

## Civic Education and the Learning Behaviors of Youth in the Online Environment: A Call for Reform

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**Abstract:** *Scholarly discourse in political science and communication studies is replete with empirical evidence lamenting the decline in civic engagement and political participation among adolescents and young adults. Scholars offer a variety of factors contributing to the disengagement of youth from the civic and political process including lack of attention paid to youth by politicians and the political process, the limited experience and a narrow frame of reference of young people in the political process, their aversion to traditional politics, and to poor quality courses and a decline in civic education in schools. Youth frequently lack civic and political knowledge as well as information and communications technology and social skills needed to engage in public life due in large part to the superficial coverage of substantive civic topics in textbooks and concentrating on knowledge level information that focuses on rights to the exclusion of obligations and participation. Civics curriculum often lacks opportunities for young people to embrace and communicate about politics on their own terms and frequently has little connection between the academic presentation of politics and the acquisition of skills that might help develop engaged citizens. Current approaches to civic education are at odds with young people's experiences of informal participation with their peers in a nonhierarchical network. Traditional civics curriculum often treats subject matter as another academic subject with right or wrong answers arbitrated by the teacher as central authority and students in competition for grades. A growing body of literature discusses the affinity that youth have for Internet use and the possibilities of new media to address disengagement and to enhance new forms of citizenship calling for pedagogical reform in civic education.*

**Keywords:** *Civic Education, Civics Curriculum, Youth, Citizenship, Reform, Communication Studies, New Media, Knowledge, Skills*

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## **Introduction**

### ***Civic Education and the Learning Behaviors of Youth in the Online Environment: A Call for Reform***

Scholarly discourse in political science and communication studies is replete with empirical evidence lamenting the decline in civic engagement and political participation among adolescents and young adults. Delli Carpini (2010) cites over ten individual empirical studies suggesting that youth are less likely to engage in forms of civic or political participation including voting, reading or watching news, community volunteerism and activism, in addition to having less trust in fellow citizens and lacking a sense of pride and obligation associated with American identity (p. 341-43). An additional paper reviews almost two dozen empirical studies suggesting “the retreat of today’s young Americans” from participation in all arenas of public life such as political interest, efficacy, and involvement and high levels of civic detachment (Bos, Williamson, Sullivan, Gonzales, & Avery, 2007, p. 1266). Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper (2005) cite eight more studies worrying about the decline in youth participation from researchers and political actors and from youth themselves (p. 4). A synthesis of survey results shows a decline in face-to-face, local and election-related participation, interest in the news, and a failing trust in the press by young people (Bennett, 2008, p. 5). The purpose of this paper is to identify, from the scholarly and conceptual literature, the reasons young people may opt out of political and civic engagement and offer ways grade schools can address the problem.

## **Problem**

Scholars offer a variety of factors contributing to the disengagement of youth from the civic and political process. Among the factors is a lack of attention paid to youth by politicians and the political process (Delli Carpini, 2010, p. 345), also referred to as a “cycle of neglect,” wherein due to the lack of participation by youth, campaigns, parties, and advocacy groups are less likely to pursue youth, which leads to continued apathy (Walker, 2006, p. 27). Youth have limited experience and a narrow frame of reference in the political process as they only know the current environment, which leads them to believe that their own participation is unlikely to affect change because they are “alienated from the institutions and processes of civic life and lack the motivation, opportunity, and ability to overcome this alienation” (Delli Carpini, 2010, p. 345). Young people have an aversion to traditional politics, distrusting public officials and believing that policy making is “controlled by self-interested politicians and organized lobby groups”

(Tapscott, 2009, p. 246), with their distrust, due not to disinterest, but to their perception that political systems have failed to engage them in a way that matches their ethical and digital upbringing (p. 246).

### **State of Civics Education**

Presenting disengagement as a symptom of institutional failure, Bennett (2008) also blames cultural forces (p. 5) and the “withering away” of civic education (p. 7). Many other scholars attribute the lack of engagement to poor civic education in schools (Delli Carpini, 2010, p. 345; Galston, 2001, p. 222), and to decline in civic education courses (Bachen, Rafael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008, p. 292), especially after No Child Left Behind legislation left citizenship knowledge and skills far behind math and reading, and many school systems abandoning civic education altogether over the last 40 years (Bennett, 2008, p. 16). A 2007 survey showed that “nearly half of the [school] districts surveyed cut instruction time in social studies . . . in favor of those subjects that are tested like reading and math” (cited in Tapscott, 2009, p. 129; McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 383). Along with diminished offerings due to high-stakes testing, budget cutbacks and school boards’ fears of treating controversial issues contribute to a decline in civics courses in public schools (Bachen, Rafael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008, p. 292).

