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Beyond the Echo Chamber: Pedagogical Tools for Civic Engagement Discourse and Reflection

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ABSTRACT

How can educators leverage blogs and other social media spaces to encourage a reflective, critical discourse about civic engagement that fosters a true learning exchange over promoting one's own ideas? This article reports upon a single case study of the "Community Engagement Learning Exchange," a multi-author blog on civic engagement. Through qualitative content analysis and expert interviews with the blogger community we explored the interaction of digital citizenship and civic online discourse, in order to map out civic engagement pedagogies that make use of blogs or other shared writing / media tools. The content analysis of blog posts indicates that high verbosity scores for factual orientation, personalization and interactivity correlate with broader reach. The interview material was condensed into concept maps that identified specific themes for digital citizenship (inevitable, easy, transparent, technologically diverse and changing, unequal, divisive, difficult, superficial) and civic engagement pedagogies (content, format, authenticity, tone, listening, exemplary conduct, accountability, hope). Overall, in the community analyzed, ground rules and a shared writing style lead to discussions and learning processes that transcend differences in views, backgrounds and opinions. Further efforts to support and measure the right amount of friction that exemplifies diverse and even clashing opinions while keeping an online community together emerged from the case study as a future area of practice development for digital citizenship.

Keywords

Qualitative blog content analysis, Civic engagement, Edublogging, Expert interviews, Civic discourse, Civic reasoning, Informal learning

Introduction

In the literature, digital citizenship is a multi-faceted term, blending concepts such as literacy, critical thinking, participation, computer skills, Internet access, membership in social networks and online communities, societal and cultural values and norms, laws and rules, cyber-safety and well-being online, democratic processes, and individual rights and freedoms (Al-Zahrani, 2015). A recent whitepaper by Impero Software and Digital Citizenship Institute (2016) characterizes digital citizenship as a broad area of inquiry related to the ethics, concerns and opportunities associated with living a digital lifestyle. As a concept, it reflects our shared need to develop skills and perspectives for a safe, ethical, responsible, inspired, innovative and involved conduct online (Impero Software & Digital Citizenship Institute, 2016).

With the growth of "living online," parts of online interaction are now part of citizenship. Mattson (2016) analyzed school curricula for teaching digital citizenship and found that the focus is typically on extending traditional citizenship through digital means. In many ways, the digital sphere transforms and extends "traditional" citizenship – petitions, interest groups, advocacy on issues, public attention and praising/shaming (including boycotts or blowback on "unacceptable" behavior, cf., de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Examples of "new" citizenship activities enabled by digital technologies include mash-ups of news, opinion and organization, interaction with government officials via social media, open data, free and open software applications for the common good, Wikipedia and a wide array of "civic media" work (Gordon & Midhalidis, 2016).

Digital citizenship can be systematically conceptualized in two ways: (1) participating in a global, digital society (cf. Ribble, 2011), (2) participating in society through online information and communication technologies. This article focuses specifically on *civic engagement* and discusses how participating online can constitute and inform activities in local communities.

Overall, opportunities to engage in "participatory politics" have expanded significantly (Kahne et al., 2016). However, the new opportunities to access and share information can lead to the spread of manipulative and deceptive messages (Mamlok, 2016, p. 95). Similarly, the ease to form communities of like-minded peers can result in echo chambers that lack critical discussion, divergent opinion, and political discourse.

To reach a level of active citizenship in the online world, the basic conditions of access and technical skills need to be enriched with digital literacy competencies and opportunities for civic participation and self-expression in one or more online venues. What does it mean to be or become a digital citizen and what pedagogical approaches can foster civic engagement through digital means? As Preston et al., (2017) pointed out, dimensions relating to values and dispositions can be stimulated by active debate. Educators can provide critical and dialogical opportunities so that learners are able to reflect on their values and beliefs in relation to others in both face-to-face and digitally-mediated contexts.

The "Community Engagement Learning Exchange" (see http://cele.sog.unc.edu) is an experiment in multi-author blogging that was initiated in December 2014 by three university faculty on two different campuses to engage a diverse group of public officials and grassroots citizens with a variety of experience and backgrounds in a shared discourse on civic engagement (for an overview of the concept see Stephens & Panke, 2016; Stephens, 2016).

We use the blog community of CELE authors and commentators to explore the concept of digital citizenship, civic engagement and informal, mutual learning in a digital space through qualitative interviews and content analysis of posts and comments. Our research question is: How can educators leverage blogs and other social media spaces to encourage a reflective, critical discourse about civic engagement that fosters a true *learning exchange* over *promoting one's own ideas*? Figure 1 present a conceptual overview of the area of inquiry.
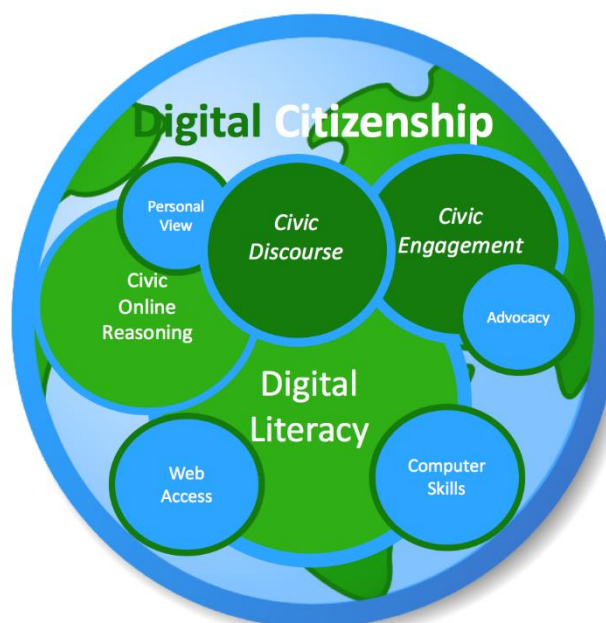

Figure 1. Mapping the components of Digital Citizenship, highlighted (dark background and italicized) are research focus and case study area (CELE blog)

The next section will explore the background of our case study, and review the concepts of digital literacy, civic online reasoning and, specifically, civic engagement. We argue that informal learning is an untapped resource to promote digital citizenship and civic engagement in pedagogy and practice. Our specific case study, which analyzes a blogger community on civic engagement, is a "*best practice*" (innovative example) for modeling and promoting civic discourse in a peer-to-peer learning exchange environment. Hence, we also review the literature on edublogging (blogging for educational purposes) and, more specifically, blogs as informal learning spaces.

