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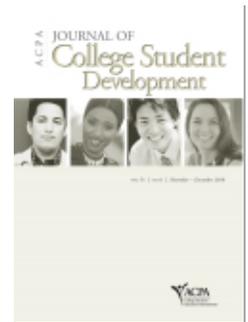
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Implications for Civic Learning

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Technology Uses in Campus Activism From 2000 to 2008: Implications for Civic Learning

J. Patrick Biddix

This qualitative study examines use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as computers, cell phones, text messaging, and social networking sites, for campus activism. Participants were 22 student leaders representing eight campuses from 2000 to 2008. The focus of this study was two-fold: first, to describe the form and function of ICT uses among campus activists from 2000 to 2008, and second, to identify relational learning practices in online environments contributing to civic learning. Over the 8-year period, the use of ICTs in campus activism evolved considerably, bearing considerations for civic learning, democratic engagement, and leadership practices in the digital age.

With a few exceptions (Astin, 1977; Keniston, 1969), the prevalent description of campus activism in higher education has been as disruptive rather than as complementary to educational outcomes (Chambers & Phelps, 1993). A developmental view emerged in the 1990s when educators, looking for social consciousness on campus, recognized an increased commitment to community service (Levine & Cureton, 1998; Levine & Hirsch, 1991), multiculturalism (Rhoads, 1998), and identity (Rhoads, 1997). Today, campus activism and “principled dissent” are considered desirable indicators of a robust civic learning environment (Keeling, 2004).

Using a phenomenological approach, this study sought evidence of civic learning among campus activists by exploring the forms and functions of information and communication

technology (ICT) use in the early digital age (2000–2008). A review of literature focused on developmental outcomes from campus activism and the role of technology in extracurricular learning follows. The key components of relational learning and leadership (Komives, Lucas, & McMahan, 2007) are used as a theoretical lens for examining civic learning in this environment.

ACTIVISM RECONSIDERED

Three studies advanced developmental considerations of campus activism. Hunter (1988) saw activism as a commitment to social consciousness, noting, “the activities of campus protest—rallies, debates, boycotts—provide college youth with opportunities for community and contexts for their exploration of personal growth” (p. 35). Chambers and Phelps (1993) found similarities between lessons learned in activist participation and involvement in traditional leadership roles, such as student government, fraternities, clubs, or other “institutionally accepted organized group[s]” (p. 19). Hamrick (1998) considered democratic theory alongside student activism, using a case study to point out core principles of democracy acted out in student unrest.

Building on this literature, contributors to *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) developed civic engagement outcomes. These included developing a sense of responsibility, committing to public life, engaging in principled dissent, and learning to be an effective leader. To encourage these outcomes, Komives

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and Schoper (2006) recommended that educators promote involvement in leadership courses, service learning, student organizations, and social activism.

TECHNOLOGY AND EXTRACURRICULAR LEARNING

The end of the 1990s brought the beginning of the digital age to campus, when technological innovation and capability met mass access (Jones, 2002). Since then, college students have increasingly turned to ICTs to support and enhance academic and social activities (Gordon, Juand, & Syed, 2007; Horrigan, 2008; Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008). Ever-expanding ICT use, coupled with increased access to those resources on campus, has added choice, customization, and flexibility to learning (Wilén-Daugenti, 2009), allowing students to “customize and enhance their own personal learning environment” (p. 97). Students connect with rapid and mobile capability (DeBlois & Oblinger, 2007; Montgomery, 2008; Rheingold, 2008), but although ICTs are lauded for efficiency and social support (Gemmill & Peterson, 2006), they may not engender commitment (Peabody, 2008) or help students to develop meaningful relationships (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007)—actions critical in campus activism (Gamson, 1975).

Using longitudinal data, Kuh and Huh (2001) found a mediating effect when technology use was included as an independent variable alongside engagement measures on certain outcomes. In other words, technology and engagement may have become so closely linked that it is difficult to separate activities (engagement) from the means (technology use; Laird & Kuh, 2005). Although, notably, the age of the dataset and the rapid diffusion of new technology may not have accounted for contemporary ICTs such as texting or social

networking software.

