

## **Commentary: Digital Citizenship: A Response to Hicks et al.'s (2014) Guidelines**

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### **Abstract**

In this essay response, the authors address two goals: First, they comment on the ideas found in the new Guidelines for Using Technology to Prepare Social Studies Teachers, going deeper into issues where they concur with the judgments expressed, where they disagree, and where they feel more should be said. Second, they take the liberty of riffing on these guidelines to imagine what might be in terms of technology and social studies education.

We appreciate the invitation from Hicks, Lee, Berson, Bolick, and Diem to respond to their 2014 “Guidelines for Using Technology to Prepare Social Studies Teachers” published in this journal. They have given us much to think about in their carefully reasoned approach to revision of the original guidelines. They are also to be commended for providing a more critical and nuanced approach to this topic than the first version (Mason et al., 2000).

With the benefit of significant research on this topic (much of it by the authors of these guidelines) and sobered, like them, by the “hype cycles and the techno-romance of emerging technologies” (Hicks et al., 2014, para. 5), social studies scholars today have a better informed and more theoretically sophisticated perspective concerning the affordances and challenges of digital technologies in social studies teacher preparation than once was the case. Most notably, claims that technology would transform or even reform social studies teaching and learning seem, from today’s vantage point, misguided or, at the very least, premature.

The new set of guidelines reflects a more modest appraisal than the earlier version of what technology can and cannot do for social studies teacher education. The new guidelines are influenced heavily by the Common Core’s (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) emphasis on literacy (and the positioning of social studies as a handmaiden of literacy), especially as this emphasis is manifest in the disciplinary-oriented College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework promulgated by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013).

One surprise in the new guidelines, perhaps related to the Common Core influence, is the removal of the 2000 principle concerning science, technology, and society, which is, admittedly, accompanied by an admonition to infuse such an orientation into the remaining four principles. Our major concern with the new guidelines is this move. Given the issues related to cyber bullying, cyber ethics, growth in online teaching and learning, rise of social media, and the unfettered free speech found on the Internet, this elision has the effect of muting a much-needed emphasis on the ethical and moral dimensions of our work as teacher educators. The new C3 Framework has much to offer the field, but its emphasis on disciplinary literacy offers too little space for addressing the normative dimensions of our work as citizenship educators, especially in the critical area of technology use.

In this essay response, we address two goals: First, we comment on the ideas found in the new guidelines, going deeper into the issues just raised: where we concur with the judgments expressed, where we disagree, and where we feel more should be said. Second, we take the liberty of riffing on these guidelines to imagine what might be in terms of technology and social studies education.

In the second part of our essay, readers may judge our commentary somewhat perverse, even contradictory to our initial lauding of the more sober, restrained, and provisional spirit of the 2015 guidelines. Perhaps myopically, we do not see it that way. The second half of our essay provides a complementary perspective. Our goal is to offer an imagined longer term context for consideration, one where evolution in this domain may yet bring about dramatic change. We also wish to bring student voices explicitly into the conversation about teacher education, along with teaching and learning social studies. We conclude the essay with a proposed set of guidelines inspired by the lived experiences of our students—a Magna Charta for social studies students about technology, if you will.

In writing this essay, we have been informed by our own experiences as a teacher educator/scholar (Crocco) and a doctoral student (Leo), with strong interests in how technology has affected and is affecting the educational enterprise worldwide. Over the last decade, we have both interacted with scores of teachers across the country who have either enthusiastically embraced technology or struggled against, even resisted, its adoption. We also represent two different generations, sometimes labeled “digital immigrant” and “digital native” (Prensky, 2001) as shorthand for characterizing the hypothesized differences between generational groups in agility, attitude, and acceptance of digital technologies.

Like others who have critiqued this construct (Miller, 2014), we argue that too much can be made of these distinctions, but we suspect that having more years in the field of education may induce greater skepticism about the potential for technology to usher in a new classroom order that upends the traditional grammar of schooling. Research by those we might call technology enthusiasts and technology skeptics have informed our thinking.

Above all, we wish to make explicit our belief that the issues being discussed in the *CITE Journal* are important for the field and ought to be debated and discussed by all social studies professionals. In addition, the two halves of this essay are united in theme, as they are both deeply concerned with the issue of citizenship and the role of social studies teachers in cultivating critical and ethical citizens.

