



Youth, Social Media and Digital Civic Engagement

NCSS Position Statement

**Approved by the NCSS Board of Directors
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“Participatory politics are interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern.”
(Kahne, et al., 2016, p. 3)

Introduction

The use of social media saturates the everyday lives of young people, offering complex, rich challenges and opportunities for cultivating their skills with and using online participatory politics in “a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (National Council for the Social Studies). While attempts to draw youth into civic engagement are still in a formative stage (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016), National Council for the Social Studies suggests drawing upon youth’s informal social media and seeking to transfer these experiences into formal civic and academic settings so as to enable students to become civically engaged in digital spaces. The following are reasons to do so, supported with recommendations on ways to aid in that transformation, and with resources to enable us as social studies educators to integrate these recommendations into civic realities.

Youth’s Use of Social Media

Almost 90% of adolescents have access to a smartphone (AP/NORC, 2018) and over 70% of teens and those aged 18 to 24 use Instagram and Snapchat (AP/NORC, 2018), which surpass Facebook as the social media platform of choice. While the following features associated with the engagement of young people in digital spaces are not necessarily “new,” they are either more prominent or take on unique characteristics in online settings.

- *User-generated knowledge*: the wealth of information available online, coupled with multiple means to shape and express such information, enables media users to create knowledge in ways unparalleled in history; (Roberson, 2018)
- *Agency*: with a tablet, persons as young as 2 or 3 years old are able to make decisions about their environment, ranging from matters as simple as what to wear to immersing themselves in digital worlds; (Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014)
- *Networked publics*: physical geography no longer limits one’s ability to form relationships with anyone in the world, let alone to create and sustain collaborative networked publics capable of acting civically; (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014)
- *(Re)Sharing*: unquestionably, sharing one’s self and ideas represents a prominent feature of engagement in digital spaces. Although the focus often follows a one-to-many approach, the above features illustrate a more dynamic, generative relationship; (Skoric et al., 2016)
- *Interest driven*: the ability to seek out and act on one’s interests is a feature that distinguishes between the face-to-face academic engagement of young people and their social engagement in digital spaces (Ito et al., 2013).

While admittedly “there is a lack of current models that theorize social media as a space for informal learning” (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016, p. 6), the above characteristics provide a starting point to help transform students’ personal use of social media into learning experiences for participatory politics.

Moving Youth from Social to Civic Engagement

Given how emerging forms of digital civic engagement reflect people’s personal use of social media (Skoric et al., 2016; Zuckerman, 2014), young people seem to have moved from a dutiful type of citizenship characterized by voting and writing legislators to “a more personalized politics of self-actualization and expressive engagement with an emphasis on non-traditional modes of engagement such as digital networking, volunteering, and consumer activism” (Xenos, et al., 2015, p. 155). Consumer activism manifested as social consumerism. A self-actualized form of citizenship aligns well with core practices of participatory politics, which include: research and dialogue on matters of public concern from multiple perspectives; production and circulation of culture and ideas within a networked public; and mobilization for change (Kahne, 2016). The gravitation of young people toward social consumerism illustrates their willingness and ability to act on matters of interest and importance to them, and necessitates ensuring that they possess the dispositions and skills needed to substantively investigate and deliberate about such matters. After generating their interest in such matters, they need to not simply (re)share what they learned with their peers in an online networked public, but to distinguish their knowledge and sharing from social purposes. Finally, while not underplaying the importance of sharing as a contribution to a larger digital culture, young people need to take civic action on matters. While creating learning experiences in digital spaces is complex enough, doing so for the purpose of cultivating participatory politics and enabling students to “become more effective and thoughtful civic actors” (Hodgin & Kahne, 2018, p. 212) is fraught with unique challenges.

Challenges to Using Digital Spaces to Cultivate Participatory Politics

How to create a deliberative, digital public space(s) for young people with diverse perspectives to exercise their public voice about matters of importance to them.

Kahne et al. (2016) noted that research and dialogue about matters of public concern from multiple perspectives represents a core practice of participatory politics. The National Council for the Social Studies position on media literacy. Online trolling, the lure of echo chambers, and the divisive nature of much online discussion are but a few reasons why many youth and educators shy away from using such digital public spaces. *Social studies educators need to ensure student access to digitally networked spaces that are respectful of diverse opinions, where youth critically grapple with matters of civic importance as they form an online public identity and share their ideas with peers.*

How to cultivate the ability of young people to form and nurture networked publics devoted to civic engagement and matters of social justice in a linguistically, and age-appropriate manner.

Concerns about addressing controversial issues often mean that service learning such as volunteering at a homeless center tends to trump peer-driven civic engagement. Enduring societal concerns such as homelessness. The prevalence of online fandom and interest groups illustrate youth's familiarity with and participation in online publics, though not necessarily the skills to create and manage an online networked public. In turn, recent movements making use of Twitter demonstrate individuals adapt platforms to their needs, but highlight the need to enable young people to critically consider requests for their participation. *Social studies educators need to provide learning experiences where students seek to transform their social networking experiences with online gaming and social media like Instagram to create networked public spaces devoted to civic matters of social justice, yet do so in a manner mindful of individual student needs.*

How to foster among youth a personal interest in and commitment to matters of collective importance.

Opportunities for online collective activism abound, though less certain is how to promote online collective political efficacy. The online autonomy of young people and their own interests and sharing user-generated knowledge drives their use of social media. Generating interest in public matters is critical to bridging the gap between personal and civic use of social media. *Social studies educators need to familiarize youth with the uniqueness of digital spaces, such as the commercial reality of most and the difficulty of shifting through online sources to ascertain the implications of public matters.*

How best to ensure equity of access to civic face-to-face and digital spaces, while protecting youth's privacy in such spaces.

While online access is seemingly ubiquitous, 15% of people in the U.S. do not have broadband or own a smartphone (Smith & Olmstead, 2018). Compounding that the fact that those young people without online access are the ones most likely to live in "civic deserts," places largely devoid of opportunities for even face-to-face engagement. *However, ensuring access is but the first step. Social studies educators need to discern how best to ensure students' privacy and security, while enabling their access to quasi-public, online networked spaces.*

Opportunities Digital Spaces Offer for Becoming Immersed in Participatory Politics

The following are recommendations on how to operationalize what is proposed, realizing that this portion of the position statement is interactive and dynamic and simply react to, but to anticipate emerging trends and to craft future recommendations best suited to those trends.

1. Use teacher-facilitated online peer-to-peer deliberation to identify public matters of concern to students, to formulate questions and plan inquiries about such matters to negotiate the validity of and diverse perspectives on related knowledge in digital spaces.
2. Provide students with formal and informal learning experiences in the creation and articulation of, and participation in, online networked publics, while realizing the non-linear, nebulous and unpredictable nature of such publics.
3. Promote not simply the creation and sharing of user-generated knowledge on interest-driven social justice issues, but the means to thoughtfully and purposefully share such knowledge via online networked publics.
4. Explore the nascent yet evolving social norms in online networked publics, remaining sensitive not simply to the challenges of online interactions, but to the articulating and operationalizing the privileges and rights of young people in democratic and commercial digital places.

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