

Social Media as an Educational Tool for Developing Youth Citizenship in a Post Disaster Context.

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Abstract:

In the past 2 years Christchurch has suffered 3 devastating earthquakes. Socially, economically and environmentally the city has been left in ruins. Educators in Christchurch now have the chance to explore the powerful learning opportunities available in the reconstruction process. Correspondingly, young people - as 'stakeholders of tomorrow' - have the chance to make a meaningful contribution towards the redevelopment and future function of their city. The implications for youth citizenship and democratic participation are unprecedented at this time, and it is therefore critical that educators are equipped to utilize the learning potential of this context. Based on the author's own involvement in post-quake Christchurch, this paper introduces the role of social media as an invaluable educational tool for negotiating the post disaster challenge, reinforcing notions of citizenship, and consolidating youth innovation for the implementation of future disaster response and recovery processes.

Challenging Norms:

Past news headlines relating to social media and mass public organising include the Arab Spring student protests, the Student Volunteer Army's support to the Christchurch community after the Canterbury Earthquakes, and the Youth Riots in London, England. Many commentators believe that social media is generally responsible for an increase in school bullying and the general proliferation of anti-social youth behaviour in the community, as highlighted when Facebook amplified the response to police brutality in London. Yet as other headlines illustrate, social media has also been used for the benefit of citizens, communities and nations alike. If we look at New Zealand's Student Volunteer Army who used Facebook to organise and delegate 10,000 students for the clean-up of Christchurch, it is also apparent that social media tools – in the 'right' hands – are effective, if not vital, for citizen lead post-disaster recovery processes.

Often tangled up with such headlines is the issue of social media in the right hands or wrong and questions regarding the relationship between user education, economic background and social associations invariably crop up. As a result of educational underachievement, institutional neglect and social dissatisfaction, are the negative outcomes essentially a case of user angst and the misappropriation of social media platforms? Or is it technology that is to blame for social media's negative impact on individuals and society? Either way, on-going global events involving young-people and various networking platforms confirm social media's indisputable power and need for continued, rational attention. In recognition of its power and versatility, as well as its near universal accessibility, schools should be prioritising the application of social media as a pedagogical tool and focused topic for urgent and inclusive

exploration and analysis. Often though, as a means of mitigating the associated risks of social media “too many schools block access to some of the key learning platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter” and deny its potential utilization (Jenkins and Losh 2012. p18)

In the disorder and loss of the post disaster context, our prior understandings or misgivings of what citizenship means are laid bare. With the closure of essential public institutions such as schools and the disruption of vital infrastructure, we are left dependent on the capacity of our communities and civil society organisations to respond. In a state of betwixt and between, young people are vulnerable to feeling socially redundant despite the energy and creativity that they can bring to such situations. On the one hand, it is through this sense of redundancy that society’s own notion of youth citizenship can be challenged and critiqued. Or, in more positive circumstances, it is through spontaneous youth volunteering and society’s support for such actions that citizenship as a concept and as an action can be fully explored and enacted.

If educators intend to build young people’s capacity as responsible citizens, skills and concepts such as critical thinking, innovation, environmental stewardship, compassion, leadership, and respect for diversity are a likely part of that process. Through the many windows on the world that social media offers, teachers are able to facilitate skills and concept development with more currency than they have ever had before. It is a platform from which we can observe the actions of individuals, evaluate the direction of communities, and reflect upon our own values positions in relation to the positions of others, at home or abroad. Furthermore, social media inspires online and offline participation in many forms. Educators therefore need further encouragement and support to engage in social media as an educational resource as it has the potential to extend, amongst other things, the social literacy of young learners in a way that textbooks and hypothetical case studies have struggled to achieve in the past.

Based on the author’s own experiences in Christchurch following the 2011 earthquakes, and the research which informs this paper, it is proposed that social media is an ideal tool to utilize the educational opportunities available in the post disaster context. Moreover, with the support of creative educators and progressive institutions, social media can promote the value of youth community service as a means of inclusively defining and enacting our collective role as citizens.

