The Use of Weblogs in Citizenship Education

A Theoretical Analysis of the Integration of Weblogs and the English Citizenship Curriculum

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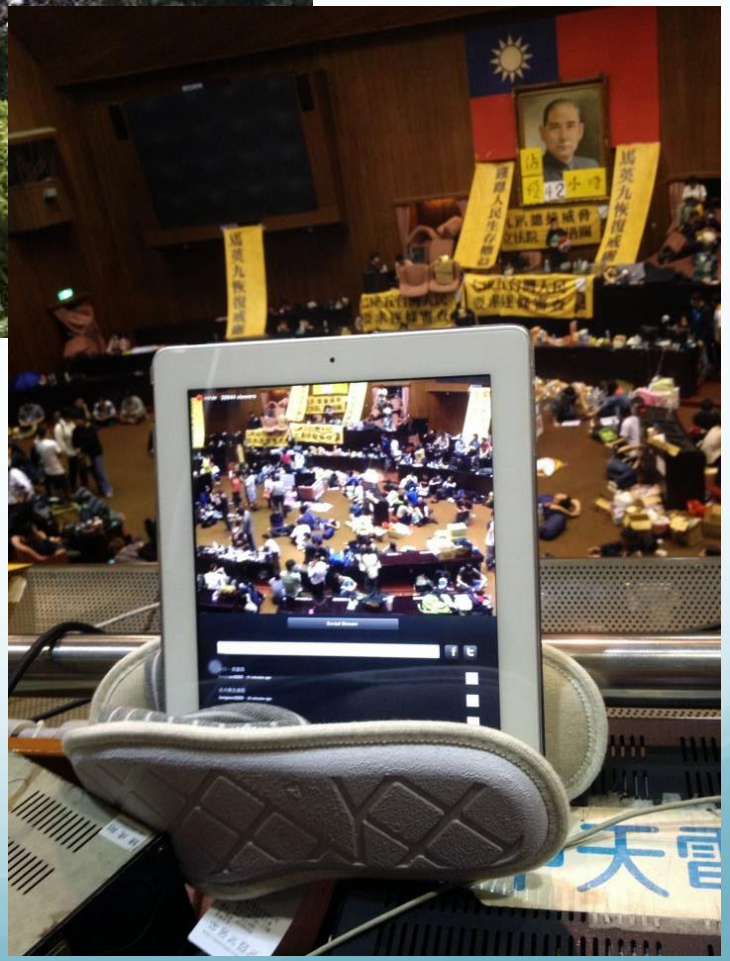
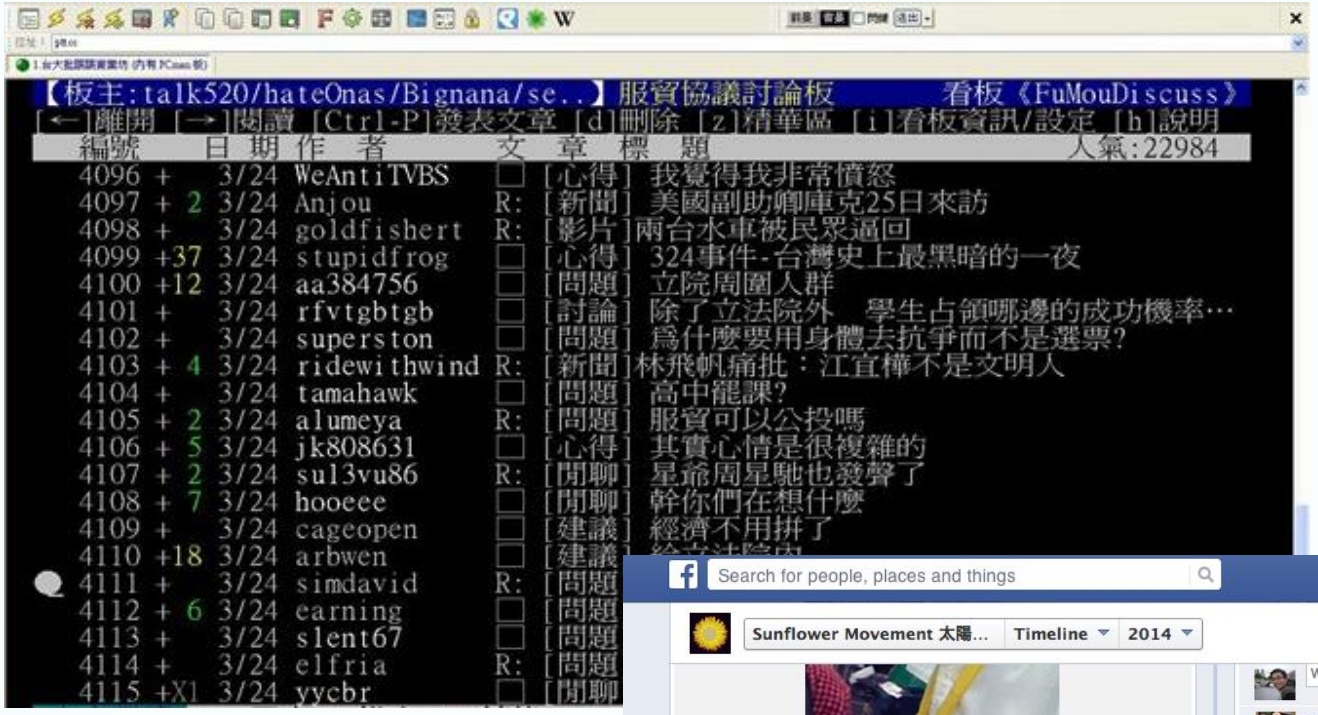




