Joining the Conversation: Twitter as a Tool for Student Political Engagement

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Abstract:

This article describes possibilities afforded by using social media, specifically Twitter, as a way to encourage students to join political conversations across the United States and around the world. In this study, we describe a project in which students used Twitter to share commentary about the state of the 2012 presidential election. The experiences of these students illustrate both the potential strengths and limitations of using social media as a tool for political engagement.

Keywords: political engagement | social media | Twitter | Education

Article:

Since 1971, when the voting age was lowered by the 26th Amendment, much has been written about the civic disengagement of American youth. In general, research has found that younger Americans tend to display more characteristics of civic apathy and are less knowledgeable about political issues than older citizens (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Snell, 2010). In 2008, for example, youth actually voted at a higher rate than in the previous presidential election, but still less than half of those under 24 who were eligible to vote did so, compared to the 67% turnout rate for those over the age of 30 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg,2009). In recent years, researchers have also noticed a widening gap within this younger demographic between educated youth from middle-to-upper income households who tend to be more civically engaged than those from lower-income households who have little to no post-secondary education (e.g., Hess, 2008; Levine, 2009; Sander & Putnam, 2010).

Perhaps not surprisingly, studies of middle and secondary students' civic and political knowledge reflect these trends. The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, found that only 64% of graduating seniors held "basic" knowledge of civic concepts (and only 24% of those students demonstrated "proficient" knowledge), with results worse among students from minority groups and lower-income households (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Yet, qualitative studies of middle and high school classrooms in a wide range

of geographic and socioeconomic contexts have found that students are generally interested in political issues and hold strong, if not well-informed, political beliefs (e.g., Hahn, 1998; Hess, 2009; Journell, 2011b), leading to the possible conclusion that the problem lies not with students' interest in politics, but rather with how politics is being presented to students (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

Levine (2009) argued that schools contribute to this growing "civic opportunity gap" in the United States that disproportionately affects young Americans. Traditional civic education has focused primarily on teaching students about the responsibilities of active citizenship without providing opportunities for them to become engaged with social and political issues of local, national, or international importance (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Macedo et al., 2005). The irony, of course, is that we live in an age where people have greater access to political information and more forums to express their political beliefs than ever before. American K–12 education, however, has largely ignored social media as an outlet for civic engagement. In this article, we describe a project in which students used Twitter as a way to join political conversations across the United States and around the world.

Social Media, Civic Engagement, and Schools

Social media has become the latest battleground for politics in the United States. Politicians, pundits, and special interest groups have official Facebook and Twitter accounts that they use to disseminate rhetoric; political advertisements are increasingly being made exclusively for YouTube audiences; and average Americans routinely take to these forums to interact with elected representatives, express opinions about policy, and debate political issues with both friends and anonymous posters. During the height of the 2012 presidential election, for example, over 12 million people "liked" Mitt Romney's Facebook page, and as of this writing, President Obama has over 58 million followers combined on Facebook and Twitter.

It is easy to see the appeal of social media for politicians: These outlets create a free and efficient way to reach more potential voters than they would through speeches, leaflets, or perhaps even television advertisements. More importantly, they are connecting to the critical "youth vote." According to the Pew Research Center, 92% of Internet users aged 18–24 use social networking sites, and nearly half (49%) of all Facebook users and 60% of Twitter users are 18 to 35 years old (Brenner, 2012; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). It is important to note that the Pew survey did not include anyone under 18; therefore, these percentages would most likely be higher if data were available for "35 and under."

Political posts made on social media sites generate considerable commentary. It is not uncommon, for example, for posts on the Obama Facebook page to have over 10,000 comments and for tweets from @BarackObama to be "retweeted" by thousands of users, which only increases the exposure of the original posts. The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 provide an extreme example of the potential influence of social media on politics; reports suggest that both

Facebook and Twitter were essential tools in both organizing protests and spreading information about the insurgency (Huang, 2011).

