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MOBILISING THE CIVIC CURRICULUM

ABSTRACT

In this paper I review recent efforts by the University of Leeds and other select UK universities to situate the civic curriculum within everyday citizenship and mobile culture practice. These changes include student curricular collaborations, as well as situated research efforts and mobile application design.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing recognition that there is an integral disconnect between traditional (formal, hierarchical) and more contemporary (flexible, social) frameworks for civic engagement (Bessant et al., 2016), the mobile cultures that populate these shifts are still under-represented within the civic curriculum. In England for example, where citizenship activities have been a compulsory component of secondary education since 2002, the civic curriculum still emphasizes traditional avenues for community service such as civic representation, political consumerism and volunteering (Cox et al., 2005).

Yet, young people are disengaging from traditional pathways for civic engagement. Recent studies show that only 1% of 18 -25 year olds in the UK are members of a political party,
with most perceiving the political system as "largely irrelevant to their lives" (Bessant et al., 2016: 274).

These trends have inspired bleak commentaries in the literature. Young people have been accused of apathy, selfishness and even narcissism, nurtured it seems by the rise of entertainment cultures including social media and its associated trivialities (Bessant et al., 2016: 274).

Such conclusions don't necessarily hold up to interrogation however. Young people are engaging publicly, only now they are more likely to be doing so via alternate, playful arenas such as participatory media (e.g. Conspiracy For Good, a transmedial charity event), art and music (e.g. the Russian protest band, Pussy Riot) social media campaigns (e.g. The Ice Bucket Challenge, a viral fundraiser), and information leaks (e.g. the informal hactivist network, Anonymous). (Bang, 2005, Li and Marsh, 2008, Alexander, 2008, Dickinson et al., 2008, Schudson, 2000). Increasingly too they are accessing these activities via their mobile phones. These portable, social tools are now integral elements of the emerging, digitally enabled public sphere.

> "It is, after all, ultimately this wider context that provides the opportunities for young people to be democratic citizens and to learn from their actual 'condition of citizenship'" (Biesta et al., 2009: 3).

In this paper, I explore ways that the civic curriculum is being reconceived through a review of recent mobile learning and student engagement activities in UK universities, including those profiled in the best practice casebook of the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, where I work. These casebook studies represent recommended teaching strategies, if not majority practice. They include student curricular collaborations, as well as situated research and mobile application design.

2 WHAT DOES THE CIVIC CURRICULUM TEACH?

The decline in formal civic engagement amongst young people has been evident for some time now (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995, Putnam, 1995, Putnam, 2000, Offe, 2002, Rosenstone and Hansen, 2001, Pintor et al., 2004, Skocpol, 2013, Kornberg, 2005, Park et al., 2004, Quintelier and Vissers, 2008, Livingstone and Markham, 2008, Wattenberg, 2011). In England the civic curriculum was introduced in an attempt to build public concern (Zhang, 2016), along with the capacity for civic engagement. To date however, this agenda has been challenged by two over-riding complexities: the global diaspora and networked publics.

2.1 Locating the civic agenda

Recent increases in global population flows have inspired proposals (Delanty, 2000, Davies et al., 2005) that the notion of a formal, national identity should be replaced with a more appropriate, alternative container such as "cultural citizenship" (Miller, 1998).

As cultures tend to be forever in a state of flux, however, cultural citizenship can be an equally complex site of potentially contested identities. Reflecting this complexity, the Community Religions Project (CRP) at the University of Leeds (The_Centre_For_Religion_And_Public_Life, 1976 -) involves students in a long-term study of the shifting and complex identities of Leeds' "super-diverse" (Vertovec, 2007) religious communities. Prideaux et al. (Prideaux and Merrygold, 2014) recount how a project that started in 1976 as a researcher led, local-diversity mapping effort has since evolved in to a collaborative community pedagogical practice. In recent years student researchers have been undertaking these studies. The students are challenged to produce an in depth report that maps the diversity of local religious communities through a combination of field trips, observational placements, local consultations, interviews, and liaison with community partners. Members of the local theological communities have also been taking part in these studies, as well as negotiating their own access to the data. Each year the study shifts focus to a different sub-area of Leeds, building a rich and varied portrait of the city over time. Whereas students gain research skills, the research staff have interpreted that data via publications that aim to better acknowledge the (increasingly comfortable) plural identities emerging within these complex social environments. Contemporary citizenship is not simply a matter of nation, or culture, but all of these and more.

