

## Editorial: Digital Tools and Social Science Education

### Keywords

Digital tools, online communication, citizenship, social science and citizenship education

### 1 Introduction

Information and communication technologies have a central place in contemporary societies. Technological developments are transforming the ways we engage with each other and with the world and impacting all our spheres of life, with consequences to how we think and act in the educational field. Particularly in the case of social science education, it is worth considering the potential and risks of digital tools and the changes they promote and/or make possible. It is exactly here that this thematic issue intends to open some ground. In this issue of the Journal of Social Science Education we explore uses of digital tools and online communication in social science education.

Seeking contributions from theory and practice in formal and non-formal educational efforts on various domains, we hope we can contribute to understanding how digital tools are transforming educational contexts and practices and foster reflection on how they could help realize the critical aims of social science education.

In the call for papers we asked different yet interconnected questions. First of all we were looking for: How do students understand their use as tools for social science education? Are these tools widening and deepening participation practices in ways relevant to social science education? Or, instead, are they supporting new participatory cultures that challenge traditional understandings of citizenship and democracy? Are they suited for empowering those traditionally harder to reach? The contributions we received do not address all these issues and cannot provide answers to all aspects of these questions but they certainly bring forward ways to better understand these matters. Taken together they provide a precious means to acknowledge significant, and current, work on digital tools and social science education on a variety of contexts. We are proud of having a varied set of papers, theoretical and empirical, coming from different countries (and continents) – Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, Canada and Mexico – that reflect the use of

different methodologies – quantitative large scale survey research, qualitative research using individual or focus group interviews, and also an example of participatory action research – focusing on various educational contexts and levels – elementary and secondary education, but also lifelong learning.

When we were planning this issue of JSSE we provided some broad guidelines, inviting for this issue of JSSE articles from a variety of perspectives, considering questions in and outside of schools, covering issues that affect students of different ages, and coming from a diverse range of countries within and beyond Europe. In this regard, our intention was fully realized.

We summarize briefly the articles that appear in this issue of JSSE. They offer a range of approaches, using insights from distinct academic disciplines (e.g. psychology; education; social studies; etc.) and focus on a variety of interconnected themes and variables. We have loosely grouped the articles into themes, in order to understand how digital tools and online communication are transforming both engagement and participation practices and educational contexts in significant ways.

### 2 Digital tools and online communication in a changing world

The issue begins with a paper by Erik Andersson where he discusses the “didactical conditions and possibilities of political controversial conversations in social science education”. In *Producing and Consuming the Controversial – A Social Media Perspective on Political Conversations in the Social Science Classroom* the author makes explicit his theoretical perspective rooted in an agonistic philosophy of education and provides clear argumentation on how democratic education – and “learning *about* and *in* democracy, *as* democracy” – should make us rethink the functions of education to include not only socialization and qualification but also subjectification and therefore embrace its political dimension. Advocating for the use of controversial conversations but acknowledging, supported by research results from the Swedish context, “that teachers find it difficult to deal with politically controversial issues” he shows how “combining face-to-face conversations with digitally mediated conversations” can be advantageous and offer a valuable set of didactical challenges, possibilities and strategies for teachers engaging in social science education.

The following paper, by Katia Hildebrandt, Patrick Lewis, Claire Kreuger, Joseph Naytowhow, Jennifer Tupper, Alec Couros, and Ken Montgomery, also recognizes the importance of the political dimension of education in their case considering treaty education in Saskatchewan, Canada. They especially affirm this political dimension since their perspective is that “treaty education is much more than teaching the facts of the numbered treaties” and takes a “anti-racist, anti-

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oppressive, and anti-colonial” stance in providing “spaces and opportunities for young people to understand contemporary issues faced by Aboriginal peoples and to consider their own responsibilities in shaping a different future for all Canadians”. *Digital Storytelling for Historical Understanding: Treaty Education for Reconciliation* presents the results of a two year research project in schools using elements of participatory action research methodology and digital storytelling methods to explore how they can contribute to further realizing treaty education particularly one that might take students and teachers to “speak back to existing narratives”.

