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Identifying the potential risks of political e-participation for adult learners

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Abstract

Adult education encourages *digital* literacy as an unmitigated good. In the current conjuncture, it does not encourage *political* literacy to the same degree. There is undoubtedly a nexus between the two, with a need for political literacy in the online environment. This paper argues that many adult learners remain ill-equipped to competently 'read' and respond to the political messages they receive online. Moreover, the problem is escalating rapidly, as the methods that political parties employ to influence people become increasingly subtle and sophisticated. At the same time we see the rise in 'fake news,' in extremism of all kinds and the declining status of the 'expert' in a 'post truth world' (Mele et al., 2017). Given this context, this paper asks the following questions:

- what are the perceptions of a sample of trainee teachers working in UK further and adult education with regard to the place of online political literacy in the curriculum?
- do these perceptions chime with what we know of the status of political literacy in current UK qualifications and curricula?
- in light of the answers to these questions, are adult learners being adequately equipped to protect their data and interpret the political messages they receive through social media?

Whilst the authors recognise the potential of the internet to mobilise political engagement and as an enabler of activism in many contexts, this paper focuses on the attendant risks of e-participation.

What we did

This was a scoping study that asked participants for their own thoughts and ideas about the subject via a paper questionnaire. We were also able to compare our questionnaire findings with our own experience of observing sessions delivered by trainee teachers over the previous two academic years, concentrating on those sessions that sought to develop political literacy. The sample of trainees identified for the questionnaire constituted 408 people studying at a UK University for a teaching qualification in Post-16 education. This is a part time, in-service programme, meaning that all have an existing role in teaching prior to and throughout the course. A paper questionnaire was issued to the whole of the second year cohort at the close of a two-day conference taking place in April, 2017.

The questionnaire used the Citizenship Foundation's description of political literacy as being,

about helping young people become politically aware and effective. It is about giving them the ability to read issues and events politically. This means using the ideas, language, forms of thought, and argument that citizens use when dealing with [or talking about] a public issue (Citizenship Foundation, 2017).

We asked respondents whether they

- were aware of this kind of focus anywhere in their institution's curriculum,

- taught it themselves,
- thought it was important
- covered its online aspects in their own teaching
- thought its online aspects ought to be part of the curriculum

We compared our findings with our own experiences of teaching observation over the last two years. Finally, we endeavoured to set these findings in the context of the current curriculum offer and qualification framework in UK adult and further education.

Rationale

The motivation to conduct this study arose from a news report on the role of data analytics in the Brexit and Trump campaigns of 2016. Both campaigns employed the corporate publicity firm *Cambridge Analytica* to harvest data from various social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter. The extent to which this influenced the results is questionable. What is clear, however, is that the company used this data to engineer and micro-target political messages in an attempt to influence votes (Bershidsky, 2016). 'Crawling' social media posts enabled them to track our vulnerabilities around family breakdown, changes in circumstances, being a victim of crime, significant loss, peer pressure, religion, sexual orientation, attitudes to drug-use and so on. This 'psychographic profiling' is then combined with psychometric tests gathered through 'fun' online quizzes such as 'Are you a Type A or Type B personality?' 'What percent Badass are you?' or 'What's your Political Compass?' Whilst many consumers are aware that their online footprint is routinely used to target them with advertising, the prospect of political strategists using it to manipulate voting preferences is new and we would argue, troubling, particularly since usually no consent for such use has been gained. There are Data Protection Laws against this and in the run up to the UK General Election of 8th June 2017, the Information Commissioner launched a formal inquiry, feeling it necessary to warn all political parties of the 'data protection risk' of such practices and pointing out to them that campaigning tools were having 'a significant potential impact on individuals' privacy' (Stone, 2017).

