Even 'Digital Natives' May Need Lessons on Online Political Discourse

New study suggests it spurs engagement

By Stephen Sawchuk

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The social-media revolution has transformed American politics more than any other aspect of our culture, with political fortunes made and lost on a well-placed or ill-crafted Tweet. And today's young "digital natives" spend lots of their time on social-media platforms, getting much of their news and their first taste of political discourse online.

But how do the two pieces fit together? Do schools have a role to play?

New evidence suggests that formal training does shape how students learn to engage with and debate viewpoints: Students who reported having lessons in media literacy and participatory politics were more likely to say they'd engaged in political activity online, concludes a **study published last week by the journal Learning, Media, and Technology**.

The new research, from University of California, Riverside, researchers Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, looks at two particular forms of online activity. One is "online participatory politics," in which people interact on digital media to express their opinions or influence issues of public concern.

The other, "targeted political pressure," refers specifically to online protest activity, including online petitions. A good recent example among youths occurred following the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., where the students took to social media to call on private corporations, like car-rental companies and banks, **to end discount programs for National Rifle Association members**, by using the hashtag #boycottNRA.

The researchers' analysis is based on data from the Youth and Participatory Politics survey, a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of 15-to-27 year olds conducted in 2013 and 2015. Using a subsample of 300 middle and high school-age students, they developed scales based on students' answers to several sets of questions, including how often they circulated, created, or commented on political content online; whether they'd tried to influence institutions by signing petitions or communicating electronically with an institution; and how often they had classes in which they learned how to create and share social media and how to share their perspective on social and political issues online.

The researchers also controlled for such factors as parental education and activism, ethnicity, and political interest.

Across several different models, the researchers found that students who reported being exposed to digital-engagement learning opportunities at school in either 2013 or 2015 displayed more online participatory political activity in 2015.

Across all the models, the effect was stronger for the targeted political participation rather than general online political engagement. Students who had lessons on media literacy and political engagement were between three and seven times more likely to participate in a pressure campaign compared with students without those learning opportunities.

But the study also provides evidence that few teachers prioritize online political engagement in their lessons. Both in 2013 and in 2015, more than 60 percent of students in the researchers' sample said they never had an opportunity at school to effectively share their perspectives online.

That should be concerning, said Kahne.

"Learning how to express yourself as it relates to the things you care about in society is fundamentally important to democracy, and in order for that process to work well, you want your ideas to be well informed and interact and be in dialogue with other people in a respectful, perhaps assertive, informed way," he said. "Schools are core to the mission. Teachers care whether students' arguments are logical and well informed and give people opportunities to enter into the discussion."

Teaching Online Engagement

For 9th-grade English teacher Janelle Bence, incorporating online engagement into her writing lessons wasn't just a good idea, it was a necessity. Her students' reading diet is so heavily influenced by social media that it permeates much of what students are interested in.

"There's a lot of pop culture, but also a lot of news, which I think can potentially be very scary," said Bence, who teaches at New Tech High in the Coppell district near Dallas.

Many of her writing tasks require students to choose topics, research alternative points of view, and construct arguments aimed at informing or convincing other young people on issues ranging from obesity to mental health to immigration. Over the years, her students have produced podcasts, videos, digital posters, and tweets related to their topics.

"I just saw them being much more comfortable with their writing and the benefit of using evidence to discuss these topics with their peers from other cities and states," she said.

About the Citizen Z Project

U.S. public education is rooted in the belief by early American leaders that the most important knowledge to impart to young people is what it means to be a citizen. If America is experiencing a civic crisis now, as many say it is, schools may well be failing at that job.

There are plenty of pitfalls for teachers looking to emulate those practices. Online conversation tends to be anonymous, generally isn't vetted for accuracy (as a newspaper op-ed would be), and is often highly partisan. Fortunately, giving youths opportunities to practice doesn't mean they have to begin on the open web, Bence noted. Websites like KQED Education, and Youth Voices, which is supported by the National Writing Project, offer opportunities for young people to blog and interact with other students without the fear of attracting trolls.

The policy appetite for explicitly teaching civics engagement seems less clear. Although civics has risen on educators' agendas, **several conservative commentators** recently have raised concerns about approaches like **action civics** that require students to research and use civic channels to solve a problem in their communities. Those approaches, they say, neglect core civics knowledge—like the slow, messy, often unsatisfying process of crafting legislation—in favor of the fast pace and pitched emotion of activism.

There's also the continued concern that teachers could bring their own viewpoints to bear, although past research suggests that it's rare for K-12 teachers to take political sides in class.

Bence understands teachers' concerns about having students discuss and share their thoughts on controversial topics. But she insists it's important work for their civic preparation.

"We can't continue to say it's challenging, so let's not do it," she said. "Then we are left with a bunch of people who don't know how to discuss things with one another."