# Democracy & Education

# Reenvisioning Education for Civic Engagement in the Social Media Century

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### **Abstract**

The reviewed article, "The Impact of Student Political Identity Over the Course of an Online Controversial Issue Discussion," represents a timely response to the eye-opening influences of social media in modern political climates. Particularly, the project provides a useful model and relevant findings for future teachers and teacher educators to incorporate online political discussions. The study clearly demonstrates the value of online discussions, especially in mixed partisan groups. Based on the findings, three additional considerations were identified and elaborated on within this response. These include a renewed consideration of quantitative analysis, a focus of identity in civic education, and a recognition that schools are not politically neutral spaces.

# This article is in response to

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OCIAL MEDIA AND online discourses have shaped contemporary political climates. This relatively recent phenomenon plays a role beyond elections and molds the political identities of citizens. While the United States has long been ideologically polarized, social media has allowed for diverse mobilizations of personal values around multiple issues (Bennett, 2012). For example, Sunstein (2018) highlighted the growing power of social media to both allow access to individual citizens to participate in civic discourses in innovative ways, but also create targeted messaging to influence a specific audience. Moreover, a growing disillusionment among young citizens toward representative government has likely led to increased participation in social movements, rallies, protests, and consumer boycotts (Dalton, 2008; Hooghe & Oser, 2015; Hooghe, Oser, & Marien, 2014; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014). Thus, social media plays a critical role in shaping goals, recruiting supporters, and organizing efforts related to this shift in civic engagement.

Hess and McAvoy's (2015) study built on previous research to present a model for education to facilitate democratic deliberation in

classroom. However, the impact of social media necessitates the adaptation of civic education thought and practice. Certainly, the rise of online civic engagement comes with opportunities and challenges. Any model of civic engagement that fails to account, or cannot be adapted, for technology, social media, and online civic engagement is insufficient. Simply put, the nature of future democracy depends on our society's, including educational institutions, ability to adapt to the complexities of online civic engagement.

The reviewed study, "The Impact of Student Political Identity Over the Course of an Online Controversial Issue Discussion,"

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(Clark, 2018) represents a model of adapting political discourse that young people experience in their daily lives. The students in the study gained useful experience and skills necessary to become effective and critical participants in online civic engagement. Future classroom teachers and teacher educators can adapt this model directly for classroom use. In addition, the focus on student's identity development represents an important goal in future academic research related to civic engagement. The rise of online civic engagement is more than simply a new way to talk about politics. As the article argued, social media has the potential to shape students' political identity and therefore should be accounted for in the conceptualizations of civic education.

After reviewing the article, I sought to frame the work within larger bodies of literature that were outside the scope presented within the manuscript. With this in mind, three central points emerged that warranted focus. First, the quantitative analysis of the project merits attention. The study made use of preexisting scales common among large-scale secondary analyses to conduct a contextualized study within two schools. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the major constructs than is often possible in large scale analysis. Second, the focus on student identity represents an emerging focus within the field of social studies and civic education. As briefly mentioned in the preceding paragraph, an important goal of civic education scholarship should consider how students navigate the education process that may, or may not, be congruent with their personal identity. Finally, when analyzing the nature of civic engagement in schools, it is important to note that schools are not politically neutral spaces. Instead, ideologically driven political actors utilize the school space and limit the ideas, issues, and goals permitted within the school space. Following, each of these aspects is discussed in more depth.

## **Quantitative Research in the Social Studies**

Over the past few decades, a substantial shift in research methodologies emerged in social studies scholarship. In 1988, Wallen and Fraenkel found that 75% of articles within the field were quantitative in nature. Since then, a strong paradigm of qualitative inquiry emerged across sub-disciplines of education research, including the social studies, that challenged notions of positivism and objectivism. As a result, the proportion of quantitative studies within the field dropped tremendously. Various estimates exist, depending on which journals are considered, ranging between 17% and 6% (Ehman, 1998; Fitchett & Heafner, 2017). In relation to this change, revisited attention to the assumptions of quantitative research has also challenged the positivistic orientation of traditional quantitative research by focusing on issues of identity, equity, and social contexts.

While quantitative research in the social studies has become less common, secondary analysis of large-scale international data sets are a notable exception (Fitchett & Heafner, 2017; Heafner, Fitchett, & Knowles, 2016). However, Lee, Napier, and Manzon (2014) argued that the broad nature of these studies can lead to decontextualized impositions, which can be difficult to translate into everyday classroom dynamics. Small-scale quantitative research can take findings from secondary analysis to provide

more contextualized findings that may be more useful to actual classroom practice. Providing an example, Levy's (2011) mixed-method study explores classroom contexts that promote students sense of political efficacy, which presents a plausible model of an open classroom climate often analyzed in large scale survey research. The reviewed study uses scales such as political efficacy and open classroom climate, which have been analyzed in dozens of studies (Knowles, Torney-Purta, & Barber, 2018). Clark's (2018) approach makes an important contribution by taking these scales developed for secondary analysis and implementing them in a specific context. Such research promotes more nuanced understandings of the measures and provides findings that are more useful to educators by exploring concepts like controversial-issue discussions and open classroom climate into actual classroom use of timely methods of political discussion.

