

*Social Media and the Idle No More Movement:
Citizenship, Activism and Dissent in Canada*

Abstract

This paper, informed by a critique of traditional understandings of citizenship and civic education, explores the use of social media as a means of fostering activism and dissent. The paper explores the ways in which the Idle No More Movement, which began in Canada in 2012 marshalled social media to educate about and protest Bill C-45, an omnibus budget bill passed by the Federal Government. The paper argues that Idle No More is demonstrative of young people's commitments to social change and willingness to participate in active forms of dissent. As such, it presents opportunities for fostering ethically engaged citizenship through greater knowledge and awareness of Indigenous issues in Canada, which necessarily requires an understanding of the historical and contemporary legacies of colonialism that continually position First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples as 'lesser' citizens. Finally, the paper suggests that the example of Idle No More stands in contrast to the notion of a "civic vacuum" that is often used to justify the re-trenchment of traditional civic education programs in schools and as such, can be used as a pedagogic tool to teach for and about dissent.

Keywords: citizenship, civic education, activism, dissent, colonialism, Idle No More, social media

Currently in Saskatchewan, the province where I live and work, efforts are being made to implement a comprehensive citizenship education curriculum in schools. Titled "Rights, Responsibilities and Respect: Enduring Understanding for Citizenship Education" the formal document situates the need for this curriculum within a "civics vacuum manifesting itself across democratic systems across the world" (2014, 4). Concern about the health of Canadian (and American) democracy is not new, particularly in light of declining voter turnout, lower rates of membership in political parties, and levels of political knowledge and political interest (Milner 2008). Journall, Ayers & Beeson (2013) note that "much has been written about the civic disengagement of American youth...younger Americans tend to display more characteristics of civic apathy" (466). Similarly, worry about the lack of knowledge of political issues possessed

by young people is pervasive (Putnam 2000; Snell 2010). Moreover, in a meta-analysis of research exploring the impact of youth participation, Youniss & Yates (1996) noted that civically engaged young people who possess more comprehensive political knowledge had a greater sense of agency, ability, and self-esteem. Recent research has noted a shift in patterns of democratic participation whereby young people have higher levels of participation in non-traditional activities (Dalton 2008; Levine 2011). In the context of citizenship education, civic engagement, and activism, it is important to be attentive to how young people are both expressing and enacting citizenship. It is also essential to consider whether the forms of engagement are indicative of “benevolent discourses of helping others” (Andreotti & Pashby 2013) that actually reproduce rather than critique inequity.

From their important research of civic education in the United States, Westheimer & Kahne (2004) created a framework for understanding teachers’ approaches to teaching about and for citizenship. The researchers describe one approach as personally responsible citizenship which they suggest, focuses on the exercise of individual rights and responsibilities, while participatory citizenship requires a more engaged and involved approach, such as organizing a food drive. Their justice oriented conceptualization of citizenship involves a more sustained critique of and critical approach to understanding political and social structures, in contrast to dominant discourses which often circulate in curriculum and teaching practices.

Central to Saskatchewan’s proposed curriculum is the development of citizens “who actively investigate and interpret their rights and responsibilities as Canadian citizens and participate in democracy” (p. 6). With a focus on engaged citizens, life-long learning, and strong sense of self,

community and place, the document reproduces the dominant approaches to understanding citizenship that are steeped in the benevolent discourses Andreotti and Pashby (2013) are critical of, as well as discourses of universality that fail to account for ongoing socio-political inequity (Tupper 2009; 2011). Notably absent from the document, and indeed troubling, is a commitment to critical citizenship, activism or any consideration of the ways in which these can be lived out by young people.

Sears (2010) maintains that a 'key component of citizenship in any country is the people's identification with the nation' (193). In liberal democracies such as Canada, citizenship may be understood as a national ethic, in which individual rights and civic participation are valued. Critiques of liberal democratic discourses of citizenship highlight existing inequities amongst citizens despite the existence of rights legislation (Pateman 1989; Pearce & Hallgarten 2000; Phillips 1998; Siim 2000; Tupper 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Young 2000). Often, these citizenship narratives depend on the veracity of Canada as a fair and just nation even though examples to the contrary are numerous (Burrows 2013). With this in mind, critical civic engagement is vital not only to the integrity of democracy, but to social justice work that aims to interrogate the ways in which a national citizenship ethic, corresponding political structures, and political processes continually position/produce some citizens and groups of citizens as marginal. Andreotti (2006) describes critical citizenship education as necessarily acknowledging the dangers of imagining one common way forward, one common future for all people, a universal citizenship ethic, regardless of specific cultures and contexts. This form of civic engagement, rooted in expressions of dissent "holds great possibility for improved democratic living" insofar as it challenges unjust norms or laws (Stitzlein 2012, 52).