Civil disobedience
Social participation
Independent thinking
Deliberative democracy
….

Introduction

- Web-logs (blogs) have been utilised in a variety of fields, including news broadcasting, business, travel and education.
- According to Pascu's study (2008, p.ix), the 'blogosphere' has been growing at a phenomenal pace with more than 100,000 new blogs being created everyday and approximately one third of Internet users gleaning information from these platforms.

- A number of studies have explored how blogs are effectively used in language teaching, natural science and distance learning, but very little related literature deals with social science subjects, including history, geography and citizenship education (CE).

Understanding Blog

- Blogs started as an American pastime. The first tools for blog creation were invented in 1999 and substantially increased in mid-2005.
- The original concept of blogs stems from online personal journal or diary and the entries/articles are presented in reverse chronological order. Bella (2005) describes blogs ‘a Web-log is an easily created and updateable Web-site that allows people to publish to the Internet instantly’.

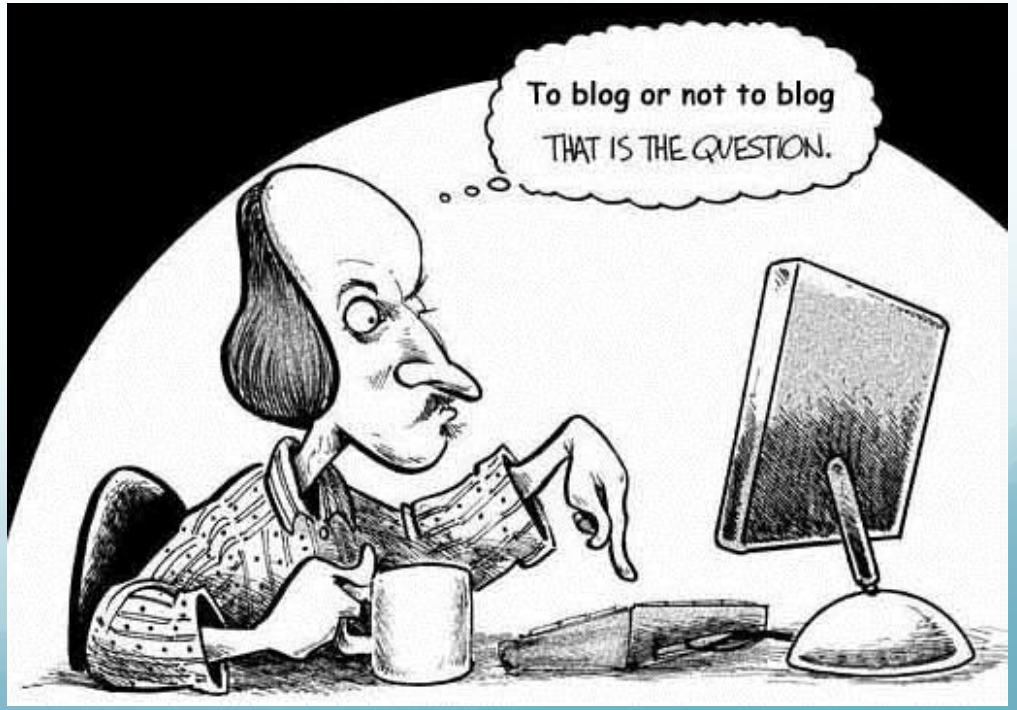
- The functions of blogs are not limited to article posting and gradually combine other Internet resource becoming an information platform.
- It offers the possibility of uploading hyperlinks, photos, slide shows, PowerPoint presentations, and audio and video resources. Besides, in the ‘blogosphere’, blogs link together and formulate an interconnected web, which embodies a sense of online community.