What remains unclear after reviewing the literature on the learning outcomes of campus activism and ICT use among college students is how technology specifically contributes to the civic learning environment. ICT in campus activism suggests expanded and new opportunities for democratic participation (Rheingold, 1991, 2008), although few studies have explored learning outcomes (Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009). This study seeks to address present deficiencies by viewing ICT use among campus activists within a relational leadership framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE RELATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A progressively more technology-laden and networked society requires collaborative practices to lead, relate, learn, and accomplish change (Allen & Cherrey, 2000), characteristics of a postindustrial view of leadership (Rost, 1993). Day (2001) saw this interconnectedness as necessitating a shared commitment among organizational participants, “beyond merely knowing what and knowing how, to knowing who in terms of problem-solving resources” (p. 596). Shertzer and Schuh (2004) found campus leaders empowered in settings exhibiting these ideals, and recommended educators work to shift the campus environment to a more postindustrial/relational perspective to promote development.

Relational leadership builds toward interdependence as a desirable leadership characteristic (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). This study focused on the environmental learning considerations of ICT use; therefore, evidence of individual leadership identity development (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006) may emerge in results, but discussion

is tailored to focus on what such actions and behaviors suggest for civic learning within organizations. At this level, purpose, inclusivity, empowerment, ethics, and process interact to promote participation, meaningful contribution, and change (Komives et al., 2007).

According to Komives et al. (2007), a purposeful environment is characterized by a commitment to mission and social responsibility. Similarly, an inclusive environment permits diverse points of view and is focused on talent development, coalition building, and civil discourse. Those involved are empowered by sharing practices, encouragement and affirmation, and capacity building among all members. This takes place within an ethical environment where members can trust each other, promoting exploration and development of values, congruency, and allowing confrontation. Overall, these components are most effectively realized in a collaborative, process-oriented, setting focused on creating change and making meaning. In this environment, “(the process) is just as important as the outcome. How the goals are accomplished and how others are involved in the process matters” (Komives et al., 2007, pp. 75–76). A phenomenological approach exploring relational aspects of campus activism in the digital age follows.

Rationale for Phenomenology

This study followed a phenomenological perspective (Patton, 1990) to uncover ways ICTs influenced civic learning of campus activists, conceptually similar to Rhoads’ (1997) approach at understanding student activism in the 1990s. Phenomenology is appropriate for research studies aiming to expose “lived experiences” (e.g., uses of technology) described through the practices and viewpoints of participants (e.g., campus activists). This focus allows the researcher to discern and describe the “essence” of human experience, marking

phenomenology as both a philosophy and as a method (Creswell, 1998).

Another basis for this approach is the researcher’s ability to select a theoretical lens (e.g., relational leadership) to view experiences for deeper examination (Patton, 2006). This strategy permeated all aspects of the study—conception, data collection, and interpretation—in an attempt to go beyond form and function to understand the significance campus activists attached to ICT use. To assist with this view, two campus activists from different time periods in the study served as ongoing consultants, based on Moustakas’ (1994) recommendation for using participants as co-researchers to advance understanding in phenomenological research.

METHODOLOGY

Sites and Participants

A total of 22 students from eight campuses participated in the study. A broad sample of campus activists, covering nearly 8 years of involvement, was attained through a chain, or snowball, sampling approach (Patton, 1990) that began with the identification of gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are participants who assist entry into the field by facilitating access to additional participants and to archival information (Creswell, 1998). In this study, two gatekeepers at separate sites served as consultants during instrumentation, data collection, and initial coding.

The first gatekeeper, a student leader in a 2005 building occupation for a living wage, was identified and contacted by means of information published on the student group’s Web site. This gatekeeper was selected based on several criteria: the occupation was one of several highly visible campus living wage actions across the United States that year, the group had an active Web presence with hyperlinks to campaigns and supporters at other campuses,

and several reported actions involved uses of ICT. Recommendations from this gatekeeper led to a total of nine interviews with students spanning 6 campuses (Georgetown University, Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University, Stanford University, Swarthmore College, and Washington University in St. Louis). Data collection took place during the 2004 and 2005 academic year.

The second gatekeeper was selected after the publication of a student's guide to activism at the University of Michigan (Bates, 2007). This gatekeeper was selected based on several criteria: the publication was widely distributed online, the publication offered a student's history and perspective of activism at University of Michigan beginning with the Port Huron Statement, and advice demonstrated the use of ICTs in student activism. Recommendations from this gatekeeper led to a total of 13 interviews with students spanning two campuses (University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the University of Michigan). Data collection took place during the spring of 2008.