Stitzlein (2012) advocates the teaching of dissent in citizenship education as a means of fostering political activism. For her, learning must involve interrogating the role of dissent or consensus in citizenship education curriculum. She states,

Without considerable efforts to integrate, mediate, and discuss dissent inside and outside of schools, schools are failing to prepare students for democracy as it currently exists around them...Theorists and practitioners of democratic education should seize the opportunity to simultaneously prepare students for both democracy as it exists and democracy as it ideally should be (114).

In light of Stitzlein's work, and in consideration of my own critiques of banal citizenship education, I draw on the Idle No More Movement that began in Saskatchewan in December 2012 as a study of critical citizenship and activism that engaged multiple generations and marshalled social media as a means of messaging, organizing, critiquing, and speaking back to Federal Bill C-45, and other related colonial practices discussed more thoroughly later in this paper. I explore the participation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people in Idle No More as an example of ethically engaged civic activism (Tupper 2011) and explore specific uses of social media to generate global momentum for the movement and greater awareness of Indigenous issues. Further, I argue that in Canada, critical citizenship necessarily requires an understanding of the historical and contemporary legacies of colonialism that continually position First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples as 'lesser' citizens. I believe that how we understand ourselves as Canadian citizens requires a consideration of colonialism. Finally, I suggest that the example of Idle No More stands in contrast to the notion of a "civic vacuum" that is often used to justify the

re-entrenchment of traditional civic education programs in schools (as is the case in Saskatchewan) and as such, can be used as a pedagogic tool to teach for dissent.

Marshalling Social Media for Activism and Dissent

In a recent issue of the publication *Education Canada*, Hunter & Austin (2014) articulate the opportunities afforded for community development through the use of online learning and digital technologies. While not specifically connecting these with the possibilities they present for engaged citizenship, there are obvious linkages. For example, the call to link young people in numerous locations around the world to work together in educational initiatives, projects, and research reflects the uses of digital technology for citizenship education. Similarly, Bhimji (2007) asserts that alternative learning spaces outside the formal context of k-12 education “facilitate expressions, understandings, and negotiation of identities among young people” (29). Further, Bhimji argues that young people are able to assert their “multilayered identities such that they are civic, politicized, urban and young while they simultaneously claim their right to belong.” In these alternative digital learning spaces, connections are made to students’ ability to enact their identities in “self empowering ways” that facilitate awareness of larger systemic inequities (30). The example offered through Bhimji’s research is of critically engaged citizenship.

In their study of Twitter as a tool for political engagement, Journall, Ayers & Walker Beeson (2013) argue that social media has become “the latest battleground for politics in the United States” (467). Research with students attending a specific high school in North Carolina, and enrolled in a Civics and Economics Course explored the course requirement for students to use

Twitter as a vehicle to respond to and learn about the Federal Election. While the researchers express concern about social media as a means for politically intolerant commentary they note that Twitter provides “an outlet for students, who are typically excluded from the political process, to have their voices heard with a larger political arena than what they would typically find at home or at school (476).

Similarly, Middaugh and Kahne (2013) explored the challenges and possibilities of experiential civic education in school settings. They argue that service learning opportunities can create youth civic engagement through its aims of engaging “youth in the authentic practice of doing civic work, but the norms and structures of school do not necessarily support this kind of practice” (101). As such, they maintain that new media is being used more often as a tool for enabling and organizing civic and political activities. They note the studies of Smith (2010) and Earl & Kimport (2010) as focussing on the ways in which youth and adults are marshalling media and social networks to not only keep informed of social and political issues, connect with civic and political institutions, but also to engage in activism. Like Middaugh and Kahne, Samuels (2010) suggests that young peoples’ reliance on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube is directly connected to communicating and organizing social movements and may be understood as a “new way of interacting with the world” (33). This is born out in Biddix’s (2010) research examining the uses of digital technologies in fostering activism. He notes the uses of Facebook, texting, and Google for connecting with others and extending learning environments beyond the boundaries of more traditional, less mobile technologies.

