Promoting Educational Reform through Teaching about Hurricane Katrina

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This paper deals with two types of educational reform related to teaching and learning the traditional school subject of social studies. First, we consider the importance of teaching about controversial issues by examining the impact of Hurricane Katrina, the record-setting, natural disaster, which struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in late August 2005. Using this episode as their foundation, the authors demonstrate how the common practice of avoiding controversy within the social studies arena can be addressed. Since Katrina represents a topic for which no warrant exists within state standards for teaching the subject, it can be considered a true “teachable moment”. Second, we analyze a case study involving the use of technology to spark discussion relative to the issues of race and class tied to Katrina, primarily for the two-year period after the hurricane struck. While the use of digital technology has been slow to gain popularity in the field of social studies, the authors use the case study to demonstrate how it can be utilized to generate democratic dialogue and civic engagement.

Key Words: controversial issues, technology, social studies, Katrina, democratic dialogue, civic engagement

Introduction

Hurricane Katrina’s impact on U.S. citizens and society has been the subject of much investigation over the last five years. A unique, early effort to consider those events was Spike Lee’s When the Levees Broke, a four-hour documentary that aired in August 2006 on HBO. (It also spawned a four-hour sequel entitled If God is Willing and Da Creek Don’t Rise that aired on the same network in August 2010). Thanks to a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, educators at Teachers College, Columbia University developed a curriculum and website (see Web-Based Resources below) to accompany When the Levees Broke. Teaching The Levees (TTL), including the DVD and curriculum – has had wide circulation since its inception in 2007. The project leaders distributed 30,000 physical copies nationwide; several thousand curriculum were also downloaded from the website. Teachers College Press later published the curriculum as a book (Crocco, 2008). An evaluation of the curriculum prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation indicated a high rate (over 90%) of satisfaction among end-users in “enhancing participants’
understanding of Katrina and the complex social issues it raised” (Ed Lab, 2009).

This paper explores the impact of multimedia representations of this tragic event – especially those that highlighted, promoted, or exploited galvanizing social, political, and economic issues – on teachers and their students. Focusing exclusively on the Teaching The Levees website (See Web-Based Resources below), this paper also assesses the venture’s unique ability to leverage educational media for social networking, democratic dialogue, and civic engagement. We consider these efforts to be one example of numerous efforts aimed at reforming citizenship education in the United States. Instead of promoting methods of instruction that rely strictly on the recitation of stale litanies of facts, figures, and dates, these projects attempt to move the field of civic education towards critical engagement with topics that require student-centered instructional approaches and demand higher order thinking skills.

The curriculum is based on the premise that there is an acute need in schools for (1) a more student-centered pedagogy in the social studies, and (2) increased analysis of challenging, complex issues. Educational researchers (e.g., National Research Council, 1999) stress the importance of an inquiry-oriented, constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Similarly, social studies scholars emphasize the educational and citizenship dividends from bringing social issues into the classroom for discussion and debate (Hess, 2009). We believe such engagement is essential to addressing the social, economic, and political issues highlighted by the “unnatural disaster” of Katrina. Indeed, we cannot imagine any other way to teach this complicated topic, one of the many episodes characterized as “acts of God” (Steinberg, 2006) in American history.

The curriculum was motivated by two questions:

- How do we encourage people in other parts of the country to care about and debate the events and issues surrounding New Orleans and the Gulf Coast as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the breaching of the levees?
- Are there lessons that Americans should take away from Katrina? If so, then how do we teach these lessons effectively?

Democratic Citizenship in the Digital Era

Creating democratic citizens has long been an important goal of social studies educators in the United States. In The Civic Mission of Schools, competent democratic citizens are defined as people who are informed and thoughtful about public affairs, have civic virtues (e.g. respect and tolerance), and are engaged in both community and political activities (CIRCLE, 2003). Stated differently, civic education aims to prepare deliberative, pluralistic, and civically engaged citizens. Our conception of civic engagement is aligned with Delli Carpini’s (n.d.) definition:

Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic engagement encompasses a range of specific activities such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official or voting. Indeed, an underlying principle of our approach is that an engaged citizen should have the ability, agency and opportunity to move
Researchers have long been concerned with the teaching of civic education in the “passive voice,” which encourages student regurgitation of facts, names, and dates rather than experiential education, service learning, debate, dialogue, and discussion. Teacher-centered forms do not provide much space for the kinds of participatory or justice-oriented citizenship described by scholars such as Westheimer and Kahne (2004). By contrast, teaching approaches focused on student-centered learning have shown promise for engaging students at higher cognitive levels, with sustained positive impact in terms of civic efficacy (Levine, 2007; Hess, 2009; Nie, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996).