### **Lack of Knowledge and Skills**

#### ***Knowledge***

Youth frequently lack civic and political knowledge as well as information and communications technology and social skills needed to engage in public life. The 2010 national civics exam administered by the U.S. Department of Education to 27,000 fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students showed that the average score for fourth graders was higher than those recorded from 1998 and 2006, not significantly different from the score in either year at grade 8, and lower than the score in 2006 but not significantly different from the score in 1998 at grade 12 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011). In reference to these results, former U.S. Supreme Court Judge Sandra Day O’Connor stated “. . . we have a crisis on our hands when it comes to civics education” (Dillon, 2011). General knowledge about how the government works to practical knowledge about contacting a public official or registering to vote is important for young people’s involvement in civic and political affairs. Traditionally, civic education required students to memorize facts, what Watkins (2011) calls the “who, what, and when model of civic

literacy” and the “primary source of information has been textbooks, a source of literacy that has not always been the most accurate or inclusive.” Scholars are generally in agreement on the state of civics texts. A survey of three best-selling high school civics books indicated they contain references to “fewer political issues, protest politics were presented in a historical throwback to days before people won their civil rights, and government was idealized in terms of its representative and responsive capacities” (Bennett, 2008, p. 16). An analysis of civics text books suggests that civics textbooks “disproportionately focus on rights, to the relative exclusion of obligations and participation” (Bos, Williamson, Sullivan, Gonzales, & Avery, 2007, p. 1278).

### *Skills*

While youth are no less likely to lack organizational, communication, and leadership skills as in the past, they are much less likely to apply them to collective problem solving (Delli Carpini, 2010, p. 345). Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) define civic skills as the communications and organizational abilities that “allow citizens to use time and money effectively in political life” (p. 304). Those who possess verbal (wide vocabulary and the ability to formulate an argument) and composition competency (ability to effectively write letters, give speeches, and organize meetings) will have the confidence to exercise those skills in public (p. 305). McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee (2010) discuss “communications competence” that includes “effective searching for information, listening to other viewpoints, thinking and connecting ideas and perspectives, expressing opinions and ideas, and actively engaging with others in collective action” (p. 368).

Bennett (2008) asserts that civics curriculum often lacks “independent opportunities for young people to embrace and communicate about politics on their own terms” and frequently has “little connection between the academic presentation of politics and the acquisition of skills that might help develop engaged citizens” (p. 7). He presents a survey of over 90,000 fourteen-year-olds in 28 nations suggesting that “civic education, where offered, remains largely a textbook based experience, largely severed from the vibrant experiences of politics that might help young people engage with public life” (p. 7) and that a large portion of the educators and educational policy makers making decisions about curriculum are “older-generation, traditional citizens who assume that their model of citizenship needs to be assumed by future generations” (p. 16). Bennett (2007) argues that current approaches to civic education are at odds with young people’s experiences of “peer-to-peer, nonhierarchical network participation” (p. 72). Traditional civics

curriculum “often treats subject matter as another academic subject with right or wrong answers arbitrated by the teacher as central authority and students in competition for academic favor” (p. 72). A 1999 U.S. Department of Education study found almost 90% of ninth graders reading out of textbooks and filling out worksheets compared to less than 46% debating and discussing ideas, engaging in role play or mock trials, visiting with political leaders, or writing letters to express their opinions (cited in Bennett, 2007, p. 72). Add to the problems a lack of teacher training in new technologies (McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 383), the profile of contemporary civic education is bleak particularly in light of the ICT opportunities afforded by digital media technologies that are already familiar to most young people, resulting in a curriculum that clashes with young people’s sense of political reality and meaningful personal expression (Bennett, 2008, p. 17).

