some type of community service (i.e., civic, recreational, religious, school, etc.), an almost 3% drop compared to 2011. The report
also stated that Americans’ confidence in its public schools had dropped 3.5 percentage points. Ilir Zherka, executive director of the National Conference on Citizenship, concluded, "The picture it paints is civic engagement is facing some headwind" (O’Neil, 2014).

Twenge, Campbell, and Freemna (2012) used data from two national surveys of American young people collected over time, the Monitoring the Future (MtF) study of high school seniors, conducted since 1976 (N = 0.5 million), and the American Freshman (AF) survey of entering college students, conducted since 1966 (N = 8.7 million), to examine generational differences in several areas of interest: concern for others, life goals, and civic orientation in high school seniors. They found that more recent generations showed less concern for others, less feeling of community (evidenced by more extrinsic and less intrinsic life goals), and lower levels of civic engagement. However, they found that the rate of volunteering increased over time. The authors attributed this finding to the fact that more schools offer service learning programs today than in the past, and not to students’ increased desire to volunteer.

Using data from the World Values Surveys (1995-2014), Foa and Mounk (2016) found that younger generations in “consolidated” (i.e., a robust civil society and a high level of wealth) democracies are much less likely to consider it “essential” to live in a democracy than earlier cohorts and are more open to nondemocratic forms of government. Based on the findings, the authors concluded that young citizens today are more skeptical of democracy than their parents were at the same age. The authors summed up their conclusions: “Even as democracy has come to be the only form of government widely viewed as legitimate, it has lost the trust of many citizens who no longer believe that democracy can deliver on their most pressing needs and preferences” (p. 16).
Voeten (2016) used data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Survey (EVS) to examine Foa and Mounk’s (2016) strong claims “more systematically.” He found no evidence to support Foa and Mounk’s (2016) claim that citizens in established democracies have become more likely to accept authoritarian rule. However, he did find evidence that millennials in established democracies have become open to non-democratic alternatives, most notably in the United States. He found that Americans under the age of 35 had become relatively less favorable toward democracy and more favorable toward army rule and a strong leader, and also expert decision-making. Voeten found this finding very significant: “The United States is an important country that is often credited for spreading democracy around the globe. If its younger generation is less enthusiastic about democracy compared to its alternatives, then this matters a great deal” (p. 8).

The survival of American society depends in part on the civic and moral development of our young people, and their commitment to the fundamental principles and values of democracy. A mature civic identity can give one a sense of how one relates to others in society (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Erikson, 1968; Youniss et al., 1997) and can motivate one to pursue goals that benefit both self and society in positive ways (Flanagan, 2004; Lerner, 2004). Civic education is important because people in democratic societies are not born with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for life in a democratic society, these things must be taught to them (Galston, 2001; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Parker, 2003; Youniss et al., 1997). It is imperative that we provide varied and numerous opportunities for our young people to develop these skills and dispositions in our schools. By not doing so, we not only do a disservice to our democratic ideals, but we place the future of our society in peril.
Theoretical Framework

The framework for this study is based in the ideals of civic identity, civic engagement, and civic education as proposed by the Center for Civic Education’s (1994) National Standards for Civics and Government. I will discuss this framework below.

*Civic identity.* An important developmental task of adolescence is to become a contributor to society (Erikson, 1968; Sherrod et al., 2010; Yates & Youniss, 1996). Positive contributors to society feel connected to their communities and develop a sense of self that transcends selfish interests and motivates them to become active in them (Flanagan, 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2003; Lerner, 2004). This sense belonging to a collective and a desire to contribute to its well-being is civic identity (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kirshner, 2009; Youniss et al., 1997). Yates and Youniss (1999) defined civic identity as “a sense of who one is in relation to society and a desire to be an active member in that society’s present and future” (p. 273).

Knefelkamp (2008) provides a vivid description of civic identity:

> Individuals with a mature sense of civic identity are fully engaged, fully human citizens of their communities. They seek knowledge of both historical and contemporary conditions. They apply this knowledge using the skills and competencies they have developed, working independently and interdependently on whatever challenges they face. They approach these challenges with a sense of discernment, responsibility, and justice seeking. They are both idealistic and realistic, patient and persistent, committed to thoughtful engagement and aware that others may engage differently. They see their role in life as contributing to the long-term greater good. And perhaps most importantly, they have the courage to act. (p. 3)

The literature suggests that civic identity consists of two closely-related components: a connection to one’s community, which is assumed to spur a desire to contribute to its well-being; and a moral identity, which is described in the literature as a personal commitment to the welfare of others.
An essential component of civic identity is a moral identity. Oser (2013) pointed out that life consists of moral dilemmas that present threats to individual rights and human dignity, so we must know how to act in ways that protect them. He argued that people are motivated to action by either a sense of morals, or by their own self-interest. When people act in defense of others’ rights, they are demonstrating moral motivation. When people act to support their own personal agendas, or simply to makes themselves feel good, they are demonstrating self-interested motivations. So, one can participate in a community simply to promote his or her own selfish interests or personal status, but participation implies a concern for others’ well-being, so the constructs are similar in that way (Kirshner, 2009; Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015; Oser, 2013). Furrow and Wagner (2003) noted that both components are processes in which adolescents transcend selfish interests and aspire to contribute to “something larger than their own personal competencies and success” (p. 116). In order to achieve a mature civic identity, not only must young people feel an emotional connection to their communities, they must also become active participants in them (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998; McAdam, 1982; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002).

One of the more influential theories of moral development is Kohlberg’s (1984) Cognitive Developmental Theory. Kohlberg proposed a theory that has established the field of moral psychology as the study of how we develop the ability to understand the concepts of fairness and justice (Haidt & Graham, 2007), two key character traits of civic identity. According to the theory, as young people mature and their moral reasoning abilities increase, they are more inclined to rely on their own moral principles to make moral judgements. For example, in early adolescence, young people strive to conform to established social conventions so others will regard them as a “good person.” As they get older, young people start to think in more abstract
terms, and do not just accept rules because “it’s the right thing to do.” Rather, they reconcile a moral dilemma using their own developing moral values. In late adolescence, they begin thinking about high-level abstract concepts like equality, justice, and respect, and they begin to consider society as a whole when making moral judgments. These moral principles are thought to motivate an individual to moral action.

**Civic engagement.** In the literature, the term *civic engagement* is often used to describe how young people participate in their communities (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; DeSouza, 2014). Civic engagement is a broad construct that includes the cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that cause a person to take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them (Heller et al., 1984). Identity and civic engagement are linked by the assumption that individuals will naturally behave in ways consistent with the self; that is, if a person places a high value on civic and moral values, then he or she will act in accordance with those values (Lerner, 2004; Porter, 2013). Young people express their awareness of their place in society through different forms of community service (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Cicognani et al., 2008). Childers (2006) argued the ways in which people behave in their communities are “outward manifestations of internally constructed civic identities” (p. 33).

**Civic education.** Citizens in democratic societies are not born with the traits and characteristics they need to be able to participate effectively in the society; these skills must be taught to them (Galston, 2001; Keeter et al., 2002; Parker, 2003; Youniss et al., 1997). Gibson and Levine (2003) defined *civic education* as “the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare young people to be competent and responsible citizens” (p. 10). Ben-Porath (2012) pointed out that civic education is assumed to consist of at least three components: an
introduction to civic knowledge, facilitation of civic literacy skills (i.e., critical thinking, deliberation skills), and development of civic dispositions (i.e., tolerance, respect, and civic mindedness). Bobeck (2007) argued that the primary focus of a social studies curriculum should be “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). The literature suggests that three school-related factors have a great influence on civic identity development in adolescents: an open school and classroom climate, the acquisition of civic knowledge, and participation in school-based extra-curricular activities and service learning. Crocetti and colleagues (2012) argued that civic engagement may be seen as the product of civic identity and civic education.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine a group of high school students’ discursive expressions of civic identity within asynchronous discussion forums in a virtual classroom. A better understanding of such expressions within these forums could provide schools with ideas for constructing curriculum that promotes the development of civic dispositions in their students.

**Significance of the Problem**

Democratic societies are sustained by engaged citizens who possess the requisite civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and are committed to the fundamental values and principles of democracy. Citizens are not born with these traits and characteristics, they must be taught to them (Parker, 2003). Levine and Youniss (2006) noted “citizens are made, not born; it takes deliberate efforts to prepare young people to participate effectively and wisely in public life” (p. 3). The historical mission of our public schools has been to develop students into effective citizens (Johanek, 2012; Jorgensen & Schwartz, 2012). According to the National Council for the
Social Studies (2013), the primary mission of civic 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” (¶ 1). Yates and Youniss (1999) found that young people are often connected to “normative society” through institutions such as schools, and that there is a strong connection between practice and construction of civic identity. If we fail to inspire young people to learn and practice the important ideals that American democracy was founded on, and become active citizens in society, then American society as we know it could be in jeopardy.

**Research Question**

The research question is “What do high school students’ civic expressions within asynchronous discussion forums in the virtual classroom reveal about their civic identities?”

**Methods**

This study was inspired by the work of McBride (2014), who conducted a discourse analysis of weekly asynchronous discussion forums in five online high school social studies courses in Florida. She used discourse analysis to examine students’ language-in-use in discussion forums and to understand how students construct and/or reveal their civic identities within these forums. Her four major findings were (a) students revealed utilitarian and social justice elements within their civic identities, (b) students showed an eagerness to question and analyze society and the government, (c) the data revealed concrete instances of civic identity exhibition along with civic engagement testimonies, and (d) the interactions that transpired within the discussion forums were a vehicle for civic identity development. She recommended that online social studies teachers use a variety of 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.

This study employed thematic analysis that incorporated both an inductive approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and a deductive approach described by Crabtree and Miller (1992) to examine the text of the asynchronous discussion forums in an online United States Government course. This hybrid approach complemented the research question by allowing the literature on civic identity in adolescents to be integral to the deductive coding process while allowing for an inductive approach to theme development.

**Assumptions of the Study**

Several assumptions help ground the research questions and methods used in this study. These assumptions included

1. Online civics curriculum can be created and implemented in a way that promotes civic identity in students.

2. The interactions between students and their peers and teachers in online asynchronous discussion boards are comparable to face-to-face discussions in the traditional classroom.

3. The online learning environment will provide a safe, nurturing atmosphere for discussion.

4. All students will have equal opportunity to make comments in the discussion forums.

5. Both students and teachers will put forth the effort to fully participate in the discussion forums.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had some limitations. These limitations included
1. This study examined only a single course in one virtual high school program, therefore the findings will have limited generalizability.

2. The data were collected over a single school year, a limited timeframe that may not be sufficient for a clear understanding of the problem.

3. The study did not consider the variation in teaching styles that could affect the quality of the interactions in the discussion boards.

**Operational Definition of Terms**

There are several definitions of important concepts which were essential to the understanding of this study. These definitions were

Adolescence: A developmental period that occurs during the 2nd decade of the life cycle and marks the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Asynchronous discussion: A discussion in which the individuals involved do not contribute at the same time (Goodyear, 2000).

Civic dispositions: The private and public traits of character necessary for the preservation and improvement of a democratic society (Owen, 2015).

Civic education: The enterprise of developing in young people the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will prepare young people to be competent and responsible citizens (Gibson & Levine, 2003).

Civic engagement: The process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them (Heller et al., 1984).

Civic identity: A sense of who one is in relation to society and desire to be an active member in that society’s present and future (Yates & Youniss, 1999).
Discussion: An instructional conversation consisting of higher order questions asked, and statements made by the teacher and students with responses given by both teachers and students for the purpose of applying knowledge and stimulating critical thinking to enhance understanding about an issue, problem, or other content (Wilen, 2004).

Identity: The personal traits, social roles, and group memberships that define one’s perception of self (Leary & Tangney, 2012; Vignoles et al., 2011).

Online education: Education in which content and instruction are delivered primarily via the Internet (Watson, Winograd, & Kalmon, 2004).

Summary

This dissertation includes five chapters. Chapter I contained an introduction, and sections that discussed the statement of the problem, theoretical framework, statement of purpose, significance of the problem, the research question, methods, assumptions of the study, limitations of the study, and operational definition of terms. Chapter II will review the literature related to this study. In Chapter III, the research methodology will be discussed, including details about the setting, participants, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter IV will review the results of the study. Chapter V will include a discussion of the results, the conclusions, recommendations for policy and practice, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Identity development is the process whereby young people gradually form a sense of self that they use to organize their beliefs, values, and goals (Kroger, 2000; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; Sneed et al., 2006), and is considered a vital developmental task of adolescence (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). The term *adolescence* can be traced to the Latin verb *adolescere*, which means “to grow up” (Rapheal, 1978). Adolescence is a developmental period that occurs in the second decade of the life cycle; it serves as the transition between childhood and adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Historically, scholars have separated adolescence into three sub-stages: early adolescence (typically aged 10 to 13), middle adolescence (aged 14 to 17), and late adolescence (aged 18 until the early 20s) (Smetana et al., 2006), but it could extend into the 20s (see Arnett, 2000; Waterman, 1982).

Adolescence has long been viewed as a period when dramatic biological, cognitive, and social changes cause young people to reorganize their views of self and others (Erikson, 1964; Hall, 1904; Lerner & Galambos, 1998). Identity formation is unique to adolescence because emerging physiological and cognitive changes, increased demands on making choices and taking on responsibilities, and accumulated experiences push the young person toward adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; McLean & Syed, 2015). It has been stated that adolescence “begins in biology and ends in culture” (see Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006, p. 258) because the transition from childhood to adolescence is characterized by sudden and extreme
changes of puberty, while the transition from adolescence to adulthood is viewed sociologically in terms of forming a firm set of beliefs and values, choosing a mate, completing a formal education, and finding a career (Arnett, 2000; Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976).

**Civic Identity**

One the most important developmental tasks of adolescence is to become a contributor to society (Erikson, 1968; Sherrod et al., 2010; Yates & Youniss, 1996). Positive contributors to society feel connected to the communities in which they live and possess a sense of self that transcends selfish interests and motivates them to become engaged in them (Flanagan, 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2003; Lerner, 2004). This sense belonging to a collective, with a desire to contribute to its well-being, is described as *civic identity* (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kirshner, 2009; Youniss et al., 1997). Yates and Youniss (1999) defined civic identity as “a sense of who one is in relation to society and desire to be an active member in that society’s present and future” (p. 273). Knefelkamp (2008) provided a vivid description of a mature civic identity:

> Individuals with a mature sense of civic identity are fully engaged, fully human citizens of their communities. They seek knowledge of both historical and contemporary conditions. They apply this knowledge using the skills and competencies they have developed, working independently and interdependently on whatever challenges they face. They approach these challenges with a sense of discernment, responsibility, and justice seeking. They are both idealistic and realistic, patient and persistent, committed to thoughtful engagement and aware that others may engage differently. They see their role in life as contributing to the long-term greater good. And perhaps most importantly, they have the courage to act. (p. 3)

The literature suggests that civic identity consists of two components: a connection to one’s community, which is assumed to spur a desire to contribute to its well-being; and a moral identity, which is portrayed in the literature as a personal commitment to the welfare of others. These two components are related, but are not the same. Furrow and Wagner (2003) noted that both components are processes in which adolescents transcend selfish interests and aspire to
contribute to “something larger than their own personal competencies and success” (p. 116).

Oser (2013) pointed out that life consists of moral dilemmas that pose threats to individual rights and human dignity, and that individuals must decide how to act in such situations. Individuals are motivated to action by either moral concerns or their own self-interests. For example, when individuals act to defend others, they are demonstrating moral motivation; when they act for personal gain, self-improvement, or simply to make themselves good, they are demonstrating self-interested motivations. Therefore, an individual may participate in society simply to promote his or her own selfish interests, but participation implies a concern for others’ well-being, so the constructs are similar in that way (Kirshner, 2009; Malin et al., 2015; Oser, 2013). In any case, it is understood that in order to achieve a mature civic identity, not only must one feel an emotional connection to one’s community, one must also become an active participant in it (see Hart et al., 1998; McAdam, 1982; Obst et al., 2002).

**Connection to Community**

The literature suggested that a mature civic identity is possible only when one has established a sense of connection and responsibility to his or her community. McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) defined community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.” Gusfield (1975) noted that the term community could be used to reference a geographical or territorial place (i.e., a neighborhood, city, or nation), and/or to emphasize the quality of human relations without reference to location.