## **Digital Citizenship and the 2014 Guidelines**

When thinking about technology within the context of science, society, and schooling, we cannot help but consider the new guidelines from the standpoint of the stubborn realities of today's public school classrooms, which are generally underfunded and shaped by an accountability regime that many consider oppressive for both students and teachers. Likewise, we cannot help but reflect on how our understanding of what it means to be an information society has evolved since 2000. For example, what have been called "cyber cess-pools" (Leiter, 2010) have proliferated online since then, and what would be called hate speech in other contexts circulates in racist, sexist, homophobic and anti-Semitic commentaries widely across the Internet.

Likewise, with the popularity of social media, young people today, including the preservice teachers in our college classrooms and their future students, have lived lives that are often well documented online. As the guidelines note, they are both producers and consumers of digital content. These twin roles have implications for what we might want to reflect upon with them as they prepare to be teachers in order to model ways of thinking critically about topics such as privacy, discourse, professionalism, and reputation. Putting citizenship, social justice, and ethics front and center in considering technology and teacher education would argue for making such a consideration explicit in these guidelines.

What we find most heartening in the new guidelines is attention to the theme of *context*—both time and space—as primary shapers of teaching with technology. In terms of the context of time, the new guidelines have a modest, even provisional quality, in recognition of the difficulty of predicting how things will evolve over the next 15 years. In terms of the context of space, the authors seem to acknowledge the role of geography in making claims about technology in colleges and schools. Whatever limitations the notion of digital divide has, and surely demography is not destiny, it is still important to recognize that the distribution of technology, hardware, and software, as well as distribution of the capacities and commitments to teaching effectively with technology, are unevenly distributed across the United States.

Still today, students going to school in many large cities, some smaller ones, and in numerous rural communities do not have access to the kinds of learning environments, high-speed Internet access, and learning platforms that students in wealthier communities take for granted. As the authors of the guidelines noted, technology use—how much and what kind—is affected by multiple contextual factors. One factor is surely school district policies on the kinds of personal apparatuses students can bring into and use in the classroom. Some districts allow students to bring smartphones and laptops into classrooms for instructional purposes; others provide every student with a tablet but restrict smartphone use or Internet use in the classroom.

More broadly, as the Southern Education Foundation reported in January 2015, the *majority* of students in public schools today are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Coupled with research by Vigdor and Ladd (2010) indicating that students, especially disadvantaged middle-school students can have "too much tech" (because it is associated with a decline in reading and math scores), teachers and teacher educators ought to be circumspect about advocacy for technology, asking the following questions:

- How much is too much?
- What's the value added (that is, for learning) in using this platform or tool in the classroom?

- Who are my students and what do they need from my structuring of their learning experiences?

The new guidelines continue the call for more research on technology use in social studies education, which will be helpful in thinking about how to respond to these questions with the warrant of scholarship as rationale for our responses as we move forward.

The new guidelines emphasize student learning, context, civic practices, research and evaluation. The authors noted that technology can serve as a “Trojan horse” (Bolick, 2008), and does not necessarily lead to transformation of teaching and learning. The authors highlighted the potential of technology to promote inclusive classrooms. They called, too, for a critical approach to technology, one that is focused on promoting effective student learning and supported by a variety of civic practices using technology. In short, the guidelines offer teacher educators and scholars a set of broad themes that can form the foundation for more fine-grained norms of digital citizenship in the preparation of future social studies teachers.

Promoting effective student learning and civic practices, however, leaves undefined the question of what is to be learned and what civic practices are to be promoted. Given the strong emphasis on literacy within the C3 Framework, the new guidelines seem to be meant to complement the disciplinary literacy approach adopted by the Framework. This approach makes sense but leaves unexplored the serious concerns of an ethical and legal nature that might have been taken up had the statement about “including opportunities for students to study relationships among science, technology and society” from the 2000 guidelines been kept in the revised version.

Admittedly, the authors’ discussion in support of the guidelines brings attention to the issues society faces from the “flood of information and flattening of the systems for sharing opinions and perspectives” and the rise of “antisocial and antidemocratic engagement” online (Hicks et al., 2014, Cultivate and Support a Variety of Civic Practices with Technology section). They also referenced the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (2009) report, an important document that cautions us about the impact of technology on democracy.

They cited Cass Sunstein’s work on rumor and reputation, which is found in a volume edited by Levmore and Nussbaum (2010) called *The Offensive Internet*. The issues raised in this book not only are significant for lawyers and legal scholars, who are the chief authors of the book’s chapters, but are also topics pertinent to the lives of scholars and practitioners of citizenship education.

