

Democratic Potential in Ontario Education: The Role of Digital Technology in Developing Democratic Citizens

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Abstract: Despite schools' responsibility to develop democratic citizens, digital technologies that offer novel avenues for civic education are largely ignored in Ontario education. To address this gap, the current literature review examined research from Ontario and internationally to demonstrate how digital technology may enhance civic education and encourage students' self-awareness as democratic citizens. The review compared the available research to the Ontario Ministry of Education's Citizenship Education Framework, which is comprised of four main categories: Identity, Active Participation, Structures, and Attributes. This comparison illustrates how using digital technology to generate youth civic engagement complies with Ontario's democratic citizenship objectives. The review depicts how digital technology develops civic identity through communication, offers unique opportunities for civic participation, can improve civic literacy, and fundamentally enables a democratic disposition of critical inquiry. The review contributes to educators' democratic citizenship pedagogy, elaborates on the connection between digital technology and democratic citizenship, and encourages policymakers to realize this connection in citizenship education objectives.

Keywords: Civic Education, Digital Technology, Democracy and Education

Introduction: Citizenship Education Framework

Canadian public schools are responsible for developing active and knowledgeable citizens (Nabavi, 2010; Sears, 2004). However, research has found that youth are shifting away from traditional means of democratic citizenship, such as voting, trust in political leaders, and joining formal socio-political organizations, towards individually expressing socio-political issues via personal lifestyles, mistrusting political leaders, and joining loose networks for social action, predominantly via digital technology (Bennett et al., 2009). For example, youth increasingly exercise socio-political action through consumer decision-making, recognize government as sometimes inauthentic, and civically engage through digital mechanisms (see Bennett, 2008; Bennett et al, 2009). Youth use digital technology to discuss events, ideas, and interests (Dahlgren, 2009; Palfry & Gasser, 2008), and raise socio-political awareness (Choi & Shin, 2017). The significance of digital technology is further compounded as interest-driven online participation of youth (e.g., gaming groups, sharing music, journaling) is shown to influence youth civic engagement (Kahne et al., 2013). Furthermore, research indicates correlations between online activity and offline civic engagement (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Pasek et al., 2009). These findings suggest that digital technology affects youth civic engagement as well as how youth enact democratic citizenship. It is therefore important to consider the manner in which education communicates, frames, and facilitates citizenship education.

Although digital technology is increasingly shown to affect youth civic participation and perceptions of citizenship, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) makes little acknowledgement of this connection. In fact, only the Grades 9/10 *Canadian and World Studies* (2013) curriculum mentions a connection between digital technology and citizenship, and this is only presented in two educator prompts in the Civics course curriculum (OME, 2013, p. 154). The minimal inclusion in the Civics course is especially surprising as Ontario's Civics course is a mandatory half-credit course for students to learn about government, politics, and is intended to support the development of students as citizens. Therefore, it is apparent that a major connection for youth and citizenship is excluded from education. However, an apt resource to connect youths' use of digital technology and democratic citizenship lays in the OME's Citizenship Education Framework (hereafter referred to as "the Framework"). In 2013, the OME developed the Framework and has included the document in all social studies curricula from Grades 1-12. The Framework connects the perceived essential components of democratic citizenship and directs educators to develop lessons that help students "to learn about what it means to be a responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they belong within and outside the school" (OME, 2013, p. 9). The four main elements of the Framework are *Identity*, *Active Participation*, *Structures*, and *Attributes*. Although the four categories are interrelated, there are clear descriptions for each category. The Framework characterizes *Identity* as being a member of various communities, and as enacted through social interaction, while the Framework describes *Active Participation* as how citizens contribute to the common good of various communities. *Structures* asserts that citizens must understand societal systems and forms of power. And lastly, *Attributes* refers to the varying characteristics necessary for good democratic citizens.