### **New Media and Youth Engagement**

A growing body of literature discusses the affinity that youth have for Internet use and the possibilities of new media to address disengagement and to enhance new forms of citizenship (e.g., Bachen, Rafael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008, p. 293; Delli Carpini, 2010, p. 346; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006, p. 299; Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper, 2005, p. 4; Livingstone, Couldry, and Markham, 2007, p. 21-22; Ward, 2008, p. 514). The new media ecology

- (a) increases the speed with which information can be gathered and transmitted,
- (b) increases the volume of information that is easily accessible, (c) creates greater flexibility in terms of when information is accessed, (d) provides greater opportunity and mixes of interactivity (one to one, one to many, many to one, and many to many), (e) shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest based, (f) blurs distinctions between types of media (print, visual, and audio), (g) challenges traditional definitions of information gatekeepers and authoritative voices, and (h) challenges traditional definitions of producers and consumers of information. All of these characteristics have potential implications for the motivation, ability, and opportunity to become engaged in public life. (Delli Carpini, 2010, pp. 346-347)

Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham (2007) assert that the “architecture of the Internet—its flexible, hypertextual, networked structure, its dialogic, interactive mode of address, its

alternative, even anarchic feel—particularly appeals to young people, fitting their informal, peer-oriented, anti-authority approach, making this an environment in which they feel expert and empowered” (p.3). In the online environment it may be that young people feel more expert and empowered, especially by contrast with the traditional, linear, hierarchical, logical rule-governed conventions often used in conventional communications with youth (Livingstone, 2009, p. 121) received by government and educational institutions. It is a venue in which youth are not “stigmatized by their age or specifically blocked from participation because of status” (Youniss et al., 2002, p. 138).

### **New Media, Civic Engagement, and Political Participation**

Livingstone (2009) suggests that since young people enjoy using the Internet’s affordances to sustain and extend their communication networks, and spend considerable time doing so, that “this energy can be harnessed to civic ends” (p. 127). Additionally, use of new media can create “public-spirited talk”—discussions about public affairs with friends and family (cited in McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 374). These researchers also synthesize data from studies that suggest the Internet is as an important source of political information among young people by its direct and indirect effects across a wide range of civic engagement, “from the expressive to the consumptive” (p. 380).

A seminal study, supported by both the MacArthur Foundation and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, examined three types of behavior: politically-driven online participation, online exposure to diverse perspectives, and interest-driven online participation. The researchers surveyed of over 2500 high school age youth and followed 350 youth for three and a half years. Three major findings of the study should inform the future of civic education curriculum for state and federal standards reform, as well as district-level educators for developing and practicing effective and transformative pedagogy. The findings suggest that 1) spending time in online communities seems to promote engagement with society as youth involvement in interest-driven online communities was associated with increased volunteer and charity work and in increased work with others on community issues; that 2) “more youth are in empty chambers than echo chambers” with “individuals tend either to see many differing perspectives or none;” and that 3) digital media literacy education dramatically increased students’ exposure to diverse perspectives and boosted the likelihood of youth online engagement with civic and political issues,” implying that young people will benefit from a

strong media literacy education program that teaches them to use the full potential of new media (University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2011). Joseph Kahne, the study's main author, states that "[r]esearch demonstrates that many youth are disengaged from traditional forms of civic and political life but are very engaged with new media . . . Our study findings strongly suggest is that there are ways to build on their engagement with digital media to foster engagement in civic life" (cited in University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2011).

### **Participatory Youth Culture**

Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel (2009) define the activity that youth enjoy online as a "participatory culture," a culture that has low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices (p. 7). A growing body of scholarship suggests potential benefits of participatory culture, including opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, a changed attitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship that can be integrated into formal learning.

While many educators may want to frame the discussion around the effective and innovative use of technology in the classroom, the discussion needs to focus on how youth participate in the new media ecology and the possibilities those practices can have in formal civic education courses. Ito et al. (2010) defines new media ecology as the intersection of more traditional media, such as books, tv, and radio, with digital media, specifically interactive media for social communication (p. 10). They suggest that the emergence of networked public culture may shape and transform social interaction, peer-based learning, and new media literacy among young people (pp. 18-26).

Ito et al. (2010) also identifies "friendship-driven and interest-driven genres of participation" as a way to describe the informal practices of learning and media engagement of youth (p. 17). Within those genres of participation, youth "hang out" with friends by chatting on a social network or playing online games. Most of these relationships, while maintained online, are developed and sustained face-to-face. Driven by their own interests and motivations, young people also "mess around" by producing and sharing digital media, searching for needed or interesting information, looking around, experimenting, or simply playing. An additional genre of

participation, “geeking out,” finds youth delving deeper into one area of interest, displaying “an intense commitment or engagement with media or technology” (p. 65). These “geeks” learn to navigate “domains of knowledge and practice and [are] able to participate in communities that traffic in these forms of expertise” (p. 67).