In the 1970s, Sarason (1974) introduced the concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) in an effort to describe in psychological terms the meaning of community. According to the theory, a psychological sense of community is the feeling that one is part of a
network of supportive relationships that are dependable, and available at all times. According to Sarason (1974), a psychological sense of community "is one of the major bases for self-definition" (p. 157). Drawing from Sarason’s work, McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed the concept of Sense of Community (SOC) that states four factors work together to create sense of community: (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (d) shared emotional connection to community. The idea is that common beliefs, goals, and needs are the glue that holds a community together. The fourth factor, shared emotional connection, is integral to civic identity: when people interact with each other, the bond between them grows stronger, and those bonds spur a community spirit. McMillan and Chavis (1986) noted that a shared emotional connection to community "seems to be the definitive element for true community" (p. 14).

Many scholars have theorized that civic identity does not develop in isolation, rather it forms over time as we interact with others who have different perspectives on issues of mutual concern (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Erikson, 1968; Flanagan, 2003; Knefelkamp, 2008). Knefelkamp (2008) asserted civic identity is "community work" (pp. 2-3). Flanagan (2004) argued that participation in community institutions which enable young people to experience a sense of the collective plays a vital role in promoting civic identity. Working with adult role models in a community can also have a positive effect on young people’s civic identity (Erikson, 1968; Toren, 1993; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss et al., 1997). Youniss and colleagues (1997) asserted that young people seek “transcendent” values and working with adults provides them with opportunities to not only to experience adult society, but also to evaluate customs and traditions embraced by older generations. Such experiences are important because “each
generation must take up the burden of renewing society and making history” (Youniss et al., 1997, p. 629).

Research suggests that a strong emotional connection to community can promote civic identity. Anderson (2010) analyzed survey data to examine whether a sense of community is vital for trust and efficacy to develop. The results suggested that a sense of community had a positive and significant effect on both trust and efficacy, regardless of an individual’s age, education, gender, and income. Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) found that adolescents living in highly cohesive neighborhoods may be more likely to acquire positive civic values and behaviors (i.e., learning how to make positive contributions to society), and to establish social networks with civic-minded adults, a situation which can have a positive impact on adolescent civic participation. In a study that examined the civic experiences of diverse adolescents, Rubin (2007) found that their civic identities develop as reactions to their daily experiences within their communities. She pointed out that the level of disjuncture or congruence between American ideals and the reality of their lives influences their developing civic identities. The results of interviews with young people conducted by Evans (2009) suggested that they feel a stronger sense of community in situations where they have voice, some power and influence, and adequate support and motivation from adults. Duke, Skay, Pettingell, and Borowsky (2009) found that a strong connection to school and having participated in shared activities with parents during adolescence predicted greater likelihood of civic participation (i.e., voting, volunteer community service, participation in activist groups), as well as endorsing civic trust in young adulthood.
Civic Engagement

In order to develop a mature civic identity, not only must one feel an emotional connection to community, one must also have a desire to participate in it (Atkins & Hart, 2002; Hart et al., 1998; McAdam, 1982; Obst et al., 2002, Yates & Youniss, 1995). The process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them is called *civic engagement* (Heller et al., 1984). Young people express their awareness of their place in society through community service (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Cicognani et al., 2008). According to Childers (2006), the ways in which people behave in their communities are “outward manifestations of internally constructed civic identities” (p. 33).

Civic engagement meets many of the unique developmental needs of adolescents including to speak and be heard; to contribute and make meaningful decisions; to receive support, guidance, and positive feedback from adults (Checkoway et al., 2003; Malin et al., 2015; Schine, 1989); and to develop a sense of agency and self-efficacy. Civic engagement also contributes to a sense of belongingness in young people, and helps them develop a personal ideology (Erikson, 1968; Malin et al., 2015; Youniss et al., 1997). Civic engagement can enhance adolescents’ civic identity by increasing their awareness of social and political issues, which may stimulate their sense of social responsibility (Crocetti et al., 2012; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Schine, 1989). Some scholars have asserted that it is through civic engagement, motivated by a sense of civic responsibility, that the freedoms of a democracy are preserved for future generations (Malin et al., 2015; Schine, 1989). Crocetti and colleagues (2012) hypothesized that a reciprocal relationship exists between identity and civic engagement: identity promotes civic engagement, which in turn strengthens identity.
Research has shown that civic engagement can promote civic identity. Checkoway and colleagues (2003) reviewed case studies of young people’s involvement in community organizing in six Midwestern cities. While working alongside professional community organizers, the young people were given opportunities to learn and apply skills such as public speaking, problem-solving, organizing groups, and planning programs; and to speak in public forums. The authors concluded that participation enhanced their civic identities by increasing their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. In a study involving 428 students in the Boston area, Metz, McLellan, and Youniss (2003) hypothesized that participation in community service that is specifically aimed at people in need or social issues would lead to greater interest in social issues and higher levels of civic engagement. The findings supported their hypothesis. Research by Hardy, Pratt, Pancer, Olsen, and Lawford (2010) suggested that identity and civic engagement are reciprocally interrelated: civic engagement may foster identity development, and a strong sense of identity may predict later civic engagement.

**Moral Identity**

An essential component of civic identity is a moral identity. Yates and Youniss (1996) theorized that young people seek to identify with “transcendent” ideologies and values that connect the self to the past, present, and a hopeful future. Such values, they posited, give meaning and purpose, and motivate young people to connect with their communities and to participate in them. Below, I will briefly discuss some of the major theories of moral development, some empirical research that supports them, and how they relate to civic identity development in adolescents.

During adolescence, young people begin to think differently. The cognitive abilities that develop in adolescence allow young people to solve more complex social problems. As this
happens, the moral development, or the way that people make judgments about what's right and wrong, also changes.

One of the more influential theories of moral development is Kohlberg’s (1984) Cognitive Developmental Theory. Kohlberg proposed a theory that has established the field of moral psychology as the study of how we develop the ability to understand the concepts of fairness and justice (Haidt & Graham, 2007), two key character traits of civic identity. Kohlberg developed a six-stage theory of moral development, and he grouped these six stages into three, higher-order levels of development: (a) the Pre-Conventional Level, (b) the Conventional Level, and (c) the Post-Conventional or Principled Level. Each level is then further sub-divided into two stages to make a total of six stages. The Pre-Conventional Level includes (a) stage one, the punishment and obedience orientation, and (b) stage two, the instrumental purpose orientation. The Conventional Level includes (a) stage three, the morality of interpersonal cooperation, and (b) stage four, the social-order-maintaining orientation. The Post-Conventional Level includes (a) stage five, the social-contract orientation, and (b) stage six, the universal ethical principle orientation. Kohlberg believed that by early adolescence most youth have reached the Conventional Level of moral reasoning.

According to the theory, as young people mature and their moral reasoning abilities increase, they are more inclined to rely on their own moral principles to make moral judgments. For example, in early adolescence (Stage 3) young people strive to conform to established social conventions so others will regard them as a “good person.” As they get older, young people graduate to Stage 4 and start to think in more abstract terms, and do not just accept rules because “it’s the right thing to do.” Rather, they reconcile a moral dilemma using their own developing moral values. In late adolescence, they begin thinking about high-level abstract concepts like
equality, justice, and respect, and they begin to consider society as a whole when making moral judgments. According to the theory, these moral principles motivate an individual to moral action (Kohlberg, 1984). According to Kohlberg (1984), most people fit into Stage 4, but most people do not advance past this stage. At Stage 5, an individual sees society as a “social contract” into which people enter on their own accord with the expectation of working for the benefit of all. The individual recognizes that different social groups in the society have different values and goals but they all desire basic rights, such as life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and those rights should be protected. Modern democratic societies are based on the reasoning in Stage 5. According to Kohlberg (1984), only 10 to 15% of people are capable of reaching this stage.

Other theories of moral development have emphasized the role of emotion in motivating action. For example, Hoffman (2000) focused on the role of empathy, another key character trait of civic identity, in motivating moral action. Hoffman (2000) argued that having a firm understanding of basic moral principles is not sufficient to motivate a person to action:

\[
\ldots \text{abstract moral principles, learned in “cool” didactic contexts (lectures, sermons), lack motive force. Empathy’s contribution to moral principles is to transform them into prosocial hot cognitions—cognitive representations charged with empathic affect, thus giving them motive force. (p. 239)}
\]

Simply put, moral understanding can help one control and guide moral emotion, but it is moral emotion that provides the “spark” that motivates one to action. According to Hoffman (2000), “\ldots empathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (p. 3).

Some models of moral development have identified moral identity as the prime source of moral motivation (Blasi, 1994; Colby & Damon, 1992). These models are based on the notion that humans tend to act in ways that are consistent with their core self (Blasi, 1994). So, when
certain moral values are at the core of one’s identity, there is an increased sense of desire and responsibility to act in ways consistent with those values. It is understood that moral identity and civic engagement are linked by this assumption: that is, if a person places a high value on civic and moral values, then he or she will act in accordance with those values (Blasi, 1994; Lerner, 2004; Porter, 2013).

In contrast to conventional psychological theories of moral development, some recent theories have emphasized the role of culture in moral development. For example, Shweder, Much, Mahaptra, and Park (1997) enumerated three fundamental moral ethics that they claimed are common to all cultures: Autonomy, Community, and Divinity. Of particular importance to civic identity is the Ethic of Autonomy, which involves thinking of others as equals who have desires, needs, and preferences. It is our moral obligation to recognize their right to fulfill those needs and desires, and to help them do it. While the autonomous individual is free to make many choices, the self struggles with concerns about the needs of others, causing harming to others, and encroaching on their rights (Jensen, 2011).

There is research to support claims that a sense of morals can influence civic identity. Hart and Fegley (1995) found that teen moral exemplars, who were nominated by community leaders, were more likely than non-exemplary teens to describe themselves using moral terminology (as identified by the researchers). In a series of studies designed to find out how children and adolescents judge acts of exclusion based on gender and race, Killen (2002) found that young peoples’ sense of fairness and justice become more sophisticated with age, and adolescents are more likely than children to consistently speak of concepts such as individual rights and equality in an in-depth manner. In a 2-year longitudinal study, Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer, and Aliset (2003) examined the correlates of high-school students’ endorsement of
explicitly moral values as ideals for the self. Those who reported being involved in community service at age 17 were more likely to adopt prosocial moral values.

**Civic Education**

*Civic education* is the enterprise of developing in young people the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens (Gibson & Levine, 2003). The nation’s public schools have long had the mission of developing students into effective citizens (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Johanek, 2012; Jorgensen & Schwartz, 2012). Schools are mandated not only to impart civic knowledge to young people, but also to reproduce our democratic traditions (Amna, 2012). School is the place where young people spend most of their time between the ages of 6 and 17 (Parker, 1996; Torney-Purta, 2002), so schools are the institutions “most systematically and directly responsible for imparting citizen norms” (CIRCLE, 2003).

A formal civic education is understood to consist of at least three components: an introduction to civic knowledge (i.e., the Constitution, recent political history, voting rights); facilitation of civic literacy skills (i.e., critical thinking, how to work in groups, deliberation skills); and development of civic dispositions (i.e., tolerance, respect, and civic mindedness) (Ben-Porath, 2012; Galston, 2001; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Patrick, 2002). Civic education is important because people in democratic societies are not born with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to participate effectively in society; these things must be taught to them (Galston, 2001; Keeter et al., 2002; Parker, 2003; Youniss et al., 1997). According to the *National Standards for Civics and Government*:

The goal of education in civics and government is informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy. Their effective and responsible participation requires the acquisition of a body of knowledge and of intellectual and participatory skills.
Effective and responsible participation also is furthered by development of certain dispositions or traits of character that enhance the individual's capacity to participate in the political process and contribute to the healthy functioning of the political system and improvement of society. (Center for Civic Education, 1994, p. 1)

Branson (1998) asserted that a civics education “most assuredly needs to be concerned with promoting understanding of the ideals of democracy and a reasoned commitment to the values and principles of democracy” (Section II). Blevins and LeCompte (2015) declared that “preparing students to become citizens in a democracy is a complex endeavor” (p. 23) that involves not only students learning essential civics content knowledge, but also having opportunities to apply this knowledge to authentic civic tasks:

To prepare students for their roles as active and informed citizens, social studies curriculum should engage students in a comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, and encourage students to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions based on information from multiple perspectives. Active citizens not only understand how the Constitution and our government works, but also their role as informed and active participants. (p. 23)

**Civic and Political Knowledge**

A basic level of civic and political knowledge is required for participation in a democratic society (Dahl, 1992; Galston, 2001; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Rubin, 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002). Civic knowledge is concerned with the course content, or “what students ought to know” (Branson, 1998). Muirhead (2011) declared that knowledge is the starting point for the instincts we develop about the mission of government; it gives us a fundamental sense of what we are electing people to do. And it tells us something about the standing dangers that democracies characteristically face. (p. 6)

According to Downs (2012), adequate knowledge of political and social institutions, and civic affairs is “as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of citizenship” (p. 344). The United States Commission on Immigration Reform in its 1997 Report to Congress (U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, 1997), strongly recommended special attention be paid to the nation's founding documents:
Civic instruction in public schools should be rooted in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution—particularly the Preamble, the Bill of Rights, and the Fourteenth Amendment. Emphasizing the ideals in these documents is in no way a distortion of U.S. history. Instruction in the history of the United States, as a unique engine of human liberty notwithstanding its faults, is an indispensable foundation for solid civics training for all Americans. (p. 40)

Dewey (1927) introduced the idea of “social knowledge,” or a store of accumulated civic and political knowledge, as well as practical civic skills, on which we can draw to help guide us in everyday life. Dahl (1992) argued that a free society must find ways to increase the political knowledge of its citizens. Dahl noted that in a democracy the people are the rulers, so “it seems reasonable to ask that the rulers should be politically competent: that is, aware of what they want their government to achieve, and predisposed to act in ways intended to bring it about” (Dahl, 1992, p. 46). Torney-Purta (2002) noted that an ideal civics education should provide students with opportunities to acquire political knowledge, to develop the qualities of good citizenship, to participate in important discussions of social issues, and to be aware of civic service organizations. Bahmueller (2000) thought that a knowledge base is the foundation for the development of positive civic dispositions, which can serve as the motivation for civic engagement. Parker (2005) boldly asserted his support for a strong civics curriculum: “Without historical understanding, there can be no wisdom . . . And without civic understanding, there can be no democratic citizens and, therefore, no democracy” (p. 4). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) declared “all things being equal, the more informed people are, the better able they are to perform as citizens” (p. 219).

Research has shown that a civic and political knowledge base is important to civic identity development. After analyzing data from the National Election Studies (NES), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) reported that 90% of citizens in the top decile of political knowledge in that survey had voted in the previous presidential election, and only 20% of citizens in the
bottom decile voted in the same election. After examining data from the 1988 National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Assessment, Niemi and Junn (1998) reported that the results suggested that among high school students, the number of civics courses taken by a student is positively related to the student’s civic knowledge. Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schultz (2001) examined data from the IEA Civic Education Study, a survey of civic skills, knowledge, and attitudes of 90,000 adolescents in 28 countries. The authors found that civic knowledge was the most important predictor of students’ intentions to vote in the future.

**Civic Skills**

Civic skills comprise the individual abilities required to participate in a democratic society (Comber, 2005; Kirlin, 2003b; Soltan, 1999a). Some examples of these abilities include critical thinking skills such as evaluating a social or political issue and defending a position on it (Patrick, 2002; Tolo, 1999), communication skills such as public speaking and writing letters (Batisttoni, 2002; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), organizational skills such as planning a meeting (Verba et al., 1995), collective decision-making skills such as working on a team to accomplish a goal (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, Patrick, 2002), and any other “skills useful in civic endeavors (Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002)”.

Democracy involves participation in decision-making and these actions require high level civic skills to perform. Parker (2003) argued that “knowledgeable citizens are better citizens of a democracy in regard to their possession and use of civic skills” (p. 11). Kirlin (2003b) declared that “civic skills do not exist in a vacuum,” they are part of a larger set of personal and public traits essential to effective participation in a democratic society. She also noted that notion that people should possess these skills “makes intuitive sense” (Kirlin, 2003b, p. 3). Boyte referred to the “capacities, traits and skills tied to . . . practices of citizenship” as *civic competence* (1999, p.
Soltan (1999b) described civic competence as “a combination of attitudes and ideals that include skills” (p. 20).

**Extracurricular activities.** Extracurricular activities are school-sponsored activities that require active participation from students outside of the regular school day (Brown, 2007). Participation in extracurricular activities provide young people with opportunities to acquire civic knowledge and skills (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Verba et al., 1995; Youniss et al., 1997) and to work alongside positive adult role models (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003) in their communities.