Participants had to meet two criteria to be included in the study: Affiliation with a campus group with an activist or political mission and active involvement in the group. Several participants were affiliated with more than one group, and therefore spoke from multiple experiences. In this way, perspectives from over 30 groups were represented. These included political and reform/advocacy groups, such as Students for a Living Wage, the Asian American Youth Project, GLBT Advocates and Allies, and Public Interest Research Groups.

Participants were overrepresented in terms of gender (17 women, 5 men) and involvement period. Of the 22 participants, 4 held positional leadership roles from 2000 to 2002, 5 from 2003 to 2005, and 13 from 2006 to 2008. Participants were not asked to disclose race/ethnicity, although several

referenced experiences as members of minority or marginalized groups. Before interviews, participants were sent an institutional review board-approved informed consent.

Data Collection and Analysis

An interview guide was used to permit open-ended questions without imposing a rigid structure (Patton, 1990). This method allowed the flexibility to probe, explore, or ask relevant follow-up questions as needed while still addressing major points. Topics for the interview guide were collaboratively developed with the two gatekeepers. This joint approach largely accounted for the use and diffusion of new ICTs between the two phases of data collection (e.g., the importance of texting or blogging among later activists) and helped to frame initial guidelines for questions. Excluding questions directed at the use of specific ICTs, the following topics were common to each interview: A personal history of participation in social activist organizations, uses of ICT within the organization/s, the nature of communication between members, and an overall evaluation of ICT use. In many cases, participants referenced publicly viewable online documents to evidence their work, which entered into analysis as a triangulation strategy.

Twenty-one interviews were conducted electronically by means of instant text messaging (IM) software. IM allows for real-time interaction and a semistructured format. One interview was conducted via e-mail exchanges. Researchers using Internet-based tools for data gathering face many of the same challenges as those conducting traditional face-to-face sessions (Mann & Stewart, 2002), with two additional considerations. A prerequisite for both researcher and informant is software proficiency. Students in this study were asked if IM was an acceptable and comfortable format before each interview. Further, an absence of visual cues can be difficult to

manage (Humphreys, 2005), although setting ground rules can be helpful (Biddix, 2008). To approximate visual cues, participants were asked to type “done” at the end of a thought.

Transcribed data for each interview ranged from 1,452 to 6,250 words per interview ($m = 3,153$, $s = 1,147$). Most interviews took place over several sessions, ranging from 1 to more than 2 hours in length per session. Data analysis and verification followed an interpretive interaction approach (Denzin, 1989). This involved the following process: (a) Locating statements and key phrases identifying form and function of ICT uses, (b) interpreting meaning as a researcher, (c) working to obtain the meaning from a participant point of view, (d) looking for reoccurring aspects among other interviews, and (e) offering initial statements that capture the reoccurring aspects for participant verification. To enhance reliability and trustworthiness, final descriptions were shared with two participants, as well as a reviewer experienced in interpretive interaction. Further, archived information provided by participants (e.g., links to Facebook groups, news stories, student group Web sites) were checked against participant descriptions as a triangulation strategy. These verification checks resulted in no major revisions.

Regarding limitations, a larger sample from additional institutions could provide further insight into the experiences of students using ICT for activism. Technological fluency is a subject characteristic bias in this study, largely owing to the sampling procedure. An analysis of differences in access to and fluency with ICT use among students was beyond the scope of investigation, but may yield a contrasting viewpoint. This study makes no claim at generalization for all student activists; however, perspectives from early adopters and those comfortable in completely online environments were represented.

FINDINGS

Findings are organized by date of general or widespread ICT use during the delimited study time (2000–2008), as recollected by participants. To define and describe the use of technology in campus activism, two subsections for each ICT are presented. The intent of this arrangement is to provide the reader with a quick reference by ICT type, as well as to frame the subsequent discussion relating form and function to learning outcomes. Readers will note some sections are much more detailed than others, reflecting both the longevity and development of tools used. Finally, quotations were intentionally left out of this section to allow for an uninterrupted narrative and to maintain a collective description (DeVault & McCoy, 2002).

