Social Media and Civic Participation in the Classroom: The Joys and Challenges of a Co-creative Media Education Project

Auli Harju, Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication (COMET), University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract

Young people's internet use has been studied starting from the questions of access, possibilities and risks, to the question of how it is to grow up in the online environment. These studies often focus on young people's online networking, gaming, text messaging and other activities related to entertainment, socialising, content production and consumption.

School is an important site of internet access for students which brings along the themes of learning and knowledge building. This article provides a close look at how high school students use social media and other online applications in their media studies when participating in the development and implementation of an online campaign against climate change.

The research took place in two Finnish high schools. The ways students used different social media applications, and their attitudes towards them were studied by observing and interviewing the students during the project. The article discusses the methodological issues and provides a lessons learned type of approach for further consideration in media education projects.

In these kinds of participatory processes teaching and learning become two-way processes when working together in the online environment. The routines of internet use, the introduction of new tools and applications, the discussions in the class room, and the common, societal goal create points of action where the educational, the entertaining and the civic practices intertwine. However, the school context somewhat restricts the bottom-up participation which in other contexts, such as social media, occurs naturally among youth.

Introduction

Civic competencies are central goals of school education. Furthermore, Bennett (2007: 68) reminds us how young people live in a rich, but fragmented information environment; they are at the centre of new media practices, taking part in and forming them at the same time. On one hand, young people usually cope better with the online world than older generations; on the other, their media environment is highly commercialised and their relationship with the traditional news media somewhat distant.

The internet has been considered by some to offer a platform for a new kind of participation (see Gauntlett, 2011). However, positive experiences with the media do not directly translate into civic participation (Coleman et al., 2008: 183). Using the internet is not always active and even less public-spirited. Peer-to-peer networking does not automatically lead to deliberation, nor the interaction on the internet remain horizontal and democratic (Coleman, 2006; Livingstone, 2006).

To be able to participate as citizens, people also need to imagine themselves as meaningful agents in a political context (Dahlgren, 2007: 9). Therefore we need to ask how internet and social media realises the potential of civic action among youth, and what kind of practices and resources a school environment offers for their online civic participation.

According to Coleman (2006: 258), we need to ask what kind of citizens we want young people to be; if it is a type of e-citizenship, it should include meaningful democratic political influence, not just political simulations on the side of the 'real' political decision-making (ibid.). In Finland, the public sector has faced the challenge of how to develop practices for informing and involving citizens online. The development of the internet regarding its technological and communal characteristics opens up possibilities for new kinds of policies, for instance, in sharing relevant data and information that are of interest to citizens (Poikola & al., 2010: 11). Also, in almost all Finnish cities, online platforms for delivering municipal initiatives have been facilitated for young people (Kotilainen and Rantala, 2009: 659).

However, much needs to be done in developing the internet-based interaction between citizens and the public sector. This also requires better understanding of the relationship that people in general, and young people in particular, have with the internet and social media.

This article investigates Finnish high school students' use of social media in participating in the development and implementation of an online campaign against climate change. The project was one of the case studies of the SOMUS project (Social Media for Citizens and Public Sector Collaboration) funded by the Academy of Finland.

Internet use is approached here both locally in the school environment and methodologically by collaborating with the students in a participatory online media education project. My analysis focuses on identities, skills and practices and media publicity, as parts of media culture as an action space for young citizens' participation (see also Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009).

Here, the process of building the online campaign is presented in detail. Having been the teacher in the classroom during the project, and thus engaged in the process, I will reflect upon our working methods that borrow from participatory design and open research group work (Harju and Ropponen, 2010) and describe the ways the students used social media.

Besides working with the high school students, I also collaborated with a research team which took part in planning of the project, realising students' ideas into demo versions and beyond. For the purposes of this article, I refer to this group of researchers as 'we'.

Civic culture and media education

School education shapes citizenship by teaching students the skills and knowledge they need to act as effective citizens in society. School, at its best, can empower citizenship. However, school governance still functions analogically with centralised decision-making meaning that it manages students' civic activities instead of enabling and supporting them (Coleman, 2006: 259–260).

