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Citizenship education: curriculum and communication aspects of 'e-citizenship'

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All the media, including the World Wide Web, are vibrant with children's cultural, moral and national identity and citizenship, and offer a great variety of virtual experiences. In the context of modelling and discussing such a complex phenomenon as the impact of computer-mediated communication and the broader notion of virtual experience on children's identity and citizenship, the phenomena need to be perceived at both psychosocial and technology science levels. Contrary to the approach of ICT communication as information transfer separating knowledge from the communication process, it is necessary to be aware that it is possible to communicate only to the extent to which participants have some common ground for shared beliefs, recognise reciprocal expectations, and accept rules for interaction which serve as necessary anchors in the development of conversation (Clark and Schaefer, 1989).

To carry out a complex analysis of virtual citizenship issues, we may consider the following aspects:

- the ability of ICT to imitate reality, and provide other specific features of computer communication environments
- the social implications of media, for individuals and at a societal level
- the social shaping of technology and communication processes by social, cultural, political and economic influences
- questions of equity in access to and use of media; issues of power and control associated with all the media and new technologies in society
- the historical precedents of mediated communication, and the future potential of new technologies.

It is necessary to look at virtual experience as facilitating citizenship, identity and education, but we should neither overestimate nor elevate it over other means of communication. Excessive use of mediated communication can lead to a dissipation of the communication potential of all media, including internet services. The problems of mediated communication are very complex, and this paper identifies only some of the essential problems and questions.

Developing technology as a subject of citizenship education

The networking of ICTs and the globalisation of society are changing current notions of citizenship. Some technologists and governments highlight an 'e-citizenship' which should be integrated into the citizenship curriculum with the aim of preparing learners for life in the expected 'online society'. The e-citizenship debate in UK education (Selwyn, 2002) took place in the 1980s and 1990s and was only partially successful, but such 'computer literacy' and 'science-technology-society' debates are beneficial because they make all experts aware of the place of these issues in future community activities. Designing and using ICT for civic education is very complex and often speculative: in

the context of concepts of citizen, citizenship, identity, community, culture, there are frequently disputed terms such as 'netizen' and 'netizenship', virtual identity, virtual community as well as cyberculture etc.

Technology needs to be understood as a topic in the citizenship curriculum, and it also has a role in supporting and engendering the teaching and learning of citizenship, both in the formal context of the citizenship curriculum and in the implicit development of citizenship education throughout the overall curriculum. There have been commercial and practitioner activities around the following goals of using applications of technology - learners would

- become informed citizens by means of various citizenship information sources
- be able to listen, cooperate and discuss in virtual environments
- explore social situations in ICT simulations and multi-user virtual environments
- produce citizenship materials and artefacts.

In applying technology to these aims we should look at all aspects - social, moral, ethical, international and political - of all ICT advanced software systems in order to extend our educational abilities.

Use of media sources in citizenship education

The use of media as a source of information forms the majority of current citizenship activities by learners and educators. Databases, hypermedia documents and world wide web resources have been welcomed by educationalists as a ready source of citizenship information. Modern ICT facilities thus contribute significantly to the accomplishment of the intentions of educational curricula to pass on the 'knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens' to students and to stimulate them to be interested in the society. Using video tapes, civics CDs, the internet and video-conferencing, students can examine key ideas of European democracy. For example, the use of video-conferencing to interact with EU deputies might lead to an examination of the continuing influence of key ideals of democracy and European enlargement. There is a need to support student's active learning, too. Using word processors and concept-mapping software might highlight student's understanding and explaining the organisation of EU government. For example, the use of concept mapping software to explain the structure of the EU government in diagram form, and by using publishing and presentation software, students can compare European democracies with other forms of government. However, there is a need for educators and researchers to avoid seeing increased access to citizenship media resources as somehow leading to increased levels of citizenship. Online materials have the potential to be as badly written as (some) textbooks (Lawson, 2001). In this reductionist context of such resource-based teaching Buckingham (1999, p 174) argues that there is a danger that growing levels of citizenship information will merely 'create a kind of illusion of being informed ... not a guarantee of active citizenship, but a substitute for it'.