Form and Function of E-Mail

Form. E-mail was the basis of online communication for campus activists. As a tool for announcements, campus activists partitioned e-mail by task. A single electronic list was adequate for organizations in the early decade, but several factors worked to branch this into today’s multitiered system. The first major split came when students, fearing administrators were reading messages to/from university-provided e-mail accounts, formed secondary lists through noncampus accounts. As more students connected via e-mail, leaders found the general list difficult to moderate with anyone able to post announcements, opinions, and general comments. Messages between existing members in this forum intimidated novice entry into the online activity of the group. Furthermore, occasionally members abused the list by sending either too many messages in a short time or by initiating arguments, producing countless rebuttals. Both actions resulted in flooded inboxes that were either user filtered (sent to the trash) or simply ignored.

As a tool for decision making, campus activists created small lists only for leaders, allowing group decision making at times when meeting in person was not feasible. Students were now able to continue work without the traditional boundaries imposed by student schedules such as class, study time, work, and involvement in other organizations. This capability proved invaluable to earlier activists, who recalled connecting during academic breaks to maintain momentum. Although at that time important decisions were still relegated to in-person meetings, several of the more contemporary groups were able to reach consensus during periods when schedules prohibited face-to-face meetings. Contemporary activists described an inverse relationship between size of the group and capability of making critical decisions online. Only smaller groups felt comfortable with this format. Larger groups had to meet in person to resolve differences.

As a tool for discussion, campus activists created lists to allow for debate. This required a monitoring function to gently (and sometimes not so gently) request conversations be moved from the announcements list to the discussion forum. Although partitioning mailing lists worked for a few groups, most student leaders believed this action silenced discussion. Some posited it was because those members engaged in the debate wanted the wider audience, whereas others believed the step of moving debate to another forum resulted in a loss of momentum. A related action is the member removal process initiated by some groups. Repeat offenders, or those continually starting debates in the announcement forum, baiting, or otherwise using harmful language, were either suspended or removed to preserve the forum. Several student leaders observed that topics populating e-mail debates, especially heated discussions, typically did not spill into face-to-face meetings. This helped to keep

meetings on task, and also served as a venue for individual voices and opinions perhaps unheard in regular meetings.

As a tool for management, groups with committee structures frequently created issue-specific lists to specify information on certain events, such as during a protest action or election. This targeting function was equally mentioned among students working in early campaigns and in more recent ones to ensure important messages were read.

Function. When examining the recruitment function of e-mail, gender differences emerged in the descriptions provided by student leaders. Male leaders tended to view e-mail as a mass solicitation tool, most efficiently used for invitations and announcements. Women leaders tended to view e-mail as a communicative tool for gauging and building commitment, most efficiently used to solidify personal connections (via one-to-one messages). For example, men were often content to add potential members to the announcements list after a recruitment meeting, whereas women were more likely to follow-up with a call or personalized e-mail. A further consideration of gender differences is explored elsewhere (Biddix, 2010).

As an engagement function, e-mail served three critical roles. First, to promote and maintain member involvement, e-mail was a lifeline at times when other obligations prevented meetings. However, announcements could be quickly lost in the barrage of other messages students receive, so it became critical for both the sender to tailor messages and for the receiver to effectively manage them. Second, e-mail was critical to campus activist groups who maintained involvement with off-campus supporters and/or constituents, either for work or for collaboration. Students found e-mail an easy way to leave messages for non-campus collaborators who were less likely to keep college schedules (e.g., late night

phone calls). Third, for those individuals or groups connected to larger organizations, e-mail lent a sense of connection to the broader campaign. In some cases, a national movement, such as RocktheVote (<http://www.rockthevote.com>) or even a global one, such as the Global Climate Campaign (<http://www.globalclimatecampaign.org>), may only have a few members on a campus, but tens of thousands as part of the larger association. Those few members across campuses were likely unable to meet, so e-mail became an important tool to build involvement.

Mobilization is closely related to both recruitment and involvement. E-mail lists created for awareness/advocacy easily transitioned to mobilization tools for student activists. E-mail lists were vital for both informing others and generating support, especially when providing specific instructions for getting involved. Students used lists for rally announcements, calls for help, and even online petitioning campaigns, but contemporary students preferred text messaging (discussed later) as a more effective means of quick mobilization.

Form and Function of the Internet, Web Pages, and Weblogs

Form. Students used the Internet as an information-gathering source, publicizing venue, and tool to connect with others. Millions of additional pages added since 2000 created a vast navigable data repository, critical for informing specific causes either underserved or not updated in campus libraries. For example, anti-sweatshop activists found limited information in the early millennium to support their issue locally, but partnered online with nonprofit organizations to gather, store, and share information.