Youniss and colleagues (1997) asserted that participation provides young people with opportunities to acquire essential knowledge and skills, and it incorporates civic engagement into their developing identity. Eccles and Barber (1999) noted that participation can satisfy adolescents’ unique needs for connection to community and a sense of belonging. Flanagan and colleagues (1998) asserted that through participation young people develop a set of shared democratic values, which connects them to “the broader polity” (p. 137), a process that helps them develop an understanding of themselves as civic actors. Ziblatt (1965) argued that voluntary organizations in high school are crucial to civic identity development because they are the primary mode of civic engagement for young people just before they enter adulthood and become citizens with full voting rights. Benninga and Quinn (2011) declared that if schools are to fulfill the mandate to produce citizens, standards in civic education should be infused with meaning, “both through appropriate school assessments of necessary content and through school-sponsored civic activities that involve the majority of students in meaningful service activities” (p. 109).
Several studies have found that participation in extracurricular activities in high school can promote civic identity. Over a 2-year period, Verba and colleagues (1995) collected information from 2,517 adults about their current political and volunteering involvement, and their participation in extracurricular activities in high school. Regression analysis indicated that participation in high school clubs and student government were significant predictors of adult civic engagement. Zaff and colleagues (2003) analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 to determine whether participation in extracurricular activities can predict the likelihood of attending college, voting, and volunteering. They found that students who participated in at least one extracurricular activity in grades 8, 10, and 12 were more likely to both vote and volunteer as young adults. Kirlin (2003) reviewed empirical research related to the relationship between adolescent participation in extracurricular activities and adult civic and political engagement spanning 40 years. She found there is a strong correlation between participation and adult political and civic behaviors. After reviewing studies that demonstrated the long-term benefits of participation in organized groups in high school, Youniss and colleagues (1997) pointed out that such participation allows young people to explore the roles and processes that prepare them for later civic engagement.

**Deliberative discussion.** Many scholars have contended that the most important skill that can be developed by civics education is deliberation (Gutmann, 1999; Newmann, 1989; Parker, 2003; Preskill, 1997). According to Brookfield and Preskill (1999), deliberative discussion refers to

the willingness of participants to discuss issues as fully as possible by offering arguments and counterarguments that are supported by evidence, data, and logic and by holding strongly to these unless there are good reasons not to do so. (p. 13)
Freedom of speech is the foundation of American democracy. For democracy to flourish, citizens must be able to deliberate with each other and their elected officials. Larson and Keiper (2002) called deliberative discussion the “centerpiece of democratic education” because it engages students in the “essential practice of democratic living” (p. 4). Parker (1996) asserted that when civic discourse is taught, modeled, and practiced in the classroom, it is “elevated to the high point of the school curriculum” (p. 197). Branson (1998) noted that democracy is “a dialogue, a discussion, a deliberative process in which citizens engage” (Section III, ¶ 2). Barber (1989) asserted that “democratic talk” gives us not only the ability to participate in society, but to create it, or remake it.

Scholars have long contended that public schools are a particularly appropriate space for young people to practice deliberative discussion. Dewey (1938) described classrooms as “citizenship laboratories” where students from different backgrounds learn how to discuss issues of common interest. Parker (2003) noted that public schools are the only public spaces where almost all young people gather, which makes schools the ideal site for “a genuine civic apprenticeship” (p. 11). Rosenblum (1994) noted the schools can be an ideal space for civic identity development because it is a "diverse social identity group". Gutmann (1999) thought that classrooms are ideal for promoting “rational deliberations of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society” (p. 58) because of the great diversity found there.

Discussion as a pedagogical strategy can be dated to Socrates (Michaels, O’Connor, & Resnick, 2008). According to Wolsey (2004), discussion was the first instructional tool, and written response to text was a close second. Hall (2015) noted that discussion is “an instructional strategy that has stood the test of time” (p. 22). Wilen (2004) defined classroom discussion as

An instructional conversation consisting of higher order questions asked, and statements made by the teacher and students with responses given by both teachers and students for
the purpose of applying knowledge and stimulating critical thinking to enhance understanding about an issue, problem, or other content (p. 35)

Hess (2004) further described classroom discussion as the range of pedagogical processes designed to engage students in thoughtful, structured discussion in which varying options are analyzed, potential consequences considered, and judgments are made. The pedagogical rationale for discussion is best understood from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism is a philosophy of learning that is based on the notion that people construct knowledge and meaning based on their experiences, especially interaction with other (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Rourke & Anderson, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Wagner (1994) defined interaction as “reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions” (p. 8).

Classroom discussion can promote the development of essential civic skills such as critical thinking, decision making, literacy, numeracy, and problem solving (Gutmann, 1987, Larson & Keiper, 2002) that are thought to be necessary for civic identity development (Wilen, 2004), and civic engagement (Engel & Ochoa, 1988; Gross & Zeleny, 1958; Parker, 1996). Larson and Keiper (2002) provided an excellent description of how discussion can help students develop critical thinking skills:

Discussion is thought to be a useful teaching technique for developing higher order thinking skills; skills that enable students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information. Students explain their ideas and thoughts, rather than merely recount, or recite, memorized facts and details. During discussion, learners are not passive recipients of information that is transmitted from a teacher. Rather, learners are active participants. Discussion, when combined with probing, open-ended questions, requires students to organize available information for the purpose of arriving at their own defensible answers. (p. 2)

Gross and Zeleny (1958) noted that because political and social organizations so often make important decisions by discussion, “it is difficult for a teacher of the social studies to over-emphasize discussion techniques and procedures in the classroom” (p. 484). Barber (1989)
asserted that well-designed classroom discussions provide students with chances to engage in the types of interactions that are essential for responsible citizenship in a democratic society. Preskill (1997) argued that “open, thoughtful, and highly participatory conversation” is a critical element of a democratic society. He asserted that if schools want to fulfill their mandate to prepare students for civic life, they must provide students with opportunities to experience the “yeasty give and take of civic deliberation” (p. 317).

Research supports the notion that deliberative discussion in the classroom can promote civic identity. Using survey data of high school students in California and Chicago, Kahne, Crow, and Lee (2013) found that classroom discussion and service learning opportunities promoted gains in positive civic behaviors such as listening to different opinions, voting, volunteering, and an overall commitment to civic participation. Several large-scale surveys of high school students showed that those who reported having certain experiences in school (class discussion, learning civic skills, service learning) were more likely to also report being committed to some form of civic and political engagement, and also being involved in it (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Torney-Purta, 2002; Verba et al., 1995). In a study of 135 students, grades 8-10, in social studies classrooms in Chicago, Kahne, Rodríguez, Smith, and Thiede (2000) found that when teachers provided students with more opportunities to learn and practice civic skills, they were also providing them with more opportunities to practice higher-order thinking skills. In McDevitt and Kiousis’s (2006) focus groups with 11th and 12th graders, students identified classroom discussions about political issues that are relevant to them as the single most important factor leading to their increased political interest.

Asynchronous discussion. As discussed in a previous section, interaction is an essential component of a constructivist learning environment. Interaction is especially important in a
virtual classroom, where the teacher and the students are physically separated. Marra, Moore, and Klimczak (2004) asserted that interaction is "the most striking characteristic of computer-mediated communication and the factor with the greatest potential to have an impact on learning" (p. 24). McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, and Vrasidas (1999) contended "that interaction may well be the single most important activity in a well-designed distance education experience" (p. 122). Many scholars have contended that one of the major challenges confronting online teachers is how to replicate the face-to-face interaction of the physical classroom (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005; Rossi, 2006; Stern, 2015). Garrison and Anderson (2003) asserted “facilitation of the learning experience is the greatest challenge facing teachers in an e-learning environment” (pp. 83–84).

According to Moore (1989), there are three types of interaction in a virtual classroom: learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-content interaction. Moore (1993) based his theory of transactional distance on the premise that students experience a psychological and communications gap in a virtual classroom. He theorized that in order to decrease that distance, students must interact with other students, instructors, and the course content. He suggested learner-learner interaction is important because as students interact with each other, they not only learn about the content, they learn how to work within a group. He also noted that learner-instructor interaction is important because students gain knowledge from the instructor, who is a subject matter expert. Finally, when students interact with the course content, they are having an internal dialogue where they think, discuss, and examine the content with themselves.

In a virtual classroom, asynchronous discussion is the primary means for promoting interaction (Larson & Keiper, 2002; Merryfield, 2000; Murphy & Cifuentes, 2001; Snyder, 2008; Wu & Hiltz, 2004). An asynchronous discussion is one in which the individuals involved in the
discussion do not contribute at the same time (Goodyear, 2000). Roach (2014) described online asynchronous discussions as “discussions which progress at the pace that students post to a forum, or discussion board” (pp. 14-15). In a virtual classroom, asynchronous discussion unites the social and cognitive aspects of learning (Larson & Keiper, 2002).

The most common environment for asynchronous online discussion to take place is a threaded discussion forum (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013). Rizopoulos and McCarthy (2009) provided a helpful description of a threaded discussion:

> A thread is an online discussion that exists among students and their peers. Teachers pose questions and classmates choose to respond to each others’ comments. These asynchronous conversations in the web-based discussion forum that the teacher creates for the class, catapults students into focused discussions that allow for exchanges of opinions and information. The teacher has the ability to monitor these dialogues and may even participate when needed by proposing further questions for discussion or removing potential roadblocks that inhibit the process. (p. 374)

The primary benefit of asynchronous online discussion forums is the flexibility that they provide for learner-learner interaction to occur at any time and at any distance (Guzdial & Turns, 2000; Larson & Keiper, 2002; Ng et al., 2009). In an online learning environment, asynchronous online discussion forums provide students with a safe, structured learning environment where they construct knowledge and meanings together (Rourke & Anderson, 2002; Zhu, 2006).

The literature suggests that asynchronous online discussion forums are an effective teaching tool for helping students develop civic literacy skills such as critical thinking, reflection, and collaboration; a sense of community; and civic dispositions.

**Critical Thinking Skills**

*Critical thinking skills* refer to the intellectual skills essential for informed, effective, and responsible citizenship (Branson, 1998). Lee (2007) described *critical thinking* as an essential skill that enables young people to “close the gap” between the knowledge and skills that they
learn in school and those they will need to function in society. Greenlaw and Deloach (2003) asserted asynchronous online discussion provides “a natural framework for teaching critical thinking because it captures the best of both traditional writing assignments as well as in-class discussions” (p. 41). Grisham and Wolsey (2006) characterized asynchronous discussion as “interactive, like discussion, but thoughtful, like written discourse” (p. 652). Writing is a critical thinking skill that enables students to form logical arguments supported by evidence (Cohen & Spencer, 1993), and it helps students make better connections with the concepts from course materials (Graham & Herbert, 2010). Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994) pointed out that writing is considered as an essential tool of critical thinking because it makes thinking visible. DeLoach and Greenlaw (2007) contended that regardless of how online discussion boards are used (i.e., to supplement a traditional course, or in a wholly online course) they provide a “powerful pedagogy for developing critical thinking in students” (p. 420). Stansberry (2006) asserted that asynchronous discussion is a “perfect forum” for discourse to promote “increased student engagement, critical analysis and reflection, and the social construction of knowledge” (p. 28). Many scholars have argued that critical thinking is essential for citizens to pass along democratic traditions to future generations (Barber, 1989; Glaser, 1985; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Levine, 2007; Parker, 1996).

**Reflection.** Reflection is critical for the construction of new knowledge (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; McVerry, 2007). In asynchronous online discussion forums, the participants have plenty of time to reflect on their peers’ comments, and how they intend to respond to those comments (Buckley, 2011; Greenlaw & DeLoach, 2003; MacDonald & Caverly, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Reese-Durham, 2014; Yang, 2008). Burniske (2000) noted that in a traditional classroom, students must wait their turn to speak—and may be interrupted by others if
they do speak—but in asynchronous online discussion forums, the “turn-taking” does not permit interruptions, which means each student may express themselves freely. Knowlton, Knowlton, and Davis (2000) argued that a period of reflection provides students with an opportunity to examine and revise their own opinions about an issue. This allows students to perfect their responses before posting them to the open forum, where they can be read and judged by classmates. McVerry (2007) contended that a period of reflection allows students to improve their existing literacy skills, which can encourage the development of new literacies. Breault (2003) noted that the period of reflection asynchronous nature of online discussion forums afford students helps them to become aware of their connection to the society.

**Collaboration.** Grisham and Wolsey (2006) described asynchronous online discussion forums as places where students can not only learn, but also build group coherence by interacting with each other. Hansen and Salemi (1990) asserted that the dynamic and collaborative nature of asynchronous online discussion forums produces a “synergy” where the whole becomes greater than the simple sum of the parts. Gill (2006) suggested that when "employed creatively, a properly designed discussion group" can promote collaboration among participants (p. 382). Du, Yu, and Olinzock (2011) argued that in an online environment, group work provides students with opportunities to formulate different approaches to a problem, and to discover information they may have overlooked in preparation for a discussion about it. Greenlaw and DeLoach (2003) pointed out that a major advantage of online asynchronous discussion forums is that every student has an opportunity to be heard and to contribute to a discussion, which most often isn’t the case in a traditional classroom. According to Rovai (2004), small group activities in an online classroom can promote feelings of trust between students.
Research suggests that asynchronous online discussion forums can promote the development of higher order thinking skills. Caswell (2001) surveyed 88 high school students who were enrolled in two social studies courses at a school in New York state. Seventy-three percent of the students reported that the discussion forums improved their understanding of the learning material and enabled them to express themselves better. Meyer (2003) found that students use some higher order thinking skills to a great degree in online discussion forums; he noted it is much easier to observe and measure these skills there than it is the face-to-face classroom. Also, some research has shown that students are more motivated to produce work of a higher quality when they know their words will appear in an online discussion forum (Kymes, 2005; Larson, 2005; Rowen, 2005). Some researchers in elementary and high school classrooms have concluded that the use of asynchronous online discussion forums encourages more frequent participation of quiet students and reluctant readers (Larson 2005; Lipponen, Rahikainen, Lallimo, & Hakkarainen, 2001; McNabb, Thurber, Dibuz, McDermott, & Lee, 2007), or students who need more time to process information before making a contribution (Snyder, 2008).

**Sense of community.** McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1994) noted that historically, community has been viewed as a physical place. However, in the Internet age, our sense of community is often being maintained through ties, rather than through geographical proximity (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997). Thus, in the modern sense, a community may have a physical dimension or it may not (Hill, 1996; Rheingold, 1991). Wellman (1999) noted that
when community is seen as what people do together, rather than where they do it, community becomes separated from its physical dimension.

Rovai and Lucking (2000) theorized an online classroom can be a community, and its members can have feelings of belonging and commitment to each other. Grisham and Wolsey (2006) referred to a sense of community as “the soul of learning” (p. 648). According to Rovai (2002a), a classroom community is defined in terms of “spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals” (p. 4). Garrison and colleagues (2000) introduced the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model to help clarify the concept of virtual communities. In a community of inquiry, knowledge is constructed through “the collaborative and confirmatory process of sustained dialogue within a critical community of learners” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 91). This framework consists of three elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence refers to the ability of members to construct knowledge and meaning through collaboration (Garrison, 2007). Social presence refers to the ability of individual members to project themselves emotionally and socially in the course (Garrison et al., 2000). Both cognitive and social presence are supported by teaching presence, which refers to the instructors’ ability to project themselves in the course (Swan, 2003). Teaching presence consists of the design of a course, facilitation of communication, and direct instruction (Garrison, 2007).

Several studies have found that asynchronous online discussion forums are an effective teaching tool for promoting a sense of community in students. Over a period of 2 years, Merryfield (2000) compared her course’s threaded discussions with face-to-face discussions in her regular university classroom. Her purpose was to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and how they can complement each other. The results suggested that online
discussions about hot topics such as discrimination, prejudice, and privilege can contribute to the development of a culturally diverse learning community. Correia and Davis (2007) investigated the collaboration design of two online teacher training courses at a large Midwestern university. The participants were 31 teachers who were taking the courses. Data were collected through analysis of discussion threads, course materials, and student responses to a questionnaire. The results indicated that peer-facilitated discussion was the most popular collaboration design preferred by online learners. Students preferred the peer-facilitated discussions because of the increased interaction, and they felt that their contributions contributed to a sense of community.

In a study involving 424 university students, Liaw and Huang (2000) investigated students’ overall satisfaction with their institution’s e-learning system. Among the findings was the use of threaded discussions promoted a sense of community because of their asynchronous nature.

Civic Dispositions

*Civic dispositions* are the private and public traits of character necessary for the preservation and improvement of a democratic society (Branson, 1998; Leming, 2001; Owen, 2015; Patrick, 2002; Quigley & Bahmueller, 1991). Some examples of civic dispositions are respect for others, a willingness to listen to others, a willingness to negotiate and compromise, tolerance, civility, and critical mindedness (Branson, 1998).