Digital literacy, civic reasoning and civic engagement

Notions of digital citizenship are embedded within several popular models of digital literacy (Preston et al., 2017). The traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write has expanded to encompass fluency in using digital tools and online information with aptitude and creativity. The UK-based organization JISC defines digital literacies as "*those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society*" (Hibberson, Barrett & Davies, 2015). "*Digital Literacy is not just about ensuring that students can use the latest technologies, but also developing skills to select the right tools for a particular context to deepen their*

learning outcomes and engage in creative problem solving" (Adams Becker et al., p. 24). It transcends isolated technical skills, and encompasses a comprehensive understanding of digital environments, appropriate behavior in online communities, evaluating, creating and sharing content, curation and co-creation of content with others, community etiquette, ethical choices, digital rights and responsibilities.

While government representatives and the media traditionally have filtered and directed communication around public issues, digital public deliberation can include all participants — citizens, politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups, the media — at every step in the policy making process, ranging from agenda setting to final vote (Holzer, et al., 2004).

With the Internet as "*both the world's best fact-checker and the world's best bias confirmer*" (Lynch, 2016), the ability to critically evaluate the merit of different sources becomes a substantive part of citizenship. Civic online reasoning – the ability to judge the credibility of information on the Internet – consists of three core competencies: (1) Who is behind the information? (2) What is the evidence? and (3) What do other sources say? In 2015-2016, the Stanford History Education Group prototyped, field tested, and validated a bank of assessments to evaluate civic online reasoning. In total, they collected and analyzed 7,804 student responses — middle school, high school and college level. Based on their findings, they come to a Cassandran conclusion: "*At present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish*" (Wineburg et al., 2016).

Civic engagement depends upon an informed citizenry, but it requires other abilities and agency beyond the critical reception of information, chiefly the willingness to act upon the information, and engage others in a fair and open debate. Jacoby and Ehrlich (2009) define civic engagement as comprising one or more of the following elements:
* Learning from others, self, and environment to develop informed perspectives on social issues;
* Recognizing and appreciating human diversity and commonality;
* Behaving, and working through controversy, with civility;
* Taking an active role in the political process;
* Participating actively in public life, public problem solving, and community service;
* Assuming leadership and membership roles in organizations;
* Developing empathy, ethics, values, and sense of social responsibility;
* Promoting social justice locally and globally.

Civic engagement through informal learning

Civic engagement encompasses actions wherein individuals participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2009). The actions can benefit the public good, the individual's sense of purpose and well-being, or the economy. There is growing consensus that educational institutions are charged with developing students' digital citizenship (Hatcher, 2011). Jacoby and Ehrlich (2009) describe it as higher education's historic and fitting role to invest in developing the civic knowledge and skills needed to work with others to make a difference.

One of the primary ways in which higher education currently teaches civic engagement is through the redesign of curricula to incorporate community-based service activities that are integrated with traditional academic learning objectives (Bringle & Clayton, 2012). While service learning is a promising approach to increase civic engagement among traditional students, it may be less feasible in non-traditional, adult learning settings. However, enabling civic engagement is not a one-time effort performed only within educational institutions.

The role of *informal learning* in fostering civic engagement competencies is an untapped resource. As one can learn something about almost anything on the Web, the concept of informal, self-directed learning (prompted by curiosity or serendipitous discovery) has the potential to enrich formal learning experiences, foster lifelong learning, and change professional development.

The CELE blog is an example of an informal learning platform. It is not tied to a course with specific expectations and separate roles of learner and teacher. In contrast to many other public administration blogs that focus on professional development and news for employees in local government, CELE aims to give voice to active citizens and to attract a mixed audience to post, comment, and learn (Stephens, 2016).

Blogs as informal learning spaces

Blogs have become an integral part of everyday Internet culture. The appeal of blogging is not based on technological innovation, but on the emergence of specific use practices. Blogs constitute a form of "micro publishing" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), that users flexibly integrate into different contexts to meet various motivations and needs. Reese et al. (2007) summarize the distinct characteristics as "ease of use, low barriers to creation and maintenance, dynamic quality, easy interactivity and potential for wide distribution."

Though few blogs reach a wide readership, the rest show the typical "*long tail pattern*" (Anderson, 2013) in which the sum of niche audiences outperforms the mainstream. Bloggers document their own lives, provide space for personal expression and processing of experiences and feelings (Nardi et al., 2004). Furthermore, blogs can help in the development of ideas and thoughts and promote the communicative exchange in a group. (ibid.)

The entirety of all weblogs is called "the blogosphere," a part of the web that is developing dynamically by its own rules and with changing protagonists. While bloggers come and go, the blogosphere grows incessantly (Whelan, 2003). The fascination of the blogosphere has left its mark in the field of education. Sim and Hew (2010) reviewed 24 empirical studies in a meta-analysis, focusing on the type of blog usage and its impact on learning and motivation (performance and affective aspects). The authors identify the purposes of blogs as: a learning diary, documentation of everyday life, expression of moods and preferences, communication, assessment and task management. Overall, the authors were cautiously optimistic that blogs foster learning: "*results from self-report studies generally suggested that the use of blogs could help student learning*" (Sim & Hew, 2010, p.156).

Blogs like CELE operating outside a specific class or assignment offer opportunities for informal and incidental learning. Whereas in formal, institutional settings, an instructor or facilitator takes care of providing the learning material, informal learning is dependent on resources available in the learner's environment — "*from family and neighbors, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media*" (Conner, 1997-2007; an overview on the genealogy of the term is given by Straka, 2004). Kurhila (2006) states that easy-to-use tools and wide access to networks result in informal learning becoming a larger part of all learning. Edublogging has contributed to seamless learning opportunities in academia (Panke, Gaiser, & Maass, 2012).

How can we conceptualize "learning by blogging" when blogs transcend the academic and policy advocacy spaces? How do both individual blog activity and blogging within a group contribute to learning outcomes? Learning in a blog environment can happen in multiple ways:

- Preparing a blog post and writing it can be valuable for organizing thoughts and thus "learning" as one presents.
- Others' posts can point readers and contributors to citizen engagement techniques of interest for their local community.
- Readers who comment contribute a question, thought, challenge, etc. to the author's original argument, allowing for wider attention and exchange.

