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Teaching Civics and Democracy in the Age of Influence: Political Literacy and Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

In today's digitally saturated society, educators face a growing imperative to reframe political literacy and instruction for the 21st century. Traditional methods often not only fail to resonate with Gen Z scholars but often neglect to connect with students immersed in primarily short-form, visually driven, emotionally resonant content through social media. Social media influencers use storytelling and authenticity to command attention—skills that are increasingly relevant in education, particularly in teaching political systems. This research explores how tools commonly used by global content creators can be effectively integrated into civic instruction without sacrificing academic rigor. These methods promote deeper comprehension by aligning pedagogy with the communication styles students already navigate daily. By proposing an interdisciplinary framework for teaching political literacy that draws from communication theory, civic education research, and strategies used by digital influencers to increase student engagement and conceptual understanding to make political instruction more compelling and accessible. Drawing from more than a decade of teaching History and Political Science courses and leading a global digital brand since 2013 with over 4.7 million readers and social media connections, Rebecca VanDeMark uniquely blends influencer storytelling with practical ways to translate these techniques into diverse classroom settings. Her unique approach examines the ethical boundaries and raises critical questions about media responsibility in social science education. The intersection of education, history, political science, law, and digital communication empowers educators to reclaim the classroom as a vibrant space for civic education and formation, while influencing citizens who can critically navigate modern media environments.

Keywords: Political Literacy, Mass media effect, Media Studies, Civic Education and Leadership, Humanities and Social Studies Education