Boggs (1991) argued that a well-rounded civics education stresses the development of not only essential knowledge and skills, but “the disposition to use them” (p. 53). Avery (2003) asserted that understanding the principles of democracy involves more than having knowledge by suggesting that one can know facts but have little or no understanding of their relationship or importance. Torney-Purta (2004) argued that civic dispositions provide motivation for civic engagement, so schools should focus on helping young people to develop civic dispositions.
Gibson and Levine (2003) stated that one of the goals of civic education is to impart in students “moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference” (p. 4). Branson (1998) asserted that democratic dispositions are not inherited, but they must be “fostered and nurtured by word and study and by the power of example” in our public institutions, and most especially in schools. Neil Postman, the American social critic who is best known for his critique of mass communication, declared that “public education does not serve a public. It creates a public. And in creating the right kind of public, the schools contribute toward strengthening the spiritual basis of the American Creed” (Postman, 1995).

In Democracy in America, de Tocqueville (2006) described civic dispositions as “habits of the heart” that helped form the early American character. Leming (2001) suggested that the concepts of habit and character are so strongly related that it is easy to discern if a person has a democratic character simply by observing the person’s habits. Individuals who display a strong democratic character embrace their democratic rights, responsibilities, and duties responsibly (Langton & Jennings, 1968; Owen, 2015); are committed to values and principles important to the preservation of a democratic society (Leming, 2001, Owen, 2015); and are willing to compromise personal interests for the greater good (Stambler, 2011). Branson (1998) argued that civic dispositions are “in the long run, probably of more consequence than the knowledge or skills a citizen may command” (p. 12).

The Formal School Curriculum and Civic Dispositions

Scholars have contended that participation in structured learning activities in the classroom can help students connect civic knowledge and skills to democratic dispositions. According to Patrick (2002), a well-rounded civics education shows how knowledge, skills, and
dispositions are interrelated, and “elevation of one component over the other—for example, civic knowledge over skills or vice-versa—is a pedagogical flaw that impedes civic learning” (p. 9).

Torney-Purta and Lopez (2004) asserted that civic dispositions encompass one’s motivation for civic engagement, and that young people can become motivated when they see teachers and school administrators display pride in their school, community, and nation, and model the principles that sustain them. Gastil (2004) contended that civic education can help students develop civic habits by providing them with opportunities to be instructed on the nature of “democratic conversation” by teachers, and to practice deliberative discussion with peers. In *Every Student a Citizen—Creating the Democratic Self* (Education Commission of the States, 2000), the authors declared that

> the purpose of school, after all, is not merely to provide the next generation with the tools they need to make a living, but also to help them discover the personal and collective means - the perspectives, strength of character and values - they will need to sustain our civilization. Young people need help in moving toward a higher regard for democratic institutions and a greater willingness to be involved in them. (p. 2)

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) contended that people with a strong civic knowledge base are consistent in political ideology, trust institutions, and tolerate minority groups. They suggest “all things being equal, the more informed people are, the better able they are to perform as citizens” (p. 219). Niemi and Junn (1998) declared “what takes place in the civics curriculum—the amount, content, and approach—makes a difference” (p. 90).

Research suggests that the formal civics curriculum can foster the development of civic dispositions. In a review of related research, Galston (2004) found evidence that suggested civic knowledge promotes endorsement of democratic values, encourages participation in politics, and can influence opinions on a specific issue; and that “the more civic knowledge we have of the working of government, the more likely we are to support the core values of democratic self-
government, starting with tolerance” (p. 264). In a longitudinal study of high school freshmen and juniors in Chicago’s public schools, Sporte and Kahne (2007) found that classroom learning experiences and participation in service learning were the strongest predictors of students’ civic commitments. Zaff and colleagues (2003) analyzed a 1988 national survey of students to determine if participation in extracurricular activities could predict the likelihood of voting and volunteering for community service. They found that individuals who participated in at least one extracurricular activity in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade were more likely to vote and volunteer 2 years after high school. In a study that compared more than 1,000 high school students who participated in service-learning with those who did not, Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that students who participated in service learning showed higher levels of civic knowledge and dispositions, more highly internalized moral standards, greater commitment to their communities, and stronger beliefs that one can make a difference in the world.

**Open School Climate and Civic Dispositions**

Across the literature, school climate is described in many ways, but most descriptions emphasize the overall character of the school experience as perceived by students, teachers, or other stakeholders. Homana, Barber, and Torney-Purta (2005) defined school climate as “the impressions, beliefs, and expectations held by members of the school community about their school as a learning environment, their associated behavior, and the symbols and institutions that represent the patterned expressions of the behavior” (p. 3). Nwankwo (1979) referred to school climate as "the general 'we-feeling', group sub-culture or interactive life of the school" (p. 268).

The National School Climate Center (2015) cited five characteristics of an open school climate:

1. Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.
2. People are engaged and respected.

3. Stakeholders work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision;

4. Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.

5. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

Rich and Schachter (2012) declared that two characteristics of an open school climate can promote development of positive civic dispositions: (a) caring teachers who are positive role models, and (b) a holistic school program that stresses personal development as well as academic learning. Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, and Gallay (2007) argued that if young people perceive that authority figures are being fair and responsive to them, and are committed to a common good, they are more inclined to believe that America is a fair society, and such a perception is "the bases on which they develop an allegiance to the principles that make democracy work" (p. 422).

An open classroom climate has been described as an environment in which issues are openly discussed with respect to all opinions (Campbell, 2008; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1996; Hoskins, Janmaat, & Villalba, 2012). Homana and colleagues (2005) asserted that an open classroom climate can help students develop essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes for responsible citizenship in a democratic society. Levey (2013) suggested that an open classroom climate simulates small-scale democratic decision-making experiences, which encourages political efficacy in students. Theiss-Morse (2002) argued that civic education should be designed to encourage civic discourse, which promotes the understand that “ordinary people have refreshingly different interests . . . that each issue has an array of possible solutions, and that finding the most appropriate solution requires time, effort, and conflict” (pp. 87-88). When
teachers promote an open classroom climate, they are teaching students about *social trust*, or an individual’s positive view of humanity (Flanagan & Stout, 2010; Uslaner, 2002). Flanagan and Faison (2001) noted that students who attend schools with open classroom climates are more inclined to believe that the United States is a fair society where equal opportunity for all is assured. Berman (1998) suggested that trust builds a “bridge to civility” that creates in young people a desire to contribute to the well-being of others and helps them develop civic responsibility.

Several studies have found that an open school climate can have a positive effect on the development of civic dispositions in students. In a study involving 1,015 students, Owen (2015) examined six categories of civic dispositions: support for the rule of law, political attentiveness, civic duty, community involvement, commitment to government service, the norms of political efficacy and political tolerance. Students’ scores on all of these indicators increased after they completed a civics education course. In a survey of 1,052 ethnic minority students, Flanagan and colleagues (2007) found that regardless of age, gender, or ethnic background, the students were more likely to believe that America is a fair society, and to commit to democratic goals, if they felt that their teachers promoted an environment of respect, tolerance, and fairness at school. Several other studies (see Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim, & Pedhazur, 2006) have found that students who had taken a civic education class reported an open class climate had a positive effect on their adoption of democratic attitudes. (see Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Flanagan et al., 1998; Perliger et al., 2006). Also, in a review of the literature on teaching tolerance, Avery (2002) found a positive correlation between discussions about civil liberties and the development of tolerant attitudes.
Summary

One the most important developmental tasks of adolescence is to become a contributor to society. Positive contributors to society feel connected to the communities in which they live and possess a sense of self that transcends selfish interests and motivates them to become engaged in them. This sense belonging to a collective, with a desire to contribute to its well-being, is described as civic identity.

The literature suggests that civic identity consists of two components: a connection to one’s community, which is assumed to spur a desire to contribute to its well-being; and a moral identity, which is portrayed in the literature as a personal commitment to the welfare of others. These two components are related but are not the same.

A formal civic education is understood to consist of at least three components: an introduction to civic knowledge (i.e., the Constitution, recent political history, voting rights), facilitation of civic literacy skills (i.e., critical thinking, how to work in groups, deliberation skills), and development of civic dispositions. Civic dispositions are the private and public traits of character necessary for the preservation and improvement of a democratic society. Civic education is important because people in democratic societies are not born with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to participate effectively in society, these things must be taught to them.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study employed thematic analysis to analyze the text from the asynchronous discussion forums in an online United States Government course. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (p. 79). However, the method may also be used to interpret various aspects of a topic of research (Boyatzis, 1998). I chose thematic analysis for the following reasons:

1. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “a rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions” (p. 97).

2. The method is theoretically-flexible; it can be used within different frameworks and is good at answering research questions that focus on people's experiences, opinions, and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2017), a characteristic that makes it an appropriate method to examine the thoughts of multiple participants and to discover common themes in them (Alhojailan, 2012).

3. It is a straightforward method for qualitative analysis and is appropriate for this study.

Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) informed us that the design for a particular research study depends on the analytic purpose, or the general approach taken by the researcher. Attride-Stirling (2001) asserted that qualitative researchers need to be clear about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they intend to do it in their work. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that there must be congruency between the theoretical framework that guides a study and
the methods used to answer the research question(s), and that this must be acknowledged by the researcher. I briefly state my research strategy below.

This research was conducted within a realist/essentialist paradigm. The theoretical framework that guided this study was based in the ideals of civic identity, civic engagement, and civic education.

My methodological strategy was descriptive in nature. My goal was to describe students’ expressions of civic identity as they expressed them and to provide a true, full account of their expressions. I conducted data analysis on the semantic level.

My analytic process progressed from description, where I categorized the data to show patterns in it, to summary, then finally to interpretation. In my report, I focused on the four highest-ranking themes produced by a ranking system that was based on two factors: frequency (the total number of times a theme appeared over the entire data set) and appearance [the total number of different data sources (i.e., discussion forum transcripts) that contained the respective theme] (see Table 1). I supported the themes with the use of illustrative quotes from the students, and I attempted to interpret the significance of the identified themes, as well as their meanings and implications, in relation to the literature.

**Setting**

The course that served as the setting for this study was an online high school United States Government course. It is a 1-semester course that all students attending the state’s public schools must take in partial fulfillment of their graduation requirements. Beginning in 2013, all students in the state’s public schools must complete an online/technology enhanced course or experience (exceptions through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are allowed), and many students choose to take the online United States Government course to satisfy this requirement.
The course consisted of nine individual units. Seven of the units (1-5, and 7-8) included at least one asynchronous discussion forum. Units 2 and 5 included two discussion forums. Units 6 and 9 did not have a discussion forum. The nine units, along with their associated discussion forums and discussion prompts, were

1. Unit 1 Democracy in America

   1.01 We the People Discussion: ‘Consider the following quote by the 19th century French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville: "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." What do you think de Tocqueville means by this quote? When you have formulated an opinion (you may use any material from this lesson to help support your opinion), go to 1.01 We the People Discussion and post your answer to the question "What are the two most important responsibilities of citizens, or 'We the People'?"

2. Unit 2 The Constitution

   2.01 Shays' Rebellion Discussion: “What are your views on rebellion or protesting against the government? Do you feel that Daniel Shays was justified in his call to stop the courts and free those in debt to the government? Why? How do you think that Shays' Rebellion encouraged the idea of a new government in America?”

   2.04 Demand Your Right Discussion: “The Bill of Rights was written more than 200 years ago when our country was, in many ways, a very different place. Over time, the Constitution has been amended, or changed, and now includes a total of 27 amendments. But the original Bill of Rights has not changed."

3. Unit 3 Division of Powers

   3.04 Constitutional Reform Discussion: "What changes should be made to Alabama's state constitution regarding funding local government and funding campaigns?"

4. Unit 4 The Legislative Branch

   4.02 Majority vs. Minority Discussion: “For this task, you will analyze a political cartoon to determine its meaning, then discussion your thoughts with your classmates.”

   About the Political Cartoon:

   The 1909 political cartoon below, titled "The minority," suggests there were disagreements, even fights, in the House of Representatives early in the 20th century. Some things never change, especially in politics.
Task Directions:

Before you begin the task, study the political cartoon closely and ask yourself the following questions:
  - Who are the people fighting in the cartoon?
  - Why do you think the cartoon is titled "The minority"?
  - Why would the "minority" in Congress have to fight?

Follow the steps below to complete the task.

Step #1 - Make your original post

Once you feel you have thought of good answers to the questions above, go to 4.02 Majority vs. Minority Discussion and post your answers to the following questions:
  1) How does Congress today compare to the Congress portrayed by the cartoonist?
  2) Do you think politicians in Congress fight too much today?
  3) Do you think the structure and the system of rules in the House of Representatives is fair for both parties? Why or why not?
  4) Provide one way to improve conflicts among the majority and minority parties in the House of Representatives.

5. Unit 5 The Executive Branch

5.02 Presidential Powers Discussion: ‘The 1908 illustration below, titled "Rough on Cats," shows then-president Theodore Roosevelt delivering a jolt of electric current through a pair of winding wires that spell out the words "Presidential Message" to two sleeping cats labeled "House" and "Senate." It was Roosevelt who first referred to the presidency as a "bully pulpit."

Task Directions:

Study the illustration above closely and try to answer the following questions (you may use any material from this lesson to help support your answer):
  - What does this illustration suggest about the President's informal powers to influence or set the political agenda?
  - What resources does the President have today that make that "bully pulpit" even stronger?
  - Does the informal power of total media access give the President too much power today? Explain your answers.

5.04 Becoming President Discussion: ‘Make a post that answers the question "Does the average person have a chance of becoming president?"’

6. Unit 6 The Judicial Branch

No discussion forum.
7. Unit 7 Voting and Elections

7.04 Voter Turnout Discussion: “What do you think is the main reason eligible voters do not turnout to vote? Explain your answer. What do you think should be done to increase voter turnout?”

8. Unit 8 Polls and Public Opinion

8.01 Southern Voters Discussion: "Why has the Republican Party enjoyed such a successful stronghold across Southern states such as Alabama since the 1980s? What policies of the Republican Party appeal to Southern voters?"

9. Unit 9 Political Parties

No discussion forum.

The course material, as well as all discussion forums, resided in a content management system maintained by a third-party vendor based in a foreign country. Students in all course sections obtained learning materials and assignments from the same course shell.

The pacing for the course was class-paced; that is, students moved through the course according to a class schedule. There was a posted pacing guide with assignment deadlines in each section. The students were expected to submit assignments by posted due dates. Each section was taught by a single teacher who possesses an active state teacher certificate in the appropriate subject area. The students could communicate with their teachers via e-mail or through tools that were available in the course management system.

During the school day, the students went to their respective schools’ computer lab (or the library in some cases) to do their work. The students could access the course after school hours, so they could also work from home. While the students could work on some assignments at home, they were required to take all assessments at their own schools. The students were supervised by a “facilitator” when they were in the classroom. A facilitator is not required to possess a state teacher certificate (i.e., in some cases, a school librarian served as a facilitator),
and is not a subject matter expert. The main tasks of the facilitator were to take roll, answer basic questions from students, help the students with the technology, proctor tests and quizzes, keep students on task, report any problems to the teacher, and to carry out instructions from the teacher.

**Participants**

This study examined the text in online asynchronous discussion forums, so there were no direct participants in the study, *per se*. Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). There were 45 sections of the course offered during the 2016-2017 school year. I collected the text of the asynchronous discussion forums in five random sections of the course. Three of those sections were offered in 1st semester and two sections were offered in 2nd semester. A total of 107 students were enrolled in the five sections of the course that were examined.

**Instrumentation**

In qualitative research, it has been widely acknowledged that the researcher is an instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Merriam (1998) stated that “data are mediated through this human instrument, the researcher, rather than through some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or computer” (p. 7). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) described the qualitative researcher as “the person with all of her or his skills, experience, background, and knowledge as well as biases which is the primary, if not exclusive source, of data collection and analysis” (p. 26). In qualitative research, it is assumed that since the researcher collects data through interactions with participants, observing a phenomenon, and/or by transcribing textual sources, the “human-as-instrument” is the person most capable of interpreting the meaning of those interactions (Keele, 2011).
Researcher Positionality

A researcher’s beliefs, values, and actions will influence how data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The term *positionality* both describes a person’s view of the world and the position that the person has chosen to take in a research study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). England (1994) cautioned us that qualitative researchers should “locate ourselves in our work and to reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research” (p. 87). Readers of qualitative research studies want to feel confident that research is credible (Greenbank, 2003), so I need to reveal to them any biases, assumptions, and experiences that could obscure my ability to conduct this research. During this study, I tried to be aware of my own beliefs and values, and avoid making moral judgements during data analysis, and while formulating my conclusions.

I am a White, heterosexual, middle-aged male, and I have lived in the southeastern United States for most of my life. I was educated in my state’s public schools, and I attended a state university. I was the first member of my family to earn a college degree. After graduation, I taught social studies courses in my state’s public schools for several years. For the past decade, I have taught online and traditional courses at the university level. Currently, I teach for a major online university.