Bennett (2007) separates two kinds of citizens: Dutiful Citizen (DC) and self-Actualizing Citizen (AC). The former is expected to know the basic workings of political institutions, to understand the values of the national civic culture, to be informed and make responsible voting choices, whereas the latter sees his/her political activities in personal terms, i.e. contributing more to the quality of the personal life, self-esteem, social recognition and friendship. The question is where and how these types of citizenship connect, and how the connection is linked to the ongoing change of democratic societies and institutions.

The goal of school education is to hold on to the DC type but not to forget the AC type of citizenship in the process. In Finland, though, AC hardly exists in the school system since 'a citizen' is mainly considered as an informed, knowledgeable voter.

Bennett (2007: 66) suggests four steps for engaging young citizens in educational environment: students should define their relationship to meaningful issues for enabling their personal identification; research relevant information that motivates the linking of the issue to the government; connect with other citizen-learners for peer-recognition and support, and to locate available channels to effective governmental action on the issue.

Loosely following these guidelines we set up the case study where participatory design

methodology was linked to media education: two groups of high school students were invited to participate in the planning of an online project that would enable participation related to the issue of climate change. The students were given a chance to present their ideas freely right at the beginning. Consequently, they wanted to create a campaign to raise people's awareness. The end result was a campaign against climate change named *Ilma vaivaa* (*Climate Worries*).

In the class, the students discussed how climate change was relevant in their everyday life. In this way they created anchors for identification to the issue by localising or actually 'glocalizing' (Robertson, 1995) it. They were introduced to some new social media services that provided co-creative and communicative spaces. With different tasks given during classes they were guided to seek information and find answers to questions like what could we do or how should everyone act in order not to make things worse. The campaign perspective brought the media environment into the discussions especially when the students pondered how to spread the word about the campaign. Finally, the campaign website functioned as the channel for their goal: to engage others in the community, i.e. having an influence with their project. In the following sections these steps are presented in detail.

A participatory school project: research design and methods
Developing the website

The *Ilma vaivaa* website took form as a photo challenge that invited people to present their everyday actions against climate change with photos. The goal of the website was to create a Finnish online photo gallery of everyday climate actions. There were four action categories invented by the students (transportation, vegetarian food, package material, and recycling) in which the photos could be submitted. When submitting a photo, the user also agreed to its appearance on the *Ilma vaivaa* Flickr gallery. Besides submitting photos, users could also comment on photos on the website or challenge their friends to submit a photo in one or more action categories.

Working methods

The *Ilma vaivaa* website was developed and implemented using participatory design as a method. Participatory design refers to a software design process in which the end users participate actively as members of the design team. Participatory design should bring together users and designers, integrate their different knowledge, and provide a common design space for users and designers (Muller 2002). In this case study, we took the approach even further: in the beginning it was 'planning the unplanned'. There were only few fixed

settings at the beginning of the project, such as the connection to climate change and the schools as working environments. The rest was left for the open planning process to reveal. With this kind of an approach we wanted to guarantee the students a feeling of ownership over the project, hoping it would result in commitment to the process.

We felt that the students needed a safe environment to start with, without outsiders' comments and other interventions. For this purpose, Owela Web Lab was used for brainstorming, writing down ideas and commenting. In Owela one always needs to sign up in order to comment or suggest an idea and there is an option to have either an open project platform or a closed one, accessible only for selected users.

After the first layouts and demo versions of the campaign website, the process became more open. For example, the students and the technical developers were interacting via Etherpad, a real-time text editor similar to Google Docs but with features such as instant update (no delay in showing what others write), a color-code for different writers (helping to see what is being added and edited by whom), and a chat window (for 'meta-talk' regarding the document at hand). The meeting of the students and the researchers was announced in a Finnish microblogging service, Qaiku, accompanied by a link to the Etherpad document. Hence, the invitation was open for anyone but during the session when students were using it, only the researchers of the SOMUS project were present. However, the use of Etherpad and the presence of the researchers there as commentators excited and motivated the students.