Politics, as constructed by the news, becomes a spectator sport, something [youth] watch but do not do. Yet, the new participatory culture offers many opportunities for youth to engage in civic debates, to participate in community life, to become political leaders, even if sometimes only through the ‘second lives’ offered by massively multiplayer games or online fan communities. (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009, p. 10)

### ***Participatory Aspects of New Media***

Accessing and using interactive Web 2.0 sites and tools such as blogs, social bookmarking, social networks, shared documents, video and photo editing sharing, and wikis affords students opportunities for critical thinking and development of creative ideas and products, while providing unique occasions for students to collaborate, solve collective problems, and share—which are all valuable skills. 38% of teens who use the Internet share self-created content online (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010, p. 42), 14% blog, and 52% comment on friends’ blogs (p. 45). The popularity of YouTube, MySpace, and other new media sites that encourage user-generated content and communication suggests that the emerging digital media culture is increasing opportunities for young people to connect, engage, and create (Montgomery, 2008, p. 29).

Participatory websites also allow access to information not contained in traditional sources (civics textbooks, subscription databases, library shelves, and read-only websites), such as historical and contemporary political videos available on YouTube, and Wikipedia’s current or lesser-known civic and political topics not available in *Britannica* or *World Book* online or print encyclopedias.

### **Negative Aspects of New Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement**

While scholars offer ample evidence that youth are engaged through the new media ecology, not all agree that the Internet is an end-all for promoting participation among young people. “It seems to be widely assumed that the [I]nternet can facilitate participation precisely

because of its interactivity, encouraging its users to ‘sit forward’, click on the options, find the opportunities exciting, begin to contribute content, come to feel part of a community and so, perhaps by gradual steps, shift from acting as a consumer to increasingly (or in addition) acting as a citizen” (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005, p. 5). A misguided notion may be that youth will want to “suddenly be involved with politics and decision making because the Internet makes it trendy” (as cited in Selwyn, 2007, p. 137). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that the Internet provides a venue to pursue already existing civic interests rather than encouraging new political interests (Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham, 2007, p. 26).

### ***Digital Participation Divide***

While new technologies provide ways to attend to and participate in the public sphere, they require access and skills to use them effectively. Milner (2009) contends that while “the digital technologies can boost civic literacy and the proportion of citizens with the knowledge and skills to be effective citizens,. . . they can also exacerbate class-based gaps in such knowledge and skills” (p. 17). Almost all youth have access to the Internet (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010, p. 9; Livingstone, Couldry, and Markham, 2007, p. 21), but low income youth often lack broadband access at home and depend on their school or public library (which offer filtered access and frequently block participatory media), or a friend’s house for access therefore creating a limited or no access to “networks of informal education and support that make navigating the challenges of digital citizenship more manageable” (Watkins, 2009, p. 33) which transforms the digital divide, or gap, into one of participation. “As digital media technology evolves into a dynamic form of literacy, personal expression, and involvement in civic life, the participation gap between poor and affluent kids grows more urgent” (Watkins, 2009, P.32). Jenkins (2006) argues that we need to confront the cultural factors of race, class, and language differences that “amplify these inequalities in opportunities for participation” (p. 269). Additionally, teachers who are employing effective strategies in civics classrooms and transforming the learning experiences for their students tend to be in more affluent schools (Haste, 2010, p. 183; McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 383). An analysis of the 1999 International Association for Educational Achievement indicates that favorable attitudes toward a range of political activities were associated with the degree to which “classrooms were more open, interactive, and focused on participation,” but that these characteristics were less likely to occur in mixed-race classrooms (cited in Bennett, 2007, p. 72).

To close this skill-based digital divide, young people need to develop “an ICT form of literacy akin to, and comprising, print literacy” (Milner, 2009, p. 12), what media scholars and educators refer to as media literacy. Schools need to “make concerted efforts toward developing . . . communications competencies” (McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 368). In other words, there is need for reform in civic education.

### **Call for Reform in Civics Education**

The need to educate a generation of politically active and civically engaged citizens has resulted in growing consensus that the character of pedagogy must shift from the student as a passive consumer of political and civic knowledge delivered by a teacher and textbook, to someone who can use a wide range of resources in collaborating with others to solve authentic problems, create and share content, and deliberate on and communicate a range of knowledge and ideas. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills succinctly categorizes these participatory skills into “the four Cs—critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity and innovation” (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills).

