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Civic education on the Web: what sources are mediated by the 'virtual space' for teaching practice?

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The literature on the educational use of internet services is mostly in its infancy and is insufficient for many topics, including civic education. This paper reviews a variety of approaches to the use of the internet in civic education, and divides them into three categories: information delivery, information retrieval, and information sharing within multi- user virtual environments and communities. These approaches are analysed in the light of an increasing emphasis on building the learning community, with a shift from 'information' to 'ways of knowing'. Some useful civics web sites containing both methodological and learning resources in English are presented. It is hoped that both the categories and the actual sources will prove useful in analysing what didactical usage of web can offer in the field of civic education. The internet presents a vast array of resources in this area, and only a limited range of some important sites can be introduced here.

Civics information delivery sources

In the context of information delivery the web's 'instructionist approach' to civic education simply focuses on the transmission of information from web designers, teachers and experts, as designers of courses, to students. Mastery of the information is often emphasised over ways of thinking and knowing. Most commonly, the web distance education student receive a set of materials to study and is then required to demonstrate mastery of that information. Many internet resources can be used as teaching or learning materials in themselves, but there are an increasing number of online courses, tutorials and other materials explicitly designed for teaching and learning on the web. Much of this material is for use in primary and secondary education. Here are some examples of higher education teaching resources and online courses about education.

United Kingdom

- Case studies (Diversity, Human Rights, Generations, Crime, Poverty, Environment, Drugs, Bullying) of successful citizenship projects in schools provide stimulus and supporting information to help teacher get involved with an existing project or start one of their own: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/schools/getinvolved/teachers/>.
- Teaching Citizenship:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/schools/getinvolved/teachers/teaching_.shtml

Australia

- 'Teaching Civics 2003' represents the latest teaching and learning activities in the Australian context. It is possible to search for classroom activities according to topic and year level; identify information materials about discovering democracy projects; research the resource database for a range of relevant curriculum materials including; books, kits, Internet sites, videos and CD-ROMS:
<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy/teachciv.htm>.

USA

- Civics Online hopes to not only provide a rich array of multi-media primary sources, but to also give teachers ideas on using those sources in the classroom:
<http://www.civics-online.org/teachers/activities.cfm>.
- Hopkins Online Academy (HOA) – courses of civics: Civics 9 - I & II - registration is necessary:
http://www.hopkins.k12.mn.us/pages/HopOn/current_courses/courses_desc.html#civics.

There are not many online teacher's civic education sources on the web, and it must be also noted that most distance education projects simply translate an old medium - classroom environment - into a new one e.g. text-based virtual space, complete with programs to simulate white boards and white-board erasers etc.

Web sites for exploratory use

Use of the Internet as an information retrieval medium has a number of pedagogical benefits when used in combination with (not instead of) other information sources (Bruckman, 1999). It is evident that, for example, the volume of information available from the electronic library exceeds that possible within the school library and classical printed books. Some points to note are

- searching for the latest information has the potential to get both pupils and teachers more excited about what they are searching for. Giving them 'real' information agency sources used by journalists, for example, may lead to a more serious engagement with the learning and teaching process.
- the traditional classroom project based on information retrieval activities in the form of exploratory learning and a critical evaluation of the information discovered is more valuable than 'surfing' the net for information.
- a majority of Web discussions about civic education topics and education policy are very nationally focused, and actual legislation about education is inevitably geographically limited. If such information is wanted for comparative purposes there is no problem, but otherwise the researcher must be sure that s/he has located what is really needed in terms of geographic/national focus.

In a complex space of civic and political information students need to be taught to be critical consumers of specific Web information. All participants in the educational process know searching strategies which indicate key Internet sites for civic education, for example, but most have to discover how to improve their Internet searching in order to locate search engines and educational gateways such as <http://www.education.com>, <http://www.education-world.com> etc. There are also civics subject gateways such as the Civics Online server that provides a rich array of multi-media primary sources, but also gives teachers ideas on using those sources in the classroom at <http://www.civics-online.org>. Other Web sites, such as that of the Center for Civic Education - a not-for-profit educational corporation - are focused on fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens: <http://www.civiced.org>. The open homepage of the Resources Group of the CiCe project has as its main aim the collection of bibliographical data of publications that offer valuable information to teachers,

students and other experts working in the field of citizenship education - <http://free.hostdepartment.com/c/cice/index.html>