Research shows that digital technology enhances citizenship education and affects youth civic engagement. However, as OME curricula predominantly exclude the connection between digital technology and democratic

citizenship, it is pertinent to demonstrate how the Framework can better integrate digital technology. This is especially imperative as the research indicates digital technology is a more relevant and used avenue for youth in enacting citizenship (Bennett et al., 2009). Accordingly, this paper examines these four Framework citizenship dimensions in relation to educational scholarship and uses the scholarship to highlight how digital technology may enhance Ontario citizenship education. Specifically, digital technology improves citizenship education by optimizing communication, developing social inquiry, enabling civic literacy, and generating critical digital literacy skills. The following literature review explores: 1) developing civic identities through communication; 2) using digital technology to encourage active participation for the common good; 3) how digital technology affects civic literacy; and 4) the importance of critical digital literacy for youth.

Identity: Developing Civic Identity through Communicating

The Framework describes *Identity* as being a member of various communities, which is enacted through social interaction. The Framework relates civic identity development with connecting with communities, considering others' opinions, and investigating events and issues. This, of course, is dependent upon citizens' abilities to openly communicate with one another. As Mirra et al. (2013) explain, civic identity is developed across, "the social interactions that occur between individuals, the cultural practices that structure these interactions, and the institutions in which these interactions occur" (p. 3). Educators specifically view communication and discussion as integral components of citizenship education (Zyngier, 2012), and important for learning to live in democracy (Hess, 2009). Therefore, fostering an open climate for classroom discussions relating to social issues positively influences youth civic identities (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014).

Digital technology offers many mechanisms to capitalize on the civic function of communication and educational researchers recognize the communicative abilities of digital technologies to develop civic identities (Choi, 2016). Because youth mainly use digital media as outlets for civic engagement (Bennett et al., 2009), Kahne et al. (2012) identified digital media as most relevant for youth. Similarly, Lee et al. (2012) found that digital media is particularly important to youth when expressing and sharing ideas, and that digital media is consequently essential for encouraging youth civic engagement. Even non-political online interaction positively influences civic engagement (Kahne et al., 2013). In fact, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that more than half of participants using chatrooms for non-political hobbies ended up discussing political topics. These findings indicate that non-political digital forums may enable political discussions and influence both online and offline civic engagement.

Digital platforms offer students an eased ability to communicate with one another, which extends connectivity and civic identity with various communities. Including digital technology as a space for civic discourse benefits students who are inexperienced with engaging in digitally mediated civic communication and might otherwise be excluded from civic discourse altogether (Bachen et al., 2008). This is reflected by Johnson (2001) who explained that digital communication in Civics courses encourages students uncomfortable with public speaking to participate in the lessons. Because of this eased communication, Hung (2014) demonstrated that blogs facilitated democratic civic identity by cultivating skills for deliberation and social interaction. Alongside eased communication, Fournier-Sylvester (2013) showed that Grade 10 Civics students appreciated online discussion because the platform enabled thoughtful responses. She explained that, "The most common reason given for favoring online ... discussions was having the time to think before taking a position on an issue" (p. 40). Because of the time required to consider perspectives, digital forums may encourage the development of a civic identity that includes critical and informed perspectives.

In addition, Couldry et al. (2014) examined youth digital storytelling for its merit of online civic discussion with three case studies and found that such activities augmented youths' civic identity. This finding was later mirrored by Chan (2019), who examined digital storytelling in relation to civic identity and found that digital storytelling improved youth critical thinking alongside their civic identities. Furthermore, Chan's randomized control trial showed that students who used digital storytelling actually became more open-minded and less ethno-centric compared to the control group. Chan explained that the dialogic function of digital storytelling enabled youth to become more reflective and open-minded while developing their Hong Kong civic identity. The impact of digital storytelling on civic identity was also uncovered by Truong-White and McLean (2015). Informed by Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three types of democratic citizenship (personally responsible citizen, participatory citizen, justice-oriented citizen), the researchers found that students' digital storytelling projects enhanced student civic engagement, and that the digital storytelling projects aligned with identities of personally responsible and participatory orientations of citizenship.