National organizations and the federal government recognize the need to develop new standards that promote skills and attitudes to engage all students in a participatory environment while encouraging problem solving and collaboration. In 2007, two organizations updated their standards to address those needs. The American Association of School Librarians’ (AASL) Standards for the 21st Century Learner has students using skills, tools, and resources to gain and share knowledge, participate in an ethical manner, produce content that effectively satisfies a purpose, and think critically, among others (2007, p. 3). The International Society for Technology in Education’s (ISTE) National Education Standards for Students include creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration, research and information fluency, and digital citizenship (2007). The U.S. Department of Education’s recently released National Educational Technology Plan asserts that

... 21st century competencies and expertise such as critical thinking, complex problem solving, collaboration, and multimedia communication should be woven into all content areas. These competencies are necessary to become expert learners, which we all must be if we are to adapt to our rapidly changing world over the course of our lives, and that involves developing deep understanding

within specific content areas and making the connections between them. (2010, p. xvi)

Although heavy in content, the National Council for the Social Studies also revised its standards to include

a strand dealing with civic ideals and practices. In the early grades, students are introduced to civic ideals and practices through activities such as helping to set classroom expectations, examining experiences in relation to ideals, participating in mock elections, and determining how to balance the needs of individuals and the group. During these years, children also experience views of citizenship in other times and places through stories and drama. By the middle grades, students expand their knowledge of democratic ideals and practices, along with their ability to analyze and evaluate the relationships between these ideals and practices. They are able to see themselves taking civic roles in their communities. High school students increasingly recognize the rights and responsibilities of citizens in identifying societal needs, setting directions for public policies, and working to support both individual dignity and the common good. They become familiar with methods of analyzing important public issues and evaluating different recommendations for dealing with these issues. (“Civic Ideals and Practices,” 2010)

However, even with new national standards in place, articulated participatory skills, access to engaging and effective online tools and resources, and the public call for reform—note the documentary “Waiting for Superman”—the state of civics education remains firmly locked in the traditional practices of teacher- and textbook-delivered content and students as passive, bored, and disconnected consumers of that static knowledge.

### **Toward a Pedagogical Reform in Civic Education**

The dominant model of political science in the 1960s, a “functionalist model,” asserted that it was “necessary for citizens to learn a basic set of facts, beliefs, and behaviors reflecting a unified political system” by “portraying societies as a unified whole,” but has since given way to focusing on communities as arenas where many forces with differing interests are contending

(McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 372). Watkins's (2011) discussion of civic education shows it historically as "targeted toward immigrant, non-English speaking, or racially and ethnically diverse students has been designed to construct loyal, obedient, and patriotic citizens [and that] . . . [in] the "1960s and 1970s, uprisings around racial and sexual equality civic education—especially issues like who and what topics should be included in civic and history textbooks—began to reflect the push for greater inclusion and diversity in our civic imagination." Watkins (2011) also asserts that perceptions of civic literacy—what students should know about the American democratic experiment—has "evolved as a result of various social, political, cultural, and economic pressures." Four decades of communication research has drastically changed the "conception of youth from a passive recipient of influence to a more active participant in seeking and using information to make sense of the world" (McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 372).

Bennett (2007) contends that most policy makers define and fund traditional civic education programs that promote the knowledge and behaviors to develop what calls the "dutiful citizen," one who 1) sees an "obligation to participate in government-centered activities," 2) understands that "voting is the core democratic act," 3) who "becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media," and 4) "joins civil society organizations or expresses interests through parties that typically employ one-way conventional communications to mobilize supporters" (p. 63). But the challenge for civic education, Bennett (2007) argues, is to figure out "how to integrate and adapt these conventional DC [dutiful citizen] virtues to the changing civic orientations of the new 'self-actualizing citizen'" (p. 62). This emerging citizen is one who has 1) a "diminished sense of government obligation and a higher sense of individual purpose," 2) feels that "voting is less meaningful than . . . acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism," 3) whose "mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment," and 4) "favors loose networks of community activism [that are] often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies" (Bennett, 2007, p. 63). While textbooks will most likely remain central to the civics curriculum, students are well served to construct their learning from a variety of print and digital resources. Watkins (2011) asserts that "emerging digital media platforms will be key in the effort to engage, invigorate, and create an informed citizenry."