Following is a list of some useful Web resources organised into broad categories:

Government and other official Web sites

The importance attached to education by most governments and the obvious potential of the Internet for educational purposes means that there is a very large amount of official information published on the Internet in the context of civic education. Web service can offer the sites of the US Department for Education e.g: 'History and social studies' with 'Federal Resources for Educational Excellence' at <http://www.ed.gov/free>. Others are

The UK Department for Education and Skills

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes2/ks1-2citizenship>,

'Teaching Civics' developed by Curriculum Corporation for the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training:

<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/democracy/teachciv.htm>.

The United Nations 'Cyberschoolbus' was created in 1996 as the online education component of the Global Teaching and Learning Project, whose mission is to promote education about international issues and the United Nations:

<http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/index.html>,

with resources at <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/res.html>.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: <http://www.unhcr.ch/> provides lesson plans in civic education for refugee children ages 9-11, 12-14 and 15-18 years.

Other organisational Web sites

This context includes many associations, trade unions, charities, pressure groups, professional and academic societies, educational institutions etc. There is a great number of different sorts of resources e.g.:

The US Center for Civic Education mentioned above is focused on commitment to values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy:

<http://www.civiced.org/curriculum.html>.

US Public Broadcast Stations (PBS) is a private, non-profit media enterprise owned and operated by the American nation's 350 public television stations and offers many teaching materials:

<http://www.pbs.org/teachersource>,

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/general/general_allen.html.

UK BBC Schools Web pages provide methodical materials:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/library/teachers_resources.shtml,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/11_16/subjects_a_g.shtml#citizen,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/static/teachers/default.stm>.

NACE (National Alliance for Civic Education) has more than 200 group and individual members committed to advancing civic knowledge and engagement. NACE believes the time has come to band together to ensure that the next generation of citizens understands

and values democracy and participates in the ongoing work of building democracy in America. <http://www.cived.net>,
teacher resources: http://www.cived.net/rsrc_tchres.html.

The activities and programs of the Simon Wiesenthal Center:
<http://www.wiesenthal.com>, with teacher resources:
<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/resources> is frequently updated.

The portal site 'Citizenship education: the global dimension' for teachers and educators keen to explore the global dimension of Citizenship education offers links to information about training opportunities which support the teaching of the global dimension to Citizenship education.
<http://www.citizenship-global.org.uk>.

'Trócaire' offers a range of classroom activities and resources designed for the Irish Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) course. Ideas aim to encourage active global citizenship and topics include development, interdependence and rights and responsibilities:
<http://trocairecspe.kerna.ie/teacher.htm>.

'Exploited Child Unit' provides teacher and parent resources which are available to help to keep children safe and provide guidance on the issues of missing and exploited children:
<http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/teacherparent.htm>.

On-line electronic document lists and databases

Many on-line electronic document lists, databases, library catalogues, full texts online, journal articles, working papers, online journals and conference papers, government reports, books, legislation etc. are available on the Web. The following are only a few examples.

The Eurotext project web site is a very efficacious gateway to the database of texts, links to other resources and information at <http://eurotext.ulst.ac.uk>. Eurotext include: improved access to learning materials relating to the European Union; decreased pressure on conventional library holdings; efficiency gains in the preparation of academic programmes; encouragement of independent, active learning through the development of innovative models for the provision of learning materials in an electronic environment.

The site 'European integration - online documentation by Luciano di Fonzo' - helps students and researchers in accessing documents on European integration matters: and is creating by ECSA - an international scientific network which regroups 49 national associations of professors and researchers working in the field of European integration studies.
<http://www.ecsanet.org/EUinfo.htm>

The US Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) collection has a searching site
<http://search.ed.gov/csi/eric.html>,
resources for teachers are at <http://www.ericsp.org/pages/resources/index.html>,

A civic education resource is
http://askeric.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Social_Studies/Civics/CIV0014.html

In a general context the Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. is well-known as one of the world's most trusted sources of information on every topic:

<http://www.britannica.com/>.

ScienceDirect's site offers the digital library of the future. This is one of the world's most advanced web delivery systems for all topics information:

http://www.info.sciencedirect.com/librarian_help/ideal_integration.

