Adult Education and the Challenge of Online Hate

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to trace possible connections between adult education and strategies for addressing instances of hate – specifically as they happen in online and social media contexts. While there is a gap in the literature addressing the connection, recent high profile cases of online hate raise the question: how can pedagogical approaches address the phenomenon? In this paper, we examine the ways in which community and adult educators can use social media to promote healthy communication and to foster powerful learning spaces when addressing contentious social issues in community settings. Basing our work on influential models of adult learning program design, we explore strategies for using technology in, and with, community meetings, town-hall discussions, and public forums.

Introduction

This paper traces possible connections between adult education and strategies for addressing instances of hateful speech. There is not a vast amount of research addressing the connection, but Canadians have witnessed recent high profile cases of online hate that have profound impact on communities and social relationships. The following paper attempts to question how adult educators can use technology and social media for positive outcomes. Obviously, this question is not so simple. To answer this question, we report on the SOMEONE (Social Media Education Everyday) project that aims at developing social media tools that incorporate popular and adult education techniques in order to provide adult and community educators with strategies for engaging Canadians in healthy communication. Specifically, the project attempts to provide Canadians with examples of how citizens can use adult education models of open discussion and facilitation to have positive community discussion. The project is part of an initiative put forth through a website that encourages research and discussion about lifelong learning and online hate. While the resources created through the SOMEONE project span early childhood

to adult education, only the latter are discussed in this paper. We engage in the study here as a case study of an action research project bridging this emerging, and we would argue necessary, connection of learning and social media.

There are, however, a number of dilemmas that arise when examining the nature of pedagogy and hate. For example, are traditional pedagogical methods progressive enough to engage in socially just education? Related to this is the question of how to distinguish between, and diminish, socially cruel acts from acts that Paulo Freire (2004) describes as *just ire* – the legitimate anger that needs to be expressed and addressed in a world of inequalities. The ramifications of balancing the former question should not be overlooked. If the proverbial net is cast too wide, and silencing is emphasized and privileged, social justice is jeopardized. If, on the other hand, we ignore hateful or cruel acts, we fail to address justice from the other side of this issue. As such, this research is oriented to two important tasks. The first is the pragmatic question of how adult educators can extend methods of facilitation to guide healthy discussions in community settings to prevent and address instances of hateful speech. The second is to forward a theoretical discussion on the ways in which we recognize and engage with just ire of an engaged citizenry. The following two sections relate to these two tasks, respectively.

The SOMEONE Project: A Case Study

The SOMEONE (Social Media Education Everyday) project consists of a series of nine individual projects focused on building resilience amongst communities targeted by hateful expression. As such, this project seeks to build digital literacy and critical thinking skills amongst Canadians throughout their lifespan. These projects are led by seventeen academic collaborators from the fields of education, educational technology, peace education, art education, critical media studies, marketing, sociology, and computer

science. Notably, the co-authors of the present paper are leading one project under the larger SOMEONE umbrella, which aims at developing social media tools that incorporate popular and adult education techniques in order to provide adult and community educators with strategies for engaging Canadians in healthy communication.

In our project, we attempt to leverage the power of the connection between social media as a tool for identity and community building, personal expression, and democratic participation with theories of adult education in order to enhance Canadians' abilities to respond to and engage with contentious socio-political issues impacting their communities. We translate influential models of adult learning programs into online environments in order to foster informal learning spaces in which critical conversations about social structures and justice or injustice may be pursued. To this end, the resources that are currently being developed map various techniques and ways to have digital discussions and communication, which will be presented to audiences via short animated videos and distributed via social media.