Rapid developments in technology and digital media present new opportunities and challenges to civic education. Proponents of on-line participatory democracy such as Henry Jenkins (see Web Based Resources below) and Chris Cziksentmihalyi (see Web Based Resources below) laud its potential to create new spaces for facilitating civic engagement while enhancing the critical media and digital literacy skills necessary for success in the 21st century. A special issue of the International Journal of Social Education, edited by Michael J. Berson in 2006, considered how the Internet might affect civic education. One of the key ideas proposed in this issue was the Internet’s facilitation of discussion and debate, especially with others outside one’s own community, which is essential to the cultivation of deliberative citizens in the digital era. In a review of the “electronic republic,” VanFossen (2006) notes that widespread hopes that the Internet would stimulate greater political engagement have been largely unfulfilled. Moreover, some authors fear that on-line discussions may be having the effect of turning young people away from politics and political issues rather than increasing interest or engagement in civic life. This results from the latitude provided by the Internet for the anonymous expression of extreme viewpoints (sometimes called “flaming”) rather than rational deliberation that leads to common ground (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2003; VanFossen, 2006). Despite these challenges for on-line democratic discussions, Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson (2004) illustrate a successful case. In a structured on-line forum, several young people enhanced their listening skills and tolerance while learning to practice civic dialogue skills. The on-line forum required participants to register and introduce themselves before participation, to join an assigned small on-line group, and to contribute to the discussion within a finite period. These arrangements addressed some drawbacks of regular on-line discussion forums.

New media environments also provide opportunities for young people to interact with individuals who live far beyond their geographical communities and neighborhoods. Political scientists, however, worry that the Internet may become yet another example of what Bishop (2008) calls the “big sort” in American life, or the self-segregation of Americans into physical communities of like-minded people. Hargittai’s (2008) recent study about popular social networking sites confirms this concern. In her case analysis of a freshman class at a Middle West college, Hargittai finds that one’s social network site choice and use were associated with one’s parental educational background, race and ethnicity. According to the study, Caucasian and Asian students and those with higher levels of parental education were more likely to use Facebook; in contrast, Hispanics and those whose parents had not received a high school education were more likely to use MySpace. In Kahne and Middaugh’s (2009) literature review on social networking, their findings show that while some
scholars worry that the customization of on-line environments might lead people to interact only with those who share similar perspectives and values, other scholars contend that even interest-based on-line communities are more likely to have members with heterogeneous social backgrounds than geographic communities.

Connecting people on-line could also lead young people to civic activities offline, which are important practices of participatory citizens. Based on their research into the social networking site Taking It Global (TIG), Raynes-Goldie & Walker (2008) found that most youth interested in civic engagement go to on-line social networking sites to seek information about their interests, connect with peers who share interest in similar causes, and find ways to organize social actions. Specifically, “forty-four percent (44%) of [the] respondents agreed that the information, networks and tools to mobilize and organize found on TakingITGlobal.org website (see Web-Based Resources below) have helped them make change in lives or community” (p.172).

A competent citizen in the era of digital democracy should be able to evaluate and find reliable information about social issues via the Internet, discuss views with other people from diverse social backgrounds in on-line environments, and take advantages of digital media to help coordinate civic activities and social actions. We draw two conclusions from the scholarly literature on social studies and digital media:

- The subject culture of social studies has been slow to adopt, and even downright resistant, to incorporation of new digital media technologies into teaching the subject.

- Scholarly research suggests that if there are gains to be made in terms of civic engagement as a result of new media they are, to date, largely unmet.

Goodson and Mangan (1995) argue that, as recently as fifteen years ago, social studies was a school disciplinary sub-culture markedly disinterested in the use of digital technology, at least from the standpoint of classroom teaching. With the full flowering of the Internet, this situation may have changed, but anecdotal evidence from social studies teachers working in New York City’s schools seems to indicate that the hurdles, even for motivated and skilled teachers, in using technology in urban classrooms are often insurmountable (Crocco & Cramer, 2003).

