

# Chapter 33

## Mobile Learning for Social Change: Democratizing Education and Civic Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter focuses on how mobile apps and smartphones can be used to enhance democratic education in schools and society at large, why such opportunities need to be more seriously considered as integral to the school learning environment, and how it can empower citizens for civic engagement. Using Dewey's philosophy of democratic education this chapter provides examples of mobile apps designed through classroom, community-based or after school programs that provide youth with coding training opportunities as well as macro-level highlights of civic engagement for social change. Reviewing theories of technology – from determinism to social embeddedness – this chapter reflects on the inherent “democratic” design of mobile technologies, as well as the challenge to embrace the interest that youth and society in general have for mobile app use. It is a call to promote mobile-driven democratic education in an environment encouraging continuous learning as well as cultivating and leveraging mobile technologies to develop an informed public voice and participatory agency.*

### INTRODUCTION

For the majority of the world's population today the widespread use of mobile phones has become an accepted part of everyday life. In 2014 Quartz publication asserted that globally there were almost as many cell phone subscriptions as there were human beings on the planet, which was more than the total population that ever had access to telephone land-lines (Fernholz, 2014). The advent of smartphones has

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subsequently launched the mobile app age, which has created more opportunities for connectedness and a globalized social network that can likewise be harnessed for democratic education and social change. This chapter provides an overview of theories of technology and democratic education and highlights both micro and macro-level examples of mobile applications that were designed, developed and used for civic engagement and social change, some of which connected classroom education with real-life experiences.

Currently, the use of new media technologies such as mobile apps in schools has provided the opportunity to not only learn about democratic education, but to also actively participate as citizens in addressing and improving social outcomes. Mobile technologies have in a sense democratized the classroom space by enhancing students' social networks. At the same time, the presence and use of mobile technologies have allowed youth to become civically engaged as they design and develop mobile applications that are – in the spirit of democratic education – relevant to their personal life experiences and pertinent in addressing larger social issues of inequality and access.

## **BACKGROUND: THEORIES OF TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION**

What is meant by democratic education? For philosopher and activist John Dewey the concept of democratic education centered on nurturing students' abilities to observe their environment as well as to encourage their development of creativity. Dewey staunchly supported the designing of educational spaces that linked the students' life experiences with the classroom curriculum. School for Dewey was not a place for rote memorization and lecture-based instruction, but rather a place where what is taught is directly relevant to the current social circumstance and experience of the student. Dewey sought to connect the social life of the school with that outside of school walls with the intention that students learn to become aware of how their actions affect their peers and others in the larger society (Dewey, 1916). In his seminal work *Democracy and Education*, Dewey noted that “in the final account, then not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its own permanence, but the very process of living together educates” (Dewey, 1916, p6). In essence one critical purpose of formal schooling is to develop informed citizens who can thrive and contribute to a democratic society.

Building on Dewey's vision of developing informed and active citizens in a democratic society Westheimer & Kahne (2004) describe three ways that individuals can become civically involved. First, there is the personally responsible citizen who volunteers, and takes seriously his/her role as a law-abiding individual. Secondly, the participatory citizen is active at the local, state or national levels. In schools, for example, students are taught how government works and are provided with opportunities to train and take part in community-based initiatives. Finally, the justice-oriented citizen practices democracy by studying the socio-economic and political structure of society and mobilizing solutions to effect systemic change. The justice-oriented citizen inquires about the root causes of social problems and creates opportunities in community to address challenges and find long-term solutions. Both the participatory and the justice-oriented citizen move beyond the responsibilities of the individual to engage with their communities, and both encourage a certain level of discussion and deliberation to solve problems.

Keeping Dewey's democratic education aims in mind, one may reflect on the nature and purpose of mobile technologies currently in popular use. Technology, and in particular communication technologies, have been studied from various viewpoints including determinism, neutralism and social embeddedness. According to Warschauer (2004) the belief that technologies can fix issues or improve conditions

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