Methodology

Our study is a single case study with attention to bloggers' conceptions of digital citizenship, probing their perspectives and learning from comments and other posts, and a content analysis of the blog material. The methodology lends itself to exploratory inquiries within the qualitative paradigm. Instead of testing a hypothesis, we want to gain a rich understanding of a specific online community. We are specifically interested in the interaction of digital citizenship and community engagement.

Since the area of informal and mutual learning via blogs is relatively unexplored, a case study provides advantages for refining concepts and initiating theorizing. Robert Yin notes that a case study is "*an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.*" (Yin, 2009, p. 14) Since we are adapting edublogging research to a less structured exchange (i.e., it is not an academic course with an instructor, nor a structured service learning opportunity for academic credit by participants), an approach of "thick description" of a "specific, unique, bounded system" (Stake, 2008, p. 443, p. 445) is particularly apt.

We interviewed a sample of CELE bloggers to map out civic engagement practices that have the potential to transfer to other shared writing environments and social media tools. We also conducted a content analysis of

CELE posts to better understand which prompts lead to further discourse and reflection and potentially reach a wider audience.

Content analysis

We conducted a qualitative analysis of 100 CELE blog posts from the time period of December 2014 to March 2017 connected to 22 different blog authors. We developed our coding scheme based on previous qualitative studies on academic blogs and other academic web profiles by Bukvova, Kalb & Schoop (2010) and Bukvova (2011). We slightly altered some categories to better match the context of both academics and professionals in civic engagement. In addition, we also coded for each post for how many comments and unique page views the post yielded.

Blog Content: We distinguished three types of content: expertise, activity and identification. Expertise-related content provides information on a topic. Activity-related content gave information about things that currently occupied the bloggers in their professional context. Finally, some content is apparently dedicated to describing the blogger as a person, including descriptions of interests, personal background information, or posts reflecting on personal experiences. Although Bukvova (2011) developed the three content categories as distinct, one post may comprise content from more than one category.

Blog Verbosity: Interpreted and evaluated as a qualitative measure, verbosity helped us to understand how the bloggers develop the content and how this relates to reflectiveness and discourse. For the purpose of this study, verbosity was assessed with regard to three categories: (1) the amount of factual information provided; (2) the level of personalization; and, (3) the level of interaction.

Factual information. This first category of verbosity describes the amount of balanced, sourced, factual information that the bloggers provided about the particular topic. It ranged from none (implicit), to basic facts, sourced information, detailed information, to elaborate, balanced discussion.
0. None/implicit. Facts about the topic were not provided (directly).
1. Noted. Factual information was provided, but not sourced.
2. Stated. Factual information was provided and sources stated.
3. Detailed. Factual information was provided, sources stated and context discussed.
4. Elaborate. Elaborate argument was provided, discussing facts as well as the context, offering different positions and sources.

Personalization. This second category describes the amount of information given by the bloggers about their personal relationship to the particular topic. Besides providing facts about a topic, bloggers typically chose to reveal their opinions, thoughts, or ideas. The level of personalization could be described using four levels:
0. None.
1. Personal notes. Few remarks about the individual's personal relationship to the topic (e.g., experiences, opinions, thoughts, humor, likes, dislikes). The focus remained on the facts.
2. Personalized. The focus was mostly on the facts, but the relationship of the author to the topic formed an important part of the content.
3. Highly personalized. The focus was on the individual's relationship to the topic. Facts were provided to give the audience background necessary to appreciate the individual's argumentation.

Interaction. The third category describes the bloggers willingness to interact with their audience regarding a particular topic. This could be demonstrated in the text itself, *e.g.*, through direct addresses of the audience, or in further measures taken by the researchers, e.g., participation in discussion about the topic in the comments section. The extent of interaction could be described using four levels:
0. None. No interaction about a particular topic.
1. Conversational. The content was written as if addressing the potential reader, e.g., using the second person.
2. Direct. The blogger appeals directly to the audience, e.g., asking for comments or participation. Unlike conversational addresses, direct interaction showed an expectation of response.
3. Active. The bloggers engaged in an active dialogue with the audience by responding to comments.

Expert interviews

Our research relationship allowed for co-constructing the concept of digital citizenship and civic engagement between researchers and interview partners. Through guided, partially-structured interviews, we aimed at preserving the multiplicity of perspectives and treating our interview partners as expert analysts of their media environment and blog contributions. The interview group was comprised of a purposefully selected subgroup of the CELE blogger community.

As detailed by Stephens (2016), three general categories of authors are (1) academics, (2) engaged community members, and (3) local government officials. Thus, sampling targeted one or more bloggers from each category. We recognize the imperfections of these categories. An "academic" may also be an engaged community member in settings other than professional associations.

A second screen consisted of differences by experience in (1) traditional and new media, and (2) nonprofit leadership and community advocacy. For example, a contrast between a former nonprofit director with a monthly column in a local newspaper and a photo-journalist with extensive Facebook personal and professional content was identified.

Changes in work status while doing the CELE blog posed opportunities for insights. One blogger was selected due to his government role as a public information officer while also completing a Master of Arts degree in Technology and Communication and becoming an adjunct instructor of courses about new media at two universities. The "academic" selected has extensive experience in teaching and researching civic skills development in undergraduate students and civic efficacy effects after graduation. In sum, seven of the 15 regular bloggers form the pool of interviewees. All of the interviewees had been writing for the blog for at least one year.

We conducted all seven interviews by telephone. On average, the interviews lasted about 20 minutes. We recorded and transcribed the conversations, evaluating the material through a comparative summary and organized statements along the topics of *digital citizenship, CELE community, civic discourse pedagogy*. We used concept mapping as a technique to reduce the material, capture, cluster and structure, and thereby identify themes (Cañas, Novak & González, 2004).

Results

Content analysis

A content analysis of the CELE blog posts allowed us to systematically chart this blogging community. In addition to coding and counting, we carefully read through the text corpus to get a feel for the culture of the blog community. This section provides both descriptive data and analytical insights into the CELE blog.

