



The Use of Weblogs in Citizenship Education: a Theoretical Analysis of the Integration of Weblogs and the English Citizenship Curriculum

Cheng-Yu Hung

University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)

Cyh26cyh26@gmail.com

Abstract

According to existing studies, the weblog, or blog, is one of the most commonly applied new technologies in teaching due to its ability to allow a combination of text, photographs, videos and discussion forums on an interactive platform. Its influence is particularly keenly felt in language teaching, distance learning and natural science education. However, its use in the humanities, including history, geography and citizenship education is relatively unexplored. The author discerns a strong connection between weblogs and citizenship education and argues that they share the mutual objectives of transmitting knowledge, enhancing deliberative interaction, cultivating participation and contribution as well as generating a sense of community. While citizenship education is widely included in school timetables across countries to stave off social apathy and reverse the trend of ever-declining participation in public affairs, the nature of blogging can be an effective tool to encourage information sharing and opinion exchange between pupils as well as teachers, which may further stimulate participation and confidence in school, community and the larger society and transform the acquired civic knowledge in class into real life experience.

1. Introduction

This research, centering on the three core strands of the English citizenship curriculum (1) political literacy (2) community involvement (3) social and moral responsibility (Advisory Group on Citizenship Education, 1998), analyses the linkages between CE and blogging to provide contextualized insights for future studies to consider the probability of combining this ICT tool with other countries' humanity courses in schools.

2. Concepts of blogging and English Citizenship Education

In 2002, CE was officially introduced into the English national curriculum and implemented as a statutory subject in secondary schools. The initial initiative of this subject introduced by the Labour government rests on the low turn-out of the 18-24 age-groups in elections, and the government's concern that young adolescents' disengagement from society and politics might lead to democracy's destruction and social apathy (Advisory Group on Citizenship Education, 1998).

In contrast to other subjects, CE not only delivers knowledge, but also cultivates pupils' interest and skill applicable to a social context. 'Active citizens' is what CE intends to 'produce' (Arthur & Davison, 2000, p.15), but under the limitations of age, space, finance and legal civil capacity, pupils can merely acquire the knowledge from textbooks, unable to participate and exercise their civil rights in person. However, according to communication scholar Marshall McLuhan's concept '*media is the extensions of our limbs*' (1964), via Internet, pupils have the chance to explore the other undiscovered side of the world and practice what they have learned from citizenship education, such as online voting and online environmental issues campaigning. The following section will adopt the Crick Report's three strands of CE (1) political literacy (2) community involvement (3) social and moral responsibility with some additional revision and then respectively analyze the connection between CE and blogging (Advisory Group on Citizenship Education, 1998).



3.1 Blogs and Political Literacy

CE in England was unofficially launched in some schools in the 1970s because of the fear of neo-fascist influences among the youth and prevailing individualism detrimental to the preservation of democracy (Heater, 2001, p.109). The government's focus is mainly on political literacy, stressing the advantages of liberal democracy and the dangers of totalitarianism (Kisby, 2006, p.86). In this respect, 'democracy consolidation' is the most significant issue. Interestingly, as Coleman (2007, p.191) mentioned, the youth are among those who are least able to perceive democracy as relevant to them but they are also the most likely to be competent in ICT. As a result, it can be argued that if 'E-democracy', which means that democracy can be developed by the means of information and communication technologies (Gross, 2002), can be successfully promoted, these mostly politically unmotivated youngsters might attend to democratic issues and improve their political literacy through the Internet.

Regarding 'E-democracy', a number of studies have suggested that new technologies are beneficial to democratic development and social equality which are consistent with the nature of CE (Klein, 1999, p.216; Ferdinand, 2000, p.6; Oral, 2008, p.438). Alexander (1999) argued that online networking extends the participation into real life and advances the level of public discourse on public and community issues. Take 'MP Blogs' as an example, this is a blog platform for MPs to write articles to convey their campaigns and newly ratified legislation to their constituencies. Simultaneously, readers are able to leave their comments or seek MP services, which facilitate communication and makes MPs more approachable than before.

3.2 Blogs and Community Involvement

Marshall (1997) identifies three elements of citizenship – civil, political and social. The civil element includes '*rights necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech... the right to own property and conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice*'. 'The freedom of speech and expression' is particularly important given that it protects different claims, celebrates diversity and in turn encourages discussion and civil participation. The Internet is open not only to a specific social class or presently existing privileged group but also to everyone having the access to a computer and Internet connection (Oral, 2008). Besides, because the Internet is characterized by depersonalization and de-individuation, the imbalanced power and discrimination between genders, social class and ethnicities in cyberspace are easily eradicated (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2002). As a result, considering it more deeply, blogging features the concept of equality and multiculturalism.

The voting rate, as an important criterion in political participation, is one form of self-expression on social issues or elections, and is particularly emphasized in *Citizenship Education Curriculum for Key Stage 3* to teach pupils how to vote and the implications of a low turnout. In some blog platforms, electronic elections and electronic voting are constantly conducted on a variety of issues ranging from daily life events to social policies, and pupils construe how the act of voting might change policy making and that every single ballot should be valued. Bouras *et al.* (2003) indicate that electronic elections and online voting are another contribution of the Internet to democracy.

3.3 Blogs and Social and Moral Responsibility

A number of blogs are concerned with global campaigns including charitable work, human rights and environmental protection. In this decade, activists have incorporated the Internet into their repertoire but the Internet has also changed activism. 'Cyberactivism' is a successful example of new technology into social campaigns. Online activists recruit and attract potential participants on blog platforms and the collective identity and consciousness are raised and solidified via constant discussion on common goals and interactive post-feedback format. Through wide-spread of technology and dissemination of information, cyberactivists promulgate a certain agenda either to challenge social injustices or achieve

communal goals. For example, 'Amnesty International UK Blogs' and 'Greenpeace Weblogs' are two blogs centering on global human rights and environment protection issues.

Habermas (1989) explicates his concept of 'public sphere', defining *'private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the states... a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed'*. It is obvious that the online discourse extends the public sphere but from Habermas' viewpoint, an active public sphere does not definitely result in more rational-critical communication. Due to the development of global business and cultural commercialization, the public sphere is squeezed out and controlled by capital interests when the masses turn into simply consumers instead of rational citizens (Habermas, 1989). The Internet now is hugely dominated by corporate interests and full of online commerce. Some blog owners sell space to advertisers and therefore, their audience suffers the colonization of online commercial life (Dahlberg, 2001, p.617). As a result, when blog owners succumb to the temptation of commercializing their site, their audience maybe simply become the target market for business, which undermines the possibility of social improvement through cyberactivism and shrinks the public sphere.

Along these lines, the Internet is a discourse tool mixed with advantages and disadvantages and more attention should be paid to applying blogs to CE. Bimber (2001) researched the connection between political information and social participation and there is weak evidence to support that increased information leads to more participation. That is to say that the abundant information purveyed by blog platform does not necessarily reduce the political apathy among the youth. Streck (1997) also suggests that online participation does not definitely transfer to democratic participation in the real world.

4. Conclusion

At the theoretical level, it can be argued that the underlying meaning of deliberative democracy, rational-critical dialogue, civil republicanism, active participation and global awareness can be found both in the nature of citizenship and in blogging. This demonstrates the extraordinary compatibility of blogging and CE. Besides, the great potential for integration might inspire educational institutions to launch the 'E-democracy scheme' to promote citizenship courses in schools or to promote continuing education or even immigrant education projects. However, online commercialization, unnoticed segregation among communities and the anarchy of information should be paid more attention since these might hinder the educative effect of blogging.

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