A feature of the 2017 election has been a plethora of political advertisements tailored to individual social media users, paid for by the three main political parties. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism gained access to a dataset which appears to show how UK voters are being targeted with specific messages in an attempt to influence the way they vote. Will Moy, director of the independent fact checking website *Full Fact* warned that this is a 'dark ads' election, whereby people in the same household can receive different messages on the same topic;

It's possible to target dark ads at millions of people in this country without the rest of us knowing ... Inaccurate information could be spreading with no-one to scrutinise it. Democracy needs to be done in public. (McClenaghan, 2017)

Similarly, *the Guardian* reported in May, 2017 that the Welsh marginal constituency of Delyn had been subject to 'dark ads,' which became apparent through bids for advertising slots on Facebook. A Labour party activist setting up a link to a site where young people could register to vote saw the rate per click rise rapidly from £1.08 to £3.40. They were being outbid by Conservative Party advertisements, taking click-throughs to dark ads about 'Labour's 'death tax,' taken from a sensationalist and highly contested opinion piece in *the Express* newspaper (Cadwalladr, 2017).

People need a sophisticated level of political literacy to deal competently with such practices. Most social media users are unaware that they might be targeted in these ways. Further, an ability to distinguish content that has a basis in fact from 'spin' is also vital. Whether controversial claims are subsequently found to be untrue is almost immaterial. The advertisement cannot be unseen. Moreover, the newly acquired cultural heft of 'post-truth' politics and 'alternative facts' points to the dangers of a growing tendency to dismiss expert, evidence-based information. Faith is placed instead in moving stories of individual suffering or courage (Davies, 2017) and the credibility of statistics and authoritative research to accurately represent the world is declining, dismissed by many as a way for liberal elites to win people over to their world view. This state of affairs led us to question the extent to which adult learners are prepared to protect their data and to 'read' political online content critically and we began by asking a large sample of trainee teachers working in adult and further education for their perceptions.

What we found

The questionnaire

164 of 408 (40%) of the trainee teachers sampled returned a completed questionnaire. One session leader neglected to hand it out, therefore there are no returns from those teaching within the Humanities and Social Sciences discipline, which might have been expected to reveal some engagement with political education. Other tutors also reported leaving it to the last minute when some trainees were rushing for a train, so that we cannot say with certainty that the 60% who did not respond did not wish to take part. However, those who elected to complete the questionnaire might be those who thought this a more important issue and the results should be read with that caveat.

Figures 1 and 2 show the range of specialisms taught by respondents and in what kinds of institution.