As issues of youth disaffection and debates about the effectiveness of social media as an educational tool are discussed, it is important to keep the post disaster context in mind. Due to the general lack of research on the role of social media and young people in such contexts this paper aims to explore research from regular contexts; in which case, the reader is invited to critically reflect upon the degree to which such issues are augmented in communities and institutions following the destruction of natural disasters.

Young people and advocates for the inclusion of social media in learning programs are often up against a reputational brick wall. Interestingly, much of the negative commentary surrounding young people at present connects to

their absorption in social networking and perceived addiction to reality entertainment. Critics believe that engagement in these activities indiscriminately separates young people from roles of responsibility or accountability in the real world. As if experiencing a nightmare prophecy, many educators make reactive attempts to limit young people's access to the sources of their perceived addiction. Thus, efforts to increase the use of social media as a pedagogical tool and topic for focused learning are easily associated with other polemical or preventative topics of learning (such as sex, drugs, suicide and bullying) rather than as a learning tool for positive promotion and inclusion in classroom learning processes.

One of the most cutting critiques of today's young people and their access to technology comes from author Mark Bauerlein (2009) and his book *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. Bauerlein's work traces a disturbing correlation between the rise of mass digital technology and the documented educational deficits of young Americans. Within his work Bauerlein reveals a damning paradox: even as technology gives younger people greater access to knowledge, enrichment and information than ever before, according to Bauerlein it has become the tool that they have used to seal themselves off from the world. Bauerlein claims that technology has contracted young people's horizons to themselves. Extending this point, he also believes that the insular online world of the youthful social network is an ego-centric echo chamber" which is simply self-reinforcing and self-referential (Bauerlein 2009).

As accurate as some of Bauerlein's observations may appear to be, at least to popular conscience, his broad brush depictions portray all young people as if they live in self-imposed exile from the world of knowledge, social competencies and civic participation. In Bauerlein's opinion, young people are using technologies to retreat into a self-absorbed immature milieu that disregards and disavows the wider world (Bauerlein 2009). Furthermore, in the process of hibernating from the 'world offline' young people are thought to inadvertently stunt their social and cognitive development, which then continues to deteriorate as parents and teachers wrongfully assume that time online equates to student centred or self-managed learning development. Therefore, in an attempt to mask their own technological inadequacy, Bauerlein theorises that such adults neglect an opportunity to provide meaningful learning support and pastoral care as they keep a self-protective distance. He observes that young people's screen savvy conceals a deplorable lack of skill, so effectively, in fact, that their comparatively technophobic elders have been fooled into complacency (Bauerstein 2009). Similarly, Lisa Herrera (2012) suggests some of the more specific developmental outcomes in the age of online media, writing that today's youth commonly "exhibit signs of having a short attention span, seeking instant gratification, being willing or unable to read or think deeply, and lacking skills for long term vision or planning" (Herrera, 2012, p335). If we are to extrapolate this thinking to the post disaster context and consider how teachers and other community leaders might respond to the need for youth participation in the response and recovery processes, we might understand a degree of hesitance based on young people's apparent incompetence in regular contexts. Likewise, it is understandable that a suggestion to further utilise social media in a time of crisis may be ludicrous as it would be

perceived to further isolate young people when their inclusion and input is most valuable.

It is easy to resign ourselves to thinking that young people and social media will persist as a volatile mix beyond the control of even the most expert of educators. However, a much more optimistic narrative is also beginning to emerge and it is one which counters the more vitriolic perspectives currently circulating regressive media streams and school hallways. These perspectives reveal that a partnership between young people, teachers and social media in fact presents a fantastic opportunity to increase learning engagement, promote cross-cultural interaction, facilitate civic action and stimulate the development of critical thinking skills. Far from the “self-absorbed immature milieu” of Bauerlein’s critique, Ito (2008) sees social media as a self-sponsored and peer-centric enterprise. He writes that young people’s engagement in social media should be “celebrated as evidence of identity enactment, social interaction, and creativity through their uptake and transformation of newly available digital means” (Ito et al 2008 as cited in Hull, Stornaiuolo and Sahni, 2010 p334). And in direct response to perspectives which echo Bauerlein’s stance, Luke and Luke (2001) state that “far from being isolated techno-subjects marooned in their bedrooms and pacified by the soporific effect of wall to wall media ... many of today’s children and young people have the resources for more widespread interaction and cultural production than any other generation” (Luke and Luke 2001, as cited in Merchant 2009, p114). What the research of the pro-social media cohort presents is the idea that with the support of expert educators social media is not something to be controlled or mitigated in formal education settings. Instead, it is a tool, if not the tool, by which we can improve educational experiences, extend the quality of young people’s learning outcomes and broaden the range of young people who then achieve them.

