

WWW and multicultural democracy: Evaluating U.S. History websites

Cecil Robinson, Douglas McKnight, The University of Alabama, Campus Box 870231, Department of Educational Studies, College of Education, Tuscaloosa, AL, 35487-0231
Email: crobinson@bamaed.ua.edu, dmcknigh@bamaed.ua.edu

Abstract: Claims about the potential of the Internet within social studies and democratic education have been somewhat silent on issues of diversity. To address this problem, this study employed tenets of liberal and multicultural democratic theory, developed an evaluative coding scheme, and examined content of websites that preservice teachers ($N = 20$) selected as resources for U.S. History unit plans. Results indicate selected websites housed a large amount of redundant non-diverse information. Website content was available in local media resources, consisted of textbook accounts, and focused on traditional historical topics; only one of ten websites was diverse. A four-cluster model provides further support for a discussion about the Internet, as currently used and framed, leading to less diversity of ideas and voices within the classroom, anathema to the stated democratic purposes of the social studies.

Although there are an increasing number of claims about the potential of the Internet within social studies and democratic citizenship education (Glenn, 1990; Mason et al., 2000; Whitson & Berson, 2003), social education research has been somewhat silent on issues of diversity and technology (Marri, 2003b; Zambon, 2003). This is problematic because technology, citizenship and diversity have been propelled to the center of the global stage. The Internet brings people, places and events from around the world into our daily lives, and has led to a complex and expanded concept of diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2001) that requires global citizens to interrogate the multiple voices that span class, gender, race and national borders, shape world issues, and provide guidance for one role of the social studies. As stated in the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS, 2002) standards, “[t]he primary purpose of the social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”

A small number of social education research studies have started to explore the relationships between technology, social education, democracy, and diversity (c.f., Marri, 2003b; Salinas & Robinson, 2002; Zambon, 2003). This paper adds to the literature by presenting liberal and multicultural conceptions of democratic citizenship as a framework to evaluate the content of Internet websites in relation to the NCSS goals on diversity. The present study employed the tenets of liberal and multicultural democratic theory to develop a coding scheme to examine the content of websites that preservice teachers selected for a U.S. History unit plan. The results provided fodder for a discussion of how the Internet, as currently used and framed within social studies and technology research, may lead to less diversity of ideas and voices within the classroom, anathema to the stated purposes of the social studies.

Justification

One of John Dewey’s central concerns was “the relationship between the school and the larger life of the community” (1915, p. 20). When this relationship was not congruent, he posited that “certain changes in the methods and materials of the school work” were necessary such that school “might be better adapted to present social needs” (p. 20). These quotes identify the need to adapt both the ‘methods’ and ‘materials’ of education to meet social needs. On the surface, it is an obvious statement that educational change can stem from the methods teachers use to guide students’ experiences. Less obvious may be the agency attributed to curriculum and materials—particularly media—in creating constraints and affordances that affect whether learning occurs and social needs are met (Dewey, 1958). For Dewey, learning “depends critically on the reflective medium in which activity takes place. ... The medium must be capable of instantiating the key elements of a domain of inquiry—broadly construed—in a manner accessible to students” (Schaffer, 2005, p. 14, 15). However, there is a dearth of social studies and technology research focused explicitly on media—most research has centered on methods. Technology research in social studies is typically the ‘application’ (methods) of technology in social studies classrooms, or the ways teacher educators, teachers and students ‘use’ technology (c.f., Bolick, Berson, Coutts, & Heinecke, 2003). A similar trend is also present within democratic education research, which focuses on teaching students to use technology to collect, store, analyze and manipulate data as a means to participate in democratic society (Glenn, 1990). Focusing solely on methods reifies technological deterministic impulses that *a priori* assume

technology progresses us towards societal and educational ends (McKnight & Robinson, in press). This determinism situates technology and progress as givens and thereby beyond critique. Discussions are not about inherent tensions or limitations of technology, but revolve around lack of access, integration and skills to acquire “more information.” Such predilections translate into discussions about the Internet that are not about examination and change, but as an ideal—the amorphous ‘potential’ of the Internet. This study attempts to resist this potential pitfall by asking the question: What information did preservice teachers select when using the Internet for a U.S. History unit plan? More specifically we ask: “Where did they go? What did they access? Was the information accessed not readily available in other media formats?” Such questions do not assume the inevitability of the Internet as a neutral tool (Bowers, 1988) or necessary societal good (Bromley, 1998). It instead treats the Internet as a historically inscribed cultural artifact that must be examined and interrogated within its social spheres of use (Feenberg, 1995).