Comments. The number of comments per post ranges from 0 to 23. Seventy-seven percent of posts have at least one comment; 48% of those posts that have comments contain an author reply.
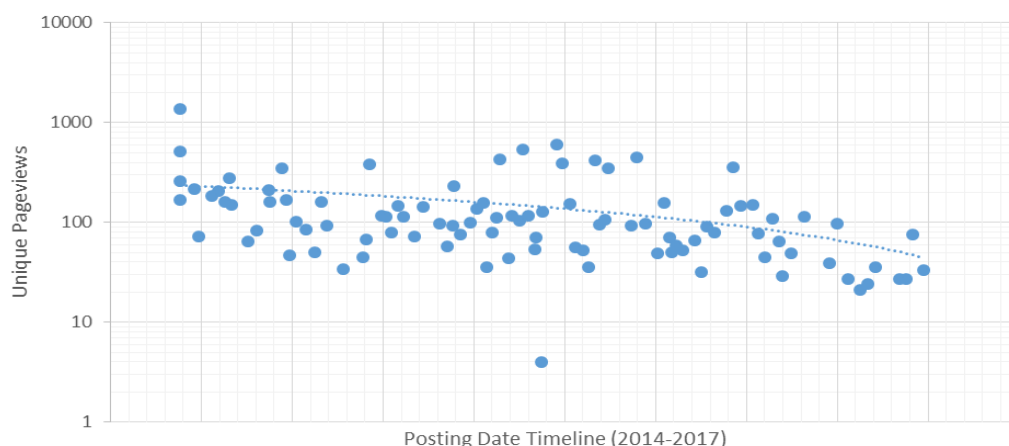

Figure 2. Unique Pageviews with trend line: Newer posts have slightly fewer pageviews, which indicates a longer shelf life of posts (people interact with the post by finding it through search engines)

Pageviews. The median number of unique pageviews is 97. There are two outliers: One post had only four views, another 1385. Half of the posts have between 50 and 150 unique pageviews (Note that all blog posts are accessible on the blog homepage, and this is the most viewed resource, see Figure 2).

Content Orientation. As depicted in Figure 3, the CELE bloggers use their posts to portray a public, professional persona. They rarely share personal information. Instead, the authors focused on documenting their professional activities or on sharing their expertise. Posts that use the individual biography of the blogger as material typically also talk about professional activities of a specific topic. Events in their personal lives serve as a hook, example, metaphor, or analogy to dive deeper into an issue. Posts that offer identification typically reach broader distribution and yield more discussion.
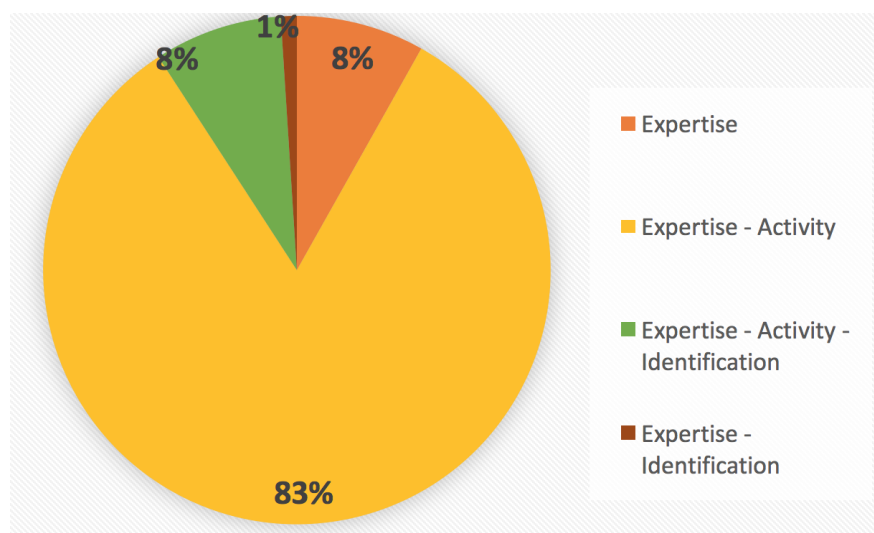

Figure 3. Content orientation of blog posts

Verbosity – Facts: The average score for factual information is 1.9. In 59% of the posts analyzed, authors provide facts and sources. Figure 4 shows the distribution across five categories.
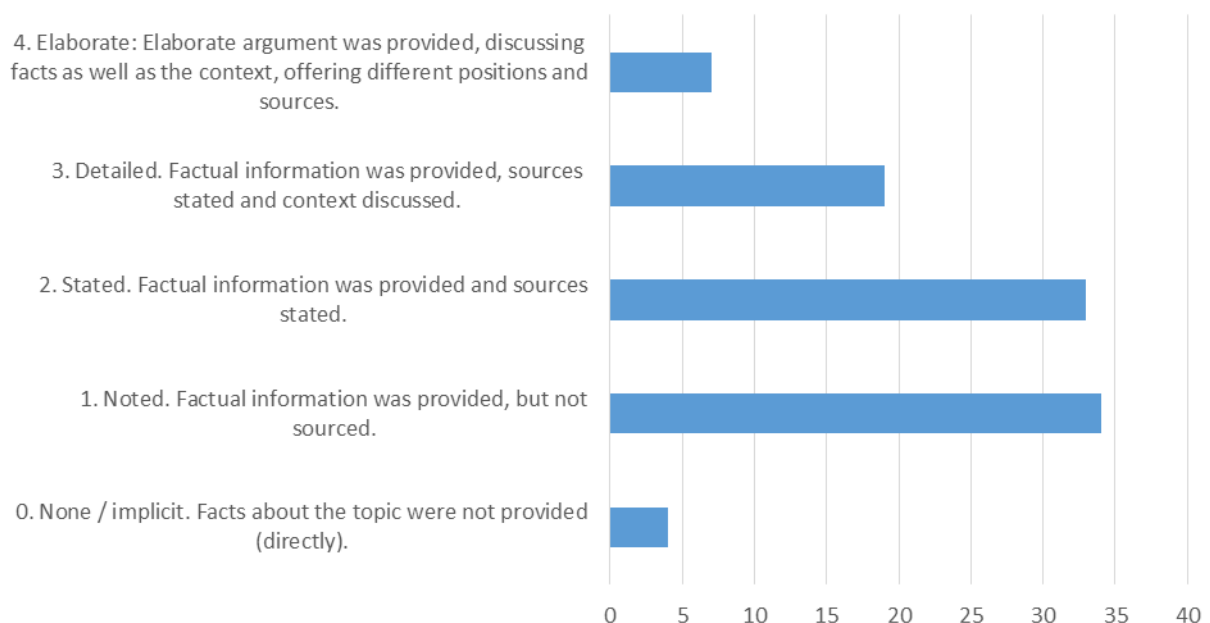