The research indicates that digital technology offers educators novel avenues for facilitating youth civic education via communication platforms. Digital technology allows for students not only to be more comfortable in expressing ideas and perspectives, but arguably more importantly, these platforms necessitate that students actually deliberate opinions and responses before expressing ideas. This is important when considering *Identity* in the Framework as the digital environment develops civic identities that are deliberative, critical, and unimpulsive. Consequently, by more capably connecting with communities and respecting others' opinions and perspectives, students might more closely align with the other *Identity* criteria.

Active Participation: Digital Technology and Civic Engagement

In the Framework, *Active Participation* is described as contributing to the “common good in local, national, and global communities” (OME, 2013, p. 13). The Framework specifies that participating in one's community is a central aspect, which involves investigating controversial issues and voicing informed opinions on matters relevant to the community. These criteria of *Active Participation* in the Framework are similar to conceptions of civic engagement. For example, Barrett and Zani (2014) define civic engagement as “denot[ing] the engagement of an individual with the interests, goals, concerns, and common good of a community” (p. 4). Accordingly, citizenship education in Ontario should specifically encourage students to actively participate in civic and political life (Molina-Girón, 2016).

Digital technology specifically aids educators and students in investigating community issues as it “allows/empowers citizens to access, research, disseminate/share, and broker information” (Hicks et al., 2012, p. 473). The ease of access to vast information online enables social studies students to develop tools of critical inquiry (Bermudez, 2015). Similarly, the large extent of different online communities encourages students to acquire different perspectives, while also challenging and strengthening perspectives (Rosenberry, 2010). This distribution of information and varying perspectives fundamentally enhances opportunities to solve community problems (Glassman & Kang, 2010). Therefore, civic engagement is not necessarily about membership in online communities, but rather using different online networks to address social issues. To consider solutions to social issues, digital simulation can be used to investigate community concerns, as Poole et al. (2010) demonstrated. The researchers used digital simulation for students to role-play as political aides and allowed “teachers to infuse their classrooms with real community issues and provide their students with real community problem-solving opportunities” (p. 79). Such instances improve student civic engagement understanding by situating learners in relevant scenarios they might otherwise not be aware of, nor experience.

Digital technology may also encourage an online participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2009), which is specifically directed towards expression and civic engagement, knowledge sharing, and social connection between members of informal online communities. When considering this online participatory culture, Kahne et al. (2013) identified three categories: 1) politics-driven activity; 2) interest-driven activity; and 3) friendship-driven activity. The researchers found that both politics-driven and interest-driven online activity strongly correlated with civic and political activity. In discussing this finding, the researchers asserted that youth use digital technology to learn about social issues, which encourages youth to engage with civic and political life. This finding builds upon Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis of research examining the relationship between Internet use and political participation, which found that Internet-use positively affects political engagement. Therefore, the function of digital technology as a tool for social inquiry in a democratic society is imperative as democratic growth is reliant upon the resources and tools citizens use (Nelson, 2016).

Citizenship education in a democracy relies upon the free and open opportunity for students to voice informed opinions on community issues; accordingly, Olsen (2018) connected voicing informed opinions to a solution-oriented citizenship. While addressing barriers to civic participation, Gleason and von Gillern (2018) illustrated how digital technology provides free software for students to generate and share public service announcements (PSAs) related to socio-political problems—thus removing the barriers for civic engagement. The researchers explained that students felt empowered in pursuing topics related to personal interest, responsibility, and agency, and that students learned about forms of civic participation while engaging with varied communities. Similarly, Wargo and Clayton (2018) examined secondary students' creation of video PSAs and short documentaries pertaining to local issues. The researchers found digital media production allows students to innovatively and creatively express their civic perspectives. Importantly, the researchers found that digital technology, “revealed a discursive constellation of social, civic, and multiliterate practice that constituted a new nexus of civic expression” (p. 482).