Throughout the developed world as well as in the global south social media uptake is near universal for those with internet access. In relation to social media accessibility and the potential for civic engagement stemming from the likes of Facebook or Tumblr, Flanagan and Levine (2010) write that “new electronic media have several advantages. Barriers to entry are low, communities of interest are diverse and numerous, and peers can recruit one another for service activities even if they are physically dispersed” (Flanagan and Levine, 2010, p173) Furthermore, as highlighted in the research of Warren and Wicks (2011), social media also encourages inter-generational communication and cross-cohort interaction for the purposes of civic engagement. In this instance, appropriately facilitated engagement in social media enhances a young person’s social capital within their immediate community and globally. Warren and Wicks reveal that “interpersonal or online interaction among members of a social system including parents, teens, teachers, friends and acquaintances energises a social network which leads to greater rates of participation within the system” (Warren and Wicks, 2011, p167).

Further disabling Bauerlein’s (2009) portrayal of holed up and disengaged youth online, current research also discovers “that those who are active online are more likely to be active offline also” (Schlozman et al 2010 p490). In this respect, the case of Egypt’s young people during the Arab Spring provides a worthwhile example. Between 2000 and 2012 the amount of young people

who had access to the internet (and by association social media) in Egypt rose from 300 thousand to 21 million (Herrera 2012, p338). Preceding and then during the uprising young people online came to understand that their ability to select, circulate and comment on a news story brought with it a considerable amount of power. Herrera writes that “with communications tools at their disposal, youth who may not have otherwise been political were now acquiring political sensibilities” (Herrera 2012, p343). What brought the greatest sense of satisfaction and empowerment for many of Egypt’s youth, was that not only were the social media sites a cultural space that were uniquely youthful, Arab, Egyptian, Muslim orientated, and participatory, but they also represented a more virtuous society that stood in direct contrast to the perceived corruption of the world outside (Herrera 2012). In fact, in the virtual world young people were starting to develop a model for the society that they wished to inherit. Subsequently, young people started to construct their online vision through offline actions. Social media space allowed Egypt’s young activists to see themselves as having societal agency; with that agency came voice and with networks came collaboration and civic engagement.

Inspiring Teachers:

In the following discussion about the need for teachers to shift mind sets and adopt the use of social media and other online technologies for learning, the analysis of regular contexts considers the impact of natural disasters on existing teacher issues relating to the use of technology. Furthermore, readers need to conceptualise the advent of natural disaster as an opportunity for teachers to demonstrate leadership and instigate change. Such leadership is for the empowerment of young people to enact their citizenship and develop the social and cognitive competencies required to navigate the challenges and opportunities present in post-disaster society. However, like the negative commentaries surrounding the social efficacy of today’s young people, teachers also need to overcome their own limitations in their use of technology and in their ability to inspire greater youth civic engagement through their pedagogy.

In many parts of the world teachers are lacking in formative experiences that acquaint them with programs and online networking platforms that their students are fluent in. This leaves teachers not only ill-prepared to integrate social media into their planning and instruction, but it also means that they are unable to appropriately advise their “students with safe and ethical engagement with the online world” (Jenkins and Losh 2012, p18). Knobel and Lankshear (2008) identify two mind sets that people have of the world in relation to technology; one is that the world is very much the same as it always has been, however it is now more technologically sophisticated. Whereas the other mind set recognises that the world is different and has changed as a result of digital technologies. We need to enable to teachers to see the world from the second mind set, and help them to understand that new technology in the classroom helps affect change in learners’ worlds and it allows “teachers to be more collaborative and social, as it is multimodal, and it helps teachers grow projects organically from the authentic needs of their students” (Knobel and Lankshear. 2008, p23).