I was employed as an instructional designer at the virtual school featured in this study when I conceived this study. My primary job responsibility at the virtual school was to collaborate with subject matter experts to produce content and learning materials (i.e., lessons, learning materials, quizzes, exams) for the school’s United States History and United States Government courses. My work experiences there ultimately led to my interest in learning more about civic identity development in adolescents. While I worked on the design of the government
course being examined in this study, I was not employed by the virtual school while I was conducting this study.

Because of my experience as a teacher and my training in instructional design, I possessed special knowledge of the phenomenon I chose to study. Also, my position at the virtual school placed me in a unique position to observe the phenomenon from the position of an insider. As an insider, I had easy access to resources, in the form of people and information, that could enable me, consciously or unconsciously, to influence the research.

Data Collection

The data corpus consisted of the text from all available discussion forums in five sections of the course. The virtual school downloaded the discussion forums from its course management system (CMS) for me. They saved the transcript from each individual discussion forum in a separate Microsoft Word document. There was a total of 45 discussion forums in the five sections of the course that were examined, but due to technical difficulties, two discussion forums could not be retrieved from the CMS. Consequently, I collected the transcripts from a total of 43 discussion forums from the 2016-2017 school year.

As soon as I received the transcripts from the virtual school, I began the process of preparing and organizing them for analysis. Specifically, I combed through the transcripts and removed all extraneous information (i.e., topic headings, time stamps, copyright information, etc.) and images from each one and established a common format (i.e., same font face, font size, text color, heading, etc.) for them. At the same time, I looked for minor errors in the text, such as additional spaces, special characters, or other anomalies that were present in the data. I detected several such errors and I fixed them. In order to preserve individual anonymity, the virtual school assigned unique alphanumeric (i.e., Student 1, Student 2, etc.) identifiers to all of the students.
before sending the transcripts to me. As I read the transcripts, I looked for proper names, place names, or other unique identifiers that could jeopardize individual anonymity of the students, teachers, or the virtual school. I found a couple of those types of errors. Both cases involved students’ full names being used in a discussion. I was able to identify both students from information in the discussion thread, and I replaced their proper names with the correct unique alphanumeric identifiers. The virtual school did not provide any demographic data about the students to me.

After I corrected the minor errors in the transcripts, I put the transcripts into a common format and imported them into NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software package. I chose to use NVivo 11 because there was a large amount of data to be managed. I found NVivo 11 to be very useful and helpful in storing the data, making it readily available for quick access, and performing searches on it. However, I did not rely on the software to analyze the data. That responsibility was mine alone as the qualitative researcher. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) described the qualitative researcher as “the person with all of her or his skills, experience, background, and knowledge as well as biases which is the primary, if not exclusive source, of data collection and analysis” (p. 26). Ishak and Baker (2012) asserted that

inevitably, the software cannot replace the wisdom that the researcher brings into the research because at the back of every researcher’s mind lies his or her life history that will influence the way he or she sees and interpret the world. (p. 102)

Bazeley (2007) argued that the major benefit of using the software is it makes the data more manageable for the researcher. I found that the software did reduce a great number of manual tasks, which gave me more time for data analysis.

In NVivo 11, I set up the transcripts as Sources, an NVivo 11 term that describes data and information files (i.e., texts, images, audio files, video files, and others) that are imported into the
software to be used as data sources for a research task. Next, I created a Case Node for each individual student. In NVivo 11, case nodes are node types that represent individuals and groups. Each case node was comprised of all of the comments made by an individual student in a discussion forum. I set up a total of 107 case nodes, one for each student.

Data Analysis

The data analysis phase commenced with a close reading and rereading of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), the analyst should immerse himself in the data in order to “get a feel for the text.” As I read each transcript, I made notes in a notebook on my thoughts about the data, and ideas about how I might code it, that I could refer to in later phases of analysis. In qualitative research, researcher notes are important for several reasons, including: notes can help organize the data collection process, help the researcher map the analytical process, reveal researchers’ perspectives (Hunter, 2007; Yin, 2016), and facilitate reflexivity in the researcher (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Notes are also part of the audit trail that helps establish trustworthiness (Birks et al., 2008; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) of the study.

After reading through the transcripts three times, I then began to code them. Glaser and Laudel (2013) stated that the function of codes is to indicate what is talked about in a segment of text. Codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and represent “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). Miles and Huberman (1984) described the process of coding:

Codes usually are attached to 'chunks' of varying size - words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. They can take the form of a straightforward category label. (p. 56)
One of the aims of coding is to reduce a large data corpus in order to facilitate more efficient analysis, a process commonly called *data reduction* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibbs, 2007). Miles and colleagues (2014) prefer the term *data condensation* to describe this process because they feel that the term data reduction implies that something is being weakened or lost. They argued that by condensing, the researcher is actually making the data *stronger*. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that coding is not simply a method of reducing data, it is also an analytic process because it forces the researcher to read the data at both the semantic and conceptual levels. The outcome of the coding process provides the researcher with evidence that shows how the data supports or contradicts the theoretical framework guiding the research (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). According to Boyatzis (1998), a “good code” is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (p. 1).

I used a deductive approach to coding as outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1992). In this approach the researcher uses a “template”, or a set of *a priori* codes derived from existing literature or theoretical frameworks. This template is commonly called a “codebook.” Crabtree and Miller provided a concise description of a codebook: “The codebook is a data management tool: It is used to organize segments of similar or related text for ease in interpretation and to search for confirming/disconfirming evidence of these interpretations” (p. 99). Bauer (2000) argued that codes should be based on the principles that underpin the research, and the specific questions the researcher wants to answer. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) asserted that using a coding scheme developed from the literature has the advantage of being supported by the accumulation and comparison of research findings from many studies. Miles and Huberman (1984) stated that it is not possible to conduct a qualitative analysis without having developed a conceptual framework prior to the data analysis phase.
The codebook that I developed for this study was inspired by Section V, Part D of the 1994 Center for Civic Education’s National Standards for Civics and Government. Section V, Part D lists 13 civic dispositions or traits of private and public character that are important to the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy (see Appendix B).

According to the Center for Civic Education’s Web site:

The *National Standards for Civics and Government* were developed by the Center for Civic Education with support from the U.S. Department of Education and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Three thousand individuals and organizations participated in the two-year project to identify what students should know and be able to do in the field of civics and government at the end of grades 4, 8, and 12. *National Standards for Civics and Government* has been used as a model for state curricular frameworks and standards throughout the country. The U.S. Department of State has distributed an international edition of the *Standards* to other nations through its Public Affairs Offices and other agencies around the world.

The 13 dispositions or traits (with an example of text that reflects each) that I used as initial codes include:

1. Civility—“I think we should follow the laws and rules. The two most important responsibility I think we have in this world is provide for our families and learn and follow every rule that’s ever been created.”

2. Respect for others’ rights—“I do not think he is saying that one specific political office should have all of the control. Instead, all citizens should have a voice and should be heard and respected.”

3. Respect for law—“The two most important responsibilities of a citizen are to obey the laws of the land and the right to vote. For the overall health of our citizens and our communities, it is vital that we obey the laws of the land. We must also exercise our right to vote. If we do not exercise this right we have no reason to complain about the people who are elected or the laws they pass.”
4. Honesty—“I believe that it's not the quantity of deeds that we do, but rather the quality it is presented, the amount of honest, willing good we do that comes straight from the heart.”

5. Open mindedness—“In addition to making our own decisions as citizens, it is important for those decisions to be educated. We cannot choose a course of action in response to events that we have not attempted to understand.”

6. Critical mindedness—“Citizens must also stay informed so that they actually know what they are voting on and who they are voting for. If an individual is not informed about current events and issues, he or she cannot cast an educated vote, and could end up voting for things completely against their beliefs or that are not good for the country.”

7. Negotiation and compromise—“In a democratic society not everyone will be happy but we need to find a median and compromise between ourselves.”

8. Persistence—“It is important to form your own opinions about life, equality, and many other things and speak them. It is an important responsibility we have form our own opinions, but it is also our responsibility to find a way to bring them to the light. What good is having a talent if you can't show it off? what good would it be if you had an opinion, but never told anyone what it is?”

9. Civic mindedness—“I believe that in order to have a quality democracy, every citizen must do his or her part in the society. They must vote, pay taxes, and help his community. Without the people doing their part in the society, the society will crumble. I believe that is what is happening in today's world. Not enough people are doing their part and that is tearing down this society.”
10. Compassion—“Everybody plays a role in society, and when everybody is working, everything gets done. The economy benefits which in return, citizens benefit. But for some citizens, they are unable to work, which is why those who do work should try to give back and volunteer to help those who can't.”

11. Patriotism—“I also believe as an American citizen we need to take pride in our country and give back to the people that give for us. Starting with the military, that's just my opinion.”

12. Courage—“I believe that the measure of whether a democratic society is strong or weak is a reflection upon whether that society has strong or weak citizens who participate within it.”

13. Tolerance—“Another important responsibility citizens of a democratic society have is a willingness to tolerate those who have different backgrounds, ideals, and lifestyles. In the United States of America and the free world, human rights must be respected, and unjust intolerance of others drags progress as a society. If intolerance reigns supreme, then it is no longer a democratic body and ‘We the People’ only refers to the citizens who lie in the majority.”

I felt that this set of 13 initial codes would be enough for my study. King (2004) warned us that starting with too many pre-defined codes can be counterproductive to the goal of attaining clarity in organizing and interpreting the data; and having too few may leave a researcher without a clear direction. I felt that this template approach would relate very well to my theoretical framework and would also provide some specific terms that would give the data a “voice,” or as Blair (2015) stated, the use of a template of codes would “allow the data to speak through me rather than at me” (p. 19). In NVivo 11, I set up a Node for each code (i.e.,
disposition). In NVivo 11, a node is an individual code that is applied to the raw data and can also be a category or theme.

Using NVivo 11’s built-in tools, I first test-coded the transcripts of all of the discussion forums in a randomly-selected section of the course. This preliminary coding phase served two purposes. First, it allowed me to test the reliability and appropriateness of the codes in context in order to determine if the codebook should be refined (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Second, it helped me make sure that I fully understood the terminology and the guidelines set forth in the template (McQueen & McLellan, 1998). I worked my way systematically through the transcripts, identifying segments of text which I felt were relevant to the research question, and marked them with the appropriate code(s) from the template. I followed the advice of Marshall and Rossman (1999), who suggested that qualitative researchers can “become intimate" with the data through "reading, reading and reading" (p.153) it, and made three passes through each transcript.

I used several common coding techniques to code the transcripts. First, I looked for word repetitions. The idea behind this technique is that words that occur many times in a transcript (i.e., “keywords”) are viewed as being important in the minds of the participants. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) noted that some of the most obvious themes in a data corpus are those “topics that occur and reoccur” (p. 83). D’Andrade (1991) observed that "indeed, anyone who has listened to long stretches of talk, whether generated by a friend, spouse, workmate, informant, or patient, knows how frequently people circle through the same network of ideas" (p. 287). I did not code segments of text that were part of sentences in which a student simply restated a discussion prompt, paraphrased or quoted another student’s comment, or simply stated his or her agreement or disagreement with another student’s comments.
According to Bryman (2001), a common criticism of coding is that the context is lost. Therefore, I coded segments of data inclusively, that is, I kept some of the relevant surrounding data in order to preserve the context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I employed the Holistic Coding method as described by Dey (1993) in order to preserve the “keyword in context.” According to Dey (1993), holistic coding attempts to catch basic themes or concepts in the data by “absorbing them as a whole [the coder as ‘lumper’] rather than by analyzing them line by line [the coder as ‘splitter’]” (p. 104). There is no maximum length restriction to a coded segment in holistic coding; the coded segment can be as small as a paragraph, to as large as an entire study (Saldana, 2009). For example, I assigned the following excerpt the code *Respect for others’ rights* (important concepts are shown in bold):

We are a nation bound by race or religion, but **we share the same values of freedom, liberty, and justice.** Citizenship offers many benefits and equally important responsibilities. By applying, you are demonstrating your commitment to this country and our form of government. In our government system you are aloud many things, but two most important responsibilities of a citizen are **respect the rights, beliefs, and opinions of others.** Also, we have rights. Rights are something citizens earn. We have the rights due to our, citizens, behavior. (Student 18)

While coding, I was aware that I could code an individual segment of data in as many different potential themes as it may fit into, so a single extract could be coded several times (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I also looked for metaphors and analogies as I coded the transcripts. This technique owes much to the work of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), who observed that people often represent their thoughts, experiences, and behaviors with analogies. The following quote, which I assigned the code *Respect for others’ rights,* is an example of a student using a metaphor:

*Just like the human body, if you don’t work and put effort forth for healthy movement and growth then the body will not function properly.* Our government is the same way. People must exercise their right to vote and be active within their local government and national
government in order for the democracy to function like it was naturally intended to work. (Student 12)

During the test-coding process, I found it necessary to add another code to the codebook:

*Motivation.* In the codebook, I gave the new code the following definition:

**Label** Motivation (Malin et al., 2015)

**Definition:** The reasons that lead people to civic engagement.

**Example:** I think that eligible voters don't vote because they are lazy. They have time to vote whether they have a job or not. The voters that don't vote are the majority of the ones that complain. People should get more involved with voting because if they want to have a say so in their government then they need to step up and make time to vote.

At the end of the test-coding phase, I concluded that the template codes were appropriate and reliable. The final version of the codebook contained 14 codes with example text that I used to code the remaining transcripts. The final 14 codes that I used to code the transcripts were:

1. Civility
2. Respect for others’ rights
3. Respect for law
4. Honesty
5. Open mindedness
6. Critical mindedness
7. Negotiation and compromise
8. Persistence
9. Civic mindedness
10. Compassion
11. Patriotism
12. Courage
13. Tolerance
14. Motivation

Exploring the Themes

The coding process produced 538 coded references in NVivo 11. I then ranked the potential themes to establish their relevance. I based my ranking system on the frequencies of coded references for each potential theme. The term frequency referred to the total number of times a code appeared over the entire data set. Using NVivo 11’s built-in tools, it was easy to determine the highest-ranking potential themes (see Table 1). I explored the potential themes that had at least 50% of the total number of coded references of the highest-ranking potential theme (56). The ranked potential themes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

The Ranked Potential Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Theme</th>
<th>Code References</th>
<th>Unique Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law-abiding</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others’ rights</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic-mindedness</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Theme</td>
<td>Code References</td>
<td>Unique Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civility</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriotism</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-mindedness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I explored the four highest-ranking potential themes in depth to determine their accuracy and reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestion of using constant comparison method (Patton, 1990) to review the potential themes with regard to two criteria: *internal homogeneity* and *external heterogeneity*. According to Patton (1990), internal homogeneity is demonstrated by the fact that data within each potential theme will fit together in a meaningful way (i.e., consistency); external heterogeneity is concerned with establishing clear differences among categories (i.e., distinctiveness).

First, I checked for internal homogeneity. I read the data extracts in each potential theme multiple times until I felt certain that all of them formed a coherent pattern, then I moved on to
the next potential theme. Within each potential theme, I discovered a few data extracts that weren’t consistent with the others. In some cases, I determined that the data extract did not belong in the potential theme. In those cases, I explored the possibility that it would fit better into another potential theme. If I found a better fit for the data extract, I moved it into that potential theme; if I discovered that the data extract did not seem to fit with any of the other potential themes, then I discarded it. For example, within the potential theme of *Respect for others’ rights*, I found the following data extract:

> I have to agree. Had Shays not led a rebellion, change may have never come, or something much worse would've come farther down the road. (Student 24)

After I read the data extract multiple times and compared it to other data extracts within the potential theme, I decided that it was too vague and I could not readily state its meaning. I decided to delete it from the potential theme, and I did not assign it to another potential theme. In another example, within the potential theme of *Sense of civic responsibility*, I found the following data extract:

> I personally feel that even if you put more voting polls out and increase voting hours, People still will feel **unmotivated** to go. I feel if voting is stressed and the community puts effort into it, people will actually go to vote. (Student 36)

After careful consideration, I decided that the data extract would fit better in the potential theme *Motivation*, so I moved it there.

Second, I checked for external heterogeneity. The primary task was to determine if the potential themes precisely reflected the content of the data set without intersecting other potential themes and did not leave out any important concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Guba (1978) warned us that the existence of many data items that are unassigned, or overlap with other data items, could be evidence of “some basic fault” (p. 53) in the coding system. After reading the data extracts multiple times, I concluded that the potential themes were clearly distinct and clear.
At the end of this phase of analysis, I had a set of four consistent and distinct themes that I could use to tell an honest and accurate story about the data. These themes were: respect for the rule of law; respect for others’ rights; a sense of civic responsibility; and critical thinking.

Summary

This chapter described the data and methods used in this study. I employed thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze the text from the asynchronous discussion forums in an online high school United States Government course.

