

Guest Blog: Why getting kids ‘college and career ready’ isn’t enough

Introduction

By Valerie Strauss October 20, 2014

Conventional wisdom holds that young people aren’t political or even civic-minded. The following post takes issue with this notion. It was written by Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College and a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He chairs the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics. His work concerns the ways educational initiatives and participation with digital media can influence the quality, quantity, and equality of youth civic and political participation.



U.S. Constitution (National Archives)

Why getting kids ‘college and career ready’ isn’t enough

By Guest Blogger Joseph Kahne

One of my favorite teaching stories is about a philosophy professor who forgot to prepare for his upcoming class. He decided he’d pose a great question and then spend the next hour facilitating the discussion.

“Which is worse, when it comes to our democracy,” he asked his class, “Apathy or ignorance?” At first, the room was quiet. Then, a student in the front row raised his hand and answered, “I don’t know. And, I don’t care.”

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This story comes to mind with polls showing that voting rates of 18-29-year-olds are likely to hit a record low in the fall midterm elections — dropping below the 24 percent who voted in 2010. Moreover, a recent study by [CIRCLE](#) found that the most common reason young adults gave for not registering was a lack of interest.

For many, this captures what's so troubling about youth: Too much apathy.

But here's the thing. That diagnosis is wrong. Young people know and care deeply about many things. And the way to revitalize our democracy is to provide supports and opportunities for youth to connect to the issues they care about in informed and effective ways.

Consider the way young people use digital media. Increasingly, they are building a bridge between their online lives and societal issues.

For example, in 2008, 13 percent of 18-24-year-olds posted or circulated political news on a social networking site. Four years later, that portion more than doubled to 32 percent. And, when it comes to these changes, youth and young adults are leading the way. While 39 percent of all adults engaged in some online political activity in 2012, 67 percent of those aged 18-24 did. Such activity, which we call *participatory politics*, ranges from blogging and circulating political news, to online petitions, to mobilizing others for change.

Lest one think this form of engagement means little, our national [survey](#) of 15-25-year-olds found that as many young people get their news from family and friends via Twitter and Facebook as from newspapers and magazines combined. By circulating information and perspectives via the Internet, young people help choose which ideas influence their peers.

So, will Instagram, Twitter and Facebook save democracy? Not quite. While it's important to recognize the potential of participatory politics, there are very real risks. For example, misinformation and echo chambers thrive online. And, while some young people care deeply about societal issues — many are focused elsewhere.

Educators can help. Research shows that when youth learn how new technologies can be used for civic purposes, they become more politically engaged.

Unfortunately, many young people aren't getting the supports they need. For example, only 14 percent of respondents in our recent national survey said they had more than a few classes on how to determine if online information was credible. Perhaps then, it's not surprising that

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when we asked if they and their friends would benefit from learning how to be more discerning about what they read online, an overwhelming majority – 84 percent – said yes.

We can do better. In Oakland, for example, as part of the [Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age](#) initiative, the school district has expanded its goal from preparing all students to be “College and Career” ready – to having all students be College, Career, and *Community* ready. More than 60 teachers are involved. Students are studying issues they care about and are proposing solutions and educating others. Topics range from the obesity epidemic, to recycling, to the portrayal of youth of color in the media.

The contributions students make, when given the chance, is often impressive. For example, Oscar Davalos and Jose Cartegena from MetWest High School started an online blog, [youngOakland.com](#), where they and their peers opine about everything from solar power, to school reform, to the impact of incarceration on families. These students are learning the essentials of what it takes to contribute to society – they run workshops, analyze research, learn to judge the credibility of online information and communicate their ideas.

It’s working. Our surveys indicate that these experiences translate into stronger civic commitment and deeper engagement in school.

But reformers in schools and districts can’t do this work alone. Clearly, community-based programs make crucial contributions as well. And policies must change. Most state curriculum frameworks and assessments barely address civic engagement. Moreover, the federal government has zeroed out all targeted support for civic education. Business and philanthropy also need to step up. There’s plenty of room for improvement.

“The Death of Democracy,” wrote Robert Maynard Hutchins, “is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”

Hutchins was right. We need to make civic education a priority. It’s not student apathy that threatens democracy. It’s our own.