Greene (1995) indicates that teachers must be prepared to learn and relearn, adopt and continually adapt if they wish achieve their pedagogical mission. He writes that “if teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional ... we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been experienced in our lives, we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again (Greene 1995 as cited in Meyer 2011, p26). To ‘begin again’ involuntarily suggests that teachers must abandon the safety of traditional modes of instruction. But despite the inconsistent degrees of learning success that such modes may bring, the knife-edge climate of standardised testing and appraisal, as well as increasing levels of learner disengagement, means that contained or sporadic outcomes trump the risk of failure which might result from change. Whilst it seems counter-intuitive to neglect the inclusion of a powerful learning resource and the single most engaging communication tool for young people, the pressure cooker atmosphere of modern schools rarely accommodates experimentation and error.

The post-disaster context, however, is a space whereby norms are disrupted, the status quo is contested, and the ‘classroom’ becomes ad hoc or informal depending on the functionality of the school (and teachers). Even though best-practice advice suggests that the role of the educator in such settings is to construct the nearest sense of normalcy and routine possible for psycho-social reasons, it can also be a time for collaborative leadership and experimentation between teachers and learners. In fact, in this context teachers have the power to establish new possibilities with regards to the modes classroom learning they facilitate, including the use of social media. As Wankel (2011) suggests, in any circumstances “resistance to change is unacceptable, and dogmatically using traditional methods is an unsustainable alternative: the implications of moving towards social media are vast and rewarding in many ways” (Wankel 2011 p5).

Disaster context or not, there is a strong argument for the urgency of teacher preparedness and engagement in social media technologies. Researchers now agree that the risks of not conforming to new modes of learning far outweigh the retention of the traditional. Contemporary students live in an information rich world where access to media is ever present; as Gammon and White (2011) state, we are in a “cultural climate increasingly defined by the collaborative and networked technologies of the internet. This new context demands increased recognition from educators about the skills and strategies that students need in order to become skilled, responsible and engaged citizens” (Gammon and White 2011, p344). Moreover, Wankel (2011) supports the importance of Gammon and White’s observation through stating that “the importance of engaging students in new and emerging technologies in education cannot be underestimated. Using social media presents a more innovative experience that engages students in the process of their own learning rather than making them knowledge databases or receptacles” (Wankel 2011, p84). To repel change and not support the inclusion of new technologies brings unintended, but entirely preventable consequences for teachers. In fact, such resistance may threaten the most important learning resource a teacher and young person share: the relationship. As Jenkins and Losh write, “Each time a teacher tells students that what they care about the most, what makes them curious and passionate about outside of school, does not belong in the classroom, that teacher also delivers another message: What teachers care about, and what is mandated by educational standards

have little or nothing to do with learners activities and interests once the school bell rings” (Jenkins and Losh 2012, p19).

Referring to the complacency with which adults view young people’s use of new technologies, it is worth presenting a starting point for engaging young people and social media for learning purposes. Jenkins and Losh point out that “many young people today reach large audiences via blogs and social media, yet lack mature and knowledgeable mentors who might be able to give them advice on how to navigate the largely uncharted waters of online social relationships.” (Jenkins and Losh, 2012, p18). With this information at hand, it is worthwhile reminding teachers that in this era they can engage and support students through the development of 21st century literacies, which are “the technological competencies and the values, knowledge and dispositions needed to participate confidently and critically in local and global worlds” (Hull et al 2010, 331).

In the post-disaster context local and global worlds collide. Whether in relation to the involvement of international aid agencies and a disaster’s connection to other countries or global trends, or whether or not authorities and civil society organisations are responding to local needs effectively, young people too often find themselves as peripheral observers to events that are incredibly central to their lives. In this instance “nothing is more important than giving our kids the tools to face what’s happening in the world, to understand it, and to have the critical perspectives and confidence to be a part of changing it” (Meyer 2011, p26). This is where teachers, learners and social media can and should come together. Young people have the skills to utilize new technologies, but they need the support of their teachers to guide them, ask the critical questions, and initiate opportunities for online civic thinking to be applied through offline activities. It is about supporting young people as they move from the periphery of disaster response and into the centre of the rich learning and decision making processes available at such times.