Conceptual Framework

“The relationship between the school and the larger life of the community” is measured through “present social needs” (Dewey, 1915, p. 20). Though there are a multitude of claims about the societal justification of social studies in education, perhaps the most common is that social studies is the discipline to develop a democratic citizenry. For Dewey, education and its associated materials and methods were means to political democratic ends, and societal needs were to be evaluated through these political ends. To make claims about the relationship between schooling, its methods and materials and democracy, one must articulate a democratic framework (Dewey’s political ends) so that one has a lens to evaluate social needs and educational change. And past technology research has indeed articulated a democratic framework. Consider the following claims by Berson, Lee, and Stuckart (2001) concerning the usefulness of the Internet in social education to create an informed democratic citizen:

Today, effective citizenship includes a range of computer technology skills.... Citizenship in a democracy implies critical thought, and critical thought requires information. Technology can make more information available to students than ever before. The Internet, in particular, has the ability to dramatically increase the amount of information available to students. (p. 214)

This quote reveals assumptions about relationships between the Internet, democracy and social studies education: citizenship in a democracy requires citizens to reason critically, interpreted as the ability to process large amounts of information; the Internet is a medium that provides access to the information to be processed; and the social studies classroom is a site to practice this skill, assumed essential in a modern democratic state. Each component is useful and has provided a foundation for social studies educators to think about and employ the Internet in their instruction. However, these claims present a narrow account of democracy that creates an incomplete picture of the relationship between democracy, the Internet and social studies. This account disregards—or does not consider necessary—discussion on how diverse information, theoretical perspectives and voices should stem from democratic principles and the ways that the Internet affords and/or constrains these principles. Liberal democratic ideals attempt to avoid this critique by arguing for ‘diverse information,’ and elaborating on the technology savvy, rational conception that ‘more information’ enables citizens to engage in democratic deliberation.

A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence, a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures. (Dewey, 1916, p. 305)

Dewey’s vision of a progressive democratic society problematizes claims that more information is necessary for democratic citizenry because these claims do not ensure that ‘more information’ is not ‘more of the same information.’ To sustain its democratic health, society must seek out variation—differing opinions, ideas and worldviews. This points toward the significance of asking whether information is readily available and replicates the traditional, authoritative narratives that constitute history textbooks, or whether it provides alternative perspectives.

Multicultural Democracy: From Political Diversity to Sociocultural Diversity

Dewey’s democratic goals were radical in that he acknowledged the importance of diversity of thought. However, his conception also has the trappings of liberal democratic theory. Dewey only refers to politically diverse thoughts, and was uncomfortably silent about other dimensions of difference such as class, gender and race. This is problematic because in his estimation, educational change is a function of social need and social need is evaluated against democratic ideals. Any democratic ideals that ignore (or discount) issues of diversity will be translated into

schooling institutions that do the same. To understand why liberal democracy is silent on issues of socio-economic and cultural diversity, one must look to its central tenets of unity and neutrality. Unity is anchored in the phrase *e pluribus unum* which translates into a process of moving *from many to one* and creates the goal of “transcending difference, conquering and overcoming it” (Parker, 1996, p. 111). Neutrality assumes “all men are created equal” and perpetuates the rugged individualism of “pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps.” Neutrality creates a path to unity, but requires the explicit elimination of difference and diversity (Marri, 2003a).