Based on these statistics, civic education and social media would seem to be a natural pairing (Bennett, 2008). Public education, however, has not kept up with the times. Much has been written about the potential of the Internet to enhance civic education (e.g., Bennett, 2008; "Enhancing Democracy," 2006; Hicks, Tlou, Lee, Parry, & Doolittle, 2002; VanFossen & Berson, 2008), but the vast majority of these writings have focused on using the Internet for greater accessibility to information, which could then be used as a conduit for civic action, as opposed to using technology as a medium for civic participation and political interaction with others.

Social media are examples of Web 2.0 tools, which Lankshear and Knobel (2006) defined as Internet-based applications that provide opportunities for participatory and collaborative activities among online users. Activities such as customizing one's personal networking space and posting comments, pictures, and multimedia on other users' pages are examples of Web 2.0 applications and are the defining characteristics of popular social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Research suggests that middle and high school students across the United States are actively using Web 2.0 tools outside of school, and studies show that they believe their academic experiences would be more engaging if their teachers used these same tools as part of their instruction (e.g., DeGennaro, 2008; Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008).

Most public schools in the United States, however, have placed restrictions on the use of popular social media in middle and secondary classrooms. Although social media pose risks associated with classroom management issues and cyberbullying, completely eliminating all forms of social media from classrooms prohibits teachers from using potentially valuable resources that research has shown to be effective in promoting civic engagement in after-school and community-based educational programs (Levine, 2008). Moreover, a quick perusal of literature on teaching in higher education uncovers a wide range of articles advocating the use of popular social media, specifically Twitter and Facebook, as effective instructional tools (e.g., Blessing, Blessing, & Fleck, 2012; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011).

Although few studies on using popular social networking sites in K–12 classrooms exist, we believe that these technologies hold immense potential for civic education, given both students' digital immersion outside of school and these sites' ability to allow users to share political commentary with individuals located around the world. In this study, we describe a project in which high school students used Twitter to monitor and share opinions about the state of the 2012 presidential election. The experiences of these students offer a glimpse into the possibilities and limitations afforded by the use of popular social media in middle and high school classrooms.

Research Context

This study took place with students at Connor High School (CHS), a Title I school located in a rural district of North Carolina, during the Fall 2012 semester. Pseudonyms have been used for both the school and all participants. At the time of the study, CHS enrolled approximately 1,000 students, and the student population was approximately 73% white, 15% African-American, 8% Latino/a, and 3% multiracial, with approximately 52% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Based on students' performances on end-of-course assessments, CHS had been labeled as a "school of progress" by the state.

All of the students who participated in the Twitter activities were enrolled in Civics and Economics courses taught by Mr. Fillmore, who is white and was in his 18th year of teaching. The aspect of Mr. Fillmore's instruction that we are highlighting in this article is his use of Twitter as a tool for teaching the 2012 presidential election. Twitter was created in 2006 and currently has over 500 million registered users around the world (Dugan, 2012). The concept behind Twitter is relatively simple: Users can make short posts, or tweets, of no more than 140 characters that can then be viewed by everyone who chooses to "follow" that user. Tweets can also contain pictures and links to outside Web sites that are able to be seen by one's followers.

What makes Twitter ideal for civic education is the use of hashtags. A hashtag is a word or phrase prefixed by a # sign that automatically connects all tweets using that same hashtag. If, for example, someone searches for #Obama2012 on Twitter, they will be able to see all tweets that have recently incorporated that hashtag into their posts. It is this system of linking comments via hashtags that makes Twitter unique from Facebook and other sites that often require users be "friends" with other users in order to see posted items. On Twitter, posts can be viewed via a hashtag search regardless of whether a user is following any of the users who have made posts with that hashtag. [For a more detailed explanation of Twitter, see Greenhow and Gleason (2012.)]