In their research, Estanque, Costa and Soeiro (2013) discuss the recent examples of activism that have occurred within and beyond countries. While they focus on these new “waves of global protests” in the context of changes to labour realities and material issues, their research speaks to the value of activism and dissent as a means of speaking back to those in power, both economically and politically (31). They write,

Since late 2010 and early 2011, we have witnessed a new cycle of global mobilizations. With significant differences according to the contexts in which they occur, its agendas and modes of action, many of the protests that have erupted in several countries share a set of features and are interconnected. They reveal, in different ways, a crisis of legitimacy of political actors, widespread dissatisfaction with the responses in the face of economic crisis and concern about the processes of labour precarization that are today a strong global trend...(38)

The authors describe a recent social demonstration that took place in Portugal “as an expression of some of the features in this emerging type of mobilization, where youth play a leading role” (31).

Common throughout all of these studies is recognition that social media provide opportunities for engaged citizenship, activism, and dissent through interconnectivity. The Idle No More movement exemplifies how isolated forms of initial dissent and civic engagement can grow exponentially through the use of social media. The origins of the movement, rooted in a critique of ongoing colonialism in Canada, and the many failures of the Government to honour the spirit and intent of the Treaties as well as failures to consult with First Nations people about proposed

legislation, became a platform for digitally educating, informing, and inviting activism on the part of Canadians.

Ongoing Colonialism in Canada

Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) describe colonialism as “the specific formation of colonialism in which the colonizer comes to stay, making himself the sovereign, and the arbiter of citizenship, civility and knowing” (73). This conceptualization are pertinent to understanding the history of Aboriginal-Canadian relations, particularly as this history continues to in/form Canada’s current social, political and economic realities. As I have argued elsewhere (see Tupper 2008a, 2008b, 2009 & 2011, in press), Aboriginal people in Canada have been prohibited from experiencing their individual rights in society and from active civic engagement by virtue of being Aboriginal.

Despite this lived reality, the citizenship education that students encounter in schools often fails to account for the differential distribution of rights (Rubin 2007; Tupper, Cappello & Sevigny 2010; Westheimer & Kahne 2004). This is partly because the rights of citizenship entrenched through constitutionalism that inform Canada’s national ethic are believed to be granted universally to individuals regardless of their social locations (Tupper, Cappello & Sevigny 2010; Tupper 2011). Yet Canada’s colonial legacy has meant that Aboriginal peoples have struggled to experience their full rights as citizens. I have written about this in the context of the ongoing disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women, unsafe drinking water on First Nations reserves and the over-policing of Aboriginal peoples (Tupper 2009). These examples are illustrative of the inequitable enactment of the rights of citizenship in Canada. In addition to

citizenship rights, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have also been subjected to erosion of their treaty rights, and in some cases, a complete failure by Government to honour these rights from the time the treaties were signed despite their foundational importance (LeRat 2005; Miller 2009). Specifically, many First Nations communities in Saskatchewan were not granted the reserve land they requesting following the signing of treaties. Further, the creation of the Indian Act undermined the treaty relationship as one of “brother to brother” to one of “parent and child” with the Government taking on a paternalistic role, thereby constructing First Nations people as children. The Act set forth the terms through which Aboriginal communities would be governed by the state, creating the conditions for the system of residential schools, the pass system which regulated the movement of First Nations between reserves, the banning of traditional ceremonies, and the overall disenfranchisement of the first peoples.

Recently, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada relocated their offices from the First Nations University of Canada. Shortly after their move, a number of commemorative treaty medals were found in a dumpster behind the University. The irony of this was not lost on First Nations communities and their allies. The act of casting aside the treaty medals, which depict a handshake between a First Nations chief and government agent, is symbolic of the historical and contemporary tensions between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian Government. These tensions, and the differential experiences of the rights of citizenship, have most certainly contributed to the Idle No More movement.

