

Exploring the Impact of Virtual Internships for Democratic and Media Education

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the design and effects of our pilot study of PurpleState, a Virtual Internship simulation. PurpleState utilizes the concepts of epistemic frames and communities of practice as models for learning in media and democratic education. PurpleState places students in the roles of interns at a strategic communications firm who are hired to develop a media campaign on a proposed fictitious state level “fracking” ban. Results of the study include significant effects on participants’ knowledge of the issue, why it was controversial, the ability of participants to understand political media, and in their beliefs about being able to engage in civic action.

Introduction

This paper describes the design framework used to create PurpleState Solutions, a Virtual Internship simulation, and presents findings from a pilot study of the simulation with two classes of grade nine students. For PurpleState, we sought to provide students the opportunity to develop an understanding of the dynamic nature of media in politics and help them to develop the skills and knowledge to be both more critical of the political media they engage with *and* more skilled and confident in using media strategies to take political action. Through the use of the concepts of epistemic frames and epistemic games from learning sciences, as well as theories from political communications and existing civic education models, we present the virtual internship as a model that is more relevant and authentic for developing today’s young citizens.

Theory and design framework

The use of simulations in democratic education is far from new, but most are designed to be more engaging models for helping students learn standards-based curriculum, academic content, and skills (e.g., Parker, et al., 2011; Parker, et al., 2013). These simulations also often place students in roles of official power and at the national level, such as a Supreme Court Justice or member of Congress. As a result, students may not fully understand the dynamic nature of politics and the roles that other groups outside of the structures of elected office may have. The official curriculum also often lacks specific objectives related to critical media literacy in the context of politics, or media strategies for taking political action (Raphael, Bachen, Lynn, Baldwin-Philippi & McKee, 2010; Stoddard, 2014).

PurpleState was designed using the model of Virtual Internships developed by Shaffer (2006a, 2006b) that employs epistemic frames and communities of practice from professions as models of learning. The concept of epistemic frames provides a model with the potential to help students transfer their academic experiences to their role as citizens outside of school (Bagley & Shaffer, 2009; Shaffer, 2006a, 2006b). We use the epistemic game model and the epistemic frame of strategic communications consultants, whose firms assist candidates, political action committees, and special interest groups to develop and implement media and campaign strategies; this epistemic frame emphasizes expertise in the skills, knowledge, and values that can transfer to young peoples’ actions as citizens outside of school.

Methods

Here we present findings from our third iteration of implementing PurpleState, with 43 grade nine students from central Wisconsin (USA). The participants engaged in the simulation over a three-week period (10 class hours) and we worked closely with the teacher to collaborate on helping all students be successful, including the two ESL students in the class and several students with special needs. This mixed methods study focuses in particular on measures related to the participants’ knowledge of the issue, i.e., fracking, their understanding of why it is controversial, and in their ability to transfer the political media strategy to a related but different context. We also focused on adapting existing measures of self-efficacy for political engagement to better fit the current context of political engagement and the role of media. Data utilized here were generated as part of a pre-post questionnaire and student tasks in the simulation. See Stoddard & Chen (2018), also in this volume, for more on the development of these measures.

Results

We were particularly interested in how much students would learn from engaging in the controversial issue, framed as a proposed ban on fracking. We saw significant increases in open-ended items focused on participants' knowledge (Fracking Knowledge, $p < .0001$) of the issue and why it was controversial (Fracking Controversy, $p = 0.0002$). They also had a significant increase in their ability to explain how they would apply political media strategy to a different but related context – illustrating transfer of the strategy that they had learned (Politician Advice, $p = 0.0002$). These items measured students' abilities to use evidence and reasoning related to the issue, and for the question about why it is controversial, we were also looking to see if students could explain why it is controversial from both sides of the issue.

We also saw significant growth in participants' epistemic understanding of political messages and how they are structured to persuade in a Video Analysis task. This task asked participants to apply their epistemic understanding of political communications to a political advertisement that was part of an "Energy Voter" campaign funded by a petroleum industry lobbyist group. We saw significant changes in participants' abilities to identify the intended audience for the video ($p = 0.0045$) and in their ability to identify the intended political message of the video ($p < .0001$). We did not see a significant change in their abilities to identify the specific persuasive technique being used (e.g., bandwagon, appeal to emotion).

Finally, given the intersection of political knowledge, skills, and beliefs being a predictor for future political engagement, we were also interested in the potential impact of participants' confidence to engage politically. We saw a significant increase in participants' self-efficacy for political engagement ($p = 0.0007$), assessed using adapted instruments that have been validated in the past ($\alpha = 0.79$). Items in this scale include "Construct good arguments about political issues" and "Identify hidden political messages in advertising". As noted above, more information on the adaptation and development of this scale can be found in Stoddard and Chen (2018), elsewhere in this volume.

Conclusion and implications

In this paper we describe the design and results from our pilot study of the PurpleState virtual internship. The conceptual framework of epistemic frames developed here, when operationalized through epistemic games, has the potential to significantly change the nature of how we teach young people to be citizens, in addition to serving as a dynamic model for reaching academic and skills goals. PurpleState is designed to engage young people in collaborative practice, a better understanding of the nature of media and its function in society and politics, and provide opportunities to engage in relevant contemporary controversial issues.

There is evidence that epistemic games have great potential to develop student civic thinking and action by engaging students through virtual internships in authentic contexts and problems. The significant gains found in our study of participants' knowledge of the issue and why it is controversial, and in their increased self-efficacy for engaging politically and in particular using media to engage, illustrate the potential for this model. If our goal in civic education is having informed citizens who are confident in taking action, PurpleState illustrates one approach to working toward this goal. These games also have the potential to develop student skills in persuasive communications and media literacy over traditional academic work and assessments.

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