In the third paper on this issue, *A Qualitative Study on Learning and Teaching With Learning Paths in a Learning Management System (LMS)*, Cindy De Smet, Martin Valcke, Tammy Schellens, Bram De Wever, and Ruben Vanderlinde, investigate “which conditions at the school and teacher level affect the use of learning paths” a functionality of Learning Management Systems. They focus on real classrooms in secondary schools in Belgium by interviewing teachers “on teachers’ conditions (ICT experiences, expertise etc.) and school conditions affecting their LMS use, as well as their perceptions and expectations about the LMS next to student characteristics and learning outcomes”. Highlighting the importance of conditions such as a well-functioning ICT infrastructure, technical support and pedagogical support, the reported results invite us to seriously consider the barriers that often prevent the adoption of innovative digital tools in educational contexts.

Also focusing on a Learning Management System, specifically a e-Learning Management System directed at young adults who are “affected by the lowest levels of skills and highest levels of unemployment”, the paper by Marta Pinto, João Caramelo, Susana Coimbra, Manuela Terrasêca and Gabriella Agrusti, *Defining the Key Competences and Skills for Young Low Achievers’ in Lifelong Learning by the Voices of Students, Trainers and Teachers*, takes a lifelong learning perspective and presents the LIBE “Supporting Lifelong learning with Inquiry-Based Education” project. The paper brings the results of focus groups discussions with low achieving students and with teachers of low achieving students which meant to align the online courses to be developed with the needs and expectations of those who are supposed to benefit from them. It is, in fact, possible to connect this with other papers in this issue as some of the results that emerge reinforce the potential of using “specific software and social networking applications” and the importance of investing in pedagogical support as a means of facilitating motivation, self-efficacy and participation.

In *Assessing two Theoretical Frameworks of Civic Engagement*, we come back to issues closely linked to civic education. The paper by Benilde García-Cabrero, María Guadalupe Pérez-Martínez, Andrés Sandoval-Hernández, Joaquín Caso-Niebla and Carlos Díaz takes the data from Chile, Colombia and Mexico present in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS, 2009) to “test two major theoretical models used to

explain civic participation and civic knowledge of adolescents” - the Social Capital Model (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003), and the Informed Civic Engagement Model (Barr & Selman, 2014, Selman & Kwok, 2009) - to investigate which is more robust at predicting and explaining civic knowledge and civic participation of adolescents in the three countries. Besides empirically verifying and contrasting theories using data from a large international survey, the reported findings are important for “designing educational policies and practices that effectively promote civic engagement”. We would particularly emphasize the results showing the need to engage with conflict in democratic education as “it requires not only learning to participate democratically, but to democratically communicate using reflective, argumentative and deliberative capacities allowing emotions to support the involvement and commitment of students.”

The above mentioned papers, read together, bring forth two questions we believe should be further explored. Specifically, we see them contributing to discussing i) how digital tools can contribute to further realize the aims of social science education and citizenship education, and ii) how using digital tools in educational contexts comes with particular challenges.

Some of the papers particularly contribute to the first question. When considering how digital tools can help transform social science education we find helpful examples in the works sent by Andersson and by Hildebrandt et al. In both accounts, results and reflections link the use of specific digital tools – social media and digital storytelling – to further social science education in its critical aims. Assuming the advantages of dealing with controversial issues in social science classrooms (may it be in citizenship education or in treaty education), they see these tools as facilitating the introduction of a political dimension in education and therefore contributing to learning about democracy in exercising democracy. Being able to disrupt dominant discourses and engaging with critical education, as Hildebrandt et al. propose, also calls attention to the need to see democratic education as including subjectification, as mentioned by Andersson, and to deal with what it takes for students to become political subjects. Some of the more optimistic perspectives on the potential of digital tools suggest that civic engagement and political participation of today’s youth could increase by using interactive, networked activities and participatory digital media (e.g. Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009) or that these digital media can become tools for the civic and political expression and empowerment of youth (e.g. Bleumers et al., 2012; Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). In line with this, the papers by Andersson and by Hildebrandt et al. can be read as providing examples of how this can be promoted and realized in social science classrooms, or, if you prefer, how these tools can in fact create the opportunities and support for new forms of participation and new participatory cultures (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2011; Rheingold, 2008). Of course civic and political development are not simple

phenomena and, as Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan (2010) put it, to understand civic engagement and to understand it developmentally, we need to consider the multiple developmental influences including cognition, the emotions and the impact of social contexts. Also here one of the papers in this issue can become helpful in shedding some light. Given their results, the paper by García-Cabrero et al. is useful in understanding how these tools can effectively contribute to educational practices that support civic participation. We find significant that, in both models they tested, the affective dimensions were those more related to participation.