Retaining an explicit emphasis in the new standards on including “opportunities for students to study relationships among science, technology, and society” (Hicks et al., 2014, Table 1) would open the door to consideration of a set of issues that every future teacher ought to be thinking about, for example, the power relationships enacted online as manifest through sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia; the quality of the discourse and information that circulates there and the effects of rumor on reputation; notions of public and private in a digital age; cyber bullying and suicide; copyright and plagiarism; ethics and professional responsibilities related to social media; and a host of other topics and questions that a critical media literacy approach could raise regarding technology and citizenship education.

Information is not neutral, but situated. The expression of power and privilege takes form on the Internet in ways that are influenced by social relationships in this culture.

Communities—whether virtual or real—ought to operate according to norms of civility but often do not. What does all this mean for our democracy? Engaging with these questions surely involves literacy but also requires moral and ethical reasoning that goes beyond conventional understandings of disciplinary literacy.

Taking up such challenges in thinking about technology, teacher education, and digital citizenship would move toward a version of citizenship education that aligns with the classical Deweyan definition of democracy as a form of associated living. For many young people, in particular, the social relationships developed online through social media may be more meaningful than those with individuals encountered face to face. Much is exciting in all this, but much ought to be considered more fully in the doing of social studies and the preparation of its teachers.

In the first half of this essay, we have offered a critique of the proposed 2014 guidelines and evaluated their merit in accordance with the manner in which they were presented. We would like to turn now to a more playful, but no less serious, evaluation of technology and its potential to inspire reform and help social studies educators live up to their own established ideals. Its purpose is to contribute to the interest expressed by Hicks et al. in theorizing in ever more sophisticated ways about the role of technology in social studies.

### **The Social Media Paradigm**

In his compelling illustration of what happens to a society when its primary form of communication changes, Walter Ong (2002) argued that, in addition to dramatically altering the way information was created and distributed, society's transition from orality to literacy signaled a transformation in human consciousness. Ong explained how the newly invented paper, pencil, and printing press were more than new tools through which communication could occur. Rather, they enabled new ways to think, learn, and be human in the world. Society has been operating under and mostly taking for granted the values and norms of the literacy paradigm for hundreds of years.

Until now.

Many scholars contend that the proliferation of social media technology over the past 20 years also signals a major transition in society, on a scale similar to the transition from orality to literacy. As Lankshear and Knobel (2012) pointed out,

The kind of transition we are talking about here is well recognized and spoken about in already familiar terms. These include the ideas of a transition from modern to postmodern worldviews and theories, from an industrial society and/or economy to post-industrial or information/knowledge societies and/or economies, from a conception of societies based on the model of autonomous but related nation-states toward an increasingly global configuration, and so on. (p. 47)

Modernist thinking, largely enabled by the characteristics of the literacy paradigm, was based on the model of the book as a default text. As such, modernist thinking tends to be characterized by linearity, progression, and symmetry. In contrast, postmodern thinking, partially enabled by or perhaps inspired by social media technologies, is nonlinear, multiple, and hybrid and can be unstable and intuitive (Lankshear & Knobel, 2013). These new ways of thinking stimulate significant changes in society.

Lankshear and Knobel (2012) explained that, in contrast to a modernist paradigm which emphasized individualism and singularity, postmodern or social media paradigms

emphasize, “‘doing life’ out of many Discourses,” and “being able to move among many ways of thinking, speaking, valuing, judging, deciding, desiring, and acting” (p. 49). Furthermore, they argued, “These, obviously, are not just shifts in ideas and beliefs; they entail changes in practices. Life gets organized differently” (p. 49).

Unfortunately, while many social institutions are evolving and altering along with and according to this new postmodern/social media paradigm, education is not. Instead, schools seem to be focused primarily on technology integration and striving to invent ways to incorporate new technologies into modernist educational practices.

We propose a reversal in this way of thinking. Rather than thinking of social media technology as a tool and then creating standards for how best to incorporate that tool into the ways educators already do education, we would like to acknowledge social media technology as a whole new paradigm and then consider how educators can live into the established ideals of that paradigm to do social studies education better. Toward that end, let us examine the chief values or characteristics of the social media paradigm.

### **Public (Social)**

In her research with teens all over the country, danah boyd (2014) discovered that, “rather than fighting to reclaim the places and spaces that earlier cohorts had occupied, many teens have taken a different approach: they’ve created their own publics” (p. 201). They have created them online through the use of social media technology. As boyd explained, “Teens find social media appealing because it allows them access to their friends and provides an opportunity to be part of a broader public world while still situated physically in their bedrooms” (p. 201). Teen life is heavily circumscribed and restricted. Many rules seek to control their actions and attitudes. Online, they find places to escape that. While some teens are just looking for attention, boyd argued, most are simply looking for a place to belong and to contribute. “They want to connect with and participate in culture, both to develop a sense of self and to feel as though they are part of society” (p. 206).

