
Democracy & Education

Media and Democracy

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Abstract

This response supports Stoddard's (2014) assertion that media education should be considered a crucial factor of democratic education and offers both extensions and cautions related to that end. Extensions include practical suggestions for studying the non-neutrality of technology. The author also cautions educators that if media education and democratic education are to be productively merged, a more substantive consideration of the relationship between digital technologies and dispositional factors is warranted.

This article is a response to:

Stoddard, J. (2014). The need for media education in democratic education. *Democracy & Education*, 22(1), Article 4. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss1/4>

STODDARD'S (2014) PIECE provides a cogent and useful articulation of the connections between media and democratic education. His main assertion, that media education should be considered a crucial factor of democratic education, is an important one, particularly in a world of rapidly increasing media use by youth—now estimated at 7.5 hours per day (Rideout, Roehr, & Roberts, 2010). In my response, I offer extensions to Stoddard's arguments after briefly summarizing the most relevant points toward that end. In addition, I suggest a couple of cautions in relation to his ideas. All of my points are aimed at strengthening the potential for media education to enhance democratic education.

Extensions

Stoddard (2014) identifies a growing partisan political divide in the culture and rightfully suggests a connection between this and the contemporary media environment. The proliferation of media

options, including the ever-increasing number of cable channels along with an endless array of Internet sources, has allowed media companies to tailor content to individual users and consumers. This empowers users, who also have easier access today to alternative media sources largely via the Internet, but this also creates problems for a society that is concerned with civic goals of working toward the common good, as it allows users to create a "daily me" (Sunstein, 2007) of personally tailored content. Stoddard's response—to develop the characteristics of global citizenship in students, including promoting knowledge, skills, and dispositions oriented toward examining multiple perspectives and taking appropriate action—is generally on target, though I say more on this ahead.

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Much of the work on media education (more often called media literacy) treats technology as value neutral or even as an inherently progressive force within education (see Mason & Metzger, 2012). Stoddard (2014) makes this point explicitly, and he notes that it is emblematic of the move away from media education toward an emphasis on implementing educational technology devoid of critical media analysis. He rightfully notes that such approaches tend to reinforce the status quo in schools, rather than leading to more engaged or empowered teachers and students.

One of the strongest points made by Stoddard (2014) is that media education must move beyond an analysis of mere content. Stoddard asserts “students must understand how media are constructed to evoke emotion, persuade an audience, and connect with others” (p. 7). Such a task would require students to examine the conventions and techniques used by various media forms, and the most obvious place to start is with screen media, as the rapid increases in media use among youth are largely a product of mobile, digital screen technologies. Analyzing commercials would be an ideal place to begin, due to their brevity and the extensive amount of techniques compiled into a small time frame (see Butler, 2012; Hefzalla, 1987).

What is perhaps most important to emphasize is Stoddard’s (2014) point that students should “reflect upon how the technologies they use shape how they may be assessing information and how they view the world” (p. 6). The most effective way to accomplish this is to start with students’ own life experiences, including the devices and real-life situations that students regularly encounter outside of the classroom. Turkle (2011) uncovers how the frequent use of smartphones has created a phenomenon she identifies as being “alone-together,” particularly (though not exclusively) among youth. Turkle argues that today’s youth have significantly different conceptions of privacy and altered understandings of what it means to engage in social interactions when compared to previous generations. Specifically, Turkle finds that youth are now more likely to see face-to-face interactions as intrusions to privacy and often prefer interacting through the mediation of digital devices, in which they are able to more carefully craft messages and responses. Teachers could initiate discussions with students about how the group work environment of the classroom that features direct engagement (presumably without the benefit of digital devices) differs from social interactions outside of class, or possibly give students homework assignments in which they observe their friends’ social behaviors while using various media technologies. Such assignments could form the basis of inquiries about how media technologies mediate human interaction in ways that may be considered positive or negative, depending upon the circumstances. Students could also be asked to consider the potential long-term implications of such mediation, particularly of relatively new cultural tools such as smartphones.

This leads to another point about the perceived conceptual divide between media and technology in teacher education. Stoddard (2014) astutely identifies the convergences within the respective NCSS positions statements on media and technology,

but this convergence needs to be understood within the context of daily teaching practices. Put more directly, teachers’ understanding of media needs to be expanded beyond mass media to include mobile and digital technologies and other technologies that mediate human perception. For practicing teachers and students to understand technology as non-neutral, they must acquire the basic understanding that a medium is something that goes between, or mediates, communications between two or more parties. As communication is mediated in various ways, social dynamics are altered—sometimes subtly, other times dramatically. This suggests that the field of education needs to break down the barriers that separate media studies from broader examinations of technology and recognize that many devices and inventions not directly involved in communication (offhand examples include the automobile and airplane) have had significant consequences for the nature and quality of human communication and social interaction. With these understandings in hand, media education could potentially move from being a discrete topic of study to being included as an important element in the core curriculum. At the secondary level, history and other social studies courses could offer a rightful home for studying how changes in media and other technologies affect social change. Such an approach could begin to achieve Stoddard’s goal of having students understand the non-neutrality of technology, and future generations could potentially be better equipped to more intelligently guide the direction of future changes in media and technology for the benefit of democracy.