Methodology

This research utilized case study methodology, which is ideal for "examining contemporary events, but when relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated" (Yin, 1994, p. 8). The bulk of the data contained in this manuscript comes from Mr. Fillmore's use of Twitter, which was primarily conducted outside of school. Mr. Fillmore started the year believing that he would be able to use Twitter in his classroom. The district had adopted a one-to-one laptop initiative, and at the start of the semester, students were able to access Twitter and other forms of social media at school. Within three weeks, however, the district had blocked Twitter due to students abusing social media sites during school hours. The CHS principal, however, was very supportive of students' use of Twitter, as long as any assignments were offered as extra credit due the possibility of students not having access to the Internet at home.

We gained access to the Twitter data using the common hashtag, #chscivics, that all of Mr. Fillmore's students used when posting about the election. To protect students' identities, this is not the actual hashtag used by students in the study. Throughout this article, all participants' names and identifying characteristics of students' tweets have been changed. Screenshots were taken of each Twitter conversation for analytical purposes. The research team met periodically throughout the study to discuss our observations of Mr. Fillmore's Twitter instruction, which helped to confirm or dispel our existing perceptions and better inform our future observations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis consisted of triangulating our various data sources (Twitter posts, classroom observations, and interviews with Mr. Fillmore) and looking for patterns that emerged. Once patterns were formed, we looked for areas of interest within the data from which we could derive meaning about the use of Twitter as a tool for political engagement (Stake,1995).

Findings

Mr. Fillmore started the semester with ambitious plans for using Twitter to teach about the election. As he told us in our initial interview, "I'm a really big fan of Twitter … there are so many different things [on Twitter], whether it be*Newsweek, Time, U.S. News & World Report, Wall Street Journal* [for students to see], and then, following the candidates themselves." He then referred to his students' use of Twitter the previous semester: "One thing that I thought was really cool last year was when Obama did the State of the Union; they got [on] … the official hashtag of the State of the Union, so they were tweeting with everybody around the world, and it was pretty cool. And they were excited."

The findings that follow represent students' use of Twitter outside of school, which due to district policy, could not be required by Mr. Fillmore. Students, instead, were given the opportunity to earn extra credit by tweeting "live" during the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and each of the four debates.

Joining a Conversation

Besides telling students to use the #chscivics hashtag and requiring a minimum of three tweets to earn extra credit, Mr. Fillmore did not provide detailed guidelines on what he expected during these Twitter assignments. Students, therefore, had considerable freedom regarding the substance of their tweets. Although they occasionally tweeted silly or nonsubstantive comments (e.g., "Mitt, I have a Algebra 2 test tomorrow…Wrap it up #GOP2012 #chscivics"), the vast majority of students' tweets were directly related to the issues being articulated by the candidates or, in the case of the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, their surrogates.

Mr. Fillmore also encouraged students to use the official hashtags of each event (e.g., #debates, #GOP2012, #DNC2012) in order to have their tweets merge with the global conversation that was occurring simultaneously. By using these official hashtags, students were automatically becoming part of a larger conversation, even if they did not consciously tweet with that specific

intention. Simply by having their tweets enter into the global discussion, students were making their political voices heard. Their tweets were being seen by thousands of people instantaneously, and given the interconnectedness of Twitter, any of those individuals could have commented and potentially engaged Mr. Fillmore's students in a political discussion.

Due to space considerations, we are only showing a portion of the conversation that occurred during the vice presidential debate; however, the substance of these tweets is representative of those posted during each of the debates. The following is from the vice presidential debate Twitter feed (students' tweets have not been changed to improve spelling or grammar):