The reviewed article provides an example of a shift in quantitative analysis by exploring within-classroom context to understand how online discussions relate to students' political identity. These findings bring attention to new models of quantitative research that focus on societal contexts, culture, and issues of equity (Covarrubias & Velez, 2013; Gillborn, Warmington, & Demack, 2018; Stage, 2007; Walter & Anderson, 2013). For example, Walter & Anderson's (2013) Indigenous Statistics calls for quantitative analysis that rejects assumptions of neutrality/ objectivism, positions the research as investigative instead of explanative, and holds motivations of equity and social transformation. Additional scholarship developed the notion of quantitative critical race theory, or "QuantCrit" (Lopez, Erwin, Binder, & Chavez, 2017; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), and increased interest in intersectionality within quantitative methods (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Zuberi, 2001). These examples offer evidence of successful pairings of quantitative methods and epistemological perspectives more traditionally used in qualitative analysis. Future quantitative studies interested in student identity and issues of equity could consider these models to inform their research design.

## **Civic Education and Identity**

While researchers have long understood the salience of political identities within United States society, more recent scholarship has demonstrated the depths of these divisions. Across identities, groups develop shared vernacular, assumptions about society, and common arguments to orient their perspectives (Haidt, 2012; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). Controversial-issue discussion emerges largely because of conversations across identities where individuals may struggle to communicate their groups' vernacular, assumptions of society, and common arguments to members of groups who hold differing fundamental perspectives (Ho, McAvoy, Hess, & Gibbs, 2017). The terms *ideology* or *culture* can be used to summarize these divisions; however, important intersections become clear when exploring various perspectives including those of gender (Bohan, 2017), race (Navarro & Howard, 2017; Vickery, 2015, 2017), and sexual orientation (Camicia, 2016).

Clark (2018) furthered conceptualizations of identity within civic education research by specifically addressing partisanship.

Other than Hess and McAvoy's (2015) study, explicit attention to partisanship within civic education research is surprisingly rare. The communities of practice model of education for civic engagement posits that schools serve as the coproduction of identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Levinson & Brantmeier, 2006). With this in mind, Clark demonstrated the complexity of this coproduction of identity by exploring how students' partisanship can mediate interactions when discussing online political issues. This important finding suggests that the composition of students within the same class affects how students respond to political discussions. Based on this, the nature and efficacy of controversial-issue discussion may vary tremendously depending on the ideological composition of students. For example, classrooms with a predominately conservative grouping of students will likely have a very different conversation than more liberal-oriented spaces, which will then be different in a mixed group. In sum, future conceptualizations of discussions of political and social issues should consider the ideological composition of the students within the class.

The study identified a relationship between strength of partisan social identity and change in argument repertoire across mixed and uniform partisan groups. Other research studies focusing on identity demonstrate that individuals' preconceived ideas mediate their experience. For example, Campbell (2007) examined the relationship between classroom racial diversity and open classroom climate among eighth-grade students. Campbell found that students in more racially diverse classrooms reported less open climates for discussion. Beck's (2013) study of high school students found that discussions of same-sex marriage were mitigated by students' preconceived understandings of various assumptions of heterosexuality and the nature of LBGTQ individuals. In addition, Crocco, Segall, Halvorsen, and Jacobsen (2018) analyzed a set of deliberations among high school students and found that students' sociocultural identity and school settings influenced the process and dynamics of the classroom events. These studies highlight the salience of preconceived ideologies with a discussion. However, Clark's (2018) findings in figure 1 provide compelling evidence that political discussions can broaden the degree of arguments among students when nested within partisan or ideological groups. Especially important, the structure of the repertoire score variable within the study suggests that the students not only gain additional arguments they agree with, in contrast they also gain a broader knowledge of counter points. Taken with the aforementioned studies in mind, the study suggests that discussions across identities provide ample benefits; however, they may contribute to an uncomfortable classroom climate.

In addition to the implications of partisan identity, the study found important results in regard to gender that require additional attention beyond the discussion within Clark's (2018) study. Based on the results of table 7, female students were more likely to engage in problem talk, opinions, and agree/disagree behaviors. Clark appropriately considered Hooghe and Stolle's (2004) study demonstrating gender differences between modes of political participation. Additional studies provided findings that add context to the identified gender gap in online discussions

behaviors. For example, Pereira, Fralle, and Rubal (2015), testing European students, found that female students excelled in reasoning/human rights knowledge, while male students scored higher on factual knowledge. Grayman and Godfrey (2013) found that female students were more supportive of social justice. Torney-Purta and Barber (2011) identified a cluster of students, roughly 10% of the sample, who had very low levels of trust and therefore negative attitudes toward rights for women, ethnic groups, and immigrants. The students within this cluster were predominately male. When we consider these findings, with the revealed gender gap, perhaps the female students are expressing more social justice—oriented viewpoints while pulling from different sources of knowledge. This finding regarding gendered notions of civic engagement warrants consideration in future research.