Multicultural democracy explicitly acknowledges socio-cultural differences and treats diversity as essential for democracy because it protects liberty and challenges the status quo (Marri, 2003a; Parker, 1996). Within this multicultural frame, *e pluribus unum* is not translated ‘*from many, one,*’ but ‘*with many, one*’ (Parker, 1996). Such translation focuses on *diversity and unity* and allows “larger publics” and “little publics” to coexist. Larger publics are “the normative grid that binds citizens together in a broad political comradeship” (Parker, 1996, p. 118). Little publics are “associations based on religion, ethnicity, language, race, hobbies, labor—interests of all sorts, some of which are incompatible from one group to another” (Parker, p. 118). These publics come together on difficult issues on creative democratic *paths* and are a necessary part of the continuing public discussion, not a means to sustain predetermined democratic *ends* (Dewey, 1916). Parker argues that multicultural democracy “has no end other than the path itself. Ends arise on the path” (1996, p. 114). He goes on to continue, “Viewed as a creative, constructive process, democracy is not already accomplished, in which case citizens today need only to celebrate and protect it, but a trek that citizens in a pluralist society make together” (p. 114). Multicultural democracy enables national discussions to remain open to views that conflict with the “dominant” or “mainstream” common sense perspective, so that democracy does not diminish to the point of irrelevancy. This discussion does not come easy (Gay, 1997), but it is through this struggle of learning to be comfortable being uncomfortable and by “associating and resolving issues with people whose views are different from one’s own that democracy is learned” (Marri, 2003a, p. 273).

Acknowledging the importance of diversity within democracy provides grounds for the central questions of multicultural democracy (Parker, 1996). The first question is: Who is and is not participating in democracy? This question ensures that the little publics exist alongside the larger publics. For if one finds that groups are not participating, then one can begin to explore why they are not participating. In this study, we evaluate the Internet within this framework by examining the voices that are present within the websites that preservice teachers accessed for their U.S. History unit plans. The second question is: How wide is the path to participation? This question examines the social structures and paths that affect participation (Marri, 2005). In this study, we address this question by examining two structural paths of the Internet: corporate (website domain names) and disciplinary (types of information, i.e. textbook accounts, primary documents, historian accounts, teaching accounts, etc.). Each reveal paths that constrain and afford different voices within the information accessed.

Method

Participants, Materials and Procedures

20 preservice teachers (PSTs) enrolled in secondary social studies methods at a public university in the southeastern U.S. participated in this study. PSTs were predominantly white (only one African-American), middle to upper-middle class, from the home state of the institution, and there were a balanced number of males and females. All PSTs were juniors or seniors, admitted into the secondary teacher education program, had a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.0, and were blind (including the instructor) to the purpose of this study. During the first two weeks of the course, PSTs participated in six, one-hour technology professional development sessions led by an educational technology faculty member and a graduate assistant. One session was dedicated to web search and evaluation. PSTs learned about search engines, search strings, and the identification of “publication” date, author, and type of domain. Subsequent sessions reviewed these concepts. Early during the semester each PST created a unit plan on any topic of interest in the social studies, and created a “resource database” consisting of 20-25 websites that could be used as teaching, research and/or background resources to support their unit plan (personal communication, Methods Instructor, October 15, 2005).

Analysis

To consistently analyze websites, we limited the possibilities presented with hypertext. If there were links on a web page that PSTs selected, then we analyzed two levels of links. All page links to the initial webpage were analyzed (1st level). If there were any links on 1st level pages, then those additional linked pages were also analyzed

(2nd level). We also assumed that specific website addresses were intentional. If the address accessed a specific area of a larger website, then we analyzed the content within that section, not the content of the larger website.

Website Availability provided a measure of whether the websites selected represented ‘more’ (i.e., diverse) or ‘more of the same’ information. Two graduate research assistants, blind to the purpose of this study, independently answered the following for each website: “Do you think the information on this website would be available at a local high school or community library?” They were informed to think of average suburban libraries. Websites that duplicated information easily found through local resources (i.e., www.time.com) were coded as Definitely Available (DA). Websites were coded as Could Be Available (CBA) when availability was not certain, and Not Available (NA) when websites provided access to information that would not be found locally (i.e., www.loc.gov, on-line documents from the Library of Congress). Two training sessions produced moderate inter-rater reliabilities of .78 and .85. There were no discrepancies between DA and NA codes. Discrepancies were resolved conservatively with discrepancies between CBA and NA coded as NA, and CBA and DA coded as CBA.