> *Claire: The employment rate has dropped 8% in the past 42 months, What will -Romney do that is so much better than Obama's plan? #debates #chscivics*
>
> *Sally: #chscivics #VPdebate I'm glad Biden brought up the 47% comment Romney made*
>
> *Louis: I enjoy the slur campaign Biden brings up about what Romney said #chscivics #debate #wooorrdd*
>
> *Madison: Ryan has a good point, if Iran gets nuclear weapons, their neighboring countries will too and we can't live with that! #chscivics #debate*
>
> *Louis: Ryan cannot stop smiling at Biden…#chscivics #debates #juststahp #thatsscurry*
>
> *Amanda: "They should sign a pledge to the middle class saying 'We're going to level the playing field'" –Joe Biden #Amen #debates #chscivics*
>
> *Pete: #chscivics I agree something needs to be done about economy we aren't going in the right direction*
>
> *Amanda: Do unemployment rates work under the same motto as money: "Gotta loose money to make money?" #debates #chscivics*
>
> *Claire: 15 million = poverty 20 million = job struggles –Paul Ryan #debates #chscivics*
>
> *Louis: Paul Ryan says "Romney is a good man" and Joe Biden looks at him like "Whaaattt?!" #chscivics #debate*
>
> *Lindsay: "Sometimes words don't come out of your mouth the right way"…#chscivics*
>
> *Amanda: How To Win Votes: bring up car crash victims #debates #chscivics*
>
> *Pete: #chscivics That was a good one Paul Ryan! Biden what you got to say, make sure it is correct!*
>
> *Claire: spoke too soon this is a little more childish than the presidential debate Biden keeps laughing #debates #chscivics*

Amanda: “Which Governor Romney agrees with, but he changes his mind so often, I might be wrong” BURN #debates #chscivics

Amanda: “Stop talking about how you care about people, show me something” –Joe Biden #debates #chscivics

Claire: @PaulRyanVP Give us the plan straight out not bits and pieces please #debates #chscivics

Louis: Paul Ryan, what is your plan to get us out of debt? #chscivics #debates

Amanda: Can we wide spread the term “Biden'd” #debates #chscivics

Pete: #chscivics No it wasn't a good idea the we borrowed money from China. China practically owns us.

Madison: Obama had one party control pass the stimulus program…now look where we are! #chscivics #debate

Claire: its sad how Johnson is talking reality and common sense while people are listening to these idiots ruining america #debates #chscivics

Lindsay: “They got caught with their hand in the cookie jar” ha ha #chscivics

Claire: Why are both sides turning this into a class warfare? #debates #chscivics

Madison: The smartest thing said so far in this debate is Ryan telling Biden to stop interrupting him! #chscivics #debate

Claire: Quit interrupting Joe -@VPJimGray #debates #chscivics

Amanda: “Their ideas are old, and their ideas are bad.” –Biden. I agree, we can't live in the traditions of the past # debates #chscivics

Lindsay: Biden likes talking to the seniors at lot #chscivics

Claire: Joe he is a Republican they are NOT for change #debates #chscivics

Madison: Ryan to Biden… “I you don't have a good record to stand on, paint your opponent as someone you should run from!” #chscivics #debate

Amanda: Is it just me or is it getting defensive in here? #debates #chscivics

Claire: At this point Joe is sounding like a republican now:o #debates #chscivics

Sally: #chscivics #VPdebates “Do you actually have the specifics?” I LIKE YOU, WOMAN

Louis: Ryan, Let the man speak #chscivics #debate #itshisturn

Amanda: Biden: "Can I translate" I LOVE THIS GUY #debates #chscivics

Sally: #chscivics #VPdebate Biden is so blunt. I like that.

Claire: If taxes were actually fair and you democrats didn't screw up in the first place why would they WANT to find loopholes? #chscivics #debates

Louis: Paul Ryan, Are you Jack Kennedy? #chscivics #debate

Amanda: Martha Raddatz is a great moderator #debates #chscivics

Sally: #chscivics #VPdebate "That's never been done before" "It's been done a few times…" "Never been done" I love you, Vice President Biden

Madison: Obama wants to tax small businesses over 44%?! That's stupid! Over 2/3 of our jobs come from small businesses! #chscivics #debate

Claire: #debates #chscivics they should really have a button so these children can take turns talking without interrupting each other

Sally: #chscivics #VPdebate "CAN YOU GUARANTEE?" I think we all want to know the answer to that

Claire: Jim Gray wants to get rid of the 16th Amendment! Anyone else keeping up with HIS reasonable statements? #debates #chscivics