Figure 4. Factual Information: Scores overview for blog posts analyzed

Verbosity – Personalization: The average score for personalization is 1.9. The majority of posts are factual, while offering some degree of personal experiences or viewpoints. As shown in Figure 5, approximately a third of the corpus was highly personalized, giving an individual outlook on a topic.
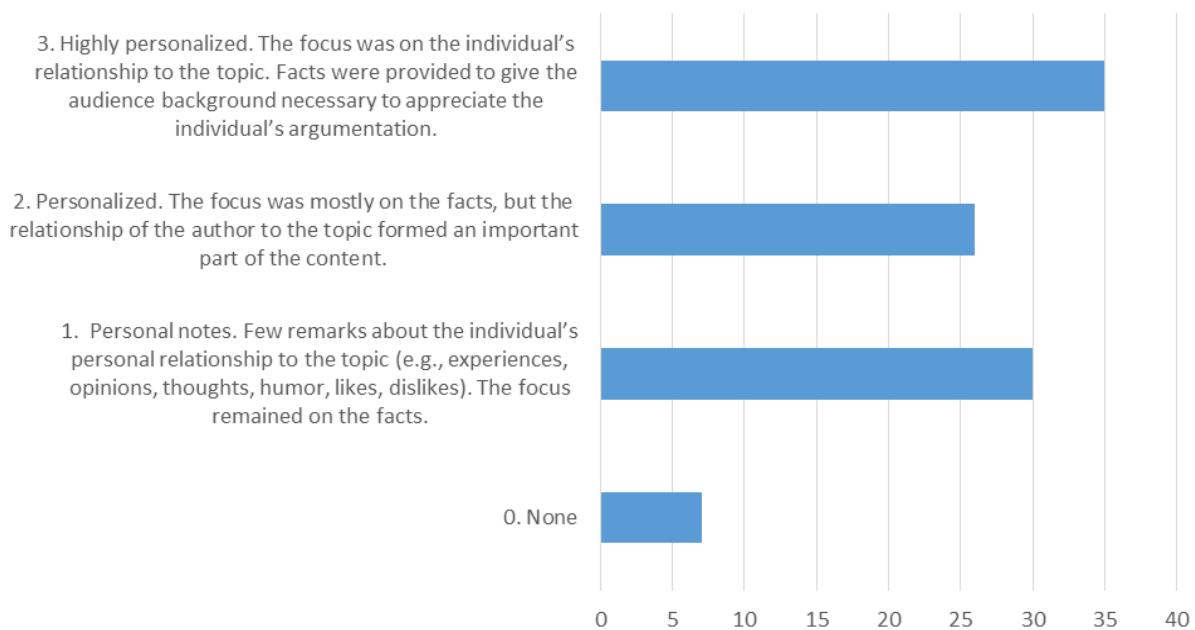
Figure 5. Personal Viewpoint: Scores overview for blog posts analyzed

Verbosity – Interaction. The average score for interaction is 1.7 which indicates a moderate level of dialogue-focused writing by the blogger community. About one in four posts contain dialogue between blog authors and their audience through comments. One quarter of posts have direct appeals for comments or other follow-up communication. About one quarter, as depicted in Figure 6, are written in a conversational tone that addresses the audience.
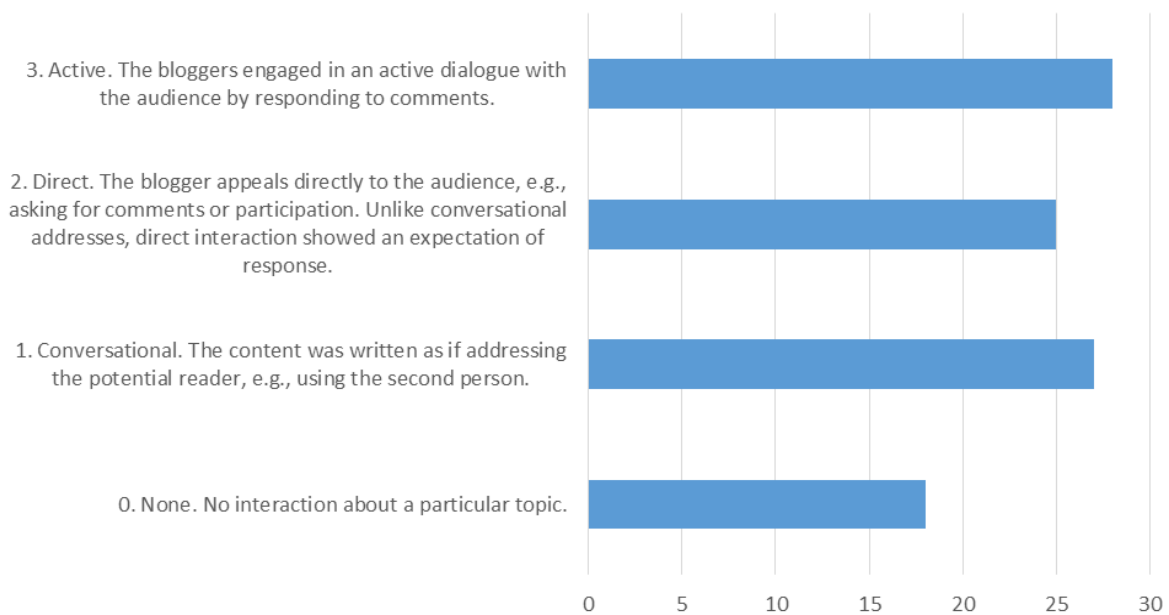

Figure 6. Interaction - Overview of scores for blog posts analyzed

We compared posts with a higher and lower pageview scores through a median split. Higher pageviews corresponded with higher factual, personalization and interactivity scores.

Interviews

How is citizenship shaped by the digital context? What are ways to promote meaningful civic engagement online and how does CELE in particular contribute to civic engagement? The CELE bloggers represent multiple and sometimes changing roles: local government public information officials, public administration academics,

writers, journalists, activists, citizens, and current for former nonprofit organization leaders. Thus, collectively, they provide a rich pool of perspectives on civic engagement in digital spaces.