Website Diversity was coded using the following categories: Traditional History, Race, Class, Gender, and Non-Historical Material. Traditional History was “historical accounts typical of high school history textbooks.” The categories Race, Class and Gender were, “historical accounts centered on issues of race, class or gender.” If a diverse website was also traditional, then it was coded conservatively as Race, Class or Gender (i.e., Martin Luther King Jr.’s I Have a Dream speech is in high school history textbooks, but was coded as Race). Non-Historical Material focused on teaching methods and lesson plans. Inter-rater reliability was .88 across all categories.

Website Domains provided a measure of the types of websites that were selected. A commercial website domain (.com) generally represents companies or individual’s using commercial products (i.e., hotmail.com accounts to create websites). Government (.gov), non-profit (.org), and educational (.edu and .k12) domains also represent different types of organizations and individuals. Each group has different interests and provides different structural paths for Internet use.

Website Disciplinary Information Sources provided a measure of the disciplinary paths of the selected websites. The following information source categories were used: primary sources, textbooks, historian, fictional, teaching, and other. Because websites can contain multiple sources of information, websites were coded according to the proportion of information sources within the site with a 1 representing a document type accounting for some of the website, 2—half of the website, 3—most of the website, and 4—all of the website. The inter-rater reliability for all websites was .93.

Results

PSTs created unit plans and Internet resource databases about the Civil War (6), World War II (4), Civil Rights Movement (3), World War I (3), 1960s, Great Depression, American Revolution and The American Presidency. Combined, the resource databases contained 448 website addresses ($M = 23.4$, $SD = 2.1$). 425 of the 448 website addresses (94.9%) linked to a working website, and formed the data for this study ($N = 425$).

Website Availability

69.4% ($n = 295$) of selected websites were ‘definitely available’ (DA) within one’s community, 19.3% ($n = 82$) were ‘could be available’ (CBA) and 11.3% ($n = 48$) were ‘not available’ (NA). There were highly significant differences between the availability of selected websites, $\chi^2(2, N = 425) = 253.02$, $p < .001$, with almost two-thirds of all websites selected representing readily available information within one’s local community. To further test website availability, CBA and NA websites were collapsed into a single category, “not and/or could be available” (NCBA). Differences between NCBA ($n = 130$, 30.6%) and DA ($n = 295$, 69.4%) were also significant $\chi^2(1, N = 425) = 64.06$, $p < .001$; even conservative estimates indicate that most of the websites that PSTs selected replicated information available in magazines, on television and history textbooks.

Website Diversity

The majority of websites within PSTs’ resource databases focused on traditional topics found in high school history books ($n = 256$, 60.2%). There were a limited number of websites that focused on diverse historical topics. For example, only 8.9% of the websites were focused on issues of race ($n = 38$), 2.5% of the websites were focused on issues of socioeconomic status ($n = 11$), and 0.4% of the websites were focused on issues of gender ($n =$

2). Because of the low number of websites focused on issues of diversity, diverse websites were collapsed into a single category ‘different voices’ (DV) ($n = 51, 11.8\%$). The remaining websites ($n = 118, 27.8\%$) did not focus on historical topics at all. Rather, these websites focused on lesson plans, or referred to historical texts that were for sale. After collapsing diverse websites into the single category, there were still significantly less websites that focused on different voices than websites that focused on traditional historical accounts and websites that did not even focus on historical topics, $\chi^2(2, N = 425) = 154.25, p < .001$. Indeed, almost 9 of every 10 websites focused on topics that did contain any form of diversity, and 6 of every 10 websites focused on topics that replicated information found in traditional high school history textbooks.

Website Domains

The different types of websites that students selected as part of their research database are presented in Table 1. There were significant differences in the distribution of website origin $\chi^2(5, N = 425) = 245.80, p < .001$. Highly significant post-hoc analyses indicate that commercial websites (.com) were selected more than twice as often as educational (.edu) or organization (.org) websites, $\chi^2(2, N = 334) = 67.44, p < .001$. These results indicate that not only was most information readily available in the local community and focused on traditional historical topics, but that the greatest proportion of information was selected from commercial websites.