Digital resources, he states, can be used to teach basic facts but should also be appropriated to engage young people in “doing civics.”

Asserting that “research indicates that not only do students prefer interactive learning environments, but that these environments matter for the translation of civics skills into civic practice,” Bennett (2007) then cites empirical evidence suggesting that those students who participated in debate in high school were more likely to participate in many areas of civic and political activity when they entered public life (p. 72).

The development of new communication skills, increased political knowledge, and the formation of attitudes that often lead to civic activity have been linked to discussion and debate of controversial issues in the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives (cited in McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 369). As “democracy involves public discussion of common problems, not just silent counting of individual hands,” deliberation with others who hold differing views “as a form of authentic instruction . . . prepare[s] young people to participate fully and competently in a form of political engagement that is important in integration with the social world (cited in McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010, p. 370).

Young people prefer the features of interactive media, “echo[ing] previous research in the field of civic education, which indicates that traditional, passive learning techniques such as memorization and recitation tend to be ineffective in the classroom” (Bachen, Rafael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008, p.294). However, educators must be cautioned against appropriating new media tools and skills on existing knowledge practices and pedagogies without first addressing some of the fundamental problems (Haste, 2010, p. 183; Selwyn, 2007, p. 136). Haste (2010) suggests that educators “shift their perspectives away from the top-down conduit model in which the teacher facilitates and scaffolds how and what children learn, [and] instead . . . use a more bottom-up model in which the teacher is the choreographer of children working collaboratively and critically, as agents of their own learning, [which] requires transformation in managing the learning process (Haste, 2010, p. 183). Selwyn (2007) argues that citizenship education would be improved by a “bottom-up approach to school’s relationships with, and appropriations of, technology” and that instead of schools controlling and restricting the use of ICTs, that technology use should be driven by students (p. 141).

## **Participation in Civics Education**

The mixture of classroom learning and participatory activity remains a major theme in scholars' thinking today. Leveraging the informal learning behaviors that youth employ in the new media ecology in formal civic education courses may increase motivation and develop positive attitudes toward the subject, transferring into actual practice when they enter public life as adults. Although it is recognized that knowledge is essential to good citizenship, principles of learning suggest that knowledge alone is insufficient and that active participation is necessary to bolster students' civic involvement. Evidence indicates that the effectiveness of civic education is raised when "students are given opportunities to participate in communities' on-going political process, ranging from voluntary service to efforts to increase voter turnout . . . [and that] schools themselves should be viewed as an important microcosm in which students have direct experience of due process, orderly conflict resolution, and adherence to principles of human rights" (cited in Youniss et al., 2002, p. 140). Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995) assert that education affects participation by imparting information about government and politics, and by encouraging attitudes such as a sense of civic responsibility or political efficacy that predispose an individual to political involvement (p. 305).

### ***New media and participation***

Digital media technologies are now a central component of civic and political life, especially for young people. A study cited in Kahne, Feezell, & Lee (2010) found that 37% of young people ages 18–24 got campaign information during the 2008 presidential election from social networking sites—more than those who used newspapers (p. 2). Findings from another study indicate that "when youth have opportunities to learn how to engage in online political activities, they become more likely to do so, [and] since online participation is a support for offline participation as well, digital media literacy education may also support broader civic and political engagement as well as increasing the frequency that youth are exposed to diverse viewpoints (Kahne, Feezell, & Lee, 2010, pp. 14-15). Bennett (2007) claims that media literacy training can develop an awareness of integrating "DC [dutiful citizen] information skills into the often discouraging real world media experiences" of young people (p. 68). Haste (2010) suggests that accessing information in the new media ecology "requires educators to rethink some basic assumptions" (p. 177), wherein the young person becomes an active [information] seeker with no restraints, able to modify the sites she accesses by being a "collaborator in the creation and the

processing of knowledge” (cited on p. 177), and most likely will work “collaboratively with friends with whom she has face-to-face contact” or has never met (p. 177).