My methodological strategy was descriptive in nature. My goal was to describe students’ expressions of civic identity as they expressed them and to provide a true, full account of their expressions. I conducted data analysis on the semantic level.

This study examined the text in online asynchronous discussion forums, so there were no direct participants in the study, per se. The data corpus consisted of the text from all available discussion forums in the course. I collected the transcripts from a total of 43 discussion forums.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine a group of high school students’ discursive expressions of civic identity within asynchronous discussion forums in a virtual classroom. The research question was “What do high school students' discursive expressions within asynchronous discussion forums in the virtual classroom reveal about their civic identities?”

This chapter presents the findings of this study.

The findings are presented in a narrative form that describes and summarizes each theme that emerged from the data analysis. Verbatim quotes are used to enhance readability and to highlight exemplar comments. Most importantly, the quotes provided a voice for students to express their own views, and also provided evidence that the themes under discussion emerged from the students’ conversations and not in my own mind (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). The quotes were not edited for grammatical clarity or to correct syntax errors, rather they are presented in a manner that reflects as accurately as possible the conversations that occurred between students. Identifiers are included along with the quotes. Tables and appendices are used to present non-textual data visually where appropriate.

Demographics

I analyzed a total of 43 discussion forums from five sections of an online high school United States Government course. There were nine discussion forums in each section. The nine discussion forums, shown below in the order in which they appear in the course, are show below.
The discussion prompt for the 1.01 We the People Discussion forum was

Consider the following quote by the 19th century French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville: "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." What do you think de Tocqueville means by this quote? When you have formulated an opinion… go to 1.01 We the People Discussion and post your answer to the question "What are the two most important responsibilities of citizens, or "We the People"?"
Alexis de Tocqueville was a 19th century French nobleman. de Tocqueville was very impressed by the participatory nature of American society. Having witnessed several failed attempts at making a democratic government work in his own country, he wanted to study a successful democracy in order to learn how it worked. In 1831, he traveled to the United States to observe American society firsthand and to gather information about American politics and institutions. de Tocqueville spent several years recording his observations. In 1840, his observations were published as a book titled *Democracy in America* (de Toqueville, 2006).

The discussion prompt for 2.01 Shays’ Rebellion Discussion forum was

What are your views on rebellion or protesting against the government? Do you feel that Daniel Shays was justified in his call to stop the courts and free those in debt to the government? Why? How do you think that Shays’ Rebellion encouraged the idea of a new government in America?

Shay’s Rebellion was a rebellion that arose in Massachusetts in 1786 that was caused by a monetary debt crisis that arose soon after the American Revolutionary War. The rebellion was named after Daniel Shays, a former Continental Army captain who led the rebels, a group made up of poor farmers and veterans angered by their heavy debt and high taxes. They could not pay their taxes and were in danger of going to jail or losing their home. Shays led a rebellion with the aim of preventing courts from foreclosing on the farms of those who could not pay the taxes. Though the uprising was confined to a small area, and caused a minimal amount of violence or damage, it exposed the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation (Gross, 1993).

A total of 107 students were enrolled in the five sections of the course that were examined. The virtual school did not provide any demographic data about the students. Section 1 had the largest enrollment of any section with 28 students. Section 2 was the smallest section with 11 students. A breakdown of enrollment in the five sections, along with the total number of coded references made by the students in each section, appears in the Table 2 below.
Table 2

Student Enrollment per Section

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Student ID Numbers</th>
<th>Number of Coded References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1-28</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29-39</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>66-88</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>89-107</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the students’ participation in the forums was low. However, 93% of the students made at least one post to a discussion forum. A total of 10 students made more than 20 posts to the discussion forums. Six of the students did not make a single post. The students who made more than 20 posts to the discussion forums are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Students who Made More Than 20 Posts to the Discussion Forums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Number of Posts</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 76</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 72</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (con’t)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Number of Posts</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 66</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 73</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 74</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 78</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 81</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion of Themes**

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used as the method for identifying and analyzing patterns within the data. During data analysis, four major themes emerged from the data: respect for the rule of law, respect for others’ rights, sense of civic responsibility, and critical thinking. The themes were not considered in any hierarchical order, with one theme having more importance than another. These themes will be discussed individually in this chapter.

What did the students’ comments in the discussion forums reveal about their civic identities? The findings, as suggested by the themes, suggested that most of the students possess
many civic dispositions essential to civic identity and some may have attained an advanced level of moral reasoning. However, the students did not seem to possess a mature civic identity due to a lack of a strong civic and political knowledge base and a sense of civic purpose. Put simply, the students’ hearts seemed to be in the right place, but they did not yet possess the knowledge and skills they needed to put those principles into practice in their communities.

**Theme 1: Respect for the Rule of Law**

This theme reflects the students’ respect for the rule of law. Within this theme, there are two related ideas that were common among the students: (a) voting is not only a right, it is a civic responsibility; and (b) obeying the laws promotes a safe and stable society. These minor themes will be discussed within the context of the major theme. Some of the most noteworthy comments made by students that illustrate this theme are presented below.

*Voting is not Only a Right, it is a Responsibility.* Some students viewed voting as a “right” given to Americans in the Constitution. Others viewed it as a "privilege" because previous generations had fought for it and other countries do not enjoy the same freedom. However, most of the students saw voting primarily as a “responsibility” because it highlights the importance of selecting who will represent them in government and how they will be represented. Also, many students expressed the feeling that voting gives them a voice in local and national affairs. For example

**Student 40:**

… Although voting is considered a right it is also a responsibility. Voting is important because without voting people would not be able to speak or post their opinion. Also, when you vote you are voting for the future and it is your responsibility to create a good future for you and others around you.

**Student 86:**
… The most important responsibility a citizen in a democracy is to get out and vote on election day. This is most important because the only way the people can truly have the power is to exercise their right to vote and elect officials in governmental positions.

Student 68:

One responsibility of citizens is to exercise "our right to vote". I believe this is very important because if you do not vote then you're not really making an impact on who gets elected to speak and make decisions on your behalf.

In the 1.01 Voter Turnout Discussion forum, where students were asked to answer the question “What are the two most important responsibilities of citizens, or 'We the People'?”,

Student 37 made the following statement:

I think that Tocqueville was trying to get us to think about our rights as citizens. We the people, were given the right to vote… In politics, you are urged to participate and exercise your right to vote. However, with privileges come responsibilities. Us, as citizens, need to know our rights and abide by the laws of our country. Together, we can make our government and country better.

His remarks prompted several replies from supportive classmates:

Respondent Student 30:

I totally agree. If we don't use our right to vote then what is the point in an election? Working together is a major key to a successful government.

Respondent Student 38:

I agree with you. Everyone must exercise their right to vote. It is a freedom we shouldn't ignore.

Respondent Student 36:

I absolutely agree with all you are saying, exercising our right to vote is important. By selecting someone to make choices and laws for our country has a big effect on us therefore whomever we choose we will depend on them and know they are reliable.

Obeying the laws promotes a safe and stable society. Many of the students expressed a belief that laws are meant to promote a safe and peaceful society, and that we should obey them.

For example, in the 1.01 Voter Turnout Discussion forum, Student 82 stated: “Another important
responsibility is to obey the laws. Obeying the laws keeps everyone safe.” In another section of the same forum, Student 21 stated: “…Besides voting, citizens should also have the responsibility of keeping their communities safe. Citizens know their community better than people who don't live in the community. Reporting dangers, concerns, and problems benefit both the community and its citizens.” In another section of the same forum, Student 43 stated:

. . . Everyone, I feel like, does need to obey the law set through the Government especially for our safety. Not only not obeying the law causes disruption it can cause harm to you and others. We need safety in the U.S so we can run as a whole, and be together as one. If we follow the laws we will be a safe nation, where others will want to come to get away from harm or a failing nation.

In the Section 3 of the same forum, Student 42 sparked a lively conversation with this comment:

. . . The second responsibility that is crucial to the society that the citizens live in is to obey the law set through the government. If people do not obey the law then that can cause a disruption in the balance of society.

His remarks prompted several replies from classmates who held the same opinion:

Respondent Student 40:

I absolutely agree with you... Also obeying the law is important because if we didn't have laws to follow then our society would become mass chaos and our country would fail.

Respondent Student 43:

… Everyone, I feel like, does need to obey the law set through the Government especially for our safety. Not only not obeying the law causes disruption it can cause harm to you and others. We need safety in the U.S so we can run as a whole, and be together as one. If we follow the laws we will be a safe nation, where others will want to come to get away from harm or a failing nation.

Respondent Student 61:

I also think Student 42 is right about you need to obey the law because without the laws, the country would never be the same and it would always be filled with crime and other terrible things.
In the 2.01 Shays’ Rebellion Discussion forum students were asked if they felt that Shays was justified in starting a rebellion against the government in order to stop the courts from prosecuting the debtors, and to free them from jail. Several students felt the rebellion cannot be justified for any reason:

Student 18:

… Even though farmers were losing money, it was not good for the entire country. **This rebellion good have been really bad** for some people. **This could have caused the united states to get out of order.**

Student 56:

**Rebellion is an act of violent or open resistance to an established government or ruler.** Daniel Shays call to stop the courts and free the prisoners with unpaid taxes is not a good idea. **The people did something wrong** to get their butts in jail so why take them out of jail just to pay their taxes.

Student 32:

I believe that **protesting your own government while using violence is wrong.** Protesting is very good for our country as long it is done in a way that hurts nobody and does not cost the government money. **If you want to voice your opinion on a matter do it with words but never use violence or force** all that will do is make it worse...

Some students felt that the farmers and veterans were being treated unfairly by the government, but that an armed rebellion was not the answer to the problem, and that peaceful protests would have been a better approach. For example

Student 17:

While the underlying meaning of the rebellion was sound, **the armed men created a hostile environment.** A **peaceful protest would have worked just as good,** yet nothing harmful would have happened and their ideas would have still been brought forth.

Student 67:

I believe the rebellion was more than justified. However, **there was probably a much better way to handle it.** Granted the rebels were extremely upset about the taxes trying to overwhelm them to the point where they couldn’t provide for their families. But **that**
doesn’t justify that they attacked an army. Which is why 4 of Shays men were killed and many other men with wounds.

Student 22:

I don't believe rebelling against the government will do anything but cause chaos. Peaceful protesting will get the attention of the government and help them realize change needs to be made. I do not feel the Daniel Shays was justified in his call to stop the courts and free those in debt to the government. As it said in the lesson, he placed fear in many citizens by doing this. Some people felt that him and his followers were dangerous. There were other ways to get the laws changed . . .

In Section 1 of the same forum, Student 21 initiates conversation by defending Shays’ actions:

I think Daniel Shay [sic] was right in rebellion against the government. A person's money shouldn't be collected/taken away if they are not the reason for a country's economic decline. Daniel Shay rebelled due to the unlawful imprisonment of farmers. My views on rebellion against the government is that people should be allowed to rebel, if the government shows signs of becoming too powerful.

His remarks sparked a lively conversation:

Respondent Student 27:

I agree. The citizens should be allowed to rebel. It is all of our responsibilities to pay for our freedom though. War is costly in more ways than one, especially when it is at home. We pay taxes so that we can have certain freedoms and privileges.

Respondent Student 18:

We are a nation that has a history of rebelling. I am not convinced though that every time you feel the government is doing wrong there should be physical altercations. I like the rule of law. The government does need to be reminded though when they abuse their power.

Respondent Student 26:

I agree with you. The government does abuse their power sometimes and it isn't fair to us as citizens who pay taxes. The rebellion was a good thing for the country at that time.

Respondent Student 22:

I disagree. I don't think he should have rebelled the way he did. Back then they were trying to find a government and laws that made everything work. I believe that the
protesting and maybe someone speaking to the governor would have gotten things changed. We live in a country that is for the people, by the people, so if we do not pay taxes then the country will not prosper. **If we were allowed to rebel every time the government did something we didn't like, there would be complete chaos.**

In the Section 1 2.04 Demand Your Right Discussion forum students were asked if they could add another amendment to the Constitution, what would it be? Several students stated they would add an amendment that would ensure public safety. For example

**Student 2:**

If I could make a new amendment it would be that an amendment could not be changed, Example people trying to change the second amendment, **it's important for people to be able to defend themselves.** I can understand if someone has a history to be wreak-less with a firearm.

**Student 8:**

If I could add one more amendment it would clearly state that if you have had a criminal history within a 20 year time span your information shall be accessible to the public. This amendment would **reduce criminal cases** by granting the public with this information **violent criminals would be shunned upon.** I think with the public knowing the crimes you've committed future offenders would reevaluate themselves before committing a crime. All in all **crime rate would drop tremendously.**

**Student 22:**

… There are many more issues in our own country that we need to fix before trying to help other countries. We're trying to help other countries **keep peace** within their country when **we have people rioting, destroying towns, and people killing police officers for no reason. We need to focus on keeping the peace in our country** before we worry about other countries.

**Theme 1 summary.** The data analysis revealed that the students have a healthy **respect for the rule of law.** Most of the students saw voting primarily as a “responsibility” because it highlights the importance of selecting who will represent them in government and how they will be represented. Also, many students expressed the feeling that voting gives them a voice in local and national affairs. Also, many of the students expressed a belief that laws are meant to promote a safe and peaceful society, and that we should obey them.
Theme 2: Respect for Others’ Rights

This theme reflects the student’s respect for individual worth and human dignity, and their concerns for protecting the rights of minorities and the poor. Also, many of the students expressed their feelings that electronic privacy rights are very important to them. Some of the most noteworthy comments made by students that illustrate this theme are presented below.

Many students felt that it is important to stand up for rights of minorities. For example, in the 1.01 We the People Discussion forum, Student 15 stated,

It is also important to protect the best interests of other citizens by supporting policies that benefit the minority. This also means that when we see injustice and inequality, it is our duty as free people to expose it and affect positive change.

In the 2.04 Demand Your Right Discussion forum, some students stated that they would add additional protections for minorities to the Constitution:

Student 54:

If I could add an amendment to the Bill of Rights it would be that acts of discrimination of any kind is illegal... This right will protect minorities, so that they can go around and not be ashamed of their race nor where that came from... No matter the race of a person or religion you practice acts of violence should not be tolerated.

Student 58:

If I could add one more amendment to the Bill of Rights it would be to ban police brutality. In the past two to three years there have been murders of innocent African American men at the hands of the police due to racism and abusing the power given to them by law.... If my amendment were to ever be acted upon it would give more protection to other races, and end at least some of the hate that is still amongst us other races today.

Student 42:

If there was an amendment I could add to the Bill of Rights, it would be that no matter the gender or race people of the same occupation would make the same wages. I would add this amendment because too often in our country women and people of color tend to make a lower salary of a white male in the same line of work. I believe that color or gender should not predict the wages of citizen.
Some students expressed their feelings that we have an obligation to protect the rights of the poor. For example, in the Section 4 1.01 We the People Discussion forum, Student 88 makes the comment, “. . . But, I also think that people should work, there is to many people not working thinking that people that do work is going to pay for all their crap.” These comments obviously struck a nerve in Student 76, who unleashed this lengthy response:

Respondent Student 76:

. . . I disagree with Student 88's statement about people's necessities being taken care of. Yes, there are people who do take advantage of our Welfare programs, but there are people who actually need the money to survive. Another reason I disagree with Student 88 is that some people who actually genuinely need the money cannot get it. For example, my grandmother cannot work due to her health issues and therefore is having a large lack of income. She applied for disability and was rejected. Another example of this is when a friend of mine had had her family's income completely cut off. (lost jobs, electricity was off, etc.) Her mother went to apply for government help, and was rejected because she had a vehicle and her husband had a job. This is a massive problem. I understand not wanting to have unemployed citizens; however, sometimes the regulations of Welfare and government assistance is that they CANNOT have a job. If they were to get employed they would be cut off from the government funding, which would in the long run be an inconvenience for them. So yes, there are working people who pay for Welfare; however, I do feel as though, since we pay taxes anyways, that the money we are paying should go to our citizens who need the money, and not matters that we could go without.

In the 2.01 Shays’ Rebellion Discussion forum, many students expressed the opinion that the rebellion was justified because the poor farmers and veterans who could not afford to pay their taxes, and were being sent to jail because of it, needed someone to help them. For example

Student 24:

. . . if the government is unfairly taxing the people so much that many lose everything they own, I believe it's the write of those people to rise up and fight for their rights to life and liberty. A man with no home or work and debts to pay may as well be dead, and many men were imprisoned over not being able to pay the taxes. The government had the audacity to tax a man out of house and home, and then jail them because he couldn't give them more . . . If the government won't protect us, the we have to protect ourselves.
Student 62:

Yes, because he helped those in need when the government didn't see them fully as people. I believed in encouraged a new government for America because they weren't treating people like they deserved to be treated.