Idle No More as Civic Engagement, Activism & Dissent

The Idle No More movement began in Saskatchewan, in late 2012 when four women, Sheelah McLean, Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon, began to exchange emails the Conservative Government's omnibus budget bill, C-45. Specifically, they shared with one another their concerns that the Bill further threatened the numbered treaties entered into in the late 1800s by the British Crown and First Nations people in Western Canada. The already fragile treaty relationship (as a result of many missteps on the part of the Canadian Government) established in and through the numbered treaties, was perceived to be even more precarious in light of the terms of Bill C-45. The Bill, over 400 pages in length, alters the legislation contained in 64 acts or regulations.

Of greatest concern to the founders of Idle No more were the changes to the Indian Act, the Navigation Protection Act, and the Environmental Assessment Act. Under the changes to the Navigation Protection Act, major pipeline and power line projects have no requirement to provide assurances that the projects will not damage or destroy navigable waterway they cross, unless the waterway is included on a list of waterways prepared by the transportation minister. With respect to changes to the Environmental Assessment Act, the number of projects requiring an environmental assessment was reduced and the approval process made faster.

Not only were the four women founders of Idle No More concerned about the changes to the various acts contained in Bill C-45, they were also deeply troubled by what they perceived to be a lack of consultation with Aboriginal peoples regarding the changes. As such, they determined that they could not be silent nor could they be idle. Further, they recognized the importance of raising local and national awareness of the terms of the Bill, and taking widespread action to

protest these terms as a form of civic dissent. According to the official website of Idle No More, the impetus for the movement,

...lies in a centuries old resistance as Indigenous nations and their lands suffered the impacts of exploration, invasion and colonization. Idle No More seeks to assert Indigenous inherent rights to sovereignty and reinstitute traditional laws and Nation to Nation Treaties by protecting the lands and waters from corporate destruction. Each day that Indigenous rights are not honored or fulfilled, inequality between Indigenous peoples and the settler society grows (www.idlenomore/story).

The movement quickly became one of the largest in Canadian history, an example of engaged citizenship, dissent and activism writ large. Through numerous teach ins, rallies, protests, flash mob round dances, and other related actions, Idle No More became part of public dialogue, debate and consciousness. What is noteworthy is the means through which the movement grew and spread so rapidly across Canada and globally. Social media figured prominently in garnering the participation of young people in the movement. A Facebook page was swiftly established to highlight the goals of Idle No More, followed shortly thereafter by the use of Twitter.

Twitter, and 'tweeting', allow for extensively broadcasting and responding to digital messages. News agencies, politicians, activists, academics, etc, are more frequently marshalling Twitter to increase awareness of local and global issues, ideas and noteworthy news stories. Twitter hashtags, singled by the use of # in front of a descriptor, can track interest, referred to as trending, in particular tweets. For example, CBC News reported that the use of the Twitter hashtag, #IdleNoMore facilitated the spread of information and the organization of various events and actions. It did not take long for #IdleNoMore to trend on Twitter

(<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/9-questions-about-idle-no-more-1.1301843>). To date, @IdleNoMore has 21,700 followers and has generated just under 5000 tweets pertaining to Aboriginal issues in Canada. Idle No More also has a digital presence on the social networking site Facebook, with over 127,000 likes since the page was created. The Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/IdleNoMoreCommunity>) highlights news articles referencing events organized by the movement along with various ways to actively learn about and support the movement, especially as they relate to critiques of government policy, processes and the corresponding experiences of ongoing colonialism. It aims to create a broad community of individuals who share the movement's concerns. Thus, social media has become an important tool of communication and ethically engaged citizenship extending across and beyond Canada's national borders.

Ethically Engaged Citizenship

Through following the Idle No More Movement on Twitter, many of my undergraduate social studies teacher education students and I attended a Flash Mob Round Dance at the University of Regina in January 2013. It was an opportunity to learn more about the concerns expressed by Idle No More, to participate in public dissent and to engage in peaceful activism. Several students shared that it was their first experience of engaged citizenship through which they felt empowered and determined to further express their support for the movement and their concerns about Bill C-45. They spoke about the meaningfulness of being alongside hundreds of people and the opportunity for solidarity in speaking back to the Government. The event facilitated the opportunity for what I have described elsewhere, as ethically engaged citizenship, which is a commitment to social change through being in relation to one another rather than working

toward social change in benevolent ways on behalf of the ‘other’ (Tupper 2011). It necessitates deeply considering the implications of colonialism for Aboriginal – Canadian relations and asks us to consider what our ethical responsibilities as citizens of Canada might be to First Nations people, individually and collectively.