Figure 1: Teaching specialisms of respondents

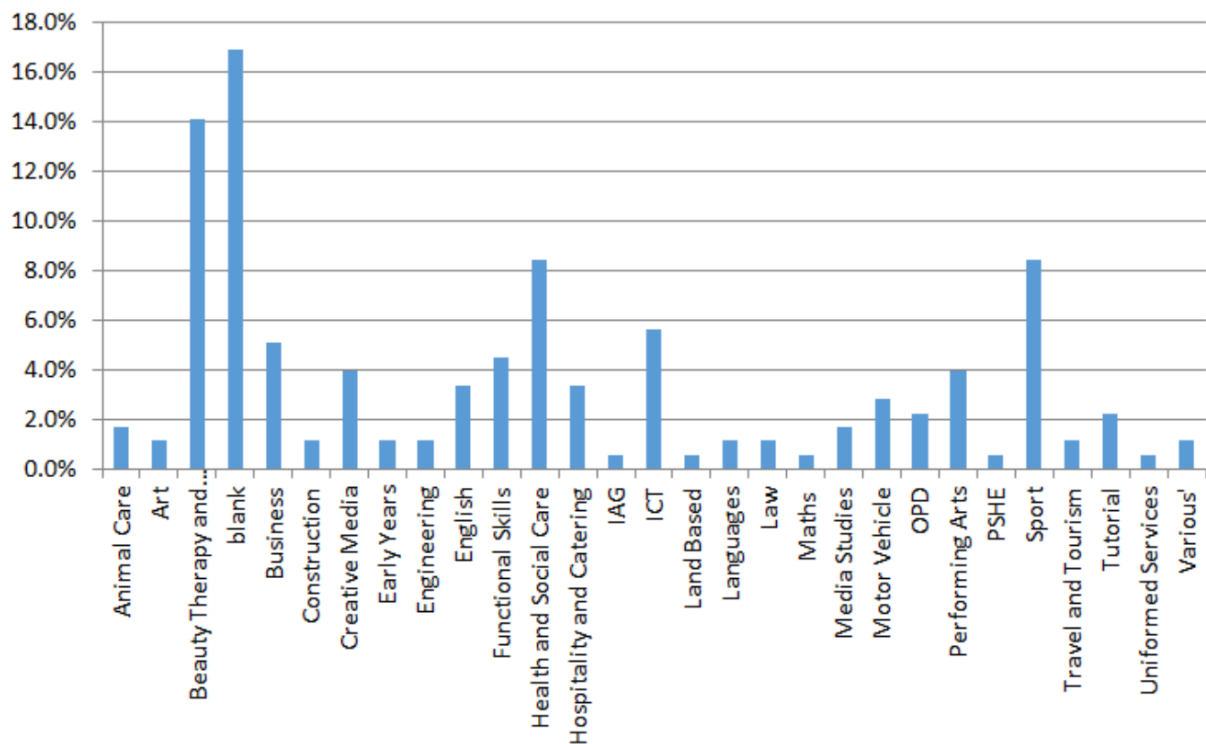
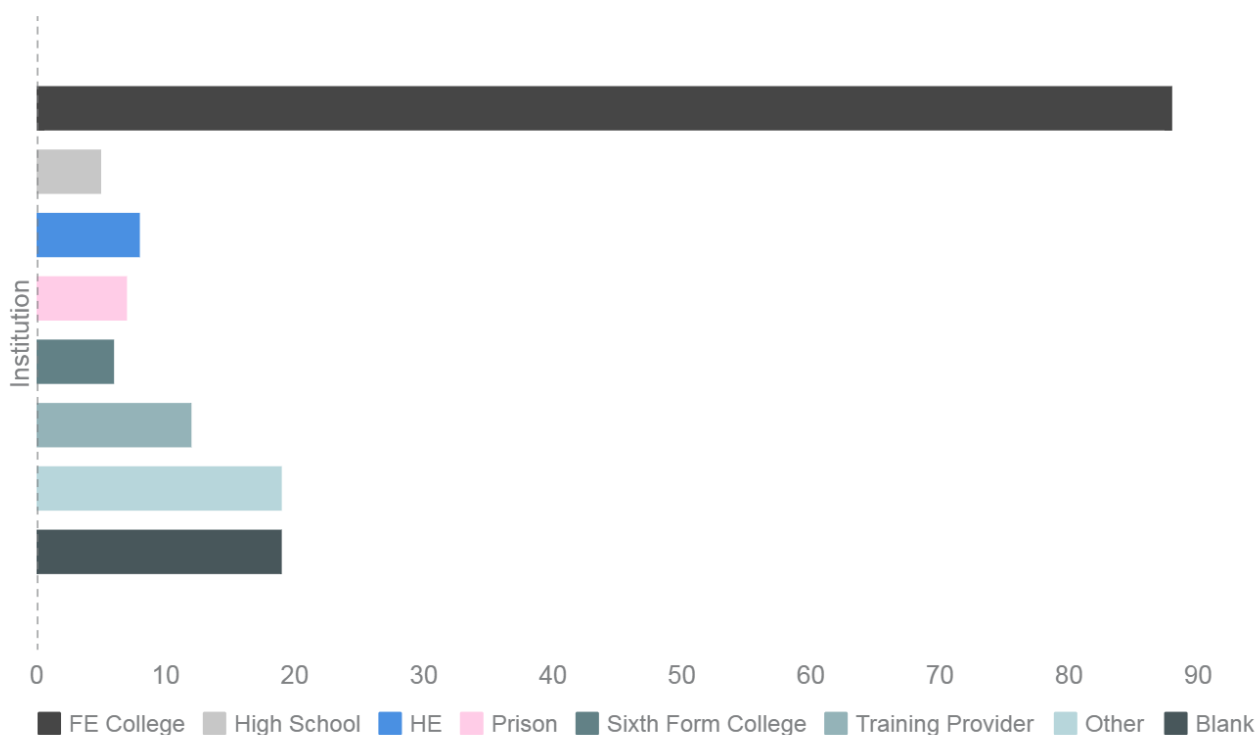


Figure 2: Type of institution in which they teach



These two figures show that the sample is diverse both in terms of subject taught and the context for this teaching and this is typical of adult and further education. There is a preponderance, however, of FE providers. Whilst a great deal of adult education occurs in FE colleges, a substantial portion of their provision is concerned with 14 to 19 year olds and the results and their relevance to adult education should also be read with that proviso.