Theoretical foundation behind blogging

- The trend towards integrating technology in education facilitates the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching and learning leading to increased motivation among children.
- Functions of information sharing, interactive feedback and collaborative learning.

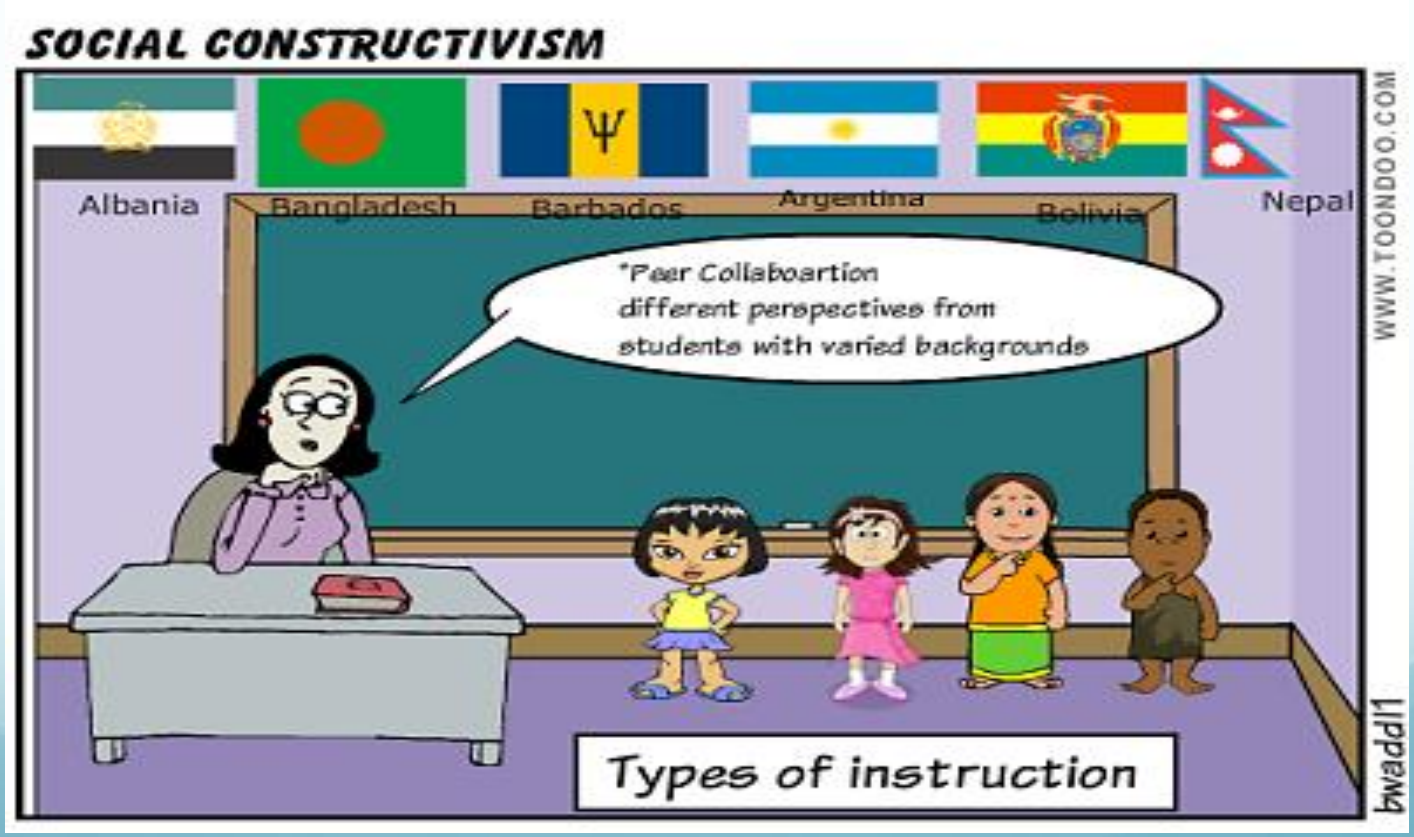
- Constructivism defines learning as a process of active knowledge construction rather than passive understanding acquisition, advocating that knowledge is constructed by the participants.
- Harasim (1996) said '*the focus from knowledge transmission to knowledge building*' and individual contributions can enrich the knowledge reservoir.

