

Learner Expertise as a Resource for Building Community in Online Adult ESL Civics & U.S. History Classes



Carly Carte, Online CILIA-T Instructor

Adult education classrooms bring together learners with different goals, histories, responsibilities, and language backgrounds. That diversity can make community-building complex, especially online. In face-to-face classes, community can grow through informal moments such as sharing food, celebrating together, side conversations, and personal connections before or after class. In a fully online class, many of those opportunities are less available or less spontaneous, so teachers need other ways to help learners see, hear, and learn from one another. In my online [CILIA-T](#) class, I have seen learners' diverse experiences become one of the class's greatest resources when students are recognized not only as English learners, but as contributors whose expertise helps the whole class learn. For teachers, this means community-building does not have to happen outside the lesson. It can happen through curriculum activities that ask learners to connect new civics content to the countries, systems, histories, and experiences they already know.

One example comes from [Module 6.1](#), which introduces the Bill of Rights by asking learners to define the term "rights" and discuss rights people have or do not have in a country they know well. In my class, students shared examples from countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, comparing rights related to education, healthcare, speech, religion, safety, and voting. At first, students seemed hesitant to share. After watching a video on universal human rights, I asked students to think about rights people have in the United States. One student remembered an earlier lesson and offered "freedom of speech." From there, we used the warm-up activity to consider whether that same right was protected by law in other countries students knew well. Very quickly, students began adding examples of other rights, asking one another questions, and connecting new vocabulary to their own knowledge and experiences.

[Module 9.1](#), on European colonization of North America, created a similar opportunity. The warm-up asks students to think about a country they know well and consider other countries it

has come into contact throughout history. One student described relationships between Laos and neighboring countries, including Thailand and China, and identified trade as one reason these countries came into contact. Another student compared that example to the relationship between Mexico and the United States. By the end of the discussion, the class had generated examples from around the world that expanded and complicated one another's thinking. Before we moved into European colonization in the Americas, students had already built a shared framework for thinking about why countries come into contact and how those relationships affect people differently.

Later in that same module, as we discussed the monarchies of England and Spain, one student asked me to define "monarchy." Before I could answer, another learner jumped in, remembering our earlier [Module 3](#) discussion on types of government. She explained that a monarchy is a government ruled by a king or queen.

For me, this was a small but powerful example of classroom community becoming academic infrastructure. Their examples became part of the shared memory of the class, giving us language and concepts we could return to in later discussion and review. Students listened closely, asked follow-up questions, helped one another find words, and began to engage their classmates as resources for learning. In my experience, this is where online classroom community becomes visible: not only in kindness, but in students' willingness to think, speak, remember, and learn together.

Carly Carte is a teacher who has been implementing the CLIA-T curriculum in her LiteracyMinnesota ESL classes. She will soon be moving to Scotland to start her MSc studies in Language and Intercultural Communication.