The majority of student leaders from earlier campaigns discussed the importance of creating a group Web page. A Web page was an

essential means of communicating issues to the larger global community, making it easier for supporters, press, and other interested parties to keep up with an organization's actions. Also, an updated Web page with active hyperlinks facilitated information sharing among institutions with issue-specific movements. Therefore, a simple Web search could lead to information on local campaigns through a trail of connected links. This particularly helped smaller campaigns often struggling for publicity. Weblogs are structurally the same as Web pages, although convention makes them more of a chronological record of events. The hierarchical structure creates a timeline of posts users can browse to review a group's actions. Earlier campaigns, although perhaps not using the word to describe the feature, often maintained what students today would consider a Weblog.

The ability to view Web sites and campus news stories chronicling student actions at other campuses helped to provide both new ideas as well as contact information for seeking advice. Comprehensively, this connected individual campaigns to larger ones, in much the same way conferences and newsletters did before use of the Internet. Equally important, the Internet allowed students to locate others interested in an issue who may not be locally represented.

Function. Early on, campus activists saw the Internet as a subsidiary tool, but quickly came to realize its importance as an archive and resource for others. When maintained, students universally agreed that a Web page was an important part of the campaign. Visitors to student group Web pages in the most effective earlier labor rights campaigns found ways to take immediate action. From online petitions to e-mail addresses and phone numbers for decision makers, students offered a variety of ways to participate, but with few exceptions among the larger groups, Web pages were not

as critical to recent activists as those near the beginning of the millennium. Leaders in more contemporary organizations (2005–present) noted that Web pages were underutilized, especially with regard to capabilities offered by blogs, such as group discussion. A Web page was viewed as static technology—an online repository much less likely to change than an e-mail message, Facebook page, or Google document, which were constantly in flux.

Student leaders rationalized a Web presence added legitimacy to the group—a place where the mission, history, archives, and relevant documents could be housed, but many functions once assigned to Web sites have moved to more easily maintained venues. Leaders explained on-the-go students were more likely to view a message received in an e-mail inbox or on a Facebook wall than to remember to check a Web site. Nonetheless, keeping a site at least moderately updated served a critical role for student activist movements, facilitating efficiency and survival through times of both mobilization and latency (Biddix & Park, 2008).

Form and Function of Cell Phones and Texting

Form. The diffusion of cell phones among college students since 2000 (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007) coupled with expanded ways to connect (voice/text/Internet) led to significant leaps in capability for campus activists. Widespread adoption and affordable service plans gave student activists mobility and connected them to an invaluable voice-to-voice network. In 2005, text messaging (texting) became an efficient way for students to send rapid individual or mass messages. In the past 2 years, cell phones began offering affordable Internet connection options, lending further mobility to nearly every tool available to activists.

Function. Using cell phones to organize

and quickly mobilize others was an important component of student action in earlier campaigns. Cell phone trees allowed students to swiftly contact others during actions to bolster support. Another function owing to mobile connectivity was the phone-in campaign, in which students handed passers-by cell phones speed dialed to decision makers. This tactic was often used cross-institutionally, where, for example, students at the University of Virginia called decision makers at Miami during a labor rights sit-in.

Using cell phones for texting allowed students to send a single message to multiple users for quick updates and reminders. Texting was regarded as more efficient than calling, allowing mass messages versus individual calls. When an event required immediacy (e.g., a poorly attended rally), leaders viewed texting as highly efficient, although opinions of effectiveness were mixed. Using cell phones to access the Internet is a more recent function. Although students rarely discussed the use of Web-enhanced phones, one example was notable. A student leader involved with anti-genocide advocacy shared the story of a friend who was arrested for trespassing as part of a protest. The police did not confiscate his cell phone during booking, which allowed the student to text supporters and post reports to the organization's blog while in jail.

Form and Function of IM

Form. Electronic chat, or IM, was a common tool for student actions earlier in the decade, although mobile capabilities have evolved its use in much the same way as cell phones. IM requires a computer or Web-enabled hardware to establish a connection with other users. It is similar to texting, although it was seen as a precursor by students for its requirement for individual accounts (e.g., Google Talk and AOL IM) and stationary hardware (i.e., until the recent introduction of IM-packaged phones

and other Web-enabled mobile hardware). IM was a way for students to remain connected to others without the interruptions of a ringing phone—important for students in class, studying, or in a meeting. IM also offered away messages, or availability indicators, which allowed users to see who was accessible.