Stakeholders of Tomorrow:

Today’s youth are tagged with monikers such as Generation TXT, Generation 2.0, and Generation Wired. If we recall Bauerlein’s (2009) critique of young people’s absorption in technology, then it would seem the identity with which they have been ascribed is somewhat diagnostic and potentially damaging. In this sense we either need to find ways in which we can help young people establish refreshed public identities or we need to redefine the way in which we interpret online technologies in relation to civic participation. As the following discussion highlights, democratic communities also need increased youth participation as means of securing the future health of their democracy. As well as this, society needs to recognise that civic participation will no longer be confined to town halls or grow from four walled classrooms. Instead, social media spaces, such as group pages on Facebook or Tumblr blogs, will accommodate debate and action planning for public good. And if current subscription rates are anything to go by, with appropriate mentoring young people are more than capable of leading the way.

The benefit of young people’s creative input and engagement in civil society is well recognised. Often though, we discuss young people’s participation as a

means of nurturing their own preparedness for future public responsibilities. As a youth serving endeavour it becomes difficult to advocate for the increased inclusion of young people in civic duties as preparedness can be seen as philanthropic and not an essential part of current political processes. Conversely, current research looks at the genuine need for youth participation from the perspective of present and future democratic wellbeing. Warren and Wicks (2011) write that “Democratic societies need to encourage political and civic engagement among young citizens because they will become future political and social leaders. Citizens who are politically and civically engaged [when they are young] will have a long term impact on society.” (Warren and Wicks 2011, p157) Similarly, Flanagan and Levine support this notion by stating that “the civic engagement of young adults – whether in the form of joining community groups, volunteering to help neighbours or leading grassroots efforts to gain civil rights – is important for the health and performance of democracy” (Flanagan and Levine 2010, p180). Later in their research, Flanagan and Levine conclude that “young adults who identify with, have a stake in, and want to contribute to their communities can help stabilize democratic societies by directing their discontent into constructive channels. They can also be a force for change; bringing new perspectives on political issues, and they can offer fresh solutions” (Flanagan and Levine 2010, p180).

As indicated above, actions which enhance citizenship qualities in young people “may include participating in community activities, volunteering, and other forms of civic life, such as working with charitable causes,” and with the right initiative from young people and teachers alike, a wealth of these opportunities can become available in the post disaster context (Warren and Wicks. 2011, p158). It is about challenging young people to see themselves as empowered stakeholders and this can only be achieved “through the [provision of] accumulated opportunities to be involved in groups that build civic identities and skills.” (Flanagan and Levine. 2010, p168) These opportunities allow for important constructive and functional understandings of citizenship as a concept and an action. And for individual youth “civic engagement fulfils a need to belong...through civic activities young generations come to appreciate their identities as members of the public” (Flanagan and Levine. 2010, p173). The outcomes of these processes, which also include improved self-conceptualisation, thinking skills, communication skills, and other organisational competencies, establish a life-long disposition for meaningful participation in civic affairs. As highlighted above, this is good for democracy, young people, and particularly good for a community’s level disaster preparedness.

Neva Frecheville, a youth campaigner from France, observes that compared to the older generations youth use new technology like social media much more effectively. She states that young people “are more creative, innovative and fun because we are not blinkered by the old ways and habits. We are setting the scene when it comes to creative approaches to social challenges. Our communication is positive and not ‘anti’ because basically through social media we are trying to envision the future that we want to live in” (Lubbadeh, 2011, p43) It is with this spirit of optimism that educators should be inspired to work alongside their learners and support the development of youth led solutions to contemporary social challenges. Nowhere is this aspiration more valuable than in the post-disaster or post conflict setting.

In the eastern suburbs of Christchurch, where educational achievement is below the national average and dependency on social services is high, a heightened sense of isolation and vulnerability was widely felt in the earthquake's aftermath. And compared to more affluent suburbs, there was a greater reliance on emergency support services for day to day survival. People – children, youth and adults alike - struggled to process the sequence of events which took place and as a mentality of fear and speculation kicked in, teachers often became young-people's trusted resource for filtered, community relevant and up to date facts. In lieu of classrooms being an open site for the processing of these events, students found teachers on Facebook; this provided an opportunity to connect, engage, and plan a response to the situation as a cohort. With the physical building closed, virtual classroom communities evolved online – and in so many instances it was the students who initiated it. Unfortunately though, this situation was uncommon and only a handful of teachers appropriated the opportunity; thus only some students gained from the learning and youth focused civic engagement opportunities facilitated. In this situation, we need to visualise a future where all teachers are appropriately skilled and prepared to use such technologies in order provide appropriate learning and civic service opportunities to all students following a natural disaster.