No doubt the sorts of alternative mapping practices already being encouraged by GPS enabled technologies like google maps, supported by readily accessible audio-visual recording and mobile tracking applications can also enrich these community mapping efforts. It is worth noting however that one of the reasons that the CRP project became more collaborative over time was to shift…

> The modernist regime of collecting, classifying, comparing, and typologising data on religion towards seeing religion as a dynamic and engaged part of a complex social environment or habitat, which is itself criss-crossed with wider communications and power relations (Knott, 2005: 119, in Prideaux, 2014: 39)

This underlines the importance of linking location based activities to an interdisciplinary public pedagogy that is as mindful of broader social issues, as it is motivated by engagement concerns. Empowering students to make a meaningful contribution to these debates is a compelling civic curriculum strategy, but one that may require complex study. In informal, social contexts Pachler et al. argue that "conversational threads" (Pachler et al., 2009), dialogues linking public pedagogy with young people's daily networking activities can help to manage such complexities. By collaborating with students, as well as students' informal living contexts, the CRP project has effectively formalized that conversation. This is an equally valid approach. The project has an ongoing presence within the Leeds' public sphere that can also potentially influence those contexts.

Admittedly, the danger of a formal civic pedagogy is that universities impose a particular world-view. For instance, Handal et al.'s (Handal et al., 2016) prescriptive list of global citizenship skills includes the capacity to observe digital property rights, with little mention of peer to peer sharing practices.

Rather than instruction in social norms, or community expectations, Biesta (Biesta, 2012: 684) proposes that the civic curriculum is best served by efforts to foster particular qualities of human togetherness, so that public pedagogy is directed towards the construction of a daily sphere where plurality and freedom can take place (Biesta, 2012: 684). Framed in this way, the CRP project also promotes plurality by contextualizing any related social issues within the poly-vocal tradition of its historic mapping enterprise.

Can such traditions also appeal to dis-engaged youth? In order to consider this question I will now review the ways that broader social shifts fostered by networked publics (such as datafication and the ontological turn) are simultaneously influencing the civic agenda.

2.2. Processing the civic agenda

Pachler et al. (Pachler et al., 2009) describe "the mobile complex" as a dynamic and convergent ecology of mobile technologies and the user-generated processes that collaborate with them. The procedural rhetoric of this complex (its public influence via the points of view and ways of being that it privileges) (Rivers, 2016, Bogost, 2008) is indicated in part by the particular affordances, or possibilities of mobile tools. These include mixed reality, context sensitive and ambient (Pachler et al., 2009) engagements that can also involve data access, playful and social networking. The ways that people collaborate with these sorts of affordances transform everyday cultures for better, or worse. These affordances therefore highlight the ways that mobile learning activities can intensify and potentially transform the everyday - through participation as well as design.

Local district knowledge, as much as informal activism and networked community engagements, for example, increasingly characterize the way that young people armed with mobile phones build a sense of social belonging today (Alexander, 2008). These contexts are thus ideal venues for civic pedagogies - and mobile technologies offer potent pathways in to these spaces. For example, the ready recording capacities of mobile technologies enable community collaborations, including socially networked storytelling and protest, whilst popular applications like Twitter can support broader community dialogues, including free speech, as well as the sharing of supportive messages amongst vulnerable communities.

One example of how educators have also encouraged greater reflective engagement with civic contexts comes from the Leeds casebook whereby students taking part in the mobile reflections (Kirk, 2012a) project were asked to research augmented reflection. In order to explore how mobile audio and video-capture facilities could help them to reflect, students first conducted situated recordings, which they later edited in to a multimedia presentation. The recordings became a tangible record of immediate impressions, which the editing process built upon, moving between emplaced improvisation and the reflective effort to package that experience (Kirk, 2012b).

Also from the Leeds casebook, mobile phones were used to conduct collaborative field reflections on the evolution of product design. After using QR codes to identify media artifacts at a museum, students took photos of these objects and shared their immediate thoughts regarding why they became obsolete with the rest of the class via Twitter. These spontaneous opinions were later contrasted with a range of expert and consumer views on the matter. Back on campus, students reflected once more on that comparison and follow up activities included redesigning the objects to avoid obsolescence. (Morris, 2009).

As these recent UK examples show, mobile learning activities can creatively employ existing mobile networking applications to intensify situated learning engagements and prompt deeper reflection both within and through that practice.

Participatory mobile contexts may well be tracked and commercially exploited (Zuboff, 2015, Pasquale, 2015, Ball, 2013). Yet, they also potentially offer the opportunity for resistance, social empowerment and the unmasking of hidden data trails.

Geo-caching, for example, is a hide and seek cultural entertainment practice with potentially transformative influence. Geo-cachers use GPS enabled applications to find and engage with physically emplaced artifacts, such as local stories hidden in GPS tagged boxes. Engaging in such grass roots, mediated cultures can transform people's experience of place (Rivers, 2016).

Clough's (Biesta et al., 2009) extensive study of the informal geo-caching community found that although people joined for fun they often ended up learning as a result (Clough, 2010). This learning increased incrementally from first reading other people's caches, to engaging with and contributing to those caches, then collaborating with the practice by making and sharing caches and eventually leading that community (Biesta et al., 2009).