Cautions

The following points are intended as things to consider as media education moves forward. The first of which is Stoddard’s (2014) argument for including digital games and simulations as a way to learn about civic action. I want to consider this in relation to Stoddard’s call for having students acquire “dispositions of global citizens” (p. 6). He reports that the motivation for simulations is the “authenticity of the experience and the ability of students to engage in realistic issues or problems with fellow students more than the students are engaged in a game or mediated simulation” (p. 7). Stoddard’s focus on the quality of the learning experience for students is important to emphasize, as many influential works of media literacy identify students as inherently interested in media and tout this as a primary reason to include digital devices in the classroom (see Jenkins, 2006; NCSS, 2009; Rheingold, 2008). This assertion risks fostering students’ dispositions in ways that run counter to the goals of Stoddard and other democratic educators. Dewey (1938) asserted that indulging students without considering the broader consequences

sets up an attitude which operates as an automatic demand that persons and objects cater to his desires and caprices in the future. It makes him seek the kind of situation that will enable him to do what he feels like doing at the time. It renders him averse to and comparatively incompetent in situations which require effort and perseverance in overcoming obstacles. (p. 37)

Dewey (1938) concluded that student interest alone is an insufficient rationale for introducing new curriculum features, and the “collateral learning” within the educational environment may foster dispositions that work against the goals of democratic education (p. 48). As media education moves forward, it is crucial to distinguish between the use of digital tools to better achieve goals of media and civic education versus approaches that are primarily designed to entertain students under the guise of citizenship education. As these areas are bridged, the broader goal of how citizenship education can be improved through the use of media education must be kept in focus, as modeled by Stoddard’s example.

A concern with fostering dispositions leads to another caution. Stoddard (2014) asserts that teachers should use “techniques in social media to create networks of like-minded citizens as well as using specific media forms such as editorials, blogs, tweets, and media-generated flash mobs to reach and persuade people” (p. 8). I want to consider this in relation to Stoddard’s call for encouraging students to deliberate with others. While targeted use of such techniques may indeed be warranted, social studies educators must first become aware of the isolating and individualizing functions of digital technologies (as previously noted in regard to Turkle’s research). Stoddard has already noted the increasing partisan divide within the culture, but this must be connected to social behaviors that are facilitated and encouraged by digital tools. One source of awareness is Slade’s (2011) book *The Big Disconnect*, in which he details the shift to increasingly privatized technologies that have, over the course of the 20th century and in conjunction with user practices, slowly normalized citizens to less engaged social behaviors in both public places and in the home. Consider the case of screen technology in home entertainment, which has transformed from a single television often watched by the entire family, to individual televisions in bedrooms, now to digital devices in which each family member can immerse himself or herself in a personalized media experience without interference from others—even when in the same room. Of course, to get a full picture of how these developments have effected social dynamics in relation to civic life, one would need to consider how interpersonal interactions have been altered by the introduction of technologies prior to television, such as movie theaters and the radio in the early 20th century, as well as examining how casual social interactions have import for civic concerns (see Boyte, 2004; Oldenburg, 1999; Putnam, 2001). While Stoddard acknowledges that personalized digital technologies are leading to a lack of commonality about what news citizens receive, it must be added that these same devices make citizens less likely to engage with diverse others on political and social matters in addition to more everyday concerns, moving citizens farther away from the deliberative dispositions that Stoddard advocates. This does not mean that media educators should ignore these technologies, but teachers should recognize these tendencies and incorporate these understandings into discussions with students about how technologies tend to frame interactions through their use. As Postman (1985/2005) stated, “no medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are” (p. 161).

A more deliberative democracy is a worthy goal for civic educators to work toward, and media education can be an important factor in achieving it. However, as research indicates, deliberation is difficult work (see Boyte, 2012; Colapietro, 2006; Fagotto & Fung, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, 2010; Kingston, 2012). Such work is less likely to be attempted by citizens who expect immediate gratification or who are uncomfortable with direct encounters particularly with those who may have passionate but disparate political beliefs. Social studies educators should not expect the uncritical use of personalized, individualized devices to lead students toward more deliberative democratic persuasions. If digital tools are fostering attitudes that may work against deliberative dispositions, as evidence from Turkle (2011), Slade (2011), and others suggest, then these matters must be seriously considered when discussing the relationship between media and civic education. If social studies educators hope to foster an intelligent participatory democracy ready to meet 21st-century challenges, a more explicit understanding of the relationship between individual behaviors, the devices that mediate those behaviors, and the society that facilitates such behaviors must be more carefully explicated and incorporated into a democratically oriented media education.

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