Web-mediated communication

Many technologists and educators consider online communication to be a powerful medium for forming democratic ‘virtual communities’ which provide mutual support, advice and identity (Gates, 1995). According to Rheingold (1993, p 5) virtual communities can be defined as ‘the social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’. The potential for the aggregation of knowledge in computer mediated spaces generates terms such as ‘computer-assisted group mind’ or ‘online brain trusts’ (Rheingold 1993). However, from the citizenship education point of view there are many issues to be discussed and resolved, especially the psycho-didactical aspects of web-mediated communication including e-mail, chat rooms and videoconferencing, used in both formal and informal teaching/learning. Finding a resolution of such question is seen as very important, and psychologists, educators and parents intensively try to achieve it, even though the cyberspace environment has developed relatively recently.

Among the basic problems of web-mediated communication is the fact that those communicating switch their attention from the recipient to the problem and the content of the message. Overall this results a reduction of the normal hierarchy of real life - of the status and roles of those communicating - and the users often unconsciously transmit the contents of their own minds and their fantasies and fears to those with whom they communicate, be it human being or computer (Turkle, 1988). The impacts of computer-mediated communication on intra-familial communication are no less significant. Bold (2001) regards it as a negative influence that they may be used as a substitute for interaction, may lead to isolation and may decrease communication between family members in the same home. As positive aspects, he considers that they can increase the communication between distant family members and may facilitate shared learning between generations, closing the gap between parents and grown children and increasing parent/child communication.

The internet environment which offer a variety of psychosocial phenomena and problems is becoming more and more attractive, especially to children and adolescents. User anonymity, limited communication multimodality, the absence of distress from social situations and the loss of fear from disclosure powerfully influence an enormous weakening of social role acceptance during the interaction (Kiesler et al., 1984). Šmahel (2002) suggests that we may talk about the reduction of the effect of social rules and the transformation of some of the internet services to environments in which users may act without deterrence as the ‘disinhibited environment’. The child easily acquires a particular anonymity for his or her behaviour, rather like being a part of a crowd. A crowd suppresses human individuality and results in the phenomenon of ‘de-individualisation’, according to Gustav Le Bonn (Joinson, 1998). Research dealing with the openness of its respondents showed that when being asked to answer via the internet, respondents were less anxious then when being asked to answer using a paper (Joinson, 1998). Suler (1998) presents the following needs and motives of the adolescents who often surf the internet: identity experimentation and exploration, intimacy and belonging, separation from parents and family, and venting frustrations. Another motive

is sexual - teenagers who try so-called cybersex, especially in the form of writing, i.e. 'they describe in detail what they do to each other and how they feel' (Suler, 1998).

Web text-based environments are very attractive for the realisation of young people's needs. For some young people, the attractive feature of e-mail communication is that you cannot see or hear the other person. Children and juveniles are confident in their anonymity and its safety, and they act differently than when they do not have such confidence. Accompanying this confidence is the stimulation of high level of interlocutor's fantasy and expectancy. In this context, the internet services, e-mail or e-mail lists (also known as 'listservs') and 'discussion groups' (newsgroups) are frequently utilised, flexible and powerful means of communication. Frequent e-mail exchanges can shape complex and emotional relationships and the 'space' in which the young people live together. Asynchronous communication in chat rooms and instant messaging are favourite services of many teenagers; they may communicate with each other in 'real time'. These are among the most utilised internet services and have become the subject of many researches. In his analysis of the talk of adolescents in a chat room compared with real conversation, Šmahel (2003, p 108) noted that virtual talk

- stayed unfinished in the majority of cases – respondents finished the conversation in the middle for various reasons
- lasted much longer than real finished conversations
- contained shorter and bare sentences, the adolescents often expressed their opinions and feelings in a condensed way
- led in some cases to more accurate formulations, as though the internet encouraged the ability to express oneself briefly and accurately.