Student 60:

I feel that Daniel Shays was justified because he was helping unfortunate people who couldn't really help themselves. He gave the poorer a voice they hadn't had. I believe that Shays' Rebellion encouraged those in charge to create better laws and regulations that made a better and new government for America.

Student 75:

The rebellion was justified. Daniel shy was in his right mind to rebel against the debtors and taxes, considering that was a major issue that led to the Revolutionary War itself. The whole taxation without representation bid was more or less exactly the same, only difference was who collected the coin. Imprisoning people for not paying debts when they have nothing to pay the debts with is idiotic . . .

Not surprisingly, many of the students expressed a concern for the rights of minors. In the 2.04 Demand Your Right Discussion forum, Student 103 stated

I would add an amendment that pertains to minors. I would allow them to fully express themselves in public schools as they see fit. This is a right they possess everyday outside of High School but from 7-3 that right is taken away.

Student 62 would add an amendment that would grant a citizen, once her or she turns 18 years old, the right to “make your own decisions regarding contracts, drinking, smoking, and other things regarding age limits.” The student went on to explain the choice:

When you are 18 you are legally able to move out on your own, but you aren't allowed to sign a contract or buy certain things until you are older or without parent consent. If you don't live with your parent I don't see the need to have their signatures or their consent on things. It would allow everyone to have the freedom that they deserve and to do things on their own like an adult, which they are considered an adult when they turn the age of 18.

Many of the students expressed a strong belief that the right to privacy is important to them. The right to privacy refers to the idea that an individual’s personal information is protected
from public view. Warren and Brandeis (1890) called it "the right to be let alone" (p. 193). The First, Third, Fourth, and Fifth amendments to the Constitution provide some protections to citizens.

In the Section 1 2.04 Demand Your Right Discussion forum, Student 7 expressed a desire to add an amendment to the Constitution that would allow a person’s criminal history to be available to the public for a period of 20 years. The student went on to explain the choice:

This amendment would reduce criminal cases by granting the public with this information violent criminals would be shunned upon. I think with the public knowing the crimes you’ve committed future offenders would reevaluate themselves before committing a crime. All in all crime rate would drop tremendously.

Student 15 replied contemptuously, “This would be a horrible violation of privacy.” In the Section 2 of the same forum, Student 36 stated:

If I could add one more amendment to the bill of rights I would guarantee more security . . . You have the right to your own business and do not have to make it public or known. It is important that us Americans have this right and freedom because privacy and security balances out.

Not surprisingly, many students were concerned about electronic privacy rights. Several of the students in the 2.04 Demand Your Right Discussion forum stated they would add an amendment to the Constitution that would safeguard electronic privacy rights:

Student 30:

If I had to add an amendment, it would be similar to the fourth amendment, just modernized. I would add that the government can't "hack" our electronics to find out information without a warrant. With the new age of technology, the government can basically spy on anybody through electronics. They can easily go through our emails, texts, and call records without us knowing. I think that is an evasion of privacy and that they shouldn't do that without proper cause and a warrant.

Student 7:

If I could add one more amendment to the Bill of Rights, it would be no mass electronic surveillance of Americans' email, telephone call, etc. I would add this amendment for the guaranteed privacy of Americans. This amendment would protect the right to
privacy. I believe it is important for Americans to have this right because the government should not be able to spy on its citizens without valid reasons…

Student 34:

I would add an amendment that thoroughly guarantees privacy and reaffirms the fourth amendment. If our founding fathers knew the amount of surveillance the government attempts, they’d probably make such an amendment themselves. This Right would help others with their privacy of wanting to speak on others actions or just freedom of press being able to exercise their freedoms freely.

Student 20:

If I could add one more amendment to the Bill of Rights, it would be that the government cannot, without a warrant, as specified in the fourth amendment, purchase or obtain information about American Citizens from non-governmental things. They could not hack into our networking or devices. The government would need specific permission to access anything that is not of importance to governmental things. If the person is a good person who has never done any harm, they should be granted certain privacy. This protects the right to privacy and search without warrant.

Theme 2 summary. The data analysis revealed that students were particularly interested in protecting the civil rights of minorities and the protection of the poor, and the right to privacy—especially electronic privacy rights. Many students expressed a belief that that a democratic government has a duty to respect human rights, to ensure those rights are protected and to protect helpless people from having their rights violated by others.

Theme 3: Sense of Civic Responsibility

The data analysis revealed that the students have a healthy sense of civic responsibility; that is, an inclination to think and care about the welfare of the community. Within this theme, the most common idea expressed by students was in order for a democracy to function well, all of its citizens must participate in it in some form. Some of the most noteworthy comments made by students that illustrate this theme are presented below.

In the Section 1 1.01 We the People Discussion forum, Student 20 stated: “. . . the overall well-being or "status" of our society depends on whether we decide to be involved
with the country and/or politics.” He goes on to state that if citizens stopped caring, our society would be in bad shape since “a democracy depends on the people to even work in the first place”. Later in the same forum, Student 17 stated:

If the society is running as it should, then this will be seen in people doing things for the society as they should, as well as maybe volunteering and participating more than other societies in which the democracy is not running as well.

Later, Student 24 stated that “a democracy is run by the people” and supported his comment using this analogy:

It's the same logic behind the idea that a chain is only as strong as the weakest link. Things have to work together in a government just like links in a chain or cells in a body. If there is a weak link in the chain, it will eventually break . . .

Many of the students in the Section 3 1.01 We the People forum shared the same opinions as their counterparts in Section 1:

Student 61:

In a community a citizen’s role or responsibility is to family and neighbors. Help them as much as you can then help everybody else. You want to help them the most just because they are the closest in your life. I know you need to help other people but they have known you the longest and they need your help just as much as you need their help. Don't stay just for them all the time, help others and you will feel better about.

Student 68:

. . . the shape we are in may be determined by how we as citizens may think, act, react, how we choose to participate and so on. I think what he means here is basically it is what you make it.

Student 66:

A society, whether democratic or not, is only as good as the voracious efforts of its citizens, meaning what you give is what you get out of it . . . A citizen may also choose to run for political office whether for their county or state if they feel that they can really contribute to their community or advocate change.

Some students expressed a belief that one of the most important responsibilities of a citizen is to hold a job. For example, Student 25 stated that
Working is important because this adds revenue and value to the communities we live in. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each citizen to do his or her part to make contributions that add value to our society as a whole.

Student 86 stated: “By having a job, they contribute to society just as one should by paying taxes.” He goes on to state that “If people do not work and contribute, then the government in turn has to pull money from another source, which will bring about more debt.” Student 84 stated “In order to be a good country as a whole, every citizen must work just as hard as everyone else, if not that harder.” Student 58 stated “If U.S. citizens did not work and benefit from their profit there would be no United States. The United States is runs on money and power just like the rest of the world.”

Theme 3 summary. The data analysis revealed that the students have a healthy sense of civic responsibility. Most of the students expressed the feeling that a sense of civic responsibility is vital to the success of democracy, and that every citizen can and must do something useful for the development of the society. Many of the students expressed the belief that it is important that they see themselves as part of a larger polity.

Theme 4: Critical Thinking

This theme captures the students’ strong feelings that a well-educated citizenry is vital to the well-being of a democratic society. Many of the students expressed a belief that a formal civic education provides the foundation for well-informed, responsible, and civic-minded citizens. Also, many of the students acknowledged the importance of gaining knowledge in current events in order to make the best decisions about how to vote in local and national elections. Some of the most noteworthy comments made by students that illustrate this theme are presented below.
Many of the students expressed a belief that a good education is the key to making
choices that result in effective and responsible participation in society. For example, in the
Section 3 1.01 We the People Discussion forum, Student 60 stated

\[
\ldots \text{education is the most important factor. The more educated a person is, the more likely they are to vote. We should teach in school what to look for when determining who is the better candidate so that people feel more educated and can make wise decisions in voting.}
\]

Student 46 stated:

**Education is another important factor. If someone were to be more educated on a topic like voting, they would be more confident in their ability to do so.** I believe we should teach people, especially those in the higher classmen groups, what to look for in voting on candidates.

In the Section 1 7.04 Voter Turnout Discussion forum students were asked their opinion about why eligible voters do not turnout to vote, and to offer suggestions about what could be done to increase voter turnout. Student 14 stated

**I think it’s because we aren’t really educated on voting. We don’t find out a lot about voting until 12th grade and it’s only a little. We aren’t told what impact of our vote does. I think that they should have more education for 18 to 24-year olds on how to vote and what our vote means. They say that lowers turnout. I think educated more of them would help more voter come out.**

Two of Student 14’s classmates were quick to agree with the opinion.

**Respondent Student 20:**

This is very true. **I agree that there is not enough education about voting.** People will not be interested in voting when they don't even know what it's about.

**Respondent Student 22:**

**If people understand why they are voting then they would vote more.** Also, if they were more educated and understood what they were voting for, the country wouldn't be in such a bad shape.
In the Section 4 5.04 Becoming President Discussion forum students were asked to post their opinions about the question “Does the average person have a chance of becoming president?”. Student 78 replied

Yes, I think the average person have a chance becoming a president. If they have a good background, meet the requirements that you need to be a president then they will be able to. Some citizens think they can't be a president because they haven't did this or didn't finish high school. But you be in another country and try to be president . . .

His comments sparked the following conversation.

Respondent Student 73:

I disagree. Yes, they have to meet the requirements to be able to run, but you could still be a good person and have a good background but lack at having the right amount of schooling.

Respondent Student 72:

I disagree. You could have a good background and meet the requirements but it all comes down to having enough money to run campaigns and to have the education you need to be able to compete. Without the proper knowledge it would be hard to win debates, etc.

Respondent Student 89:

Good background is important when a person runs for President. However, an uneducated person will not make it very far in the race. After all, would you trust an entire country with someone who didn't finish high school? It comes down to being competent for the job.

In the Section 1 7.04 Voter Turnout Discussion forum, where students were asked their opinion about why eligible voters do not turnout to vote, and to offer suggestions about what could be done to increase voter turnout, Student 5 initiated a spirited conversation by stating:

The main reason eligible voters do not turnout to vote because everyone that vote, votes for the wrong reasons and the ones not turning out to vote are the one that don't use their privilege right. What I think should be done to increase voter turnout is to let everybody 16 and up to vote to help their family.
Respondent Student 14:

I think that would help and maybe get schools to educated kids earlier would make the kids more educated and help them turn out more.

Respondent Student 20:

I don't agree that sixteen year olds should vote. I believe that many of them are just learning to drive around that time. If we got eighteen year olds and many other adults to vote, we'd get a much better outcome all-together.

Respondent Student 8:

I disagree, I think we should encourage those 18+ to vote. Not lower the age requirement, reason why? Social media. Younger people tend to believe everything they hear and when they don’t get what they "need." They exercise their 1st amendment right and gripe instead of making change.

Respondent Student 26:

I do not think that this would solve the problem. A lot of people at 16 are still immature and do not know what will be best for America. Not everyone votes for the wrong reason. Just because a lot of people are following the crowd does not mean that other people aren't being leaders and voicing their own opinions.

Respondent Student 27:

I disagree. One of the biggest problems with voters now is that they are uneducated in politics and may not be aware of what they are voting for. Also, most sixteen year olds are not old enough or aware enough to decide where they truly stand politically and do not contribute to the economy.

Respondent Student 22:

I disagree. I don't think everyone who votes do so for the wrong reasons. They vote to exercise their rights. The ones that do not vote usually don't understand that their vote does matter. I don't think the voting age should be 16. Most 16-year olds can't grasp the concept of the elections and how important they are.

Many of the students expressed a belief that every citizen in a democratic society has a responsibility to become knowledgeable about the political and social issues of the day in order to make informed decisions about elections.
Student 7:

... Choosing a candidate that holds his or her interests in the nation and the democracy and freedom of the people is important. **American citizens need to become more knowledgeable about each candidate running for president in order to make a wise decision.** Our decision affects the nation.

Student 27:

... **Without knowing the platforms of candidates, you cannot wisely vote** for the one you think will do the most good and make the most positive change for your country. Taking that extra and necessary step leads to a more intelligent and proficient society which leads to a better and less corrupt government. **It is easy to fool the ignorant and lazy.**

Student 68:

... **Another responsibility of citizens is to become knowledgeable about the issues** in order to make informed decisions. I do believe this is very important because if you do not know the things going on than how could you make the right decision when you are asked to make one?

In the Section 3 1.01 We the People forum, Student 44 stated

... There are important responsibilities the U.S. citizens have to accomplish in order to work together. Two would be something surrounding what is going to happen November 8th 2016, tomorrow. We must exercise the right to vote; however, **we also must become knowledgeable about issues in order to make these informed decisions.** If we forget these rights our founding fathers worked so hard to put into act what else will we forget that could be the downfall of our civilization.

Several of Student 44’s classmates agreed:

Respondent Student 60:

I agree with this post because it is important for us to be able to be knowledgeable about what is around us and how to work together toward causes and campaigns of our own. **To survive we must first come together and raise awareness about the issues around us.**

Respondent Student 48:

**You made a good point about becoming acknowledgeable about the things going on around us,** in order to make a good decision on who we decide to vote for. **I think we shouldn’t just vote for someone just because everyone else around us is, but because of what we truly think and feel.** No vote would count more than the other's!
Some of the students expressed a belief that every citizen in a democratic society should possess a basic knowledge about the political process.

Student 81:

I think the main reason voters don't vote is because of the registration process. Many people don't even know exactly where to go to register or even to vote . . .

Student 30:

I think the main reason people don't show up to vote is because they are intimidated by the process. This intimidation comes from the not knowing. If the voters don't know that much about politics then they are going to too scared to go and vote. If voters were more educated in the political process they would be more confident in the whole voting situation . . .

Student 33:

. . . The voters could also not be voting because they don't know when the vote is held. Aside from presidential elections most people don't know when to vote.

Theme 4 summary. The data analysis revealed that most of the students feel that critical thinking is an important civic skill that contributes to the success of a democratic society. Many of the students expressed a belief that a formal civic education provides the foundation for well-informed, responsible, and civic-minded citizens. Also, many of the students acknowledged the importance of gaining knowledge in current events in order to make the best decisions about how to vote in local and national elections.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this study. The findings were presented in a narrative form that described and summarized each theme that emerged from the data analysis. Verbatim quotes are used to enhance readability and to highlight exemplar comments.

I analyzed a total of 43 discussion forums from five sections of an online high school United States Government course. There were nine discussion forums in each section of the
A total of 107 students were enrolled in the five sections of the course that were examined.

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used as the method for identifying and analyzing patterns within the data. During data analysis, four major themes emerged from the data: respect for the rule of law; respect for others’ rights; sense of civic responsibility; and critical thinking.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine a group of high school students’ discursive expressions of civic identity within the asynchronous discussion forums of a virtual classroom. Chapter I outlined the purpose of this study. Chapter II provided a review of the related literature, using the ideals of civic identity (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Erikson, 1968; Youniss et al., 1997), civic engagement (Crocetti et al, 2012; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Yates & Youniss, 1995), and civic education (Dewey, 1927; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Parker, 2003) as the theoretical framework that guided this study. Chapter III detailed the methodology used in this study. Chapter IV presented the four themes that emerged from the data analysis phase. This chapter concludes this dissertation. Here, I present a summary of the research, and discuss and interpret the findings in relation to the research question and the literature. I also discuss some recommendations for policy and practice and identify areas for further research.

Discussion

What did the students’ comments in the discussion forums reveal about their civic identities? The findings, as suggested by the themes, suggested that most of the students possess many civic dispositions essential to civic identity and some may have attained an advanced level of moral reasoning. However, the students do not seem to possess a mature civic identity due to a lack of a strong civic and political knowledge base and a sense of civic purpose. Put simply, the students’ hearts seem to be in the right place, but they do not yet possess the knowledge and skills they need to put those principles into practice in their communities.
Theme 1: Respect for the Rule of Law

Many of the students expressed their belief that obeying laws is an important civic responsibility while others felt that obeying laws can help ensure a safe and stable society. This healthy respect for the law and a concern for the social order suggested that the students have reached Stage 4 of Kohlberg’s (1984) hierarchy of moral development, a stage that Kohlberg labeled *Conventional Morality*. The students’ comments revealed their beliefs that laws were made to be obeyed because they keep us safe, and that doing one's duty and showing respect for authority are important civic responsibilities. According to Kohlberg (1984), most people fit into Stage 4, but most people don’t advance past this stage.