Function. Students used IM in labor rights campaigns to quickly gather information and solicit advice from peers. For example, during their sit-in and hunger strike for a living wage, students at Washington University connected with participants from recently completed actions at Georgetown and Harvard. More recently, this function has been largely relegated to texting, owing to the capability for multiple users to simultaneously connect with others, wireless campus connections, and the efficiency of carrying one device (a phone) versus two or more (a computer and a phone). IM was regarded as message board and form of e-mail. Using an away message, students indicated whether they were available, creating the perception of a much quicker response than waiting for e-mail, because the user was confirmed as being able to immediately reply. For example, as the only campus member of a national youth advocacy group, one woman served as an organizer for chapters all over the country. She provided support by offering AIM office hours on a regular basis for advocates at other campuses seeking ideas and feedback on events. Although she recalled that the service was not widely used, she valued its capability and impact.

Form and Function of Facebook

Form. Facebook (www.facebook.com), a social networking application, allows members to connect with others who share similar interests. This process results in individual networks accessible by a personal profile. Members can send messages and event invitations to individuals and/or groups. In this way, the application offers an efficient means

of communicating with supporters and approximating event participation. Facebook also adds one noteworthy advantage over e-mail and other text-only applications, critical to activist efforts—the ability to “see” the message sender. Messages sent or received are tagged with the user’s profile picture. Although this may seem trivial, student leaders stressed the effectiveness of being able to “see” the face of the person they were mobilizing. Forming and maintaining relationships is historically critical in effective activist movements (Diani & McAdam, 2003; Gamson, 1975).

Function. Facebook was adopted by activist student leaders in a variety of effective ways. Early users created Facebook groups to build advocacy and support networks. From this foundation, students could generate immediate support and, more critically, mobilize a larger base before and during significant actions. Membership in a Facebook group created an easy way to send messages to all members, who were likely to check Facebook messages more often than e-mail. Further, group membership and association rapidly diffused among Facebook members, as friends continued to invite other friends. When sending mass messages in this medium, activists were better able to reach a target audience of students already in a group. For example, Facebook was the primary way students working for a state Public Interest Research Group to send messages about meetings, arranged schedules for tabling, rides to canvass, and other actions.

Several women leaders in this study referred to Facebook as a bridge between the efficiency offered by mass online communications and the impersonality of text-based messages. Facebook offered a personality with the message, effectively used as a follow-up tool after meeting someone in person. As one leader noted, friending someone first met face-to-face says, “I remember meeting you and I want to know more about

you/get you involved.” Recruits received a personal message from a friendly face with similar interests, hooking them into the larger community of involved students on campus. This approach could be very effective, noted several women leaders, who recalled friending eased their transition into new groups.

Form and Function of Google Accounts

Form. A relative newcomer to student activism is the expanded use of Google Accounts, which provide group functions such as multiple e-mail lists, a chat function, an easily updatable Web page, online message and document archives, and, more recently, the ability to peer edit and create documents online (with Google Docs). Although universities provide similar technological capabilities, students tended to prefer Google owing to familiarity with the applications (creating ease of use), efficiency (versus the same capabilities spread over several proprietary campus applications), consistency and reliability (campus servers are perceived to be fragile), portability (tools can be accessed from virtually anywhere), and lack of administrative control (no applications or prerequisites for group registration).

Function. Google Accounts offered activists a single portal for all online organizing needs—an area for mass e-mails, memos, and a place to upload and create files for group editing and review. In theory, this approach broadened involvement for students who could not attend face-to-face sessions, although leaders admitted it was most useful for the core group who would otherwise plan, organize, and mobilize others. In this sense, the function of Google Accounts may best be described as promoting efficiency than for expanding involvement.

DISCUSSION

Uses of ICT in campus activism evidence a learning environment extending well beyond

the boundaries traditionally imposed by less mobile, less connective, or less relational technologies. DeBlois and Oblinger’s (2007) “net generation” depiction of connected, engaged, participating, mobile and flexible, and visual students was supported in this study, as were Wilen-Daugenti’s (2009) aspects of a technology-enhanced learning environment emphasizing customization, extension, and flexibility. More directly, whereas previous considerations of college student civic engagement (DeBlois & Oblinger, 2007; Eckert & Henschel, 2000) did not link conceptual uses of ICT (i.e., what is possible) to action (i.e., what happens), this study outlined specific practices in the context of campus activism.

