

# Citizenship education goes digital

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A student smiles while playing iCivics during the six-weeks study. Credit: Baylor University

Can playing online video games help students learn civics education? According to Baylor University researchers, the answer is yes.

Brooke Blevins, Ph.D., assistant professor of curriculum and instruction and Karon LeCompte, Ph.D., assistant professor of curriculum and instruction in Baylor's School of Education studied the effectiveness of iCivics, a free online website founded by retired Supreme Court Justice

Sandra Day O'Connor that teaches civics concepts using 19 [educational games](#).

The study, published in *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, shows [iCivics](#) is an effective tool for teaching civics concepts to primary and [middle school students](#).

As part of the study, more than 250 students in two Waco-area school districts played iCivics games for six weeks, twice a week for 30 minutes. Students took pre-tests and post-tests and completed journal entries on their experience.

"Students' scores on a test of civic knowledge significantly improved after playing iCivics for the sample as a whole," LeCompte said.

Statistically, most of the grades showed improvement in their civics education, but with younger students exhibiting the most gains.

"Students in grades 5 and 8 showed improvement in test scores with eight-grade students scoring nearly five points higher on both," Blevins said. "Students in fourth grade showed a marked improvement of nearly 10 points, the highest out of all of the grades."

High school seniors' post-tests remained static with no improvement, but as LeCompte noted the iCivics games were designed for students in sixth through eighth grade.

Additionally, Blevins and LeCompte conducted interviews with teachers about their experiences and observations of students playing the games.

"Teachers indicated that their students loved the games and learned without even realizing they were learning complex civics concepts," Blevins said.

In today's digital world, youth are growing up using the latest technology and tools. This research study has important implications for the future of online gaming and technology in the classroom.

Blevins and LeCompte found that teachers serve as important gatekeepers in determining how civics education is taught in their classrooms, including moving towards an environment that "embraces the skills of today's digital natives."

"Regardless of state and national policy towards social studies assessments, teachers can and should focus on providing meaningful learning opportunities that are inclusive of civics education," LeCompte said.

The iCivics games consist of several modules that include citizenship and participation (Activate), The Constitution and Bill of Rights (Do I Have a Right, Immigration Nation, Argument Wars), budgeting (People's Pie), separation of power (Branches of Power), political campaigning (Win the White House), local government (Counties Work), the Executive branch (Executive Command), the Legislative branch (Lawcraft, Represent Me), and the Judicial Branch (We the Jury, Supreme Decision). Each module has different games to teach the concepts presented in the modules.

Students were able to answer questions and respond to various scenarios presented in the games. In Immigration Nation, students were able to grant entry to people based on immigration laws. To learn how taxes are collected and budgets are created, students played People's Pie and had to determine corporate, payroll and income taxes, decide what federal program to fund or eliminate from the budget, and respond to upset citizens based on funding decisions.

Building on their success with iCivics, Blevins and LeCompte began

iEngage Summer iCivics Institute last summer to engage [students](#) in active civic learning, focusing on civic leadership and the notion of public service to bridge the gap between civic knowledge and engagement. With additional grant funding from the Hatton W. Sumner's Foundation, they will host a second camp Aug. 11-14, 2014 at Baylor.

**More information:** The study can be found at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885985X13000697>.

Provided by Baylor University

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