The participating students

The research was conducted in two Finnish high schools, Messukylän lukio and Koillis-Helsingin lukio, with students aged between 16-–18. A group of students in both schools was gathered by offering them a possibility to pass one of their Media Studies courses by attending the project. There were about 10 students enrolled in the Media Studies course in both schools but in practice the groups ended up being smaller, from four to six students. There was just one male student among the participants and he decided to leave the course early on.

The project was introduced in both schools beforehand as a social media development project in which students get to use new online tools but apparently that was not tempting enough for wider participation. The students taking part in the course seemed to be more interested in environmental issues; they weren't all that interested in internet technology *per se*.

Both student groups had eight meetings that were spread in two high school semesters. The groups defined their goals, discussed climate change and brainstormed

ideas for the content and design of the challenge website. The Owela Web Lab was used for exercises such as writing down the ideas for challenge themes and commenting on them. To move from ideas toward more concrete campaign planning a story-telling exercise was used: the students wrote stories on what their campaign would look like, who they would like to challenge, and how they would promote the campaign. Later the students were asked to visualise the campaign story by taking photos and adding them to their story in Owela.

The research data consists of participatory observation and researcher's notes from the classroom and from research team meetings, exercises and comments by the students in Owela, demo version commenting in Etherpad, and *Ilma vaivaa* website with its photo challenges and comments. The students also gave feedback both on Owela as a working environment and on the course in general.

For the environment in the classroom

Since the school project was tied to the theme of climate change, environmental issues were discussed during the classes; climate change was linked to the environmental issues and nature conservation in general. Thematically, their ideas on the campaign considered influencing individuals and their everyday choices - which also fitted well with the nature of web campaign. The selection of the four climate change challenge themes for the website was due to this 'consumerist' approach: the students selected the themes of using public transport, preferring vegetarian food, reducing package material, and recycling.

The school as a working environment for the project linked the discussion to the issues of school as a community. The students were interested in what was going on in their school; they linked the global problem to their locality. Similarly, the political questions were formulated in relation to their closest circles of people: could they bring a change by challenging other students and especially the teachers? Another important place for their political action was home: how could we take the environment into account in our daily activities? The students were motivated in engaging with issues they knew well. Probably due to that, they were not interested in challenging, for example, local decision-makers or other more distant target-groups, not even when it was offered as a realisable option by the researchers.

In the students' discussions on climate change the arguments varied between skepticism and hope. On the one hand, the students seemed skeptical of adults' willingness to change their behavior. On the other hand, they believed that everyone can make a change by making environment friendly choices in their everyday life. Often their tone was normative; they talked about people's good and bad consumer habits and suggested

environment friendly actions such as avoiding plastic bags or taking the bus instead of driving a car. They also pointed to bad examples, such as their parents 'wanting to drive the car everywhere they go' or how wasteful their school's paper use was: 'everything is printed out.'

Skills and practices at school

The students adopted quickly and without hesitation new social media services and tools that were introduced during the project. They rarely needed to ask help in using the different features.

The schools formed a challenging environment for an online civic participation project especially because of the existing teaching practices. As a teacher, I was immediately faced with a narrow student-teacher relationship in the class. There were no existing practices of participatory project work and the students were lacking a 'do-it-yourself mentality' (Benkler 2006) and group work skills. From this starting point, it was a challenge to proceed with the ideas of collaboration and participatory design. The students expected to be given assignments by the teacher but they also tried to minimise their efforts which naturally influenced negatively the participation in the process.

Mapping online identities and using social media

In order to understand the students' media use, they were asked to map their media environment using PowerPoint with some provided media-related symbols, which they could use in creating their own visualisations of their media environment. They could drag and drop, change size, group and connect the symbols with arrows for describing the meaning and the context of use for them. The students used the provided pictures but also added some elements to their media environment maps from the internet, such as logos of social media services and games, and pictures of media products such as magazines and television series. Some of the students were not happy with the avatar pictures they were provided with, instead copying their own images from their social media profiles and using them to personalise their media map even more.