Integrated into this discussion are developmental elements of an online learning environment (DeBlois & Oblinger, 2007; Wilen-Daugenti, 2009), supported by strong evidence of relational leadership practices (Komives et al., 2007) embedded in the work of campus activists. This is accompanied by dimensions of the civic engagement learning outcome (Keeling, 2004) woven into the discussion, including sense of civic responsibility, commitment to public life through communities of practice, and effective in leadership. Three general themes incorporate these environmental, developmental, and participatory frameworks to enlighten aspects of civic learning in the early digital age (2000–2008): (a) Relational learning in contemporary campus activism, (b) opportunities to participate and meaningfully contribute, and (c) learning and commitment through communities of practice.

Relational Learning in Contemporary Campus Activism

Traditional notions of learning separate knowledge acquisition (e.g., classroom activity) from social fulfillment (e.g., extracurricular

involvement). Mezirow's (1991, 2000) work on transformative learning was an influential criticism of this notion, advancing the premise that learning was a function of perspective change, which was enhanced by social interaction. The contributors to *Learning Reconsidered* reminded us of this disconnect, calling for expanded opportunities for integrated learning structures to "restore the missing holism" (Keeling, 2004, p. 8) to the college learning environment, further extended by Wilen-Daugenti (2009) to include online participation and interaction. Such notions parallel the five components of relational learning (Komives et al., 2007), which strongly emphasized social interaction as critical to effective learning. An example demonstrating each of the five elements (purposeful, inclusive, empowering, ethical, and process oriented) is recalled below.

In an environment where issues could become urgent overnight, yet required an informed opinion, learning was often paired with sharing. The Internet was the primary venue for locating information, although students became critical of its use as an information source. Although activists in the early millennium shared links to information with caution, a more skeptical contemporary generation learned to bypass news filters to locate and to distribute primary sources (Stelter, 2008). For example, instead of sharing a link to a story about a political speech, students sent the text, audio, or video of the actual words. Direct, immediate, and on-the-go access to information allowed campus activists the ability to make decisions based on personal conclusions or influenced more directly by group norms. In this way, knowledge acquisition became an interactive and social activity, evidencing an inclusive social learning environment built on common purpose, most effective when others were empowered to contribute. Participation

was dependent on ethical practices within the community where information shared was reliable and valued. Group norms and practices dictated such processes as who could contribute, when, and how often, although generally contribution was more contingent on being first to locate information rather than holding a positional leadership role.

Opportunities to Participate and Meaningfully Contribute

Access and opportunity to contribute are critical prerequisites for knowledge acquisition (Eckert & Henschel, 2000). Limited involvement or marginal rights to participate do not provide opportunities for engaged learning. Considering the consequences of such exclusion promotes a deeper understanding of the effects of discrimination. Gutmann (1987) noted working within principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination is essential in a democratic society. Such lessons are perhaps best learned, practiced, and explored in the "middle democracy" of a college campus (see also Hamrick [1998]). Opportunities to meaningfully participate enable members to negotiate entry, level of participation, and place within the community.

For campus activists, continued participation, which frequently began with reading online materials and joining a listserv, created opportunities for deeper engagement. Examples included posting information, participating in discussions, and ultimately working to create change in accordance with the mission of the organization. Archived listserv and Google discussions, Facebook wall posts, and Weblogs allowed new members a glimpse at the culture of the organization, promoting earlier opportunities to contribute. As involvement transitioned to engagement, highly involved students became information consultants for others who connected across geographic boundaries for advice and ideas. In these ways, students learned to more

quickly recognize the organizational culture and existent structures in a community to evaluate the potential to make contributions.

ICTs are lateral media, meaning that anyone can be sender, receiver, poster, or collaborator of information. Although leadership hierarchies were present in nearly every group represented in this study, leaders emphasized capabilities afforded by e-mail, Facebook messages, and Google discussions for all members, new and established, to meaningfully contribute to the group. This reality, when coupled with encouragement from leadership, empowered new members early in their involvement. Groups most successful at ensuring commitment and building engagement found ways of initiating group members early in the involvement phase. The most effective were methods aimed at personal, one-on-one follow-ups.