Much research on the role of social media and other online technologies revolves around the idea of participatory culture. It is well established that a key methodology for citizenship based learning is participation in community service, including engagement in planning and critical reflection processes. As discussed earlier in this paper, for the purposes of democratic capacity building and youth inclusive practices in disaster preparedness and recovery processes, the facilitation of young people's participation is of utmost importance. With regards to the development of participatory culture in the post disaster context the education sector has an advantageous starting position; as Warren and Wicks describe "schools have long been viewed as incubators of democratic participation... recent studies have shown that classrooms that foster discussion, encourage community projects, and utilise the use of the internet to increase levels of knowledge, affiliation and engagement" (Warran and Wicks. 2011, p160). In a similar vein, Merchant looks at the benefit of partnering technology and classroom learning for the promotion of participatory culture, writing that "participatory culture [in learning] stresses collaborative or collective experience and as such holds considerable appeal for those educators who prize joint enterprise and espouse communitarian ideology" (Merchant 2006, p119).

To further advocate for the importance of social media to engage young people in the post disaster context, Jenkins (2006) highlights some key points which reinforce its value. Jenkins uses the term participatory culture to capture the the idea that new technologies support new forms of youth civic engagement. He sees participatory culture as one with:

- Relatively low barriers to civic engagement
- Strong support for creating and sharing with others
- Some kind of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced members is passed on to the novices
- Where members believe that their contribution matters

- Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins 2006, p7)

Furthermore, the Euromedia (2004) identifies the presence of three interrelated strands evolving from the use of online media for participatory learning purposes, those are:

- *Cultural*: broadening learners' experience of different kinds of media and content
- *Critical*: developing learners' critical skills in analysing and assessing media outputs
- *Creative*: developing learners' creative skills in using media for expression and communication, and for participation in public debate. (Euromedia, 2004)

Moving Forward:

Former UNESCO Director General Rene Maheu (1962–1974) stated that “with their need for absolutes, the young are less than ever able to tolerate the injustices and disorder of the world.” (The UNESCO Courier, 2011, p15) Due to political oppression or deprivations resulting from natural disaster, young people have now turned to social media as a way of negotiating the associated challenges they face. They are innovative and entrepreneurial in their approach, and yet evidence suggests that many educators are being left behind. Through analysing current norms relating to young people's engagement in online technologies, exploring the benefits of social media use in an educational setting, and critiquing the resistance of many teachers to embrace social media's potential, this paper has sought to advocate for the incorporation of social media as a vital educational tool for developing youth citizenship in the post disaster context. Evidently, much research needs to be conducted in this specific area and presently we are only able to make informed, but largely observational conclusions regarding its value.

Furthermore, this paper has sought to justify the incorporation of social media in post disaster learning contexts not just as a whimsical trial of the latest trend, but as a sustainable pedagogical approach for long term educational success and the development of improved youth citizenship. Moving forward it would be worthwhile investigating how social media can be included in the international minimum standards for education in emergencies. Research concludes that youth engagement in learning and civic action in the post disaster context presents many educational and psycho-social benefits. Moreover, as demonstrated by the literature reviewed in this paper, by the successes of the Student Volunteer Army in New Zealand and the by the young people of Egypt, youth engagement – much of which now starts online - also delivers long term benefits to the rest of society.

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Youth, once upon a time in *The UNESCO Courier*, September 2011.

Bio:

Chris Henderson has a background in international community development and education, with specific expertise in South East Asia. He has most recently worked in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, and speaks Bahasa Indonesia. Chris has classroom experience as a Geography teacher and is passionate about the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development initiatives in low-decile New Zealand schools. Internationally, Chris' work has also focused on the role of teachers and young people in supporting disaster resilience and recovery practices, and in this area, Chris has designed and facilitated international workshops for the United Nations Environment Program and UNESCO.