Louis: Defense? Math Question? #chscivics #debate

Amanda: Excuse me Paul but, by cutting military personnel, are you not putting MORE people out of work? #debates #chscivics

Claire: They STILL don't have an answer to how they are going to pay for their 5 trillion tax cut -_- #debates #chscivics

Louis: This lady is so much harder to deny then the last moderator. She can make them be quiet #chscivics #debate

Sally: #chscivics #VPdebate I think Martha secretly hates Paul Ryan

Louis: ust going to have to happen. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. #chscivics #debate

Madison: I bet Biden has said "Martha" about 500 times. Biden! Your trying to get America's attention, not Martha's! #chscivics #debate

Amanda: We better get around to women. I'd like to hear that if you please. #debates #chscivics

Patricia: haha Ryan is looking at Biden like "just shutup nobody cares at all" #itstrue #RomneyRyan2012 #chscivics

Amanda: I somehow don't think your religious rights are being violated by you telling me what I can and can not do to my body #debates #chscivics

Although only six students chose to participate in this discussion, it provides a glimpse into the possibilities afforded by Twitter in terms of student political engagement. It is clear that each of these students was actively watching the debate, and the majority of their tweets focused on either policy issues or the candidates' mannerisms, which hold considerable importance in televised debates. In many cases, students used verbatim quotations from the candidates to illustrate their points, and occasionally, students would emphasize these points using fictional hashtags (e.g., #itstrue). One student, Claire, even used her tweets to advocate for the Libertarian Party as an alternative to the two major party candidates.

The use of hashtags also created an environment in which each of the students was participating in two simultaneous conversations. The #chscivics hashtag provided a private forum in which students could communicate exclusively with each other, but the additional hashtags allowed students' posts to be seen by users throughout the world. We have no way of knowing, however, whether students followed both hashtags during the debate, and it is worth noting that even on the #chscivics hashtag, only once did any of the students directly respond to one of his or her classmates' tweets during the vice presidential debate. The lack of explicit communication among the students was typical during the Twitter activities throughout the semester; students rarely responded to each other on the #chscivics hashtag, although we have no way of knowing whether they responded to users on the general hashtags.

During our study of Mr. Fillmore's classes, we also observed an example of how Twitter can connect educators and groups of students anywhere in the world instantaneously. As the students were tweeting during the third presidential debate, the CHS principal unexpectedly joined the conversation and, using hashtags, linked Mr. Fillmore's students with two other high school classes that were engaged in a similar activity. These classes were located in Tennessee and Alabama, and throughout the course of the debate, students from all three classes were able to share tweets with each other. Due to the impromptu nature of this collaboration, we were unable to receive IRB permission to use the other classes' tweets in our study. Therefore, we cannot provide specific tweets from this discussion.

Although this particular collaboration occurred by happenstance, it illustrates the ease by which teachers and students can connect with other classes via Twitter. From a pedagogical standpoint, this type of collaboration offers a wealth of possibilities for political instruction. Given the ideological regionalism that exists in the United States, one can only imagine the possibilities

afforded by students being able to discuss political issues with students in other states. Similarly, most students would be surprised to learn how citizens of other nations view American politics. Having students discuss political issues with individuals in other states, or even other nations, would not only raise cultural awareness, it would also raise levels of political tolerance, which is a pedagogical goal too often missing in public education (Journell, 2011a).

Despite this potential of Twitter as a tool for political engagement, there are certain limitations associated with having students discuss politics via social media. During our study, we observed issues related to political intolerance that would need to be addressed by teachers before Twitter could be considered an appropriate venue for political communication in K–12 classrooms. We believe, however, that many of the instances of political intolerance we observed could have been avoided had Mr. Fillmore been more proactive in his monitoring of the Twitter conversations.