Table 1. Distribution of Website Domains

	.edu	.com	.org	.gov	.net	other ^a	Total
# of Websites	79	182	73	33	24	34	425
% of Websites	18.6	42.8	17.2	7.8	5.6	8.0	100.0

^aIncluded .k12 and foreign country websites, and search engine results used as resources.

Website Disciplinary Information Sources

Textbook accounts were the most prevalent document type, representing 42.1% of the total content within all websites. Primary sources were the second most prevalent document type (26%). The remaining types of information were as follows: teaching material (17.2%), other material (12.6%), fictional accounts (1.6%) and historian accounts (1.5%). A Friedman Test of the proportions of all information sources indicated highly significant differences $\chi^2(5, N = 425) = 508.87, p < .001$. Post-hoc comparisons using Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, and Bonferroni method to control for Type I error, indicate a highly significant greater proportion of textbook accounts than primary source documents (the second highest proportion) $T(425) = 4.40, p < .001$. This result also indicates there were a significantly greater proportion of textbook accounts than any other source type. Indeed, post-hoc comparisons produced significant contrasts across all pairs except Teaching Resource Materials and Other Materials, and Historian and Fictional Accounts. Thus, not only were most websites readily available, focused on traditional historical topics and selected from commercial websites, but the greatest proportion of websites also contained traditional historical content in a textbook-like manner.

Relationships between Availability, Diversity and Disciplinary Sources of Websites

To develop a better understanding of the relationships between the availability, diversity and disciplinary content of these websites, a two-step cluster analysis, using log-likelihood distance measures and Schwartz’s Bayesian Criterion, computed the grouping criteria used to identify groups of websites with similar characteristics. A four-cluster model produced the best fit, and accounted for 100% ($N = 425$) of the total websites. These clusters produced significant distributions across all categories: website availability $\chi^2(3, N = 425) = 208.63, p < .000$, website diversity $\chi^2(3, N = 425) = 323.60, p < .001$, and website domains $\chi^2(3, N = 425) = 11.89, p < .008$.

Cluster 1 can be described as ‘Textbook Accounts.’ This cluster accounted for 32.7% ($n = 139$) of the total websites. All websites in this cluster were definitely available, traditional history topics. This cluster contained a significant proportion of text accounts, and significantly excluded primary sources, and historian and fictional accounts. The websites were equally distributed across website domains. Cluster 2 can be described as ‘Teaching Resources.’ This cluster did not deal with historical content, but was the most prevalent, 36.7% ($n = 156$). A significant number of websites in this cluster were definitely available ($n = 129, 82.7\%$) and did not contain any history-related information ($n = 107, 68.6\%$). This cluster contained a significant proportion of teaching and other accounts, and significantly excluded primary sources and fictional accounts. The websites were equally distributed across website domains. Cluster 3 can be described as ‘Primary Sources,’ 20.5% ($n = 87$). A significant number of

websites in this cluster were could be available, and definitely available websites were significantly excluded. Although websites were not readily available, a significant number of websites were focused on traditional historical content (n = 83, 95.4%). This cluster also contained a significant proportion of primary sources and significantly excluded text, teaching and other accounts. Further, unlike the first two clusters, a significant number of websites were from education (.edu) and government (.gov) website domains. Cluster 4 can be described as 'Historian/Fictional Accounts,' 10.1% (n = 43). Websites were evenly distributed between the different levels of availability. Like Clusters 1 and 3, this cluster contained a significant number websites that were focused on traditional history content. This cluster contained a significant proportion of historical and fictional accounts, and significantly excluded all other accounts. The websites were evenly distributed across website domains.

Discussion

Proponents claim that the Internet is a useful tool in social education to create an informed democratic citizen because it provides access to 'more information,' which equals better democratic citizen decision making. In this paper we advanced a rationale for examining the Internet within a multicultural democratic framework that explicitly addressed issues of diversity, rather than a means to access and store more information. Our purpose for this framework is to create a space for Internet research that could lead to greater diversity in democratic citizenship education. This framework concentrates on the curricular content of websites, leading to the question, "When using the Internet, just where do students go to access information and what do they select?"

