Chapter 10

Citizenship @ the Edge of Two Worlds:
The Connection between Theories of Citizenship Education and the Study of Niche Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the possibilities for understanding participation in niche online communities through the theories and concepts found in the field of citizenship education. The authors note that there are a number of themes found in theories of citizenship education that help one understand the nature of participation in niche online communities. At the same time, there are a number of contrasting goals—such as the role of virtues in online contexts and who as a right to participate—that demonstrate tensions between the two fields. The authors argue, however, that these tensions are not insurmountable: they suggest that the fruitfulness of the connection between the two fields is the way in which theories of citizenship education highlight the informally learned roles of participating in online communities.

INTRODUCTION

Although the field of citizenship education does not have an extensive history, it has, however, been a major paradigm in educational literature to illuminate the pedagogical project of citizenship in its most informal sense. That is to say, citizenship education has provided an important lens to understand how new modes of social interaction can create qualities of participation. In this way, practices such as social interaction mediated through technological advancements have been queried for their educational perspective by attempting to understand how this participation develops, or educates, new modes of citizenship. Currently, citizens' use of interactive technologies such as social media has begun to impact the nature of social interactions, which in turn, is creating points of rupture within existing social paradigms. Ruptures of social paradigms, such as those provided by citizens' participation in niche online communities, is changing both the characteristics and practice of citizenship within many twenty-first century post-industrial democracies (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009).

Considering these ruptures, this chapter highlights both the potentials and pitfalls of citizens' abilities to write themselves into public online spaces. By highlighting the potential agency and empowerment that such practices afford, it offers an overview of citizens' use of social network sites for processes of identity development. This chapter equally explores the powers and potentials of theorizing the connections between citizenship education theories and the changing role of social interaction in niche online communities. Such a discussion challenges our understanding of contemporary theoretical conceptualizations of citizenship and citizen identity and seeks to question the strengths and weaknesses of the existing field of citizenship education as it comes to explaining the changing phenomenon of participation in niche online communities.

To accomplish this, this chapter has been organized into four main sections. First, we provide a critical review of the literature relating to niche online communities and identity development, and to citizenship education. Our aim is to illuminate the history, practices, and theoretical trajectories that underpin both phenomena. Second, we offer a discussion that highlights particular tensions and articulates necessary points of emphases for understanding, fostering, and engaging with niche online communities from a perspective of citizenship education. Third, we forward a set of recommendations for how citizenship educators can best support citizens in developing an understanding of themselves, their roles as citizens, and their relationship to others within increasingly complex and converging real and virtual worlds. Finally, we reflect on the connections between the study of niche online communities and theories behind citizenship education.

CONTEXT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Niche Online Communities and Citizen Identities

Philosophers of technology have offered the trope that technologies are both socially shaped and socially shaping (Buckingham, 2008; *cf.*, Heidegger, 1977). Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship, Darin Barney (2007) asserts that the "Internet *makes* people what they are, as opposed to merely being *used* by them (p. 38, emphasis in original). However, as Markham (2004) maintains, the ways in which individuals conceptualize the Internet ultimately inform the ways in which they interact with and within it. She suggests that there are individuals who view it as a tool, those who view it as a place, and those who experience it as a way of being in the world. For those who experience the Internet along arguably more ontological dimensions, it becomes a context in which citizens can construct new kinds

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