Politically Intolerant Tweets

When individuals turn to social media to discuss political issues, the result is often politically intolerant commentary. Consider, for example, the above transcript from the vice presidential debate. Although all of the tweets were focused on students' observations of the debate, several comments were clearly made in a way that poked fun at the two candidates. Most of these tweets, such as Amanda's quip about the best way to earn votes was to bring up car crash victims, were sarcastic ways to articulate political opinions.

These sarcastic comments were present on all of the Twitter feeds throughout the semester. During the Republican National Convention, for example, the students who were tweeting seemed to be predominately Obama supporters, and the vast majority of their comments were condescending toward the Republican speakers. One student tweeted in response to speaker Marco Rubio, "America, Jesus, and poor people are the only words Rubio knows. Please…get a vocabulary. #GOP2012 #chscivics." Another student tweeted at the conclusion of Romney's speech, "#chscivics #GOP2012 Ok bye. Thanks for wasting my time with your 'promises', Mitt." These comments were representative of the tone of the majority of tweets during both conventions and in many of the tweets during each debate.

Perhaps of greater concern were the tweets, though a relatively small number, that attacked candidates using unproductive language, poked fun at candidates' personal traits, or spoke in negative generalities about candidates. In the transcript from the vice presidential debate, for example, Madison at one point refers to Obama's tax plan as "stupid," and Claire refers to both Biden and Ryan as "idiots." This type of name-calling adds little to the substantive nature of a discussion, as do comments that attack a candidate's race or religious background. During the first presidential debate, for example, a student tweeted, "'Romney, the fun loving Mormon." – stuff nobody says #chscivics #debates." Fortunately, these types of personal attacks were not common throughout the semester.

More common, however, were comments that spoke in generalities about candidates without providing support for those positions. During the Democratic National Convention, for example, a student stated that “#chscivics #dnc2012 Obama is going to kill this country” without offering specifics of why he believed that to be true. Similarly, during the first presidential debate a student tweeted, “#chscivics #debate2012 YOU're harmful to the economy, Romney.” Both candidates’ economic plans provided plenty of fodder for critics throughout the campaign, but simply to say that a candidate is harmful to the economy without explaining why does little to advance political discourse.

What teachers must also keep in mind, however, is that these comments were made on the #chscivics hashtag, which students probably assumed would be read by their teacher. If the comments typically made at the end of any Internet-based political article are any indication, it is highly probable that the students saw much worse examples of political intolerance on the general hashtags. Although Twitter offers teachers a way for their students to join national and global political discussions, there is an inherent risk that students will be exposed to comments that are politically intolerant. Worse, the comments they read on non-classroom-specific hashtags may also carry racist, sexist, or xenophobic undertones.

It is essential, then, that teachers warn students of the potential for politically intolerant tweets and model appropriate political discourse. The above transcript is representative of the conversations that occurred on Twitter over the course of the semester, in that Mr. Fillmore rarely interacted with his students during these political events. Although Mr. Fillmore did tweet during each of the three presidential debates, his tweets were mainly to remind students to use the #chscivics hashtag or to ask generic questions.

Overall, Mr. Fillmore's role on the Twitter feeds was one of neutral observer as opposed to active participant. In the first debate, for example, Mr. Fillmore tweeted midway through the debate and asked two questions: “#chscivics Any students watching? What do you think of debate so far? #debates” and “#debates Anybody have Bingo on the Presidential Debate Bingo yet? #chscivics.” Only one student, Sally, responded to either of these questions. She tweeted, “@Mr. Fillmore I DISLIKE ROMNEY, MR. FILLMORE. I dislike him A LOT #chscivics.” Mr. Fillmore never responded to Sally, even though it would have been a perfect opportunity to discuss proper political commentary.

Discussion

In our final interview, Mr. Fillmore described Twitter as “an aspect [of instruction] that I think is really neat and has a lot of potential.” We agree wholeheartedly. Although the relatively small number of participants in this study precludes us from drawing definitive conclusions regarding Twitter as a tool for productive political engagement, the experience of Mr. Fillmore's classes demonstrates the possibility afforded by social media in secondary classrooms.