Despite the challenges, the design of the digital environment for Teaching The Levees (TTL), which is influenced by media richness theory (MRT) (Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987), aims to help educators to teach controversial social issues raised by the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina and to develop civically engaged citizens. According to MRT, “communication efficiency between people is affected by the fitness of the media and the characteristics of the communication task” (Sun & Cheng, 2005). Multimedia formats (e.g., websites, videos) adept at facilitating understanding of a particular topic are characterized as “media rich.” Conversely, media that fail to clarify ambiguities efficiently are considered to be low in media richness. The objective of MRT research is to choose or develop appropriate media formats that facilitate the flow of information in order to enhance understanding of a topic or engagement in an activity by the intended audience. In order to assess how effectively an on-line resource supports educators in facilitating democratic dialogue or civic engagement in their schools, researchers must consider the design of on-line communal and discursive space in order to
provide teachers an effective professional development experience related to their teaching aims.

**Teaching The Levees Project and Website**

After considerable discussion about what form the educational materials related to *When the Levees Broke* might take, the Teachers College (TC) team decided to create two main resources for the project: a curriculum book and an on-line resource. The goals of the project were as follows:

- Students will understand the many dimensions of governmental, communal, and personal responsibility implicated in situations of disaster.

- Students will develop a sense of empathy with victims of Hurricane Katrina, recognizing that all Americans are vulnerable to disasters of one form or another.

- Students will develop skills related to the process of democratic dialogue about controversial issues and the ability to articulate judgments about where they stand based on evidence.

- Students will use their new knowledge and skills to get involved in their communities to improve the common good.

Using Spike Lee’s documentary as its basis, the TC team began defining the steps to be used in order to address these goals. The team wanted to create a curriculum designed not only as an academic exercise in knowledge formation, but also as an opportunity to promote democratic dialogue and civic engagement concerning the issues featured in the curriculum. Thus, the aims of the project were cognitive, affective, and evaluative while being geared towards social action related to the learning process.

Recognizing that few educators would be able to show the film in its four-hour entirety, the team organized the curriculum around lessons tied to specific sections of the documentary that could be used independently. One challenge was determining how closely to adhere to the film. If the curriculum were to promote democratic dialogue, then Spike Lee’s compelling narrative had to be treated as one perspective among other perspectives to be considered. Likewise, students who viewed the film needed to be instructed in how to deconstruct the filmmaking techniques Lee used to unfold his argument; educators needed to have access to alternative sources of opinion and data; and educators and students needed to have the intellectual resources to challenge some of Lee’s conclusions.

The curriculum begins with an introductory statement that lays out guidelines for talking about controversial issues, whether done within the context of a high school, college classroom, or an adult discussion group - the three audiences targeted for the curriculum. The introduction urges end-users to preview any portion of the film to be used with their groups. Following the introduction, an essay about the history and geography of New Orleans is provided. A set of media literacy lessons is strategically placed at the beginning of the curriculum so that viewers of the film become aware of how the film frames the issues. There is a separate set of lessons targeted to adults who will use the curriculum in less structured settings such as church or civic groups. A set of college-level lessons is aimed at history, American Studies, race and ethnicity studies, and other interdisciplinary courses containing an historical component. Finally, the high school curriculum focuses on the traditional social studies
The major questions structuring the above sets of lessons are:

What kind of country are we?
What kind of country do we want to be?

Among the minor questions used to pursue the above questions are:

Why was Hurricane Katrina such a catastrophic event for New Orleans?
Why has this disaster had such a disproportionate and lasting impact on poor people?
Are there two Americas, divided along lines of race and class?

Should New Orleans be rebuilt for all of its citizens or only for those in economically viable neighborhoods?

In a democratic society, should the government be held responsible for the safety, health, and well being of its citizens? If so, to what extent?

What is the role of media in a democratic society when there is a national disaster?

The development and implementation of the TTL website proved critical to addressing these questions, as its design promoted democratic dialogue and civic engagement. Aside from being a portal of information about the TTL curriculum project, the website contains three major parts: “Story of the Levees,” “Resources,” and “Community.” The “Story of the Levees” section provides fundamental background knowledge about Hurricane Katrina presented through a variety of media including interactive map, timeline, textual information and relevant web links. The “Resources” section offers the option of electronic downloading of the curriculum book and additional lessons not included in the curriculum book. Here educators also find professional development materials that include video, audio and articles. The “Community” section features a discussion forum and lesson-sharing platform that invites educators to share their ideas of teaching about Katrina. In sum, multimedia materials in the “Story of the Levees” and “Resources” sections aim to prepare educators with the skills necessary to facilitate democratic dialogue and promote civic engagement. The “Community” section offers an on-line space for educators to exchange their ideas for transformative civic education practice.