However, video production is not the only method to express informed perspectives. Montgomery (2014) examined how third-grade students create podcasts to share information about historical injustice and specifically elaborated on one podcast about Native American boarding schools. The podcasts were not one-way (i.e. speaker-to-listener), but were instead discursively reciprocal as the format enabled listeners to publicly comment about the podcasts, what they learned, and engage in a dialogue with the creators and other listeners. Blogging also encourages student voice regarding social issues. For example, Levy et al. (2015) studied a secondary school teacher's use of classroom blogging to discuss political interests and found that the assignment positively influenced student political interest and political efficacy. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these studies is how the researchers demonstrated that technology provided a creative outlet for young students to critically learn about, engage with, and communicate complex social issues.

The research indicates that digital technology facilitates both investigating and voicing informed perspectives on civic issues that are engaging for students and the audience. The Framework categorizes *Active Participation* as contributing towards the common good of communities, and the scholarship illuminates how digital technology has been successfully used to enact youth civic engagement. Digital technology not only offers students platforms that enable discussions about social issues, but also encourages deliberation about how to resolve these issues. This develops democratic citizens who collaborate to resolve areas of injustice.

Structures: The Importance of Civic Literacy

The Framework describes *Structures* as developing an understanding of power and systems within societies, which is known as civic literacy. The Samara Centre for Democracy (2019) describes civic literacy as multifaceted and as including having intuitional understanding and topical knowledge. However, how does civic literacy encourage effective democratic participation? Understanding societal rules, laws, institutions, processes, and affairs might be a precursor to effective participation; otherwise, "those lacking in adequate knowledge of local, provincial, and/or federal affairs typically become complacent" (Lacharite, 2017, p. 45). In studying university students enrolled in a course about current events, Van Camp and Baugh (2016) found that courses built around current events not only enhanced civic literacy, but also increased students' self-reported civic engagement. Furthermore, demonstrating administrative decision-making processes helps develop civic literacy in students, empowering students to become civically engaged (Shiller, 2013). Specifically, Shiller showed how civic literacy empowers students who otherwise may feel alienated by presuming that decision-making is unaffected by external influence. However, does digital technology have a similar impact?

Research demonstrates that not only does digital media enhance political knowledge, but that this acquired political knowledge positively associates with youth civic participation. Importantly, using digital technology to teach Civics is student-centred and provides a student civic learning experience through a more relevant medium for youth than traditional approaches (Dubé et al., 2018). This student-centred approach via digital technology can improve civic literacy. For example, the interactive website iCivics has been shown to improve youth civic literacy as demonstrated with multiple choice structured pre-tests and post-tests that assessed students' civic knowledge (Blevins et al., 2013). This is unsurprising as Clark et al. (2017) subsequently found, in their study of ten schools, that students who learned about Jacksonian democracy through digital games performed better on essays and multiple-choice questions compared to those who did not learn through digital games. In addition to digital gaming, Huang and Chen (2013) showed that using blogging platforms is an engaging form of learning Civics content and that blogging platforms encourage student informal learning. Although further research is needed, the findings are promising as the evidence suggests that digital games measurably improve civic literacy and accordingly improve students' satisfaction of the *Structures* category as outlined in the Framework.

Digital media is especially becoming more important for developing civic literacy. For example, Mushtaq and Baig (2015) found that televised news consumption and political talk shows influence youth political knowledge and civic engagement. The researchers further determined a significant relationship between viewing political talk shows and youths' intention to vote. The impact of digital media on civic literacy and civic engagement was also uncovered by Hao et al. (2014). They found that university students acquire news from the Internet more often than other sources. In fact, acquiring news from online sources was, "significantly associated with both offline and online political/civic engagement as well as political knowledge, especially online participation in political and civic matters" (p. 1230). The increase in online news and political-talk platforms emphasize this as an area of needed research and it must be integrated into the Framework to a higher degree.