Digital Citizenship. The interviewees offered a wide variety of concepts connected to digital citizenship that comprised being an active, engaged citizen in particular in local government, to being media-savvy and able to use digital tools to advocate for a political position, to having ethical standards and following netiquette rules of engagement and discourse.

- "Two things come to mind: One is being engaged digitally, being political online and the other is how one behaves online." (Katy)

Do the interviewees observe changes over time in civic engagement? How do they see the potential of digital media to increase or decrease civic reasoning? There is consensus that engagement has increased, interaction has become easier and government activities more transparent. One thing that became clear from the interviews is that there is not a question if civic engagement online is happening, but how to use and orchestrate it and blend it with face-to-face activities.

- "Recognizing that you can't fight the digital realm, you have to embrace it." (Traci).
- "We do not really have a choice. That's the way our world is going." (Emily).
- "It is easier, quicker and less risky than knocking on doors. On the other hand, it is less personable. So face-to-face is important. The digital, it's a way to dip their toe in the water." (Beth).
- "Most of my work on deliberative dialog is conducted face to face. I use social media for organizing, mobilizing and providing background information." (Katy).
- The interviewees shared concerns about groups and regions who are getting left out, and the decrease in quality of engagement.
- "But I also think about who is getting lost, specifically [people] 50 [years old] and above." (Dan).
- "In NC rural areas broadband still hasn't made it, a lot of folks depend on satellite, or 3G data on their phone. So your cool GIS data will simply not load on their phone." (Emily).
- "It has increased but not necessarily in a positive way." (Michelle).
- "Digital media have made it easier to participate, but have led to a decrease in civic discourse." (Katy).
- "In a sense it can be propaganda. You need to be careful of what you are seeing and hearing online." (Dan).
- "The information is there [but] it is not always easy to find that information. Websites are often created from the point of view of the people who work there – the terms, the hierarchy that makes sense to them." (Brian).
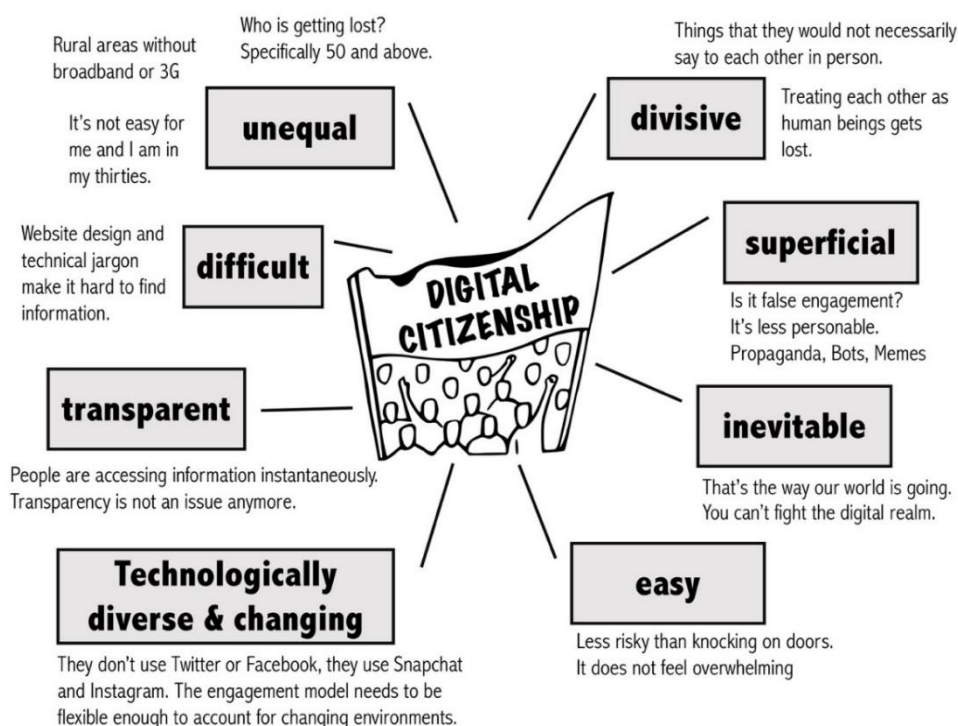

Figure 7. Digital citizenship themes derived from interviews

Social Media Ecology. We were interested in the sense-making of the interviewees of the broader social media ecology and CELE. They were asked about social media tools they used in their general communication practice. The interviewees stressed the need to use the right mix of tools to reach an audience, and to be aware of the diverse and changing landscape of social media. Specific social media sites mentioned were nextdoor, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, blogs, listservs, LinkedIn groups, and Slidehsare. One interview partner contrasted CELE to the experience in a listserv:

- "It is different from CELE. It is not a place for learning, there is a lot of commentary." (Katy),

Figure 7 applies concept mapping to delineate eight features of digital citizenship from the interview data, with illustrative comments from particular interviewees.

CELE Community. What are the benefits and drawbacks of blogging publicly about civic engagement? We were specifically interested in what the bloggers felt as the learning aspect of their blogging activities at CELE. Several interviewees reported that their writing about civic engagement improved.

- "I find it helpful and useful to communicate more clearly," (Katy). She explained: "In academic writing you talk to an audience that has shared assumptions, you use jargon, and with the CELE blog I write in a way that is not overly academic and jargon-laden and asks people what they think."
- "How to describe things as succinctly and clearly as possible." (Beth).

Some bloggers broadened or changed their views due to reading and discussing other contributors' content. Others saw the blog as a way to "get the message out" or "reach more audiences and connected networks." The main benefit of CELE is the diverse network of blog contributors.

- "It's not just that there are people from different sets of careers, also different age levels, and different career stages." (Emily).
- "It's good for connecting networks. There is great benefit in the network of contributors." (Traci).
- "It has helped me connect to some of the other people who write for the blog and learn more about what they do and hopefully improve what I do." (Brian).

We wanted to know if our interview partners see other social spaces as similar to or different from the CELE blog. They contrasted CELE along different dimensions, i.e. the quality and civility of exchange, the frequency of comments, and the quality of postings.

- "The tone on the listserv is very different. The listserv is not a resource where we learn from one another, there is a lot of commentary on the events of the day that degenerates quickly into disrespect." (Katy).
- "The blog gives us an opportunity to write in more depth. It's not the expectation that we always have a ton of responses; it's different from social media like Facebook where we expect more immediate reaction." (Traci).