In the first video in the series, viewers are introduced to a young woman who is faced with a problem: There has been hateful graffiti spray-painted on the neighborhood school. The video emphasizes the importance of having the protagonist move to address the issue with her community. This is a crucial point in the video series: Not only is the aspect of civic engagement stressed as crucial to community life, but the agency to intervene in social contexts is a focus. In this way, we leverage the concept of committed engagement such as developed by Augusto Boal (1993) in his influential *Theater of the Oppressed*. As a result, the other videos give examples of how she can get her community together and address the issue. It is here where the viewers are introduced to a discussion about the connection between facilitation models and social media. The subsequent videos are posited as parallel options for action. We explore a number of the possible intersections of social media and facilitation methods to give the viewer a number of options. For example, one video discusses how techniques such as those akin to "Dotmocracy" methods can be employed via twitter and the use of hash-tags. The basic concept here is to use participatory idea prioritization in online and physical communities -- essentially a digitization through social media. Likewise, other videos explore possible connections between "World Cafe" style conversations and the use of forums, specifically through platforms like reddit. Finally, another video posits how communities can participate in digital storytelling through platforms like Youtube, Vimeo, vines, and Instagram.

These videos stress vital aspects of citizenship education whereby participation in public debate, specifically around contentious issues, is understood as necessary for democracy. We privilege the role of dialogue as necessary for thriving democracy and as such, emphasize adult education models of open discussion and communication. There are, however, two theoretical issues that arise through a discussion of the multimedia tools and website aimed for adult education:

The first is how to preclude acts of speech that emphasize *cruelty* and *hate* but, at the same time, allow for unpopular expressions. The second is the extent to which the generic models of facilitation of adult learning are capable of addressing the specific sociological nature of hate speech in Canada. This is a particular area of interest owing to the fact that when it occurs in Canada hate crimes broadly, and online hate specifically, relate to specific demographics of race (Statistics Canada, 2012). In the next section we turn to a discussion of potential ways to distinguish between *hate* and *just ire*, and suggest both ways to mobilize the latter towards democratic ends and ways that expression of the latter can be facilitated via the use of social media.

Challenges for Emancipatory Adult Education

The concept of just ire, is articulated in Freire's (2004) *Pedagogy of Indignation*, whereby he situates outrage at injustice as a necessary part of the learning process. The amount of space Freire dedicates to this concept is quite short – but powerful. Freire recounts, in the short and introspective essay "Literacy and Destitution," some of the perils of slum living in the north-east portion of Brazil. In the essay, he recalls the perils of people living beside a landfill. One specific story of the "horrific landfill" was "that a family once removed, from a heap of hospital waste, pieces of amputated breasts with which they prepared their Sunday dinner" (p. 58). Freire goes on to note that the story left him "horrified and filled with just anger" (p. 58). From there, he elaborates in a longer, but worthwhile passage:

> I have the right to be angry and to express that anger, to hold it as my motivation to fight, just as I have the right to love and express my love for the world, to hold it as my motivation to fight, because while a historical being, I live history as a time of possibility, not of predetermination. If reality were what it is because it was written so, there would be no reason to be angry. My right to feel anger presupposes, in the historic experience in which I participate, that tomorrow is not a "given," but rather a challenge, a problem. My anger, my just ire, is founded in my revulsion before the negation of the right to "be more," which is etched in the nature of human beings. (pp. 58-59)

There are a number of implications worth addressing from Freire's passage. First, he acknowledges the emotional effects that grave historical injustices precipitate. Rather than gloss over traumatic events, he engages with the specific type of anger that he views as necessary for progressive education. Second, he acknowledges the historical -- as opposed to natural – conditions of inequality. Third, and finally, he warns against conceptualizing these historical conditions in a way that avoids predetermination.

The concept of just ire is not a major theme in the work of Freire. Notwithstanding, Macedo (2004) expands upon this idea as important to include in the discussion of socially-just

learning. Also, Grace & Wells (2011), pick up the discussion of Macedo on the concept to inform their own work with sexual minorities.

We are left to struggle with one important question however: How do we identify differences between just ire and hateful speech? Étienne Balibar (2002) makes an important distinction between what he posits as the dialectic of power (in classic Marxist parlance, this dialectic is usually state power and violence and revolutionary power and violence) and acts which transcend this dialectic and engages in what he refers to as cruelty. It is the concept of cruelty that Balibar notes is the outlier. While it is not always clear when acts transcend into cruelty, he highlights that the aspect of deriving pleasure from acts is a marker of cruelty:

> Although an essential part of the question is to understand why power itself, be it state power, colonial domination, male domination, and so on, has to be not only violent or powerful or brutal, but also cruel – why it has to derive from itself, and obtain from those who wield it, *jouissance.* (p. 136)

