

## Beyond the Hashtag: Incorporating Civic Discourse About Civic Engagement

#BlackLivesMatter  
#BlueLivesMatter  
#ImWithHer  
#MakeAmericaGreatAgain

The list of “trending” hashtags can go on for days. It’s no secret that the world has become more social—and definitely more vocal. Nevertheless, when thinking about our modernized way of expression, to what extent do we look for a deeper meaning of these concepts? While sharing media-driven, sensationalized stories on websites like Twitter and Facebook may be a clear (and, without doubt, effective) way of getting our thoughts across, do we really take time to look at the bigger picture beyond the latest trending hashtag? A hashtag can only say so much . . .

Our world has become saturated with memes—pictures with words over them to convey a point with a usually sarcastic tone, the ever-popular hashtag, and the ability to articulate one’s thoughts instantaneously with the click of a button and with little to no censorship. Therefore, it is very easy to become desensitized to the underlying meaning, such as racism or personal rights to politics, behind such opinion-worthy topics. For instance, *#ImWithHer* was associated with Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. However, it simultaneously held an undertone of feminism and the subject of gender in politics. While the hashtag served as a quick and easy way to express support for the presidential nominee, it also worked as a springboard for a discussion that didn’t necessarily fit within a 140-character limit. Thus, my classroom is a safe space for students to think critically “beyond the hashtag” and engage in discussions that directly reflect the deeper issues affecting them and the world in which we live.

I’ve found that an effective starting point is to have students look at real-world issues in areas such as human ethics, current events, and social sciences; analyze them through written and oral discourse; and pragmatically engage the issues through self-reflection. My class dissects concepts like “authenticity” and “attitude,” with each point eventually circling back to the individual student. I was surprised to discover that my students—who are very technology-driven and social-media connected—are unaware of many real-world issues that surround them every day. How can this be? Isn’t *everything* shared, posted, and

tweeted nowadays? You would think so, but you might be surprised to learn that these issues are not always presented in a learning-centered or academic fashion.

This epiphany came to me during an activity in which my class was trying to achieve a consensus of a “dominant impression” for various famous people. The lesson itself was very effective, but not for the reasons I initially expected.

**Activity:** I chose a handful of well-known people—given my own knowledge of current events in the news and social media fervor—that I thought my students would recognize. I then presented a sample of facts about each person, without showing an image of them. Students had two objectives: (1) formulate a dominant impression based on the presented facts, and (2) guess the name of the individual.

The results in every class became increasingly predictable: my students immediately recognized Michael Jordan, Kim Kardashian, and even Elvis Presley. However, certain “famous” people drew consistent crickets. One such person was Billie Jean King. I didn’t expect my students to know every single tennis-related statistic about the legendary athlete, but I *did* anticipate that they would know about her influence of Title IX, or what Title IX is. But instead, I received nothing but blank stares. You could hear a pin drop. *#AwkwardSilence*.

I quickly provided a crash-course history lesson about Title IX (and King’s major influence with it), which was followed by a very lively discussion about equality and women’s rights. My students left with a newfound sense of awareness for their surroundings and fellow human beings. The whole experience was inspiring, and yet alarming at the same time. I remember driving home that day and thinking to myself, “Why didn’t these students learn this stuff in high school? Has the curriculum changed that much? Is Title IX not an important topic anymore?” In tandem with my swirling questions and the way that day’s lesson unfolded, I had a heightened awareness for needing to incorporate civic engagement into my classroom.

The first step to achieving such engagement is fostering civic discourse. Below are some simple strategies to help bolster students’ engagement with and understanding of the world around them.

### 1. Social Media

“If you can’t beat them, join them,” applies to this

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teaching technique. I do not shy away from using social media, mostly because it is by far one of the most effective and widespread methods of communication used in our society. I do not see it as a narcissistic outlet for self-gratification, but rather as a highly interactive academic tool. Specifically, I use Twitter. Each student is able to create a free account, if they don't already have one, which they can personalize and truly make their own. Periodically throughout the semester, I'll ask them to take out their phones, open the Twitter app, and click on the latest trending hashtag. The objective, however, is to dig beneath the surface of the hashtag and why it is trending. Clicking on a hashtag brings a whirlwind of stories. I instruct my students to first view credible sources (i.e. verified Twitter accounts for NASA, our local news ABC 7, and POTUS), then they can see what other Twitter users are saying. With the click of a button, my students are engrossed in breaking news stories and commentaries that are actually happening in real time. They then can engage in the digital conversation by tweeting their own thoughts about these matters. Through the use of our own class hashtag, all of their comments become archived in one, easy-to-access Twitter portfolio about the students' opinions about the topic that can be viewed at any time. As the semester progresses, so does the evolution of their thoughts about these issues.

## 2. Freewriting

Of course, in an English class, students are required to write papers. However, it is in the prewriting stages where I really obtain the "nitty gritty" of my students' thoughts. Whether it is through clustering, listing, or just freewriting in general, my students do not have a chance to "polish" their ideas, refine them, or search for the nuggets of gold that will earn them the ever-important "good grade" on their paper. During the prewriting stage, the students quite literally are brainstorming whatever they can, as much as they can. More often than not, this is where their truest, most honest thoughts come flowing out because the anxiety of "earning a grade" is taken out of the equation. This strategy does not have to be incorporated as a prerequisite for writing a formal paper, either. I tend to employ this strategy when big events occur, locally or globally. For example, doing a free writing assignment about an event like a hometown election gets the students' attention about issues in their communities. Even if students are not involved in the concerns or have no idea who their town's mayor is, this type of exercise serves as a catalyst for increasing their awareness about matters of importance happening around them.

## 3. Interview Project

Humans, by nature, are inquisitive. We want to know

more, so we ask questions. Asking the right types of questions, however, is a skill that can be extremely beneficial. One of my favorite projects for my first-year composition students is to get them physically out in their community with the intent of interviewing someone. Students have the freedom to interview anyone they choose (except a classmate), and the questions they ask must incorporate a blend of topics, from personality-based questions to inquiries about current events and the subject's thoughts about those matters. Ultimately, students engage with a community that is a bit more tangible. They no longer analyze voices of people from around the world on Twitter; their "sources" have now transformed into real people, dealing with real issues, who are answering real questions that were personally developed by the students.

From using social media to freewriting ideas on a sheet of paper, sometimes the more informal methods of communication are exactly what our students need in order to become more involved—in the classroom and in their communities. Let's dig beneath the surface of the "trending" hashtag. Your students will become connected to their world on a whole new level. #PunIntended

*How do you use social media in the classroom? Share your tips and strategies in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)*

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