Today, most teens are finding and establishing those social connections online by being members of various types of networked publics. These online-networked publics, boyd explained, are defined by their persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability. That is, the content people create on social media websites is lasting and often permanent; it is widely available to a host of diverse audiences; and it is easy to find, transmit, and share with others. While much can be debated about the benefits and drawbacks of these realities (issues of privacy being chief among them), teens experience social media as a place of connection and communion with others, and they are accustomed to easy access to people, places, and ideas.

### **Participatory (Democratic)**

The best example of the participatory, or democratic, nature of social media is, of course, Wikipedia. Hundreds of digital artifacts like Wikipedia change daily as they are defined and shaped by the people using them. Social media gives people the opportunity to affect public information in an unprecedented way. Brown and Adler (2008) argued that the most important impact of the Internet is its ability to support social learning, which they explained is “based on the premise that our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about that content and through grounded interactions, especially with others, around problems or actions” (p. 18).

In addition to sharing information on the Internet, participants also share themselves, making the content on the Internet inherently personal. This personal and participatory nature of content distribution on the Internet should shift our view of learning from one that stresses the transmission of knowledge by an expert to an ignorant public toward one that recognizes individuals as participants in sharing and creating knowledge, ideas, and understandings.

### **Productive (Creative)**

If not for the people using it, the Internet would be a vast empty space. Social media technologies rely on users to produce almost all of their content. The very act of publishing or contributing to information on the Internet is often inherently creative, as it involves producing content that did not previously exist. Peppler and Solomou (2011) explained how, under a modernist paradigm, experts curate and evaluate the merit of creative works and distribute them accordingly (think: art museum). Under a social media paradigm, on the other hand, expertise is distributed among participants and creative merit is determined by crowd sourcing (think: Internet meme).

Because social media enables participants to communicate and negotiate with other members of a community, content production becomes collaborative, with members sharing tips and tricks with each other to make content better. Creativity, under the social media paradigm, “is a cultural endeavor, shaped and persisted through the actions and values of many people” (Peppler & Solomou, 2011, p. 21). Far from passively staring at a screen, young people spend much of their time on social media actively producing and evaluating creative content.

### **Our Proposed New Guidelines**

Stimulated by the characteristics of the social media paradigm, we sought to imagine what it would look like to create classrooms in which information and communication were public and communal rather than private and individual, classrooms where students worked together to solve complex problems, classrooms in which all students participated in creating and shaping the curriculum, and classrooms in which creativity flourished and divergent thinking was encouraged rather than stifled. This is the social media classroom.

Inspired by these ideals, we propose the following revised guidelines for embodying the social media technology paradigm to prepare social studies teachers. The good news is that these guidelines will help educators live into the kind of education social studies scholars have been proposing for years now anyway.

#### **1. I will not use valuable classroom time to force my students to consume, memorize and regurgitate information they could easily access anywhere online with the tap of a screen.**

Though postmodernism has gained prevalence in academic and social discourses more broadly, social studies educators have struggled to integrate postmodern values into the classroom (Heilman & Segall, 2006). Unfortunately, despite myriad calls from education scholars for a more critical and democratic pedagogy, most social studies classrooms still follow a knowledge transmission model, with the teacher dispensing facts to students and students regurgitating those facts back to them on standardized assessments.

The social media paradigm makes this type of pedagogy unnecessary and archaic. Students today carry around devices with access to every piece of historical and social

scientific information they could possibly require in their pocket. Happily, this unprecedented access to information frees up social studies teachers to use class time on more noble pursuits, like critical pedagogy, for example. According to Giroux (2006), the central goal of critical pedagogy is “educating students to become critical agents actively questioning and negotiating the relationship between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change” (p. 5). Memorizing and regurgitating historical facts is not in his description.

**2. I will not assume that students will be satisfied with myself (and my grade book) as the only audience or rationale for their work.**

There is much to be said about the drawbacks of the culture of affirmation that many social media communities engender, but students today are accustomed to some kind of public recognition for the things they spend their time on. We can no longer expect that they will be satisfied pouring their energy and efforts into something that only one person will see and that holds only one abstract purpose, a grade. Of course, education scholars have been arguing for more a realistic and relevant curriculum in the social studies classroom for years.