Etherpad was used in evaluating and planning of the campaign challenges and the website. The students used the shared writing pad eagerly, first playing with the possibility to change each others' text but afterwards listing the wished-for features and chosen challenge themes on the pad. Etherpad was most useful in evaluating the demo versions of the website: it was fun and easy to use as a reporting tool. The students were asked to test different features and report on them and their opinions of the design in Etherpad. The powerful element of the tool was the sharing: co-writing a document and chatting with

other students and researchers. Etherpad also triggered collaboration, for example, seeing text being created by the others in real-time and the possibility of editing each other's text actually provoked the students to write together.

In the classroom, when working on the computers, there was interplay between the individual and collective roles. The students were sitting next to each other but working on their own when doing the exercises. Even when encouraged to collaborate, they first chose to do the exercises on their own, which also can be implied as a reference to the existing learning practices at school. However, they started to collaborate by discussing and looking over each other's shoulders when they needed help or ideas for accomplishing the exercise.

Another example of collaboration was the situation described earlier when the students were evaluating one of the drafts for the campaign website using Etherpad and when the researchers were online at the same time posing some questions for the students. Instead of writing individually in Etherpad, as they had done before the researchers' intervention, the students started to discuss what they collectively wanted to answer to the researchers and who should be the one writing the answer down. It is worth noting that the openness of this process seemed to mean a lot to the students. The atmosphere in the classroom became excited when the researchers came online and greeted the students in the chat room.

In Owela, the students commented on the exercises, such as the ideas for campaign challenges, campaign stories and visualisations. The commenting was mainly supportive; the feedback was very positive and the students' comments were more like giving credit to good ideas instead of feedback that would help the group to develop the website. In order to select the ideas to be used in the challenge website, a simple voting procedure (thumb up and thumb down) was applied. The ideas that got the most 'thumbs up' were selected for further development and formed the content of the website.

Owela also encouraged students to comment by way of an inbuilt system that gave the students points every time they posted something. The students soon discovered that commenting on each others' work was an easy way to gain points and reach new levels, i.e. statuses such as 'energetic proposer' or 'sustainable developer'. In this way, the competition functioned as motivator, sometimes much better than collaboration, perhaps because there was competition not only between individuals but also between the two schools: the individual points of the students were calculated for each of the groups and presented next to each other in Owela so that the students could all the time follow the development of the scores.

Where is the public?

When the students were mapping their media environment on PowerPoint slides, we found out that the role of the traditional mass media were quite limited in their life; news media was almost non-existent in the media map visualizations, for example. Instead popular media, such as television series and magazines, were depicted next to different social media services and tools as part of the students' leisure activities.

Despite the absence of news media in the media environment maps, the students strongly connected the idea of campaigning to the mass media. Hence, they recognised the need for media publicity, which according to their understanding, was not present in the online environment. They for example suggested advertising the website on television and on the sides of local buses. These ambitions suggest that the idea of the internet as a campaigning tool was unfamiliar to them, even though they were able to point out several online campaign sites when they were asked to name websites they liked and could use as examples for their own campaign.

The mass media approach was partly taken by the students because they considered it as the way to reach adult audiences. The reason for choosing campaigning was that the students were motivated to educate the adults, who in their opinion did not understand the importance of protecting the environment. They criticised adults for being lazy and valuing luxury instead of sacrificing their convenience on behalf of nature.

All in all, the content creation process for the website, including the discussions in the classroom about climate change and what can be done about it within the campaign, was public-spirited. Though the discussions started with local and familiar aspects, they reached globally, touching on the actions of the humankind. In this sense, the students' engagement in the process was momentarily transforming; from leisure-time social media users to an interest community concerned about a specific societal problem.