A particular challenge for citizenship educators is to help citizens understand the importance of retaining the contestation and conflict arising from different socio-political perspectives while also diminishing the cruel results of such disagreements. To this end, Ruitenberg (2009) suggests that citizens must learn to pay attention to such politically-relevant emotions as anger and empathy, and to understand the difference between political and moral disputes. Importantly, such a vision of citizenship education involves helping citizens to discern emotions that go beyond themselves and relate to hegemonic social relations involving the larger socio-political collective. This requires "supporting the development of a sense of solidarity, and the ability to feel anger [and empathy] on behalf of injustices committed against those in less powerful social positions rather than on behalf of one's own pride" (p. 277). As Mouffe (2013) explains, if this is missing, there is a danger that democratic confrontation will be replaced by other, more individualistic and violent forms of conflict.

Moreover, citizenship education in favor of the expression of *just ire* must go beyond a mere recognition of political passions, to a simultaneous emphasis on the importance of mobilizing these emotions towards such democratic ends as improved social justice. However, for this to be successfully realized, citizenship education must support citizens' abilities to differentiate between moral and political anger. Ruitenberg (2009) explains, "moral anger could be the anger than one feels after seeing moral values that one cherishes violated" (p. 277), whereas political anger results from situations in which decisions are made that violate the ethico-political principles of a given society. Within a liberal democratic context, the values of 'liberty and equality for all' are fundamental to society's notions of justice. Therefore, citizens must be encourage to act in order to right injustices

that infringe upon citizens' freedoms and equality, rather than to solely act on behalf of themselves.

As we have argued elsewhere (McGray & Thomas, 2014), the Internet broadly, and social media specifically, holds promise for the field of citizenship education. In particular, we have highlighted social media as a space for informal learning, social interaction and community building, and heightened personal expression wherein citizens act to "intentionally assert actions on the world and have them act as generative mechanisms for other events" (p. 167). Moreover, due to the proliferation of online communities and new types of identities, we have posited that the Internet is developing as a new form of civil society in which citizens who may be excluded from more mainstream forms of politics might be learning to engage and/or already engaged in democratic participation. Not only do certain social media platforms hold the potential to democratize socio-political participation, but also they allow for the expression of important counter-discourses and the creation of counter-publics that demand attention of social injustice (Thomas, Fournier-Sylvester, & Venkatesh, 2014). For these reasons, we contend that social media are fertile grounds for the expression of *just ire*.

Conclusions

Throughout the above discussion, we have highlighted the two broad, interrelated objectives to which our project aims. The first is to provide educational strategies to build citizens' and communities' capacity to convey just ire – sometimes even caused by perceived social injustices, such as hateful speech. To this end, we have included within our discussion potential ways to distinguish between expressions of *just ire* and *cruelty*. We argue that this is an important differentiation given the recent trend by some politicians to expand the term *radicalization* to include ideological groups with whom they do not agree. We posit that rather than censoring alternate (e.g., non-mainstream) social perspectives, emphasis on just ire demands validation of multiple, conflicting perspectives relating to the ways in which society ought to be structured and about what social relations are just and unjust.

The second objective of our project is to leverage the power of the connections between prominent adult education models and different social media platforms in order to provide Canadians with tools for civic engagement within communities experiencing the effects of hateful speech. As we have argued above, such engagement necessarily includes participation in public debate, specifically around contentious issues, and the expression of just ire. The fruitfulness of such an endeavor lies in making explicit connections between citizenship education and the use of social media as one means by which personal expression, community building, and informal learning can and does occur.

Importantly, however, we raise the question about the possibility of decontextualizing more generic models of facilitation of adult learning and the specific sociological nature

of hate speech in Canada. The fact that just over half of all occurrences of hate crimes in Canada in 2012 targeted race or ethnicity (Allen, 2014) provide solid grounds for the need to explore the connections between models of adult education and critical social theories within future work. Going forward we highlight, and posit as a necessary task, how educational ventures that attempt to educate against hate can incorporate critical social theories that can address contemporary aspects of racialization.

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