Students blogging about politics: A study of students' political engagement and a teacher's pedagogy during a semester-long political blog assignment

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have written about the Internet's potential for engaging youth in public issues, but there has been little empirical research on the political engagement outcomes from students' classroom-based use of web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, or the pedagogies involved in designing such experiences. This paper begins to address this gap by analyzing the development of political engagement among several dozen high school students who were required to complete political blogs for their required U.S. government course and by exploring their teacher's pedagogical strategies and challenges. We analyzed data from 22 classroom observations, 15 student interviews, three teacher interviews, and surveys from over 300 students (including a large comparison group) given at the beginning and end of the fall 2012–13 semester. Quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that students in the blog-focused classes developed greater political interest, internal political efficacy, and self-efficacy for political writing than other students. We also found that the teacher did not actively encourage interactive posting in order to avoid heated exchanges — but that many students expressed an interest in seeing more responses to their online writing. We discuss implications for practice and research.

1. Introduction

In many democratic societies, engagement in various political activities, such as voting and contacting officials, has fluctuated widely. During the second half of the twentieth century, for example, voter turnout in Austria, France, Finland, and Switzerland fell by more than ten percentage points (Franklin, 2004), and in the United States, recent voter turnout is below its peak from several decades ago (U.S. Elections Project, 2014). Individuals under 30 years of age tend to participate in political activities at even lower rates than their older counterparts (Bouza, 2014; Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013), so it is important to consider what educators can do to help foster the political engagement of young people.

The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the affordances and challenges involved in supporting political engagement among young people through a classroom-based political "blogging" assignment. Over the past decade, blogs — commonly defined as "a Web site that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer" (Merriam-Webster, 2014) — have become an increasingly popular technological tool in various fields of education (Kim, 2008), and researchers have begun to explore the opportunities and limitations of student blogging assignments for engaging youth in learning various school subjects (Richardson, 2010). In this paper, we examine one U.S. public high school teacher's use of a political blogging assignment with his two government classes and analyze his students' development of political engagement. There is growing evidence that educational experiences, including online interactions,

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can bolster young people's likelihood of participating in politics (see review below). This paper contributes to our understanding of this process.

2. Background

2.1. Political engagement

Our concept of political engagement is based on the foundational frameworks of Eccles' (2005) expectancy-value theory and Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory. The expectancy-value theory posits that individuals are motivated to perform actions based on (1) expectations of success and (2) valuing the tasks at hand. This theory, which has found empirical support in various educational contexts (e.g., Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), also comports with political science research indicating that two of the most consistent predictors of political participation (e.g., voting, political activism, and contacting public officials) are political interest (akin to value) and political efficacy (e.g., Becker, 2005; Guyton, 1988; Hirlinger, 1992; Stromback & Shehata, 2010). Whereas political interest is commonly defined as "citizens' willingness to pay attention to politics at the expense of other endeavors" (Lupia & Philpot, 2005), political efficacy is conceptualized as the extent to which individuals believe that their actions can influence the government (Beaumont, 2010).

Given the predictive value of political efficacy and interest, researchers in political science and education have also examined the types of experiences that can strengthen these attitudes. Consistent with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, studies have found that political efficacy and interest develop through the interaction of environmental, behavioral, and psychological processes. For example, research indicates that political interest increases when individuals participate in political discussions (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2010) and consume informational news (Stromback & Shehata, 2010). In addition, when individuals experience positive emotions and then attribute those feelings to a particular type of activity, they tend to become more interested in that type of activity (Silvia, 2006).

Similarly, political efficacy often increases when individuals discuss political issues (Morrell, 2005) or participate in authentic or simulated political processes (Ikeda, Kobayashi, & Hoshimoto, 2008; Stroupe & Sabato, 2004). Political scientists often distinguish between internal political efficacy (IPE), one's sense of competence for understanding and acting in the political sphere (through writing and speaking, for example), and external political efficacy (EPE), the belief that the government or society will respond to one's actions (Miller, Miller, & Schneider, 1980). Nonetheless, studies indicate that teachers' instructional decisions can play an important role in fostering both dimensions of political efficacy as well as political interest (Levy, 2011; Hahn, 1999), and the study described in this paper explores to what extent a technologically rich classroom experience can do so.

2.2. Web tools for civic engagement

As the Internet has become an increasingly common tool within classrooms, many scholars have written about its potential for civic education and engagement (e.g., Bennett, 2008; Friedman, 2006; Hicks, Tlou, Lee, Parry, & Doolittle, 2002; VanFossen & Berson, 2008; Waring, 2006). The vast majority of that literature, however, has focused on web 1.0 technologies that involve accessing the Internet for information, which can be used as a springboard for civic action, and researchers have only begun to explore the potential of more interactive web 2.0 technologies, which can be a powerful medium for civic participation and political interaction.

Web 2.0 tools are defined as Internet-based applications that let users manipulate the web in ways that allow them to share information and respond to information shared by others (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Among the most popular web 2.0 programs are Facebook and Twitter, and others include blogs, wikis, threaded discussion boards, and file sharing websites. Numerous studies indicate that young people are using these technologies outside of school on a regular basis (Brenner, 2012; Hampton, Goulet, Ranie, & Purcell, 2011) and that their educational experiences would be more engaging if their teachers integrated such tools into their instruction (DeGennaro, 2008; Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008). Research also suggests that the inclusion of web 2.0 technologies in classrooms encourages authentic learning and offers a more engaging learning experience for students (e.g., Blankenship, 2009; Heafner & Friedman, 2008; Krutka & Milton, 2013; Manfra, Gray, & Lee, 2010).

While these tools could enhance student engagement in content area learning, they also have the potential to support engagement in issues beyond the classroom. Research and reporting from throughout the world suggests that web 2.0 technologies have the potential to entice politically disengaged youth into becoming more politically involved and may be stimulating a wave of political activism (e.g., Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012; Levine, 2008; Lim, 2012; Zhang, 2013). Interactions on Facebook and Twitter, for example, have been credited with facilitating higher electoral turnout (Bond et al., 2012; Vitak et al., 2011), exposure to diverse viewpoints (Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2012), and protest activity (Huang, 2011; Lim, 2012). Meanwhile, some scholars have argued that when students create and read one another's blogs, they are exposed to a wide variety of viewpoints (Drake & Drake, 2014; Hostetler, 2012).

Despite this potential, few studies have examined how schools have used web 2.0 technologies as tools to foster civic engagement. To begin to address this research gap, this study explores a semester-long classroom assignment that required students to create political blogs about the 2012 presidential election in the US (between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney) and its aftermath. Although many educators have facilitated student bloggingover the past several years (Kim, 2008), few studies have analyzed the relationship between active blogging and students' political engagement. In this paper, we analyze how one teacher structured a student blogging assignment, how the blogging experience supported students' political engagement, and the challenges associated with this process.

3. Research questions

The main questions guiding this research are as follows:

a. How does a government teacher structure and scaffold a political blogging assignment for high school students?
b. In what ways and to what extent do students become politically engaged when they create blogs about a major election?
c. What challenges are involved for students and teachers when teaching and learning about political blogging?