Scheurman and Newmann (1998) proposed that social studies teachers focus their curriculum on “authentic intellectual work.” A lesson guided by authentic intellectual work has several key components: student construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school. Authentic intellectual achievement, in this model, involves much more than the ability to do well on an academic test. Rather, students must learn to put together multiple forms of prior knowledge from a variety of thinkers and fields and connect that knowledge to a larger set of discipline-specific principles and discourses.

In addition, Scheurman and Newmann suggested, the work students are asked to do should hold aesthetic, utilitarian and personal value beyond simply documenting their competence. Thanks to social media, students already have lots of experience doing this kind of work on their own time. They should welcome the opportunity to do so in the social studies classroom as well.

**3. I will not claim any authority over information or knowledge.**

The social media paradigm implores teachers to decenter themselves and their expertise in the classroom and instead work *with* students to come to more nuanced and complex understandings of the world. The NCSS (2013) recently recommitted itself to this enduring understanding in the development of its C3 Framework, which revolves around what it calls the inquiry arc:

With the entire scope of human experience as its backdrop, the content of social studies consists of a rich array of facts, concepts and generalization. The way to tie all this content together is through the use of compelling and supporting questions....Rich social studies teaching offers students opportunities to investigate those questions more thoroughly through disciplinary and multi-disciplinary means. (p. 17)

In addition to decentering themselves in the classroom, the social media paradigm also entreats social studies teachers to destabilize the traditional hegemonic curriculum. As Banks (1995) has argued, the various White, European paradigms that dominate American history and culture are powerful and deeply entrenched in the U.S. social studies curriculum. As such, they prevent students from gaining a sophisticated, complex,

and compassionate understanding of American history, society, and culture. Banks proposed a focus toward transformative academic knowledge, which consists of concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and expand the historical and literary canon.

Teachers can seek out existing networked publics that can expose students to and help them learn more about the world and its people. For example, students could explore the social phenomenon known as Black Twitter and examine how African American citizens have used the social media site to form community, resist dominant narratives about the Black experience, and challenge oppression and White supremacy.

#### **4. I will not blame new technology for my students' disengagement in school.**

Young people are spending the majority of their time in a culture that validates their ideas and opinions, allows them infinite access to the world around them, updates them on new information and entertainment constantly, and facilitates their creativity. When comparing that reality to the culture of an average school, is it any wonder why young people seem disengaged? Rather than adapt to the demands and opportunities the social media paradigm presents, teachers blame social media for creating shorter attention spans and infinite distractions while clinging to outdated and, frankly, boring pedagogy. Meanwhile, the social media paradigm not only allows for, but also beckons students to become active and engaged citizens—one of the principal goals of social studies education.

Parker (1990) and many others have argued that citizenship ought to be the primary aim of any social studies course and that education for citizenship should be democratic and practical. Citizenship education should empower students to work together with others to participate in public life, and, according to Parker (1990), should be “rigorous yet feasible, multi-valued and multi-voiced yet unified through shared commitment to democratic ideals” (p. 21-22). Parker (1989) argued that participation—one of the chief characteristics of the social media paradigm—is a key component of strong citizenship:

Democratic community cannot even endure—let alone flourish—with sustained dialogue about public problems and aspirations. Open, free, authentic talk is the coin of participatory citizenship. Civic virtue is a disposition to think and act on behalf of the public good. Schools should be communities whose members are interconnected by a shared moral grid (p. 354).

Young people are already seeking out open, free and authentic talk, and they are finding it on the Internet. Of course, students need guidance and wisdom from teachers to help them navigate much of this talk on the Internet, as it is often filled with uncivil discourse. Engaging with the online discourses that students are already a part of and validating the digital literacies they bring to the classroom seems a noble aspiration for any social studies course.

### **Conclusion**

Fortunately, these proposed guidelines do not render the Hicks et al. (2014) guidelines irrelevant. Readers may have noticed the irony that our proposed new guidelines could be accomplished with or without the use of specific technologies. There is still much room for deliberation about how exactly to utilize some of the tools the social media paradigm has bequeathed. Regardless of the exact methods and tools used to do so, it is time to embrace the social, democratic, and creative characteristics of the social media paradigm

in the social studies classroom. As Ong (2002) pointed out, the transition from one communication paradigm to another can be painful; there will inevitably be lamentable losses. In the end, however, “we have to die to continue living” (p. 15).

In the new world of the Common Core and its overwhelming emphasis on literacy and disciplinary literacy, let us hope death is not the fate of social studies—with or without technological enhancement.

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