Citizen-learners in school context

During the planning process of the challenge website, it became clear that the school environment is in many ways problematic for civic participation of young people. Firstly, successful collaborative processes demand activeness and strong motivation from the participants. Also, often motivation for civic participation arises from the interests of active people themselves. In this sense, framing the participatory project with the climate change theme was challenging to start with even though the purpose in using participatory planning was to create ownership over the project that would translate into commitment and active participation. However, in this case the push for participation came mostly from the school environment: the students regarded the project mainly as part of their

school work, which led them to abandon the project when the course ended. A couple of them wrote a story about the course in the school blog but otherwise the promoting of the website was left for the researchers to do.

The use of social media as educational tool seemed to be new for the students. They considered social media mainly as fun, something they engaged with during the breaks or at home in their free-time. Hence, the participatory practices they learned during the project were new to them. We found out that the students easily adapted to new platforms, such as Owela, and tools like Etherpad, so we could have used any tools available. But this is not to say that selection of tools was not important; actually the use of the tools mattered a great deal. Being able to share their thoughts openly in Etherpad and being asked to elaborate their ideas further by the researchers online motivated the students more than any other classroom exercise.

The students' virtual identities were absent at school, and they lacked the type of online presence that would easily fit civic activities. Neither did they want to reveal their virtual identities to adults, nor use them in the project. The online world was their own space, mostly free of adults and their surveillance (see also Livingstone 2008: 396). They refused systematically to use their existing profiles in the social media services for promoting the website. Instead they suggested services such as Facebook, even though not all of them were familiar with it.

In their course feedback, the students felt that the project lacked something that could be described as 'team spirit'. Though they liked working in small groups, they felt that with a bigger group, they would have had more influence and the project would have been shared by the whole school.

Conclusion

In the above analysis, I have described some of the elements of Bennett's (2007) recommendations for civic education – e.g. identification, motivation, communication channels and understanding of media environment – at use in our participatory high school project. Below, I will summarise some key findings for this type of participatory process.

There is less civic education in Finnish schools than in most other European countries (Kotilainen and Rantala, 2009: 659). This influences the way students identify themselves as citizens – and how they lack a 'political imaginary'. In this case study, the connectedness seemed to manifest itself through the role of a consumer, which was apparent especially in the students' choices for the content of the climate change challenge. Furthermore, the existing practices of schoolwork did not support civic agency.

The students called for a team spirit but it was mainly absent in the realisation of the campaign; instead the project was considered like any other formal school activity. The ending of the course led to a situation where the students lost all their interest in the project even though the website was recently published. In this case, the participatory approach combined with media education did not succeed in creating further commitment or civic activities even though the students clearly enjoyed the discursive atmosphere in the classroom, and eagerly took part in many tasks during the process.

When it came to the media environment as a space of civic culture, the students' idea of 'the public' relied heavily on traditional mass media; however, their own media landscapes consisted of digital and online media. This implies that they do not identify with the public of traditional media.

Since the impact on the local community, not to mention larger public sphere, remained rather small, the motivation students had in the beginning was decreasing during the process. Evaluating this phenomenon with Bennett's (2007) ideas, it seems obvious that we did not *quite* succeed in translating the new skills of communication into participation in civic networks, and hence the community of interest did not expand outside the classroom.

In implementing participatory projects in a school environment, as in any participatory design project, we suggest putting time into creating a shared vision for the goals of the project. Though school work is mostly teacher-led, the participatory approach invites students to take an active role in defining the project practices, as well as the desired outcomes. According to our experience, a sense of ownership and the commitment that follows are crucial in succeeding. The openness of the process can be seen as two-fold: in the beginning a closed working environment may be needed, especially if participatory practices are new to students. But the benefits of openness, such as crowdsourcing, interaction and feedback, may provide important input in the process. Civic education with the kind of collaborative elements described in this article takes time. In future research more emphasis should be placed on the learning process where the existing practices ought to be rethought and a new set of activities and attitudes should be given space to enter.

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