

Chapter 13

Citizen In/Action: Analyzing Online Forums for Pedagogical Insight

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a study that explored how citizens enact their citizenship within one niche online community dedicated to teaching about and supporting issues related to global citizenship. The research highlights the limitations of existing conceptualizations of citizenship paradigms and associated educational programming. In the discussion, the authors suggest that the integration and use of the Internet—specifically the use of forum-based social media platforms—as a curriculum supplement may effectively address the challenges and limitations that exist within traditional citizenship education classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past conflicts, but all political struggle is now mediated by media, computer, and information technologies and increasingly will be so. Those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly. (Kahn & Kellner, 2007, p. 33)

Citizens in post-industrial democracies are becoming increasingly disengaged from thinking critically about political issues and, more broadly from participation in civic activities (Chareka & Sears, 2006; Flanagan, Syversten, & Stout, 2009). However, current research suggests that although this may be true when it comes to traditional political involvement many citizens – notably the younger generation of citizens – engage with social and political issues through social media (Bennett, 2008). For example, through the use of online communication platforms such as social network sites and forums, many young people

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educate themselves and mobilize others around issues that are directly relevant to them (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Bers, 2008). As such, we are increasingly required to acknowledge that citizenship within an era of globalization reflects not only the socio-political, but the communication worlds that individuals inhabit, as well. Now into the second decade of the 21st century, the Internet can be understood not only as a means to obtain political information but also as a space where engagement, organization, and political interaction already occur.

This chapter describes a study that explored how citizens enact their citizenship within *TakingITGlobal* (www.tigweb.org), a niche online community dedicated to teaching about and supporting issues related to global citizenship. Our research highlights how emerging forms of civic participation fit into current citizenship paradigms, as well as how the use of the Internet—specifically the use of forum-based social media platforms—contributes to civic education outcomes. This line of inquiry adds to the nascent body of research that speaks to the impact of Internet communities on civic engagement and generates unique evidence relating to democratic citizenship, both from a theoretical and practical standpoint.

Our objectives in pursuing an inquiry of this nature were threefold. First, we aimed to highlight the complexity of citizen identity paradigms; second, we endeavored to demonstrate how the dynamics of democratic participation and authority evolves in online environments; third, we sought to underscore the potential of online forums as a tool for developing critical thinking and literacy skills. In what follows, we aim to make a positive contribution to citizenship education scholarship by revealing how the types of interactions that are enabled by social media can impact participants' citizen identity development, as well as help citizens to cultivate the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate the complex relationship between themselves and society. Our discussion points to the limitations of existing conceptualizations

of citizenship paradigms and associated educational programming. Further, we offer practical recommendations for civic educators interested in using social media in their classrooms as a means of promoting discussions of controversial socio-political issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Citizenship Paradigms

The notion of democracy occupies a relatively privileged position in many post-industrial societies. Many “educators, policymakers, politicians, and community activists alike pursue dozens of agendas for change under the banner of furthering democracy” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 237); however, beliefs concerning what underlies the notion of democracy vary greatly, as do the processes through which it is believed to be attained. These varying conceptions of the nature and practice of democracy bring with them differing visions of citizenship, which reflect relatively distinct theoretical and curricular goals.

Actualizing vs. Dutiful Citizens

Recently scholars have begun to explore the implications of the use of new technologies for citizen identity development and ultimately, citizenship education. These scholars assert that due to the proliferation of new communication platforms, which stimulate increased connectivity over time and across borders (Merryfield & Duty, 2008), citizens are approaching learning about and engagement in civic issues differently than in previous decades (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). Seeking to respond to these changes in citizen identity and learning, these scholars suggest that we are now living in a time of two citizenship paradigms.

Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) propose that changes have occurred with regards to youth's civic orientations, as a result of the effects of

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