# **Schools Are Not Neutral Spaces**

While I read Clark's (2018) study, a basic question consistently came to mind. The opening line posited that discussions in the classroom often emphasize informed participation, civility, common ground, and consensus or compromise. Indeed, this list represents an ideal that civic educators strive to accomplish. However, Parker (2003) asserted that public education policy has never taken democratic citizenship seriously. Indeed, while reading, I found myself considering that educational institutions often provide areas of conflict between ideological cleavages within larger society. Clark (2018) made a clear argument justifying the use of online discussion to support democratic citizenship facilitated by a skilled teacher, which is certainly essential to any applied notion of education for democracy. However, understanding processes of political and social discussions in school calls attention to scholarship that demonstrates that schools are not politically/ideologically neutral spaces.

Societal-level factors challenge the ability of schools to serve as spaces for democratic deliberation. The teachers, administrators, and other students have their own ideological positions that limit the types of acceptable perspectives allowed. For example, Knowles (2018) found that teachers' civic education ideology relates to how they teach. More conservative-oriented teachers were more likely to support instruction based on textbooks and worksheets. However, more liberal- or critical-oriented teachers were more likely to implemented student-centered instructional strategies. These findings suggest that a teacher's willingness to implement an online discussion may be related to their political ideology. In addition, Leonardo and Porter (2010; also King & Woodson, 2017) conceptualized educative-psychic violence on marginalized students to frame conversations about race that minimize or ignore the significance of racism. Camicia (2016) contrasted state-level education policy and noted how it influences the inclusion of LBGTQ curriculum within classroom spaces. Rubin's (2007) work demonstrated that students from marginalized communities hold civic identities that are contradictory to the norms of efficacious civic deliberations presented in schools. More recently, Vickery's (2015, 2017) research explored how traditional notions of citizenship have failed to align with the

lived experiences of African American women social studies teachers, resulting in a reinterpretation of citizenship within their communities.

These studies demonstrate that every aspect of schooling, including its organization, its funding, and how knowledge is selected for students to learn, is political (Apple, 2008). Indeed, the structure of the schooling experience comes with certain assumptions that are often taken for granted. For example, Schutz (2008) posited that a middle-class bias toward citizenship education exists that rests on an ideal that citizens are entitled to express their opinions and have their voices heard and that a rational, wellsupported argument can change minds (Castro & Knowles, 2017). These practices are often not congruent with the contemporary political climate. Political scientists Gilens and Page (2014) demonstrated that public policy is driven more by moneyed interest instead of public will. In contrast, Schutz called attention to democratic solidarity that addresses daily tasks of survival and attention to pragmatic needs of close-knit communities, which is not often emphasized in civic education. This assertion adds context to the spiral of silence described in Clark's (2018) study. Perhaps students' response to the civic discussions was mediated by the mismatches between privileged notions of citizenship in schools and student orientations.

Taken together, this scholarship highlights the influence of ideology in relation to teachers' instructional preferences and conceptions of citizenship education privileged in schools. These ideological positions mediate a teacher's ability to create an authentic space for deliberation. Rather than treating schools as neutral, future studies of classroom discussion could incorporate the political nature of the classroom into the research design. Such designs would position deliberations that acknowledge unequal power structures within and outside schools, avoid instrumental deficit notions, and orient students' political experiences within their own communities (Knowles & Clark, 2018).

### Conclusion

Clark's study (2018) furthers important conversations regarding civic engagement, partisanship, and identity in modern contexts through online discussion. This analysis brings up areas of future research and considerations. For example, future studies could explore whether female students are also more likely to participate in different discussion formats or whether the online discussion venue provides a more empowering space. Such studies could build on previous work that has found gender gaps in attitudes, values, and preferred methods of participation (Grayman & Godfrey, 2013; Pereira et al., 2015; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2011). The findings of the reviewed study regarding mixed partisan groups is striking; however, the growing segregation between race and class in public education (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Palardy, Rumberger, & Butler, 2015) likely limits the ability of teachers to create such mixed groups. Therefore, future studies should continue to consider how the ideological composition of students within a classroom space moderates the classroom discussion.

Importantly, the model presented in the study could be readily utilized by practicing teachers as a research-supported

intervention. Given the salience of social media in contemporary political climates, educators interested in civic engagement must reconsider how students are prepared to take their places in civil and political life. Moving forward, contextualized research addressing issues of identity and civic engagement should support curriculum, teacher education, and initiatives to promote active citizenship in the social media century.

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