Of those who returned a completed questionnaire, 71% were wholly unaware of any political literacy teaching at their own place of work. This does not necessarily mean that it does not take place. Though all are in-service teachers, some are relatively new to teaching and many are in voluntary or fractional roles. In this context, that 27% were aware of at least some teaching of political literacy might be an encouraging sign, although it is not clear at this stage what the extent of this teaching might be or with what percentage of students it might engage.

40% of respondents felt that they themselves *ought* to teach 'some' through to 'a great deal' of political literacy, with the implication that the remaining 60% see no place for it in their own subject. This is not to say that they think it should be entirely absent from the curriculum. However, the natural consequence where a majority think that it is 'not their business' and where there is no mandated need to cover it, is that it is liable to fall through the cracks, being covered by no-one. Only 17% of respondents felt that they taught any political literacy. This is cause for real concern in the current conjuncture. The imputation may be that political literacy is not being adequately covered as part of the teacher education curriculum. However, all trainees at this point in the course have studied a 'Curriculum and Professional Issues' module that focuses on political issues. Moreover, the trainees in this sample had, just a few hours earlier, heard a keynote that questioned the narrowness of a system wholly focussed on a skills agenda and the potential value of a

broader and more liberal education (Simmons, 2016).

Only 13% of respondents said that they made any effort to teach political literacy within social media environments. 45% thought it had no place in the curriculum. Since we meant the *whole* curriculum when we constructed the questionnaire, we were initially dismayed by this finding, although some respondents may have interpreted this as the curriculum for their own subject only.

The lesson observations

To provide context for these findings, we drew on lesson observations conducted by two teacher educators over the previous two years. Most took place at an adult education college for learners seeking to return to education, often without formal qualifications. The college also offers training for those active in community groups and trade unions and predictably, these exhibit a high level of engagement with political issues as part of their *raison d'être*. Beyond these, Access to Higher Education courses for over 19s explored a range of political issues. History and Politics units on such courses dealt competently with issues of power and democracy. English Literature classes covered post colonial and feminist perspectives, shedding light on the political nature of some literatures and providing strong examples of writing beyond the traditional canon. Teacher education sessions also showed a strong commitment to helping students to become more politically aware. None of these sessions, however, included any kind of focus on social media political literacy, a striking omission in a college where politics forms such a significant part of the curriculum offer. However, our questionnaire results indicate it is not out of line with provision elsewhere and is stronger in many respects.

A strong left-leaning bias was observed in the majority of sessions. Some sessions sought to develop learners' critical and evaluative faculties, encouraging them to balance opposing arguments. However, many presented a leftist view as the unproblematic truth. A range of critical education theorists, prominent amongst whom is Paulo Freire, (1996), have argued that left-leaning curricula are a vital antidote to the manufacture of consent by the powerful forces of global capitalism and are an important way in which the disempowered can begin to question the sources of their oppression and to challenge them. However this may be, presenting one set of arguments as always trumping another does not address the central call of this paper which is to encourage learners to question stances, to check claims and to be wary of vested interests in interpreting arguments. At its worst, learners appeared to parrot political maxims without the arguments to corroborate or explain them.

Only one session observed during the two year period illustrated any online political literacy teaching. This was a session on Religion that explored the notion of the 'meme' (2016). Richard Dawkins coined this term in 1976 to describe an idea, behaviour or style that spreads by imitation from person to person within a culture. Subsequently it has come to mean a multimedia artefact, combining images and text that has 'gone viral,' gaining millions of online views. The tutor was conscious that creating memes has provided a way for some younger adults to develop focussed criticism of a political or philosophical nature. He engaged the class in a 'meme hunting' activity and allowed them to share a range of examples followed by a discussion of their benefits and caveats. He used this as a way to introduce Dawkins' more general idea and linked this in to the spread of religion through human societies.

The session was a fun and engaging one, supported by the fact that memes are generally humorous, cute or provocative with challenge to authority figures and a degree of satire.

To develop this further, the tutor might have more thoroughly explored the controversial and misleading nature of some memes, for example those spread by British Nationalists to incite racial hatred; the photograph of Pakistani cricket fans labelled as Muslims celebrating the Paris shootings being a typical example. Checking the provenance of such pictures through sites like 'Tin Eye' is an easy way to scotch such content. The session could also have problematised the fact that truth is not a pre-requisite for a viral idea and that these can be seductive and harmful unless we learn how to read them more intelligently.