What effect does the blog have? One important lesson is that interaction and reach do not necessarily equate to comments in the blog – and, it is not the most important goal for all bloggers.

- "I have had a lot of people come up to me and give positive feedback, but they do not necessarily leave a comment [on the blog]." (Traci).
- "It's amazing, the number of people who stop me in the street and say 'Oh, I know you — you are writing this stuff." (Beth).

Another lesson is that it is difficult to keep up with the goals of the community, specifically interaction with one another and commentators.

- "I wanted to provide a strong answer, and then I ended up not getting back to the person. It was information that I had, but it was a time constraint." (Dan).
- "The drawback is, the back and forth we really hope for, that is easy not to do. It is a problem of accountability. I don't feel it matters too much if I am not constantly engaged." (Katy).

Most CELE bloggers stressed that they were authentic in their writing on CELE, and wrote as individuals, not as agents of their organization. However, there is a continuum within the community of using the blog as a personal or as an organizational voice.

- "The way I see CELE, it's me and the way I see things." (Dan).
- "The blog is my outlet to be less objective and take a side which I cannot usually do [as a journalist]. It is a reflection of my personal experience." (Michelle).
- "You can blog about it, but are you blogging about it as an employee? I have been blogging for a while through a lot of different positions. Most of the times I tried to wear my 'citizen-activist' hat." (Emily).

Pedagogy of Civic Interaction. What role can social media play in practicing and learning about civic engagement? All interview partners agreed that the status quo of civic engagement in social media (and beyond) is lacking important civic discourse and mutual learning qualities.

- "We are not very good examples to the next generation." (Emily).
- "2015 to 2017 has been the most negative." (Michelle).

The authors on the CELE blog model a certain tone of civic discourse in their writing. They are deliberately writing in a specific way to reach others, and to connect across positions and provide factual information.

- People respond positively to what I write, because I am saying it in the friendliest way possible. They comment that I am writing in way that does not put people down (Beth).
- "This is not a blog to say we are right; you are wrong." (Dan).
- "Academic minded, making arguments based on a source. Articulate comments lead to improved discussion." (Michelle).
- "The tone of CELE is a conversational, yet friendly, it's not a combative place. The goal is to provide information that is helpful to people." (Brian).

However, as one interview partner pointed out, merely being polite is not enough. She is looking for honest feedback and authentic interaction.

- "I don't want people to yell and scream, but I would rather have their authentic reaction than a pat on the back, because then, we can have a discussion about it." (Beth).

Several interview partners mentioned clear ground rules as one of the characteristics of CELE. One person stated that from a local government perspective, clear rules of engagement are a key to successfully engaging citizens. Spreading hope, sharing stories and humanizing issues were seen as strategies to set an engaging and inclusive civic discourse tone.

- "CELE has set out some ground rules from the beginning." (Katy).
- "The process and intent has to be very clear. You have to be mindful what you are promising." (Traci).
- "Issues need to be humanized. People are so scared. Fear keeps people from engaging in a positive way." (Michelle).
- "It's the framework and the culture. We are not going in there with the specific goal of going after the other side." (Brian).
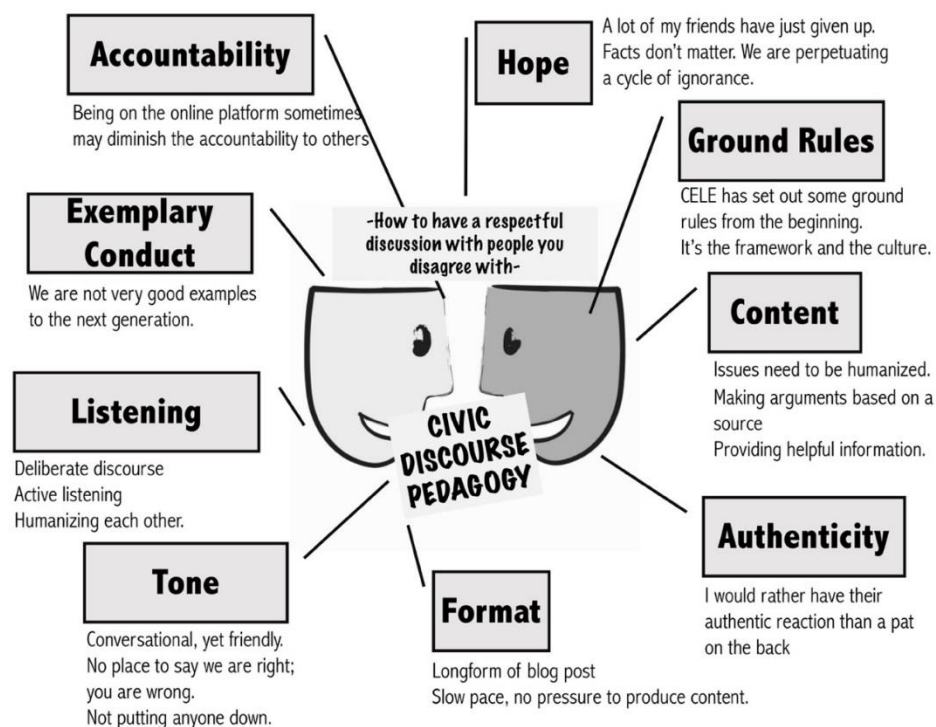

Figure 8. Civic discourse themes derived from interviews

Can ground rules and a shared writing style lead to true discussions and learning processes that transcend differences in views, backgrounds and opinions? Conversations that are meaningful and learning-oriented take place among the blogger network, and, to an extent between bloggers and their largely anonymous audience.

- "We all tend to read things we agree with. In my work, the biggest part is reaching people who basically agree with me, but need information about the specifics to act. It's hard to know, though. People may change their mind more than you and they know. Nobody will believe X, read a blog post, and then believe Y. But people mull it over, and weeks or months later it's 'Hey, they had a point'." (Beth).

One person observed that the long-form of the blog allows for more nuanced argumentation then microcontent focused channels such as Facebook and Twitter. Another interviewee mentioned the pace of CELE: it is not focused on speedy production, but on the quality of contributions.

- "We can put information in a long format. There is more room to explain what you are trying to explain." (Brian).
- "There is no drive for content, it's more about the quality." (Emily).

Concept mapping yields Figure 8 to summarize prominent factors related to civic discourse pedagogy from interview data.