**Methods and Modes of Inquiry**

A number of key data points formed the basis for the analysis of the website’s success in achieving the goals of democratic dialogue of controversial issues:

- Total requests for a free copy of the curriculum book, sorted by date and location
- Total downloads of curricular materials
- Total visits to curriculum material page
- Total hits on specific pages of the TTL website (i.e., Civic Organizations, Key People and Organizations, Professional Development)
- Total views of specific multimedia content
Total signups for periodic updates
In addition, the following data points were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the TTL website as an on-line space for professional social networking by civic educators:

- Total postings and responses to the TTL discussion board
- Total postings and responses to the TTL lesson plan share
- Total comments on the TTL blog.

Data mining from the TTL website was the primary mode of data collection in this study, augmented by surveys and interviews with end users. Data mining is a “process for examining databases to discover and display previously unknown interrelationships, clusters, and data patterns with the goal of supporting improved decision-making” (Dringus & Ellis, 2005, p. 143; see also Benoit, 2002). In the context of this study, data mining enabled the researchers to code and analyze all user activity on the site, thereby allowing the researchers to make preliminary judgments about the efficacy of the TTL learning environment. The analysis focused on metrics surrounding specific features of the on-line learning environment that tended to support the project objectives.

Measuring concepts such as democratic dialogue and civic engagement within an on-line environment is no easy task. Moreover, the reliance on quantitative data to evaluate these concepts offers only one pathway into understanding how well the website supported the curriculum’s aims. Various studies, however, support data mining as a useful strategy for elucidating theoretical concepts such as a learner’s behavior, style, and performance (Pahl, 2004). An additional “advantage to data mining is that it is not intrusive; the system observes learning interaction implicitly, analyzes for possible patterns and subsequently (if necessary) formulates association rules highlighting the correspondence between one factor (such as mastery level) and another (learning style)” (Lee, 2005, p. 5).

Relevant results from the TTL curriculum evaluation (i.e., surveys and interviews) are also used to triangulate the data acquired through data mining. In the TTL curriculum evaluation, the TC team randomly selected 500 respondents out of 16,000 curriculum recipients from across the United States for an on-line survey. Two hundred twenty-eight people (46%) responded. Two specific questions regarding TTL website usage were asked in this on-line survey: “Have you visited the Teaching The Levees website?” and “If yes, have you used the website in your educational context and/or for educational purposes? (Please describe).” Data collected from the survey, along with information obtained from 12 end-user interviews conducted over the phone, contributed to an understanding of the broad usage of the TTL website by educators.

Data Sources

Three sources of data were used for this study. The first is the back-end systems of the TTL website. Specifically, the web server log files provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of ongoing anonymous user activity on the website (e.g., page hits, media views). The second data source is composed of overt user activity on the website (e.g., blog comments). By analyzing data points such as requests for a free curriculum guide and postings on the discussion board, the researchers have an additional means for assessing the level of democratic dialogue and civic engagement on the TTL website. A third source of data came from the nationwide survey and phone
interviews of educators who requested the \textit{TTL} curriculum package. Survey participants indicated whether they used the \textit{TTL} website and some indicated how they used the website in their teaching in the open-text response question. Based on the survey results, our research team selected 36 respondents as sample educators who used the \textit{TTL} curriculum in a variety of settings and contacted them for follow-up phone interviews. In all, researchers were able to speak to twelve educators to explore the details of their curriculum usage.

**Evaluation**

Sixteen thousand hard copies of the curriculum were distributed to individuals who had requested a copy via the website. An additional 14,000 copies were distributed to members of professional organizations who had endorsed the project. Individual requests for the curriculum came from all U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Given the limited availability of hard copies of the curriculum, and due to growing demand from educators, it is not surprising that by 2008 more than 4,000 more had downloaded the \textit{TTL} curriculum book from the website.

**Figure 1. Requests for the Curriculum Package in the U.S.A**

The \textit{TTL} website made a unique contribution to the project’s overall impact. The website offered curriculum materials of different media types, providing the opportunity for users to share, blog, and discuss issues related to the curriculum. The survey results support the popularity of the website; the survey also indicates that many users who didn’t receive the curriculum utilized the website. Additionally, findings show that over half (56\%) of the curriculum users visited the \textit{TTL} website. Of these individuals, 65\% indicated that they integrated the website into their teaching along with the curriculum. Two main themes emerged relative to why the website was not used: 34\% of respondents indicated that they did not know...
about the TTL website, while 31% suggested that they did not use the website because the materials in the curriculum were sufficient.