Attributes: Critical Digital Literacy for Informed Civic Participation

The *Attributes* category in the Framework asserts that students are expected to work in a “critically thoughtful manner” (OME, 2013, p. 10). *Attributes* also recommends that students “develop attitudes that foster civic engagement” (OME, 2013, p. 10) and consider citizen and societal rights and responsibilities. However, as youth largely navigate civic issues through digital media, facilitating critical digital literacy is essential for students to develop democratic citizenship attributes. By developing critical digital literacy, students can “filter through the abundance of information, to contest, deconstruct, critique, and discover legitimate knowledge” (Darvin, 2018, p. 7). The vast sources of online information necessitate that students are capable of critically navigating digital media. For example, one survey found that one-third of youth aged 12-15 believe that search engine results are always legitimate (Bartlett & Miller, 2012). To remedy this naivety, Wineburg and Resiman (2015) emphasised the importance of disciplinary thinking for youth in digitized societies because “Self-appointed experts swarm the Net practicing historiography without a license” (p. 637). With the abundance of information and misinformation online, disciplinary thinking asserts that students should source, contextualize, and corroborate information, and ultimately closely engage with what texts have to say, rather than skimming for information and blindly accepting information as factual.

Developing critical digital literacy is essential as studies demonstrate that digital literacy positively predicts and influences students’ civic engagement (Martens & Hobbs, 2015). In examining secondary school and college students, Kahne et al. (2012) found that digital literacy education fosters increased online political participation. In fact, Kahne and Bowyer (2019) further found that students who receive digital literacy education are nearly seven-times more likely to engage in targeted political pressure (i.e., pressuring institutions to change policies or practices), and are significantly more likely to express opinions on public issues. Their findings also confirm those made previously by Kim and Yang (2016) who examined Grade 10 students and found that digital literacy is more influential for youth civic engagement than digital skills. The researchers asserted that if education ignores facilitating digital literacy, then “there is a risk that education disparity may translate into participation gaps” (p. 451). Indeed, as citizenship is enacted online, citizenship education should facilitate and develop youth digital literacy in order to ensure that youth critically assess and evaluate online information. Doing so aligns with the Framework’s *Attributes* for critical habits, while also developing a tendency shown to promote civic engagement. Considering the research illustrating the strong relationship between digital literacy and civic engagement, fostering such digital literacy in youth is necessary for the critical capacity of citizens.

Conclusion

Digital technology shifts how students communicate, acquire information, and interact with one another. This changes how youth enact and pursue different forms of civic engagement, and it is consequently essential that citizenship education incorporates different strategies to capitalize on the potential of digital technology, while ensuring students use digital technology to become civically engaged. While the Ontario education system does not adequately discuss the relationship between digital technology and democratic citizenship, the Framework can easily be enhanced by educators’ use of digital technology for citizenship education.

As *Identity* in the Framework reflects how communication encourages the development of civic identities, the scholarship of digital technology in education demonstrates how digital forums enable patient and deliberative student responses. This helps to develop young citizens who instead of responding impulsively, reflect upon and consider different perspectives, while also forming their own viewpoints. Similarly, digital technology encourages *Active Participation* in communities as students can investigate community issues by accessing vast sources of information, develop critical inquiry, voice informed opinions, and ultimately use digital platforms to engage in dialogue with regards to community issues. Centralizing *Structures*, the Framework outlines that a component of citizenship is understanding societal structures and civic knowledge. Accordingly, using software that more clearly explains complex concepts to students, while also exposing students to situations they might otherwise not experience, improves students’ civic literacy. Furthermore, as youth are increasingly consuming digital media to remain updated about current events, including the role of digital media in how students develop an understanding of societal structures is also pertinent. This latter aspect necessitates cultivating democratic citizenship *Attributes*. As youth increasingly engage with digital media, ensuring that students develop critical digital literacy skills is necessary as citizens must be capable of critically navigating the information they acquire online. The Framework is an excellent beginning towards facilitating the development of democratic citizens; however, without including digital technology aspects

into the Framework and curricula, students might remain disengaged with the portrayal of democratic citizenship being conveyed.

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