Critical awareness of teaching materials on the Web

Critical thinking is required and essential when using the internet. One of the internet's great advantages is the ease with which minority, unpopular and individual views can be expressed: almost all the barriers to publishing are removed. The downside of this is that the extreme, the eccentric, the uniformed and the just plain wrong are all openly accessible, unhindered by peer review, editors or proof readers. The web has no way of imposing the same control and standards that are present in other publishing media.

In all web exploratory activities both students and teachers need to protect themselves and their work from unknowingly using misinformation, biased sources, out-of-date or inappropriate information. They need to maintain critical awareness at all times in order to judge if a resource is credible. There are several key questions which should be asked of every new civic education internet resource:

- **Who** provided the information or opinion - a teacher, a researcher, a government department or agency, a commercial company, a pressure group, an individual or an organisation? Are details provided about the authors and the publishers? Are they qualified or reputable? Can other information about the author be found on the Web site, or is it not clear who the author and publisher are?
- Closely related to the first question is **Why**? Web users should consider why this information is provided. Can bias or propaganda be detected? Is something for sale? Is research or investigations of some sort being reported, or is the site merely advertising a product? Does it promote a particular point of view? Does the site present funded or sponsored opinions? Is the information evidence-based? Who is it aimed at?
- **When** was the material first published on the Internet? Is there a publication date, and/or a copyright notice? If there is statistical or other data, what time span is covered? How far back do they go? Are the latest figures included?
- **Which** version of a document are you looking at? Is it a draft, an interim or a final report? How frequently is the site updated? Is there a statement of policy on updating, or an updating history? Will it still be there tomorrow?
- **Where** is the civics information from? Is it a UK, US, Canadian, Australian or other English-language site? Geographic barriers to the flow of information are virtually eliminated by the Internet, so where else in the world might the information come from? Does it matter? Does the geographic origin affect the validity of the information?

Multi user virtual environment as a collaborative Web community

A more interactive use of Internet technology involves the use of mailing lists, real-time chat, and multi user virtual environments (MUVE) and communities to foster interaction among students and experts on a reasonable scale. It should be noted that the new Web technology can be used not only to reproduce traditional instructional education, but to help reform it. Projects exist which are intended to investigate the ways in which a learning and teaching process is socially determined for both students and teachers by constructivist environments that aims to enable authentic learning by supporting all the participants in the instructional process in doing projects on-line. An online professional community focused on teacher's activities is a TAPPED IN (<http://www.tappedin.sri.com>). This is a virtual environment to support communities of teachers engaged in school reform of all topics and uses existing Internet technology to study modes of collaboration (Schlager & Schank, 1997). Another example is the Connected University, an online professional development community providing educators with courses, learning resources, just-in-time support, and a convenient way to interact with peers nationwide: <http://cu.classroom.com/logon.asp>.

In the context of learning history and civic education there are (mainly American) student learning MUVE sites designed using the framework of the well-known project Palaver Tree Oral which focuses on exploring oral history topics (Ellis & Bruckman, 2002). Virtual environments looks at the ways in which network technology may support doing history in the classroom by means of online space where pupils can hear history from primary sources. Initially Bruckman's project connected children with World War Two veterans: later with older African-Americans. An analysis of the Internet data shows that students develop an increased empathy for their elders and a stronger enjoyment of learning history through participation in the online oral history constructivist environment. PTO was designed and revised over four years of work in classrooms between 1997 and 2001 and it may inspire civic educators to create other similar environments. The full attitudinal survey is available online at <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/elc/palaver/study/survey2001.html>. In the context of professionals and teachers we may find a number of such communities as MUVE for biologists, theatre professionals, media researchers, astrophysicist etc. but currently I know of no other civic education on-line community except the closed CiCe virtual environment Livelink.

Conclusion

The modern civics teacher has all the sources of Internet at her/his disposal. The civic education lecturer needs to find and evaluate ways of supporting distance learning, teaching resources online and searching large databases as well as to communicate in the multi-user virtual environments of professionals. The use of the Internet in civic education need not be an impoverished, literal-minded version of traditional instruction. More innovative thinking and critical research into usage by both teachers and learners is required so that we all understand how to use this new medium to its best advantage.

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