- No specific authority/instructor —every participant is entitled to have their say.
- The responsive feedback can accumulate knowledge and inspire new thoughts as an expanding database.
- Threads are published on the Internet for further different opinion solicitation.



- Constructivist theory emphasises that individuals make meanings via the interactions with each other to create a new personal view of the world. As Piaget (1985) said, after the process of ‘accommodation’ and ‘assimilation’, pupils internalise new acquisition into a prior cognitive system and reach a new equilibrium.

- Blog users are from different backgrounds, the reflective feedback posted through logical vein could be regarded as the ‘scaffolding’ for knowledge extension. – Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD).



English citizenship education

- In 2002, CE was officially introduced into the English national curriculum.
- CE not only delivers knowledge, but also cultivates pupils' interest and skill applicable to a social context.
- Three objectives (1) political literacy (2) community involvement (3) social and moral responsibility

Blogs and political literacy

- The government's focus is mainly on political literacy, stressing the advantages of liberal democracy and the dangers of totalitarianism.
- If 'E-democracy' can be successfully promoted, these mostly politically unmotivated youngsters might attend to democratic issues and improve their political literacy through the Internet.

- Alexander (1999) argued that online networking extends the participation into real life and advances the level of public discourse on public and community issues.
- Direct democracy, deliberative democracy

Blogs and community involvement

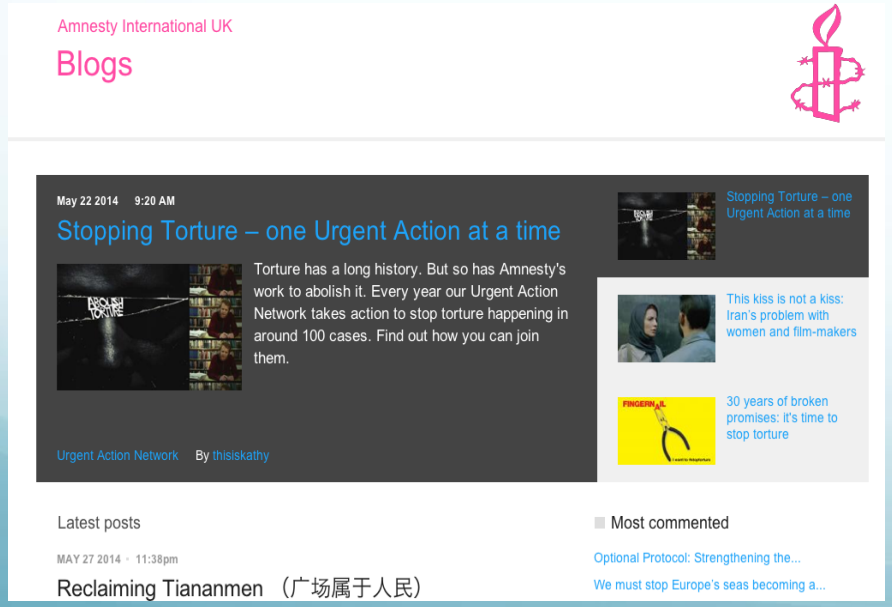
- CE not only wants to create ‘informed citizens’ but also intends to cultivate responsible ‘active citizens’.
- ‘Blogosphere’ means that the interconnected web-logs form a new virtual community where those having similar identity can join and find other kindred spirits from the hyperlinked blog platform (Hsu & Lin, 2008).