Some of the papers in the issue also alert us to the fact that this may be easier said than done especially when we take into account the challenges faced by schools and teachers when trying to engage with these forms of social science education and with the digital tools themselves. Dealing with conflict and controversy in the classroom is not easy, as the paper by Andersson documents, and dealing with digital tools can be a challenge in itself, as portrayed both by De Smet et al. and by Pinto et al.. Both these papers tell us from the perspectives of teachers and students and are particularly useful in letting us see how the use of digital tools – in the particular cases Learning Management Systems – encounters barriers. Understanding the barriers that obstacle the successful adoption of innovative digital tools in educational contexts is essential if we are to realistically consider their potential. The results by De Smet et al. and by Pinto et al. are congruent with a facilitative view of these tools but they both highlight the need to respond to the challenges that come with their use, especially the need to provide appropriate training and support strategies without which the expected gains in motivation and participation may never happen.

### 3 Further issues in social science education

Finally, in the article *An Avenue for Challenging Sexism: Examining the High School Sociology Classroom*, Kaylene Mae Stevens, Christopher C Martell report on the influence of teachers' beliefs on gender issues, and underline the importance of including attention to gender in the training of teachers and of future teachers.

Initiated by more than 40 professionals in social science education, most of them in academic positions, the *Frankfurt Declaration for a critical and emancipatory political education* ([Frankfurter Erklärung. Für eine kritisch-emanzipatorische Politische Bildung](#)) highlights recent critique of the so called Beutelsbach consensus. Dating back to 1976, the Beutelsbach consensus has long defined the principles of social science education in Germany. We make the Frankfurt declaration accessible to an English readership to offer some perspectives on the recent discourse on social science education in Germany. In some way this document introduces to the forthcoming issue JSSE 2-2016 on controversial issues.

Thorsten Hippe undertakes an accurate analysis of the book of Ian Mac Mullen (2015) *'Civics Beyond Critics'. Character Education in a Liberal Democracy'*, especially on two fundamental aspects: the task of education

related to the *status quo*, and the importance of character education for improving citizens' behavior. Hippe discusses the criticism expressed by Mac Mullen toward what he calls an "orthodox view" of civic education, a posture where individual critical autonomy based on reason and moral self-discipline is seen as the most important value, stressing individual liberties and assertively claiming reforms for equal opportunities. When discussed, the suggestions by Mac Mullen appear as not backed up by empirically well-founded research in the social sciences, and more often than not the existing empirical results are not in line with his ideas. The review essay facilitates a deeper reflection on the sources of social trust, and on the ability of people to apply reasonable principles of procedural justice, incentivating authorities to act fairly and to make fair legal systems; and that seems to be a priority task of civic education.

Bombardelli deals with the book by Paul Verhaeghe, *What About Me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society* (English version), where the author investigated the relationship between identity and socio-economic systems, underlining that our psychological identity is in interaction with our surroundings. Verhaeghe calls attention to how, nowadays, the neoliberalist ideology is invading all fields and altering the way we think about ourselves. The combination of over-regulation and control systems leads results in making the moral norm suddenly once more external to the individual, and therefore the internalized authority is replaced by quantitative standardized evaluations, performance interviews, and audits. The proposals of the author are: overcoming the neoliberal ideology, developing value based citizenship, changing economy, education and living conditions. He emphasizes the responsibility of everyone, underlining that, if we want politics to be governed by the public interest we ourselves must promote that public interest, rather than private concerns, and this is a good suggestion for education.

### 4 Some final remarks

We hope that this issue of JSSE makes a contribution to clarifying some of the relevant and current issues on the use of digital tools in social science education contexts. We would especially like it to foster a very much in need reflection on how digital tools can help realize the critical aims of social science education in its various forms, and contexts. The field is broad and constantly developing and we think that a lot is yet to cover. Further work on political literacy, civic engagement and democratic learning in the Internet era will surely re-engage with the issue of digital tools, their possibilities and challenges in the field of civic activism, engagement and social science education. For now, one last and special word of gratitude to all the contributors to this issue.



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