There was evidence that some of the students may be approaching Stage 5 of moral development, a stage that Kohlberg labeled *Post-Conventional Morality*. For example, in the 2.01 Shays’ Rebellion Discussion forum, many of the students expressed a belief that Shays was justified in leading a violent rebellion against the government in order to help the poor farmers, who had no voice of their own. This attitude suggested that the students’ morality is defined in terms of more abstract values and principles such as equality and justice, and that they see laws as being flexible - and replaceable if they do not uphold individual rights. Both of these attitudes are hallmarks of Stage 5 moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984). Modern democratic societies are based on the reasoning in Stage 5. According to Kohlberg (1984), only 10 to 15% of people are capable of reaching this stage. Other research has produced this finding. Owen (2015) examined six categories of civic dispositions, including support for the rule of law. She found that students strongly respected the rule of law from the outset, but the level of respect for the rule of law increased after taking a civics class.
Theme 2: Respect for Others’ Rights

This theme reflected the student’s concern for individual rights and human dignity, and their concerns for protecting the rights of minorities and the poor. This attitude suggested that the students are approaching or at Stage 5 of Kohlberg’s (1984) hierarchy of moral development. At this stage, an individual considers the values of others before making moral decisions. At Stage 4, an individual simply wants to keep society functioning. At Stage 5, the individual begins to consider the possibility that a smooth-running society may not necessarily be a good one. At Stage 5, an individual sees society as a “social contract” into which people enter on their own accord with the expectation of working for the benefit of all. The individual recognizes that different social groups in the society have different values and goals but they all desire basic rights, such as life and liberty and life, and those rights should be protected.

Some of the students spoke in the language of the Ethic of Autonomy (Shweder et al., 1997). The Ethic of Autonomy is based on the notion that people are autonomous individuals, capable of making decisions and taking actions based on their own personal goals and reasoning. This principle affirms the importance of allowing individuals to practice their moral right of self-determination. To violate one’s (or an entire group’s) ability to be self-determining is considered to be an immoral act and a crime against persons. Societies develop moral concepts such as justice, liberty, and rights that allow people to live together in peace without encroaching too much on each other’s autonomy (Jensen, 2011).

Theme 3: Sense of Civic Responsibility

Within this theme, the most common idea expressed by students was: in order for a democratic society to function, every citizen must participate in it in some form. This disposition is consistent with most of the literature. It is generally understood that in order to develop a
mature civic identity, not only must one feel an emotional connection to a community, one must also become an active participant in it (see Hart et al., 1998; McAdam, 1982; Obst et al., 2002). It is through civic engagement, motivated by a sense of civic responsibility, that the freedoms of a democracy are preserved for future generations (Malin et al., 2015; Schine, 1989). Several studies support the notion that civic engagement can influence civic identity development (Checkoway et al., 2003; Hardy et al., 2010; Metz et al., 2003). Some students expressed feelings that one of the most important responsibilities of a citizen is to hold a job. This disposition is consistent with the work of Flanagan (2003), Youniss and colleagues (1997), and Erikson (1964). These scholars suggested that adolescents seek out an identity that allows them to have a sense of who they are as a person and as a contributor to society.

**Theme 4: Critical Thinking**

This theme captured the students’ belief in the notion that a literate and educated citizenry is vital to the well-being of a democratic society. This disposition is supported by the literature. It is understood that a basic level of civic and political knowledge is required for successful participation in a democratic society (Dahl, 1992; Galston, 2001; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2002; Rubin, 2007). Also, several studies have supported the notion that a civic and political knowledge base is important to civic identity development (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta et al., 2002). Some of the students expressed a belief that every person should make an effort to be aware of and be able to discuss current political and social issues, which can help them make informed decisions. Many scholars have argued that classroom discussions about social issues and current events can promote the development of essential civic skills such as critical thinking (Barber, 1989; Gross and Zeleny, 1958; Parker, 1996; Preskill, 1997; Wilen, 2004). Several studies have supported the idea that
deliberative discussion of social issues in the classroom can promote civic identity development. (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Kahne et al., 2000, 2013; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002; Verba et al., 1995).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine a group of high school students’ discursive expressions of civic identity within the asynchronous discussion forums in a virtual classroom. Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The students possess a number of civic dispositions such as civility, compassion, courage, empathy, equality, morality, social justice, tolerance, a concern for the common good, and a sense of civic duty that are among the developmental precursors of a mature civic identity. The students’ comments in the discussion forums revealed that they have a strong respect for law; a respect for the rights of others; a sense of civic responsibility; they espouse the importance of knowledge and critical thinking to being a responsible citizen; and some may have attained an advanced level of moral reasoning.

2. The students do not seem to have a clear sense of civic purpose, which is an essential component of a mature civic identity (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Cicognani et al., 2008; Erikson, 1968; Youniss et al., 1997). For example, many of their comments expressed the belief that “we must all work together” to improve society, but they did not specify exactly how it should be done. Also, not one of the students mentioned being involved in any type community service or voluntary group or having any aspiration to do so.

3. Online civics teachers must establish a visible presence for themselves in their courses, particularly in the discussion forums. I examined five sections of the course, but in only one section did the teacher participate in the discussion forums. One of the most important roles for
an online teacher is to facilitate discourse in the course (Garrison et al., 2001; Marra et al., 2004; McIsaac et al., 1999), but many of the teachers at the virtual school did not attempt to establish a visible presence for themselves in the discussion forums. The reason why so many of the virtual school’s teachers did not attempt to establish a visible presence for themselves in the discussion forums is unclear, but it should be a cause for concern for the virtual school. Without direction or feedback of any kind from the teacher, many of the students’ comments were overly simplistic, and were based on emotion, misinformation, or a misunderstanding of the course material. In some cases, it was clear that a student did not have a proper understanding of the course material or had not reviewed the course material before making a comment.

**Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this study indicated that the students possess a number of civic dispositions that are among the developmental precursors of a mature civic identity, but they do not seem to have a clear sense of civic purpose, which is an essential component of a mature civic identity (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Cicognani et al., 2008; Erikson, 1968; Youniss et al., 1997). A final finding of this study was that many of the teachers at the virtual school did not attempt to establish a visible presence for themselves in the discussion forums. Based on the conclusions of this study, I make the following recommendations for policy and practice:

1. Schools should promote moral education across the curriculum. The primary mission of the public schools is to promote students’ academic achievement, but schools should also be concerned with students’ moral development. Schools should teach the universal moral ideals of justice, fairness, respect for human dignity, and concern for the common good. A comprehensive civic education should also provide students with opportunities to critically examine the varied and often complex moral dilemmas that controversial political and social issues present. This is
easy to do in the classroom because every historical and contemporary event can provide an opportunity for students to consider the consequences of moral action or inaction. Developing civic identity in students requires they have time for active reflection, experimentation, and what Dewey called “moral rehearsal” in school.

2. Schools should provide students with opportunities to participate in community service that is linked to the formal curriculum. It is important that students develop the skills they need to apply the knowledge gained in the classroom in their communities. Schools should construct and implement service learning programs that provide students with opportunities to engage in structured learning activities that are purposefully designed to increase their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a real-world context. Participation can also help students to develop moral stances and allow them to see the necessity of civility, compromise, cooperation, and empathy in solving community problems. Previous research on identity and civic engagement has shown that adolescents who have achieved a mature identity are more inclined to civic engagement (Crocetti et al., 2012; Hardy et al., 2010; Pancer et al., 2007).

3. Our nation’s colleges, universities, and schools should be committed to ensuring the quality of online instruction to students. Good courses require good teachers. Online teaching has much in common with classroom teaching, but online teaching requires that one develop a special set of skills and attitudes to do it well. Online teachers must not only be proficient in their subject area, but also be properly trained for the unique challenges of teaching online.

Pre-service teaching training programs should design courses that provide students with opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills they will need to teach effectively online. A 2010 national survey of teachers by Blackboard Inc. found that only 4% of respondents had been taught how to deliver online courses during pre-service education. In many states, students are
required to take at least one online course during their school careers, and some states require teachers to teach an online course at some time, so we can no longer afford to neglect pre-service training in online teaching skills. Pre-service teachers may take some of their teacher education courses online; their instructors should take advantage of these opportunities to model best practices in online instruction to them. Pre-service teachers should be required to take one or more online courses on pedagogy and practice in online courses. These courses should include instruction and practice in: establishing teaching presence in an online course; the fundamentals of asynchronous online discussions; facilitating asynchronous online discussions; and designing collaborative learning activities that promote a sense community in students.

For in-service teachers, ongoing professional development opportunities should be made available to help them increase their online teaching skills and learn about new online teaching methods and technologies. Ongoing professional development not only helps keep teachers current on their knowledge and skills, it provides them with opportunities to learn from each other. In-service training must provide online teachers with training and practice in: establishing a teaching presence in their courses, communicating with students, facilitating discussion, and providing appropriate and timely feedback.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study provided preliminary descriptive information about the civic dispositions of high school students based on their comments in asynchronous online discussion forums, as a possible first step toward examining the process of civic identity development in adolescents. Considering the assumption that the survival of our democratic society may depend in part on the positive civic and moral development of young people (e.g., Lerner, 2004; Sherrod et al., 2010), this research was both timely and important. A mature civic identity can give one a sense of how
one relates to others in society (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Erikson, 1968; Youniss et al., 1997) and can motivate one to pursue goals that benefit both self and society in positive ways (Flanagan, 2004; Lerner, 2004). Therefore, a mature civic identity could contribute to the survival of America democracy. Based on the findings of this study, I suggest three ways to extend this research which I will explain below.

1. A future study could compare schools that do not offer moral education programs to schools where moral education is an integral part of the curriculum. The literature suggests that civic identity consists of two components: a connection to one’s community, which is assumed to spur a desire to contribute to its well-being; and a moral identity, which is portrayed in the literature as a personal commitment to the welfare of others. This apparent overlap between civic identity and morals suggests that the processes of civic identity development might be related to, or contribute to, the processes of moral development, and vice versa. It is important that we explore the nature and extent of this connection.

2. It would be interesting to do a longitudinal study in order to see how a large group of diverse students who participated in experiential civic education programs in high school actually participate civically as adults. Few studies have tracked civic identity development through adolescence to adulthood. Such a study could yield valuable information, especially if it was linked to organized civic engagement activities in school. By providing developmental information, such a study could offer evidence about how to promote civic dispositions in young people by capitalizing on the connection between civic identity and morals.

3. One of the conclusions of this study was that the teachers did not establish a strong teaching presence for themselves in the discussion forums. Considering this conclusion, it would be worthwhile to examine the effects of teacher immediacy and teaching presence in online
civics courses on student learning, particularly in the affective domain. An important follow-up to such a study could be an investigation into the perceptions of the students of their online civic teachers. Without examining student perceptions of teachers’ pedagogical strategies, student satisfaction with their learning cannot be determined.

Summary

This chapter presented the summary of the findings, conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice based on the data analyzed in the previous chapter of this dissertation. This chapter concludes this dissertation.

Based on the findings of this study, a number of conclusions were drawn. First, the students possess a number of civic dispositions such as civility, compassion, courage, empathy, equality, a sense of morality, social justice, tolerance, a concern for the common good, and a sense of civic duty. These dispositions are essential to a mature civic identity and are the developmental precursors of civic engagement. Second, the students did not exhibit a sense of civic purpose, which is a clear sign of a mature civic identity. Third, the teachers did not establish a visible presence for themselves in the discussion forums.

Based on the conclusions of this study, three recommendations for policy and practice were identified and discussed. These recommendations were that schools should promote moral education across the curriculum; schools should provide students with opportunities to participate in community service that is linked to the formal curriculum; and our nation’s colleges, universities, and schools should be committed to ensuring the quality of online instruction to students.

Three ways to extend this research were identified and discussed. First, a comparative study could compare schools that do not offer moral education programs to schools where moral
education is an integral part of the curriculum. Second, a longitudinal study could examine how a large group of diverse students who participated in experiential civic education programs in high school actually participate civically as adults. Third, the effects of teacher immediacy and teaching presence in online civics courses on student learning, particularly in the affective domain, could be examined.
REFERENCES


Rovai, A. P. (2002a). Building sense of community at a Distance. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3*(1), 1-16.


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
July 10, 2017

Ronald Mike Moore
Dept. of ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870302


Dear Mr. Moore:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 5 as outlined below:

(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 application will expire on July 9, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Director & Research Compliance Officer

358 Rose Administration Building | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127
205-348-8461 | Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3066
APPENDIX B

THE CODEBOOK
Label: Civility (Knefelkamp, 2008)

Definition: Treating other persons respectfully, regardless of whether or not one agrees with their viewpoints; being willing to listen to other points of view; avoiding hostile, abusive, emotional, and illogical argument.

Example: “I think we should follow the laws and rules. The two most important responsibility I think we have in this world is provide for our families, and learn and follow every rule that's ever been created.”

Label: Respect (Kohlberg, 1969)

Definition: Having respect for others’ right to an equal voice in government, to be equal in the eyes of the law, to hold and advocate diverse ideas, and to join in associations to advance their views.

Example: “I do not think he is saying that one specific political office should have all of the control. Instead, all citizens should have a voice and should be heard and respected.”

Label: Law-abiding (Kohlberg, 1969)

Definition: Willingness to abide by laws, even though one may not be in complete agreement with every law, and willingness to work through peaceful, legal means to change laws which one thinks to be unwise or unjust.

Example: “The two most important responsibilities of a citizen are to obey the laws of the land and the right to vote. For the overall health of our citizens and our communities, it is vital that we obey the laws of the land. We must also exercise
our right to vote. If we do not exercise this right we have no reason to complain about the people who are elected or the laws they pass.”

Label  
Honesty (Porter, 2013)

Definition:  
Willingness to seek and express the truth.

Example:  
“I believe that it's not the quantity of deeds that we do, but rather the quality it is presented, the amount of honest, willing good we do that comes straight from the heart.”

Label  
Open-mindedness (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958)

Definition:  
Considering others' points of view.

Example:  
“In addition to making our own decisions as citizens, it is important for those decisions to be educated. We cannot choose a course of action in response to events that we have not attempted to understand.”

Label  
Critical (Levine, 2007)

Definition:  
Having the inclination to question the validity of various positions, including one's own.

Example:  
“Citizens must also stay informed so that they actually know what they are voting on and who they are voting for. If an individual is not informed about current events and issues, he or she cannot cast an educated vote, and could end up voting for things completely against their beliefs or that are not good for the country.”
Label: Compromise (Mattson, 1998)

Definition: Making an effort to come to agreement with those with whom one may differ, when it is reasonable and morally justifiable to do so.

Example: “In a democratic society not everyone will be happy but we need to find a median and compromise between ourselves.”

Label: Persistence (Knefelkamp, 2008)

Definition: Being willing to attempt again and again to accomplish worthwhile goals.

Example: “It is important to form your own opinions about life, equality, and many other things and speak them. It is an important responsibility we have form our own opinions, but it is also our responsibility to find a way to bring them to the light. What good is having a talent if you can't show it off? what good would it be if you had an opinion, but never told anyone what it is?”

Label: Civic-mindedness (Yates & Youniss, 1999)

Definition: Paying attention to and having concern for public affairs.

Example: “I believe that in order to have a quality democracy, every citizen must do his or her part in the society. They must vote, pay taxes, and help his community. Without the people doing their part in the society, the society will crumble. I believe that is what is happening in today's world. Not enough people are doing their part and that is tearing down this society.”

Label: Compassion (Colby & Damon, 1992)
Definition: Having concern for the well-being of others, especially for the less fortunate.

Example: “Everybody plays a role in society, and when everybody is working, everything gets done. The economy benefits which in return, citizens benefit. But for some citizens, they are unable to work, which is why those who do work should try to give back and volunteer to help those who can’t.”

Label Patriotism (Bobek, 2007)

Definition: Being loyal to the values and principles underlying American constitutional democracy.

Example: “I also believe as an American citizen we need to take pride in our country and give back to the people that give for us. Starting with the military, that's just my opinion.”

Label Courage (Knefelkamp, 2008)

Definition: The strength to stand up for one's convictions, when conscience demands.

Example: “I believe that the measure of whether a democratic society is strong or weak is a reflection upon whether that society has strong or weak citizens who participate within it.”

Label Tolerance (Flanagan & Faison, 2001)

Definition: The ability to accept uncertainties that arise from insufficient knowledge or understanding of complex issues or from tension among fundamental values and principles.
Example: “Another important responsibility citizens of a democratic society have is a willingness to tolerate those who have different backgrounds, ideals, and lifestyles. In the United States of America and the free world, human rights must be respected, and unjust intolerance of others drags progress as a society. If intolerance reigns supreme, then it is no longer a democratic body and ‘We the People’ only refers to the citizens who lie in the majority.”

Label Motivation (Malin et al., 2015)

Definition: The reasons that lead people to civic engagement.

Example: “I think that eligible voters don't vote because they are lazy. They have time to vote whether they have a job or not. The voters that don't vote are the majority of the ones that complain. People should get more involved with voting because if they want to have a say so in their government then they need to step up and make time to vote.”