Learning and Commitment Through Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are characterized by shared ways of doing, beliefs, and values. Individuals may belong to several communities, each requiring specific knowledge and expertise for participation (Wenger, 1998). Learning occurs through participation that grows with engagement; therefore, the desire to become more involved becomes a strong motivator to learn (Eckert & Henschel, 2000). The greatest potential for learning can be found in situations where active participation has consequences for both the individual and the community. Although a variety of characteristics can influence commitment, an environment offering multiple ways to create change in an organization or community builds confidence in member's leadership capability (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004), is a desirable for promoting civic engagement (Keeling, 2004), and demonstrates key components of relational learning (Komives et al., 2007).

In many groups, up-to-date organizational records were posted online for easy access, allowing new members to more efficiently "get up to speed" on history, future plans, and ways to get involved. This was critical for ensuring participation and promoting inclusivity. Using an example given by several different interviewees, new members or introverted students were often intimidated by older members and less likely to ask questions. This limited the potential for further involvement, and could ultimately result in attrition. Functions not requiring face-to-face to membership for participation, such as reviewing text or audio notes from a meeting, participating in a discussion, sharing in online decision making, or engaging in a chat session with other members allowed students to become more deeply involved with an organization despite time or geographic conflicts. In these ways, activists are able to build membership and commitment through varied opportunities to get involved, stay involved, and involve others (Author, 2009).

At times, activists found they had to temper open access to preserve the greater community. After witnessing bullying, personal attacks, and/or other marginalizing behaviors in online environments, students took steps to maintain online community as a space open to and tolerant of all perspectives. Leaders faced with such issues experienced the ethical decisions administrators have to confront when balancing students' right to express themselves on campus with preserving the free exchange of ideas. Such lessons offered students experience understanding what a connected society open to all opinions requires to manage and maintain—perhaps crucial in promoting learning and commitment in future communities of practice ever-more reliant on ICTs.

The form and function of ICT uses uncovered in this study evidenced relational leadership practices among campus activists,

bolstered by learning opportunities in online environments. Communities of practice focused on social commitment offered students opportunities to participate and meaningfully contribute to change—powerful learning lessons for effective future leadership and participation in civic endeavors. Considering the need for such skills in an era of rapidly evolving technological change, Komives et al. (2007) wrote:

Conditions in our rapidly changing world require that each of us become effective members of our groups and communities in order to work with others toward needed change and for common purpose. The way we relate to each other matters and is symbolic of our social responsibility. (p. 112)

CONSIDERATIONS

Technological capability has substantially expanded and evolved since the early 2000s. Campus activists are now hyperconnected via mobile devices to communities with remarkable access to information and mobilization. At no time in history have activists had such mass information and support potential. As Eckert and Henschel (2000) suggested, this environment offers new considerations for civic learning.

Campus activists sent messages through a variety of ways, but leaders found establishing a personal connection was the most effective means of building and keeping support. This was particularly true for women leaders, who tended to personalize communication to promote deeper involvement. Mobile media expanded the reach of messages, although without carefully tailored communication, messages were quickly deleted. Perhaps adaptations to overcome apathy and non-response to calls for action in online environments will help prepare students to more effectively recruit and engage others as active citizens in the digital age.

Campus activists provided members e-mail or Weblog spaces for debate and discussion. An online venue offered several features attractive for communal conversations: The opportunity to post a response to wide audience, the ability to carefully consider a response before posting, and the potential to increase participation of women, minorities, and new members in general when speaking in a group of people. However, abuse (harmful language or name calling) created the need for a monitoring function with the power to suspend or remove members. Perhaps adaptations to preserve democratic participation will help to commit students as future citizens to universal community principles and inclusivity.

Campus activists frequently maintained relationships with off-campus supporters and constituents. Many constituents, whose involvement was critical for advocacy to be successful, were not connected to ICT-latent networks. Leaders feared as movements turned increasingly to ICTs to inform and coordinate efforts, constituents were left behind. Perhaps such learning lessons, if cultivated, will ensure the next generation of active citizens will work to include voices missing from online formats.

The final consideration suggested by student use of ICTs is whether or not civic engagement can be accomplished on the go. Campus activists did not view rapid mobilization as the greatest advantage offered by ICTs, but saw the ability to connect quickly to direct information or expert advice as vital. These capabilities foretell a devoted citizenry committed to publicly available sources of information willing to share expertise and contribute in various meaningful ways to change. Such commitments may bring us ever closer to Rheingold's (1991) truly participatory democratic society.

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