An ideal civic curriculum might similarly offer of a variety of appealing (and collaboratively produced?), easy access mobile engagements designed to just as informally and perhaps also playfully transform everyday experiences, not just of place, but also of people. In order to encourage continued participation these options would offer varied types of involvement (such as personalization options, along with the capacity for intense attention, as much as the potential to be forgotten) with social rewards that include the incremental challenge to master the peculiarities of each sphere. In this way participation becomes a pathway towards mastery and potentially also social (re)design.

Like Alehegn and Mentor (Alehegn and Mentor, 2016), I argue that designing mobile applications is a civic engagement activity. Mobile networks can actively redesign power relations, so designing them is a political act. For example, applications that empower citizens to share collective intelligence, such as the ability to monitor and report electoral fraud (Revoda), can change history.

The term design thinking refers to the mental processes that industrial designers use when they investigate and try to solve complex real world situations. As societies have become increasingly complex, the term has spread to encompass innovative practice generally (Koh et al., 2015). In 2016, a Design Thinkers academy opened in London. In the same year the University of Bristol opened a new Centre For Innovation, teaching design thinking to "the change makers … of the 21st century" (Innovation, 2016).

Asking students to research the unmet needs of their local community and design mobile applications to suit is another ideal civic activity. At the University of Sheffield, for example, students have been helping to design a mobile application that children can use to record nearby sounds. The project, Storying Doncaster Sounds (Procter, 2016), aims to increase sound awareness, by emphasizing aural input within an interactive storytelling application.

Complaints that seemingly playful, mobile engagements promote superficial connections, or clicktivism rather than activism deserve consideration in relation to social issue narratives (the infamous viral Kony video illustrates the dangers of superficial research), but the assumption that mobile social networking lacks civic value is questionable.

The Ice Bucket Challenge, for example required such little discussion of the charity involved that some commentators labeled it almost supercilious at the time (Wicks, 2014). This playful, infectious and short-lived campaign raised money from pledges gained when people flamboyantly dowsed themselves in buckets of water and shared videos of the event on social media. The relative ease and thrill of participation fuelled its popularity and eventually funded a medical research breakthrough.

The problem is not the clicks, but the challenge to ensure meaningful results. The ways that mobile applications can meaningfully transform relationships between individuals and networks, people and places, or even space and time is now enhanced by convergent digital media expression, database extension, collective intelligence and automated processing, including tracking devices. Nevertheless, the meaningful application of these technologies requires deeper thinking about how such capacities also collaborate with culture (Attwood et al., 2003, Pachler et al., 2009).

3 CONCLUSION

When citizenship is reconceived as a type of communal and cultural activity, then it becomes apparent that democracy is a daily, social challenge (Dewey, 2004, Lawy and Biesta, 2007).

> "Growth' is thus a dynamic and dialectical process of self-transformation and social change. It is the process whereby individuals in the course of remaking their society, remake themselves" (Carr and Hartnett, 1996: 59).

In this paper I have argued that due to their particular affordances, mobile phones have the potential to become potent outreach tools of the civic curriculum. These affordances include the ability to situate practice within daily life, through a range of creative and active, often pro-sumer styled, networking interactions (Bang, 2005). Whereas these networks are flexible, peer-based (and therefore not always equal) and ubiquitous (therefore potentially intrusive), they can also annotate networks and augment space (Pink and Hjorth, 2012). Participants can collaborate with these tools to (ideally voluntarily) track behaviour (Foth et al., 2011) as well as analyse that collective data in a way that privileges playful, culturally expressive interactions (Foth et al., 2011).

Therefore it is helpful if students can collaborate in both participatory civic research and systematic urban design efforts – and it is especially helpful if these efforts are underpinned by broader cultural studies. Such understandings include the awareness that although mobile social networks have been shown to facilitate, community engagement(Skoric et al., 2016) they are nevertheless political actants that evoke political results which can include inequality and need to be designed thoughtfully. Drawing upon a long-term study of young NEETs (not in education, employment or training) in Leeds for example, Thornham and Gómez Cruz found that mobile usage was more likely to be a frustrating and disempowering experience for this particular group simply because of their daily status as NEET (for example when there was no free wi-fi on hand, or when their mobile based job search efforts were rejected by the unemployment office):

> An interrogation of the experiences of mobility (within this group) reveal as much about the experiences of (im)mobility as it does about who can be and is mobile (and who can't) (Thornham and Gómez Cruz, 2016: 7)

As Stevenson points out (Stevenson, 2003: 7-8), active citizenship requires inclusive social structures, as much as opportunities to participate. In terms of a civic curriculum then, meaningful results are more likely to emerge when the use of mobile tools is linked to thoughtful and informed discussion. Regarding mobile tools in the civic curriculum the classic question of all interactive spaces, "*What can we do here?"* is the ideal starting point.

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