Data collected from server logs illustrate another dimension of website usage. The table below provides a snapshot of website use (Note: Most data is correct until September 10, 2010. Usage data before November 2008 were retrieved using Web Trends Analyst. Usage data after November 2008 were retrieved from Google Analytics.):

**Figure 2. Number of Occurrences of Curriculum Usage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage metric</th>
<th>Number of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total visitors to homepage</td>
<td>263,472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downloads of the Curriculum in PDF format*</td>
<td>4,331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests for Periodic Updates*</td>
<td>3,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia Content Views (Hits)**</td>
<td>3,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia Content Views (Visitors)**</td>
<td>2,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development Content Views (Hits)***</td>
<td>3,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development Content Views (Visitors) ***</td>
<td>1,940</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data collected from December 2006 to November 2008

** Since July, 2007

*** Since May 2008

The website was immensely popular, attracting over 250,000 visitors in approximately three years. In addition to the more than 4,000 curriculum downloads, over 2,000 supplementary digital resources were also downloaded from the website.

Another mode by which people interacted with the website was through requesting periodic updates regarding progress of the project. From December 2006 to August 2007, a total of 2,089 requests were made for periodic updates from the TTL project. From August 2007 to March 2008, an additional 1,031 requests were made, bringing the total to 3,120. These updates provided subscribers with information on new additions to the website. Specifically, these subscribers received notifications of the latest blog posts on the TTL.
website. The blog posts were produced by a series of graduate students deeply immersed in the story of Katrina and its aftermath. They did substantial research on events in the Gulf Coast between 2007 and 2010, reporting on the effects of Katrina on a variety of educational, civic, and political matters up to 2010. These timely analytic pieces kept TTL website subscribers informed about the ongoing development of relevant issues raised by Katrina.

Two relatively popular aspects of the TTL website were the “Multimedia” section and “Professional Development” section. The excerpt below describes the purpose of “Multimedia” materials:

This section highlights several videos as examples of how ideas about democracy are made more salient through interactions with media – culminating in “The Democracy Kit” episode. By no means an exhaustive list, we hope the critical questions (below) fuel discussions about the potential of media as an integral part of teaching and learning around the issues encountered in the Teaching The Levees curriculum.

Teaching The Levees website, 2007

The “Professional Development” section was divided into two parts: “Democratic Dialogue” and “Civic Engagement.” To enrich educators’ on-line learning experiences, each entry in the professional development section includes not only textual documents of effective teaching strategies but also visual demonstrations (video clips) of how these strategies could be implemented in classrooms.

In the past three years, there were approximately 2,500 visitors to the “Multimedia” page, and over 1,900 visitors to the “Professional Development” section. The forum and discussion boards provide further insights into how the curriculum was used. Some of these visitors viewed these sections multiple times.

Figure 3. Forum and Blog Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum and Blog Activity</th>
<th>August 2007 – September 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total postings to discussion board / Total responses on discussion board</td>
<td>25/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total lesson plan postings / Total responses to shared lesson plans</td>
<td>8/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total comments on the blog</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The forum developed into a place where some users went to discuss teaching and learning the curriculum. Here is how the forum was most commonly used:

Curriculum Ideas and Sharing: Forum users sought advice on how to best utilize the curriculum, how to integrate outside materials and sources, and how to modify it for specific audiences. In addition, users utilized the forum as a space to share lesson plans and resources, enhancing the use of the curriculum and creating an on-line community.

Issue Discussion: The forum was used as a space to pose questions and discuss issues raised by the events of Katrina, the film, and the curriculum as a whole. The forum housed discussion of issues pertaining to the performance of the US government in this disaster, reactions to Katrina, lessons learned, poverty and wealth in the United States, etc.

Catharsis: In addition to the issues discussed above, many used the forum space as a medium to express opinion, voice concern, and present the personal impact Katrina had on their lives. Many thoughtful and emotionally laden posts revolved around the state of American democracy, race relations and treatment of those less fortunate, and social relations in this country. A variety of perspectives were provided ranging from the regional and city specific to the more global and international

While the discussion forum served these purposes relatively well, only a few participants and posts contributed to the forum and lesson plan sharing platform. The figures in the table above do not include the number of times these pages or posts were visited; they only capture the number of times an individual posted a resource or comment.

In summary, the TTL website serves as a resourceful on-line venue to support the teaching of controversial social issues related to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. This website is widely accessed by educators from across the United States, and the downloadable curriculum on the website makes it available for educators on an ongoing basis. The over 3,000 subscribers to the periodic updates illustrates an active audience group interested in following relevant news about issues related to Hurricane Katrina. A further level of website engagement is demonstrated by the 82 comments on regular web posts.