Computer technology and chat systems in particular also offer the lesser known phenomenon of 'multiciplit communication', in which the juvenile communicates with several people simultaneously, often in different communicative environments. Teenagers often indulge in this quite intensively, although they do not understand its superficiality and imperfection, and the question is whether this kind of communication is a kind of relaxation for them, like a sport, or whether it distracts from their own problems. From the viewpoint of psychology, we may talk about 'dissociation' of the personality, in which the young project their fantasies, imagination, unconscious tendencies, wishes and complexes on to their dissociated identities in the virtual world. There are many controversial questions which are the result of 'open' civic communication on the web as well as formal 'closed' school intranet or groupware conversation.

Citizenship simulations

In addition to online and networked communication packages, we can use another source of ICT - simulation packages. Typically such software is based on citizenship simulations of social situations, often in the narrative form. Generally citizenship simulation involves the presentation of various scenarios with the student required to make decisions and judgements. The use of media interactive communication to stimulate empathetic civic discussions is becoming a standard model citizenship education software design at (Selwyn, 2002). There are well-known simulation games

(Mašek, 2002) with civic topics e.g. SimEarth (allows students to act as civic or world leaders), SimCity (with simulated citizens - Sims - and all the important aspects of city life), SimHealth (a policy simulation about the US national health care system) etc. The civic using of 'multi-user virtual environments' (MUVEs - e.g., MUDs) is a very interesting possibility for the future. This offers a very complex fantasy world where children may create all sorts of imaginative roles and scenarios. At present these environments (Suler, 2000) are often based on text communication and may be compared to a living novel, complete with characters and plots, or to a very sophisticated party with its own idiosyncratic rules and culture. In multimedia environments such as Palace (Suler, 1998) the text dialogues occur in a visual room and the children use visual icons (avatars) to represent themselves. Some like to personate themselves in an imaginative way, by changing their name, age, identity, or gender. This type of online environment offers an interesting opportunity to experiment with civic education concepts including the civic and social formation of identities through online virtual interactions. An example is the research experiment (see Talamo and Ligorio, 2000) analysing students' formation of their identities through the designing of an educational world called 'Euroland'.

Producing cultural artefacts

Children's media activity based on production of cultural products, such as their own text documents, web sites or videos focusing on citizenship issues, could be extremely time-consuming and often expensive. However the processes of active design and production could be seen as offering a more valuable learning experience than the passive consumption of a finished book, article or film. The interesting 'VideoCulture' research project provides a case study of the potential outcomes and limiting factors of using media production with secondary school students in Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, England and the USA (Niesyto and Buckingham, 2001). Students' awareness of the fact that their films were viewed by students in other countries was seen as an important element of the success of the projects and was a part of real experience of multicultural education – to be able to understand and accept a different culture (Petrucijová, 2002). The young people were found to be often highly innovative and modern producers of their videos, but they were less active as audiences. The young people learned a great deal from the production of their own materials and were critical and often dismissive reviewers of each others' audio-visual work. All the above features and modern areas of computer-mediated communication could be developed to a valuable supplement to existing citizenship approaches in an attempt to develop a maximal (inclusive, participative, values-led) model of citizenship education and citizenship information acquisition for young people.

Conclusion

ICT-based communication provides interesting formal and informal civic education methods and possibilities, but we should be wary of over-emphasising the potential use of technology in society as opposed to its actual use. There is clearly a need for the development of a sensible curriculum which aims to demystify technology and explore its wider societal effects. The model of using technology in society and citizenship

education would emphasise an approach that considers how and why ICT has been constructed and shaped, rather than attempting specific functional definitions of ICT and society. This implies that there is no doubt that all the modern media (especially 'cyberspace' and the World Wide Web) are leading to deep interactions of citizenship communication and teenagers' identity exploration to increase moral and cultural consciousness. However, such awareness is likely to be shallow because the mediated communication implies many questions. as educators, we would be well advised to explore further the areas of using technology described above, which might be incorporated into an optimal model of citizenship curriculum without any restraints.

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