The curriculum context

Our sample of trainee teachers cited a range of locations for political literacy teaching in the curriculum (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Where in the curriculum is political literacy found?



Tutorials and Fundamental British Values came out highest followed by 'subject related' teaching, specified in a number of cases as Politics and Sociology A-Level. Notable by their absence are Access to Higher Education courses. FE providers across the UK do provide political education through such programmes as illustrated by our lesson observations reported above. Also notably absent are the politically informed Workers' Educational Association programmes: not surprising, perhaps given that they have been so badly affected by recent austerity measures.

It is also noteworthy that Citizenship came out as one of the lowest returns. This qualification was introduced as a school subject by a Labour Government in 2002 following the Crick Report, motivated in part by, 'the political apathy of young people [and] the democratic crisis of low voter turnout' (Crick, 1998) Attempts to address these issues through Education were no great surprise since greater voter turnout generally favours Labour in elections. This may also explain the recent shelving of the Citizenship A-Level

by the current Tory Government, with the last cohort of students due to go through in September 2017. There is an extant non-core, GCSE Citizenship qualification which aims to develop:

- keen awareness and understanding of democracy, government and law
- skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically
- skills and knowledge to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments

Citizenship qualifications proved popular with rising numbers up until 2011 when the Coalition Government decided to concentrate on 'traditional subjects.' Critical Thinking A-Level, which developed reasoning and argument, has also been abolished. The declining fortunes of these useful subjects illustrate ways in which the curriculum might be manipulated to serve the needs of whoever is in power. The consequence is that subjects requiring post compulsory students to develop their in-depth thinking skills and knowledge of the political system have been lost, part of the long decline since the 1970s of General and Liberal Studies (Simmons, 2016). The only political content mandated by the government is that,

all schools must promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and, within this, 'fundamental British values'.

This is now called Citizenship. There is no requirement and diminished opportunity for the majority of students to explore the role of either the main stream media or of social media in the political life of the nation. Higher order, evaluative skills are not developed in a political context unless they are directly related to the subjects that a student chooses to study.

Though neither Citizenship nor Critical Thinking had any specific outcomes aimed at developing online political literacy, they did at least provide scope for students to explore the issues they raised in an online setting. Their demise is symptomatic of the hollowing out of critical and political thinking from the qualifications framework to the extent that political literacy teaching now has an *ad hoc*, contingent, inconsistent status. Little wonder then that trainee FE teachers report patchy and inconsistent provision.

Conclusion

This paper has reported that a sample of in-service trainee teachers working in UK further and adult education perceive political literacy and especially online political literacy to be either absent or patchy and inconsistent. Those perceptions chime with findings from lesson observations conducted over the last two years and with the embattled status of Citizenship and Critical Thinking in the current curriculum. Though this study has not asked students for their perceptions, studies from elsewhere report that students are ill-prepared for critical or political thinking in the online world. In the US, the Stanford History Group created a bank of assessments tools, for 'civic online reasoning,' administering them to students of different ages. They found that people's 'ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*' (Wineberg, Ortega, Breakstone, & McGrew, 2016).

This study indicates that UK adult education is not adequately equipping the majority of learners of all ages, including adults with the kinds of political literacy that they need in social media environments. The Internet enables unprecedented harvesting of data and dissemination of messages and it is perhaps inevitable that political parties will seek to exploit these affordances through the services of companies like *Cambridge Analytica*. It

is in the interests of such companies and their clients to remain unperceived so that people do not begin to protect their data. Similarly, a lack of critical thinking about online content makes people easier to influence. Driving political literacy out of the curriculum serves such interests. However, whilst a politically illiterate electorate are more vulnerable to the manufacture of consent and to political manipulation of this kind, such illiteracy also leaves them vulnerable to more extreme voices that sometimes tragically carry them beyond political apathy and into radicalisation. What is encouraging in this study is the fact that a significant minority of our sample of trainees seek to develop at least some political literacy under their own initiative and that of those who do not currently do so, a significant proportion feel that it ought to be part of what they do. The time is ripe to revisit how we might more consistently and productively support adult learners in this regard.

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