You’re stranded on a deserted island with 100 others. Organization is vital for survival. How will you choose a leader and make group decisions? What laws will you pass for your little society?

At Waterdown District High School in Ontario, Nathan Tidridge plays this simulation game with his Grade 10 civics class. It’s a fun and fascinating way to get students thinking about how governments and laws are created.

Civics means learning about citizenship—how our nation is governed, and our rights and duties as Canadians. It’s a subject we believe is every bit as vital as math or science. Yet, across much of Canada, civics is tucked away in high school history or social studies curriculums. Often, the courses containing civics lessons are electives not required for a diploma. Only Ontario teaches civics as a distinct and mandatory course in high school.

If we expect the next generation to navigate complex challenges like climate change, reconciliation and refugees, they need to know how environmental and social policies are developed. As Canada prepares to celebrate 150 years, our country needs a better focus on civics.

Recent political events stress the importance of understanding democracy’s inner workings. Canadians are right now considering a radical change to our federal election process. The contentious US presidential election had Americans madly searching online for information about the mysterious “Electoral College.”

“If ever there was a need for civic literacy, it’s now,” says Tidridge, who has published several books on Canadian politics.

And yet in Canada, civics literacy is alarmingly poor. A survey by the Dominion Institute found that over half of Canadians don’t know how the Prime Minister is elected, and just 24 per cent can correctly name our head of state (it’s the Queen). It’s likely that most immigrants, who must pass a detailed test before becoming citizens, know more about how our country works than the average born-and-bred Canadian.

Civic knowledge is also essential as Canada seeks reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, which requires an understanding of treaties and the unique relationship they create between our government and First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

Youth are inherently passionate about social issues and fighting injustice. And though they have intimate knowledge of the organizational and communication power of social media, they lack the understanding of our systems needed to effectively make change happen. “They have no knowledge of how to engage with their democracy,” says Tidridge.

And a lack of civic knowledge often means a lack of civic participation.

Independent studies have shown that youth who are engaged in social issues in the classroom through our WE Schools service learning program are more likely to vote when they come of age.

And, if their cruise ship does get stranded and they need to build a government from scratch, at least these kids will know the difference between proportional representation and first-past-the-post.