### ***Information Skills***

A review of literature intending to explore how young people actually use the Internet for information seeking provides little data to help explain why and how youth access and use civic and political information. A few studies offer limited data. Evidence suggests that, currently, young people are predominantly engaging in civic activity as information seekers and in this context, the Internet is primarily used as a form of light civic engagement, as an information source, and as a tool for preparing for civic engagement, be it through research, organizational tips, or communication to others about an event or cause (Ohlin, Heller, Byrne, & Keevy, 2010, p. 119). However, the propensity for younger people to participate online was found were the most likely to say that they would turn to the Internet first to look for information only in their information seeking behavior and not in the more active behavior of contacting politicians (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006, p. 307; Ohlin, Heller, Byrne, & Keevy, 2010, p. 309). Ohlin, Heller, Byrne & Keevy (2010) also found that other types of information seeking behaviors, such as looking for current and local news were all more common than looking for political information, which helped confirm their hypothesis that younger people are the “most likely to use the Internet for information because of their greater familiarity with the Internet” (p. 309). Xenos & Foot (2008) found the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old age group was the most likely age group to seek political information online during the 2004 elections (p. 54). These sparse findings suggest educators aim lessons “at more critical deconstruction and use of available information channels, and at finding channels that address the issue at the center of the learning experience” (Bennett, 2007, p. 68).

### ***Digital Media Literacy Education***

In addition to deliberate teaching of information fluency processes and skills, media literacy scholars have identified a set of social skills and cultural competencies that young people need if they are to be “full, active, creative, and ethical participants in this emerging participatory culture (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009, p. 56) and while this set of skills is generalizable, mastery should go a long way in developing attitudes and competencies that will further civic engagement and political participation. These social and cultural competencies include

- Play: The capacity to experiment with your surroundings as a form of problem-solving.
  - Performance: The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery.
  - Simulation: The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real world processes.
  - Appropriation: The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content.
  - Multitasking: The ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details.
  - Distributed Cognition: The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities.
  - Collective Intelligence: The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal.
  - Judgment: The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources.
  - Transmedia Navigation: The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities.
  - Networking: The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information.
  - Negotiation: The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.
- (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009, p. 56).

Examples offered suggest that many schools and educators are:

experimenting with new media technologies and the processes of collaboration, networking, appropriation, participation, and expression that they enable. . . [by] engaging students in real-world inquiries that require them to search out information, interview experts, connect with other students around the world, generate and share multimedia, assess digital documents, write for authentic audiences, and otherwise exploit the resources of the new participatory culture. (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009, p. 57).

The challenge remains in disseminating these ideals and practices to all civic education classrooms, so that all young people's have similar opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

In order for today's young people to engage deliberately in civic and political life and participate effectively in the democratic process, policy makers and educators must ensure that all grade school students have access to formal civics education that contains relevant knowledge and skills, and is presented through a student-centered pedagogy which includes practicing social and cultural competencies while engaging in the use of participatory online tools and digital resources. Evidence suggests that "learning environments that emphasize old style, fact based teacher-centered pedagogy may succeed in imparting abstract facts and skills of the sort that can be tested, but, . . . they do not help young citizens translate that knowledge into later civic practice" (Bennett, 2007, p. 73). Bennett (2008) contends that the "educators . . . who design civic education programs . . . can benefit from learning how generational social identities and political preference formation are changing so that they can design more engaging civic education models" (p. 12).

There are many implications for further research, especially in how direct instruction by teachers and school librarians in the full range of media literacy and information fluency skills in civics education may correlate to knowledge attainment, positive civic engagement, and political participation of youth. Another area with limited empirical evidence is the impact that mobile devices, such as smart phones and tablets, may have on youth's participation in the public sphere (Lenhart, 2010; Watkins, 2009). But Rheingold (2008) cautions that "media technologies and practices are moving too quickly for us to wait for empirical understanding of changed learning and teaching styles before engaging young people with the civic potential of participatory media," as it is vital to the "future of the public sphere . . . that young people should be included . . . in the discussion of how they are to be educated as citizens" (p. 114). Indeed,

we need empirical study of the fundamental hypotheses underlying the approach that [he] advocate[s]—that active use of networked media, collaboration in social cyberspaces, and peer production of digital cultural products has changed the way young people learn and that their natural attraction to participatory media could be used to draw youth into civic engagement. (Rheingold, 2008, p. 114)

The empirical and conceptual literature suggesting that today's young people are disengaged also provides limited examples of how youth are engaged socially and civically through the new media ecology. If there is a perceived need for youth to participate in the democratic process through deliberation and civic engagement then policy makers and educators need to reform pedagogy in civic education to become more student-centered and model democratic processes in the classroom.

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