The on-line communities created by the discussion forum and lesson plan sharing forum platforms, however, were neither extensive in number nor very active. Several possible explanations may account for this. First, users were required to create a login in order to post materials or make comments. Second, these resources were not a central part of the TTL website, and very little was done to promote these spaces as virtual communities. Third, the small number of resources in these sections might have discouraged people from joining, returning, or participating further in these on-line forums. Given the potential of on-line spaces for exchanging ideas without the constraints of time and space, a further exploration of how to facilitate on-line discussion is needed.

Implications and Questions for Future Research

This paper highlights the experiences of a unique effort at educational reform, discussing in detail Teaching The Levees – the web-based project designed to stimulate democratic dialogue and civic engagement about an important contemporary issue in American society. Despite the growing popularity of service learning and community service in many schools and school districts, we believe that the promotion of democratic dialogue and civic
engagement is still a relatively rare phenomenon in social studies classrooms. In the contemporary educational climate of high stakes testing, narrowed curriculum, and teacher anxiety over their performance measures, teachers are subject to many pressures concerning what gets taught and how it gets taught. Therefore, the researchers were surprised by the extent to which so many educators embraced the use of this curriculum in their classrooms. Their enthusiastic responses suggest the degree to which they were motivated by a profound sense of “felt need” to respond educationally to this tragedy.

Such a response provides insights about the degree to which educators will engage in innovative practice related to educational reform efforts when they are highly motivated to do so. The same might be said of their adaptive use of on-line media in teaching social studies more generally. Crocco and Cramer (2003) have documented the ways in which even teachers in poor urban schools have incorporated technology into social studies teaching despite formidable hurdles. As in those cases, the TTL project offered fresh insights into the possibilities for the future, especially when the subject matter is current and compelling, teacher motivation is high, and on-line resources are sufficient to the task and of high quality.

Through the evaluation process, we learned that the TTL website has been effective in providing such resources. Both our survey data and interviews with end users support this assertion. Nevertheless, our findings were disappointing with regard to the discussion and lesson sharing forums. How to create a more active on-line community that incorporates these dimensions deserves further investigation.

In this respect, new developments in participatory media technology could provide help. Participatory media such as social networking sites transform participants into active creators as well as receivers of information and digital content. In addition, such media enable more efficient coordination of social activities (Rheingold, 2008). When users of participatory media use public voice, a communication style designed to “persuade other people—beyond one’s closest friends and family—to take action on shared issues” (Levine, 2008, p. 120), rather than the private voice of self-expression, their on-line participation and interaction illustrate new forms of civic engagement. Boyd (2008) points out that social networking websites such as MySpace are the latest on-line public spaces where youth can connect and interact with their peers. Thus, we need to understand better how civic-oriented websites such as TTL connect to and utilize social networking capabilities. This will be critical to enlisting a new generation of educators and their young students in new forms of learning that promote democratic dialogue and civic engagement. Efforts at educational reform that are adapted to the learning of “digital natives” will be crucial to the project of citizenship education.

In conclusion, we believe that:

- Creating media rich environments for civic ends is a long-term social, intellectual and educational project.
- Social media can provide youth with the opportunity to extend the reach of their public voice (as opposed to the more focused expression of their private voice via email, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) in a way that can serve as a new form of civic engagement.

Three guiding questions could direct future efforts in website design aimed at facilitating democratic dialogue and civic engagement:

- Creating media rich environments for civic ends is...
• How do we strengthen the social network features of the on-line environment to promote sharing of civic engagement resources? Can social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter be of help here?

• How do we create more effective on-line environments for productive deliberation that bring more educators and their students into such exchanges?

• How do we develop an environment of deliberation and action that leads to civic engagement through a student-led social action network?

Creating media rich environments for civic purposes is a long-term social, intellectual, and educational project. Success in this project will be closely connected to other educational reform efforts at the systemic and structural levels. But the latter changes must also address issues intimately related to the teaching and learning of the core citizenship mission of the schools. Teaching controversial issues provides a welcome opportunity for students to explore, analyze, and debate public problems such as those exposed by Hurricane Katrina. As teacher educators and researchers, we believe that *Teaching The Levees* has made a small contribution to both educational reform and civic engagement through digital media. We look forward to future efforts along these lines.
References

Print Based Resources


**Web Based Resources**


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