Twitter provides an outlet for students, who are typically excluded from the political process, to have their voices heard within a larger political arena than what they would typically find at home or at school. The use of hashtags also allows for students to connect with individuals from different walks of life and political persuasions. Given recent research detailing the ideological homogeneity often found in schools (e.g., Jacobsen, Frankenberg, & Lenhoff, 2012; Journell,2012), the ability to extend political discussions beyond classroom walls represents a positive step toward the goal of educating a politically tolerant citizenry capable of effectively participating in a pluralistic democratic society.

Our research, therefore, suggests that Twitter is another example of technology that can be used to eliminate geographical barriers and connect students to people with whom they would not normally interact, which research has shown can develop political and cultural tolerance (e.g., Dressman, Journell, Babcock, Weatherup, & Makhoukh, in press; Merryfield, 2003). What separates Twitter from other types of technology, however, is the ease by which connections can be made. The impromptu nature of the hashtag exchange among the three classes during the third presidential debate illustrates how quickly conversations can be linked.

From this study, however, we can also identify potential limitations of Twitter as a pedagogical tool. Perhaps the most obvious is that teachers can only maximize their use of Twitter if their school and district administrators take a supportive and progressive stance toward using social media for educational purposes. The Twitter feeds over the course of the semester also suggest another possible limitation with respect to fostering substantive political dialogues. Twitter, like any other form of blogging, represents a new wave of communication in which people display their thoughts through posting for others to see but not necessarily expecting responses. If we use Parker and Hess's (2001) definition of discussion as a “text-based shared inquiry” in which participants both talk and listen (p. 275), then most of what was tweeted over the course of the semester was not part of a larger political discussion.

Within each Twitter feed, there was a text (the debates, the national conventions), a shared inquiry (which candidate is best suited for the presidency?), and plenty of talking (the tweets). What seemed to be missing, however, was evidence of listening. Only a handful of times throughout the semester did any of the students directly respond to one of their classmate's tweets. It is certainly possible that students were responding to tweets on the general hashtags, but given the lack of responses on the #chscivics hashtag, we believe it is unlikely. Although reading others’ tweets does represent a type of “listening,” there needs to be a sustained dialogue among individuals for a true discussion to occur. In other words, it seemed as though the students were mostly talking *at* each other rather than *with* each other, which is a limitation that has been observed in students’ use of other forms of asynchronous communication (e.g., Journell, 2008; Larson, 2003).

One potential contributing factor to this limited interaction was a lack of specific instructions and modeling by Mr. Fillmore. Tweeting for academic purposes is a skill that needs to be taught,

similar to the way academic face-to-face discussions require different skills than casual conversations. Had Mr. Fillmore required students to respond to a certain number of their classmates' tweets, it may have prompted students to begin discussing on their own. Similarly, we believe that had Mr. Fillmore been more active on Twitter during each of the election events, he could have steered the conversations in a more productive direction.

At the very least, Mr. Fillmore could have modeled tolerant political behavior for his students. The advent of blogging has only contributed to the partisan divide present in American media in which name-calling and negative attacks on political figures have become typical expressions of political discourse (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Social media, in particular, often invites intolerant discourse because users can "hide" behind their computer screens. It is important, therefore, for teachers wishing to use Twitter as an outlet for students' political beliefs to both discuss and model what constitutes appropriate civic discourse online while simultaneously acknowledging that much of what students will encounter among users on non-school-related hashtags will be intolerant political behavior.

Conclusion

The experiences of the students in this study represent what we believe to be the next frontier of civic education. If a practical goal of civic education is to foster a sense of civic agency within students, then a logical first step would be to let them articulate their political opinions within a forum where their voices can be heard. Twitter and other forms of social media provide a unique opportunity for students to participate in national and international political conversations that we believe can be both engaging and empowering. As the rest of the world becomes more technologically connected, our classrooms must follow suit, or else we run the risk of further alienating a student population that will have grown up on social media.

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