While several bloggers agreed that CELE has qualities that can translate into general best practices online, one interview partner was noticeably more skeptical – and observed a broader trend of not engaging with other people's arguments, regardless of the space. *"If people meet in person and not digital, so very often the person is actually not listening, but just waiting for the other person to be finished to start talking" (Michelle).*

Discussion

Today's media landscape and social media channels are deeply divided. Consistent liberals and conservatives often live in separate media worlds and show little overlap in the sources they trust for political news (Rainie, 2017). To illuminate current attitudes about the potential impacts of online social interaction over the next decade, Pew Research Center and Elon University's Imagining the Internet Center canvassed 1.537 technology experts, scholars, corporate practitioners, and government leaders in summer 2016. Based on the results, Rainie, Anderson and Albright (2017) stated that many experts fear uncivil and manipulative behaviors on the internet will persist — and may get worse.

Through the expert interviews, we have grown to understand digital literacy and digital citizenship as lifelong commitments, not a one-time achievement. Digital citizenship is a competency – not something we *have*, but rather something we *do,* and a continuing *reflective practice*. It is a complex bundle of ability, motivation and willingness to perform and interact in specific ways (Baartman et al., 2007).

All interviewees agreed that through ease of use, instant access, low-barriers to contribution, and potential for wide distribution, social media serve as catalysts for civic engagement and civic reasoning. Especially from the local government and civil service perspective, there is no alternative to embracing the digital space for civic engagement. Digital civic engagement platforms can provide an attractive and accessible means for participation (Sokhn, Evequoz & Zufferey, 2016).

However, while the quantity, frequency and speed of civic engagement has increased, almost all interviewees were struck by a decrease in the quality of interactions through either their participating or witnessing in their social media environment. It is worth noticing that all bloggers judged CELE as an exception to this trend.

Preston et al. (2017) pose the question of whether the processes for humans connecting are fundamentally different in the physical and digital world and argued that they may be one in the same, especially where there is a strong affective element. They chiefly see differences in the scale, impact, and transparency of digitally mediated social interaction and reaction across platforms. Though our interview partners claimed that their own writing and behavior is fairly consistent in their online and offline personas, they typically characterized face-to-face interactions as more prone to civil dialogue. However, it is worth noting that the person most pessimistic about the potential for pedagogy efforts to spread *civil* civic engagement based her judgment partially on experiences in face-to-face settings, i.e., political rallies during the 2016-17 US election cycle and aftermath. *"I cannot believe I saw somebody getting hit in the face, someone walking up to a stranger saying: I hope ISIS kills you and your whole family."*

Both online and in face-to-face encounters, people struggle with *agreeing to disagree* and yet be able to engage in a mutual learning process. We analyzed the CELE blog as an example of a community that from its outset cultivates a civil discourse about civic engagement. Having ground rules, focusing on learning and information sharing, and 'not putting people down' were qualities that the bloggers associated with their CELE blog experience.

To have an impact, a civic engagement platform like CELE has to gain momentum. All interviewees stressed that they hope for a wider readership for the blog and, to varying degrees, more interaction both with their audience and with one another through comments. Which posts are best suited for these purposes? Based on the content analysis, we saw that high scores on factual information, interactivity and personalization corresponded with wider distribution. Posts that offer identification typically reach broader distribution and yield more discussion comments. Interestingly, the expressed wish to have more exchange with the audience did not necessarily translate into CELE bloggers actually responding to comments. The digital space made it easy to deprioritize commitment to the community.

Conclusion

According to Torney-Purta et al. (2015), civic learning is increasingly recognized as important by the higher education community. The authors identify civic competency and civic engagement as two key domains within civic learning. This single case study research offers initial guidance for edublogging on civic discourse in an informal learning space, and directions for future research.

Generalizable, definite conclusions cannot be based on a single case study. Instead, the purpose of our case study and the applicability of our findings can be characterized as *exploratory* and *intrinsic* following the typology described by Baxter and Jack (2008). While closely analyzing one community we gained an intrinsic understanding of the case at hand and discovered the inner workings of the blogger community that appears to exhibit a specific style of civic, civil discourse that at least some community members experience as unique in their environment. At the same time, we have exploratory results that offer background information and allow to formulate more precise research questions for later investigations.

We offer three points for edublogging practice and two for research.
- *Blog post features*. Guiding bloggers to incorporate sourced information, interactivity and personalization is a working hypothesis for fostering posts that reach a broader audience and thus enhance opportunities for mutual learning. The combination of these factors was reflected in the content analysis and elaborated through the interview data.

- *Accountability challenges for multi-author blogs*. When "everyone is responsible," it is too easy avoid individual culpability. Interviewees point to the gap between their desire for more comments on their posts and a stronger give and take, contrasted with their minimal activity offering comments or following up on comments to their post. How to incentivize regular commenting for informal learning spaces is a need demonstrated by the CELE experience.

- Start-up of a blog is crucial for high quality civic discourse. Ground rules that emphasize candor and respect were part of CELE's initiation. Interviewees further noted the blog administrators' encouraging reinforcement of the norms. However, a focus on being "civil" may result in "being too polite" and missing a stronger level of engagement and mutual learning through specific differences and more challenging comments. Further efforts to support and measure "the right amount of friction" that exemplifies diverse and even clashing opinions while keeping an online community together is a final area of practice development for digital citizenship.

Turning to research, we see two points of departure from this case for future investigation.

- *Length of writing and/or kind of media presentation*. The CELE blog used only words and still pictures to convey authors' community engagement ideas. Other mash-ups may result in different qualities of civic discourse, greater willingness of readers to comment, and further dimensions of digital literacy and citizenship. Interview data noted the value of longer-form entries in the CELE blog compared to Facebook and Twitter platforms. The amount of space per entry was considered a positive factor for civic discourse. Thus, research on civic discourse communities that use shorter-form or more multi-media formats is a frontier for both content analysis and interview studies (for example #AppelateTwitter).

- *Extend existing online social system vs. starting something new*. CELE was a from-scratch environment where bloggers and readers only came to know one another through the blog. A different research question is if pre-existing community or neighborhood-oriented blogs (e.g., nextdoor or e-democracy forum) could grow into the candor, respect, and reflection exhibited by CELE. For example, social systems that have a mix of face-to-face and online interactions may be better able to handle contention because of the ability to draw on richer relationships and utilize face-to-face setting to clarify or defuse passions generated online.

Acknowledgements

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