Ethically engaged citizenship draws on Donald’s (2009) conceptualization of ethically relationality in order to critique how the substantive experiences of liberal democratic citizenship have been differentially produced. Donald notes that ethical relationality requires a deep consideration of the histories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada in order to facilitate being in ethical relation. I argue the need for all Canadians to have an ethically engaged disposition so that they may “be always mindful of how individual behaviours and choices support or undermine relationships with First Nations peoples. Canadians will be unable to engage ethically with one another if we fail to understand what it means to be in relation” (Tupper 2011, 153). Thus, ethically engaged citizenship must be a central concern in citizenship education programs.

Because Idle No More had such a digital presence, I was able to use it as a teaching tool to support my commitment to critical and ethically engaged citizenship. Following our participation in the Flash Mob Round Dance and our experiences of being in relation, several students and I met to discuss the concerns embedded in the Idle No More movement. Our conversation was an extension of the learning students had just participated in through their attendance at a two day Treaty Education Workshop offered by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan in which they grappled with the historical and contemporary

legacies of colonialism. The students were particularly interested in making connections between treaty failures and the impetus for Idle No More, especially failure related to a commitment to share the land in consultative ways. We talked together about further possibilities for learning and activism that supported an ongoing critique of colonialism in Canada. Recently, one of these students who is about to graduate from teacher education sent me a tweet expressing her gratitude for the opportunity to participate in activism and dissent. I can only hope that she will extend similar opportunities to the students she is alongside, and that she will do so with the aim of fostering ethically engaged citizenship.

Conclusion

In his work, Levine (2009) is critical of schools and their corresponding civic education programs and for what he perceives to be their failures in creating opportunities for students to actually become engaged with social and political issues, especially in light of the ways in which social media may be marshalled for civic participation. As educators, we must be attentive to the civic opportunity gap he speaks of, especially those of us directly involved in citizenship education, whether in the context of social studies, history, or other subject areas. These concerns are born out in the ways citizenship has been framed within a context of individual rights and responsibilities. This is not to suggest that individual rights and responsibilities are not important, because they most certainly are. However, knowledge of these does not necessarily require critical engagement with democratic systems and structures which differentially produce individuals as citizens depending upon their social and racial locations.

As I noted early in this discussion, the proposed civic education curriculum in Saskatchewan makes no explicit reference to social media and its many uses for fostering engaged citizenship for young people. Nor does it consider citizenship within a colonial context. And yet, this

province is the birthplace of the Idle No More Movement. Idle No More could not have had the immediate and pervasive impact it has without social media. Young people could not have engaged as extensively as they have and continue to within this movement if not for social media. It stands as a powerful example of activism and dissent because it could so quickly and so broadly connect with individuals who then became part of the larger social movement. Some may only have followed the movement on Facebook or Twitter, never attending a rally, flash mob, teach-in, or protest. Even so, they were learning about significant social and political issues in Canada, and perhaps for the first time, were encountering these issues through anti-colonial discourses. Others may have participated for the first time in one or more of these events, sparking an ongoing interest in activism. While there is no published research to date on the meaningfulness of this social movement for young people, I observed its power with many of my own students and have been deeply appreciative of the opportunities it has afforded me to continue teaching for ethically engaged citizenship and to continue supporting my commitment to reconciliation with First Nations peoples in Canada.

The uses of social media for teaching about and for citizenship as illustrated through a consideration of the Idle No More movement holds promise for ameliorating concerns that young people are not interested in and therefore will not participate in the political realm. My experiences with Idle No More have revealed to me just how deeply young people care about and want to be involved in a movement that aims to speak back to government policy that further undermines and erodes the treaty relationship in Canada. Although Bill C-45 was passed into legislation, the movement continues to invite Canadians to express dissent, participate in activism, and engage in new opportunities for learning about the history of the country in more

ethically relational ways. As Middaugh & Kahne (2013) note, “new media has played an important role in helping youth engage in critical thinking about social issues” (105). In light of the unique historical moment of “widespread political dissent currently unfolding” around the world and its reliance on social media to critique, educate and organize, the conditions for critical citizenship education in schools and elsewhere become more possible (Stitzlein 2012, 189).

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