- Hampton and Wellman (2000) pointed out that the Internet strengthens social ties and the maintenance of relationships and Kent (2008, p.35) indicated that blogs can foster identification and engagement.

Blogs and social and moral responsibility

- The CE curriculum especially stresses the aim –‘to teach pupils to consider the interconnections between the UK and the rest of Europe and the wider world’ (QCA, 1998).
- A number of blogs are concerned with global campaigns including charitable work, human rights and environmental protection.

- ‘Cyberactivism’ — Online activists attract potential participants on blog platforms and the collective identity are solidified via constant discussion on common goals and interactive post-feedback format.
- ‘Amnesty International UK Blogs’ and ‘Greenpeace Weblogs’ are two blogs centering on global human rights and environment protection issues.



Application of Blogging into CE

- Some school teachers keep a blog platform, employed as both a citizenship information library and a class blog.
- A diversification of resources can meet different kinds of pupils' needs because some students like to read plain text but some prefer visual aids (Smeets, 2005).

Blogs and controversial issues teaching

- Cross and Price (1996) ─ when teaching controversial topics, teachers express serious concern about the expression of their own perspectives which might lead to indoctrination and subjective judgments.
- Whereas, with the aid of blog platforms, multiple resources could be adopted as supportive evidence and diverse opinions can be displayed.
- Every pupil's perspective can be heard on blogs and the responsive debates not only balance teachers' viewpoints but also help them to discover different points of view.

- From Xie et al.’s research (2008), classmates reported that other bloggers’ articles and comments provided different opinions, and they could more likely gain ‘a holistic, in-depth view of the content’.
- Although the role of blogs is to be able to extend the discussion and engagement in the classroom, the ‘anarchy of information’ on the blog might be a major concern. Gossip, slander, and superficial banter sometimes hinder the learning environment.

Blogs and reflective learning process

- Pupils' writing practices on blogs can enhance what they have learned from the class and some pupils. 'knowledge recipient' → 'independent learner'.

- Pupils feel empowered and responsible for what they write as articles will go public and receive feedback.

- Related research indicates that some individuals perform better on their blogs than they do in the classroom because they develop a higher public self-awareness to maintain their public appearance and image with the underlying intention of keeping a good online reputation (Guadagno et al. 2007).

- Kang *et al*. (2011) and Xie *et al*. (2008) indicate that journaling and peers' comments are perceived as an effective approach to promoting students' reflective thinking skills and this process uplifts them to the higher-order learning stage.

- Latham (1997) was sceptical about the quality of feedback offered by the peers and Sandars (2006) also said that the lack of quality assurance or peer review of what is posted is the major concern of the educative value of blogs. Therefore, the formation of 'collaborative learning' by blogging is questionable.

Blogs and class/school/community cohesion

- Besides the tutor blog as the learning resource library and pupils' personal blogs, the 'class blog' can act as an 'extra-curricular extension of the classroom', fostering a feeling of community and participatory culture between classmates (Top, 2012; Soares, 2008, p.520).
- Class blogs can be utilised as discussion boards and encourage pupils to make their voices heard, especially for more introverted and quiet individuals.

- The concept of ‘class blogs’ can be applied to ‘school council’ and ‘community’ as a discourse tool for public affairs discussion. Blogging therefore provides another alternative to extend pupils’ participation in school democracy construction and community policy formation.
- Due to the lack of the access of ICT, the ‘exclusion’ might engender a feeling of learning helplessness and pupils’ motivation may gradually deteriorate if the teacher overestimates the connection between blogging and ‘participation’.

Conclusion

- Although related study on CE is still lacking, a multitude of researchers have spelled out the interplay between the Internet, blogs, democracy, participation and citizenship.
- The author therefore accentuate the close relationship between this technological device and CE from the theoretical perspective in order to advocate the applicability of ICT in practical citizenship teaching.

- Web-logs can be integrated into CE and can enhance the effect of practical teaching in terms of pupils' civic knowledge acquisition and the cultivation of deliberative skills and social participation.
- However, online commercialisation, unnoticed segregation among communities and the anarchy of information should be paid more attention since these might hinder the educative effect of blogging.

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