Results of this study indicate that the Internet might be more accurately described as providing 'more of the same information' when pre-service teachers are not explicitly directed to use the Internet to foreground diverse cultures within American democracy. Only one of ten websites contained information that was not readily available through other local resources, and definitely available websites was a significant grouping criterion for the two most prevalent clusters, Cluster 1—Textbook Accounts and Cluster 2—Teaching Resources; indicating teacher educators should not assume the Internet will inherently provide preservice teachers with access to new information. Only Cluster 3—Primary Sources significantly excluded readily available websites as a cluster-grouping criterion. Given the tendency for the Internet to provide preservice teachers with otherwise available information and Primary Sources as the only cluster that provided otherwise unavailable information, teacher educators may need to explicitly direct preservice teachers to search for primary sources on the Internet if their goal is to provide access to new information. Results also indicate there may be greater success if they are directed to .edu and .gov Internet domains, as websites within the Primary Sources cluster were most often accessed from these domains.

To further justify our description of the Internet as 'more of the same information,' consider that more than half of the websites focused on traditional historical narratives that did not contain any voices of under-represented groups, and over a quarter of the websites contained only teaching resources (that also did not focus on under-represented groups). Only one of every ten websites focused on issues of diversity. Even when students accessed primary sources, Cluster 3, almost all were focused on traditional historical content. Indeed, a cluster-grouping criterion for the Primary Source cluster was the significant *exclusion* of diverse voices. In other words, the website content held little diversity and instead replicated the homogenous approach of textbooks, even when primary sources came into the picture. Simply, the theme is redundancy – the Internet provided more of the same information students have had access to in textbooks and other print, television and video media, shown to be thoroughly lacking in the presentation of diverse voices that speak of different ways of knowing and interpreting the meaning of American history and democracy. This indicates that, from a pedagogical and curricular standpoint, one cannot assume that the Internet will inherently provide access to more diverse information. Just as teacher educators may need to direct preservice teachers to primary sources by searching .edu and .gov domains, teacher educators may also need to be explicit in mandating diversity as a theoretical frame by which to understand what and why preservice teachers must not approach the Internet as a technical, neutral tool.

A potential limitation of this study is the notion that preservice teachers in this study did not intend to use the Internet to support the NCSS goals of developing and maintaining diversity, and that this misuse of the Internet skewed the dataset that informed our analysis. At best, this limitation should necessitate a discussion that revolves around ways to better train preservice teachers to use the Internet. We acknowledge that these preservice teachers were not introduced to the critical, multicultural democratic framework in understanding to what end they were using the Internet, but argue the issue does not lie in their technical use of the Internet. Each preservice teacher had 6 hours of technology training, demonstrated great facility when searching for and evaluating websites, and had no difficulty selecting 20-25 reputable websites for their research database. Rather, we question the Internet as a

democratic medium and instead see it as a means to replicate dominant ideologies not by strict governance of websites, but by the ways in which we approach the Internet as unproblematic and neutral. Unless teachers explicitly foreground diversity, students will not do it on their own, as they have been long indoctrinated into the traditional, non-diverse accounts as true and good and hence outside of questioning. As such they will not seek other perspectives on curriculum. If we direct students to use primary sources and historical fiction, our data indicates that they will not largely reproduce the usual information, which meets Dewey's first criteria. But that is only the first step. Students must have a multicultural theoretical framework that addresses race, class and gender perspectives that will direct students away from the largely Eurocentric narrative and toward those voices and perspectives mostly ignored in textbooks except as sideline material. Examining Internet technology in the social studies with a multicultural democratic framework surpasses the technologically savvy concentration because the latter emphasizes the access and manipulation of 'more information' without interrogating whether the information is homogenous, redundant and representative of only one form of thought. In other words, our empirical analyses raise the distinct possibility that providing pre-service teachers with the multicultural democratic evaluative framework to create curriculum could facilitate a pedagogical approach that will actually lead to the increase of diversity in the creation of democratic citizens.

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