

Using E-Service Learning for Promoting Digital Citizenship

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Abstract: Today's citizens live in a digital age. Millions of people interact all over the world using different technologies on daily basis. This wider interaction has generated a digital society. There are vast opportunities of education and social interaction available for students as members of this digital society. As is customary with the members of every society to behave and act in a certain way, similar is the case with the members of the digital society. Students in the present time are entirely comfortable with the internet. Despite of this, there are many questions to be answered. Are the students using the internet appropriately as responsible citizens of a digital society? Are they aware of their roles and responsibilities? What are the challenges that digital citizenship education faces? Is e-service-learning a useful tool to prepare responsible digital citizens? This study reviews relevant and wider literature to find answers to these questions.

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1. Introduction

In recent decade, outstanding developments have taken place in the field of information and communication technology (Ghods et al., 2014). Technology has conquered every sphere of human including education. There is a highly positive correlation between technology based instruction and learning effectiveness (Ahmad et al., 2013). E-service-learning is a new concept in education and is gaining fast popularity these days. Studies have indicated that it has the potential to produce online responsible citizens (Waldner et al., 2010). Being a reciprocal teaching and learning method, service-learning has benefits for all the stakeholders such as the community, instructors, students and the higher education institution itself (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2011). In view of Jacoby (1996), "Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs" (p. 5). However, researchers have argued that in e-service-learning program, the focus must be on intellectual development of students (Barab et al., 2004; Kaye, 2010). This will help create future thinking citizens who are able to understand the needs and requirements of human society, the issues of justice and civic life in a more effective way (Battistoni, 1997; Kirlin, 2003). Citizenship skills can be developed online in various ways such as persuasive thinking, writing and listening practices (Warschauer, 2003). Researchers have called these attributes the

essential elements of democratic minded citizens (Crawford, 2011). Research has further informed that e-service-learning empowers students online to discuss the problems of civic life, communities as active citizens (Howard et al., 2001).

Studies have shown an alarming concern that despite of the popularity of the traditional service-learning method that was required to be performed in a community setting, there are chances of its being outdated or ineffective due to the increased emphasis on passive working in the community setting with more use of physical work and less use of intellectual skills (Sener & The Sloan Consortium, 2007). This created a new thinking among the service-learning researchers about its future. One of the biggest challenges was to digitize service-learning (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). The main concern was the transition of the service-learning academic activities from traditional to online learning platforms. One of the reasons for digitization of service-learning from traditional to digital was that students found involvement in the community site activities very expensive due to the time and other factors involved. They viewed the online medium of service-learning as the better option (Hargittai, 2002). Some writers say that this would be one of the reasons behind the lowering interest among students in service-learning programs (Khodamoradi et al., 2014).

E-service-learning or electronic service-learning is defined as a course in which the instructor provides guidance online and the service is provided online

(Boulianne, 2009). According to many writers, this type of teaching and learning is more effective as it makes the students free from the barriers of geographical and cultural limitations and creates an online homogeneity of community of learners (Poole et al., 2011). These days, students are increasingly pursuing their studies online. But very few courses related to service-learning are conducted online. The reason is that in many places this facility is not available. Hence, this is one of the challenges to online service-learning course. But despite of this, researchers argue that the future of service-learning could be in danger due its traditional nature.

There is a need to transform it from high-touch to high tech in order to maintain its relevancy in the present information age and knowledge societies where teaching and learning in every domain, including citizenship is becoming digitized (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Therefore, writers suggest that to remain relevant, service-learning must go online. But many others question this supposition that how this transition will be possible. The only answer provided by the existing literature is e-service-learning.

Writers believe that armed with the power of e-service-learning it would be possible to develop citizenship skills of students while sitting in a laboratory or a library by integrating the e-service-learning in the online courses (Boulianne, 2009). Many writers say that this is challenging, but others argue that it is possible to develop the citizenship skills of students online by providing them with opportunity to study community life through online courses and find out solutions to the needs and issues in the community. This will ensure the relevancy of service-learning as a civic pedagogy in the 21st century (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005).

Educators find it difficult to decide about the use of service-learning as a digital citizenship tool. There are various sources which can be used for developing digital citizenship skills such as internet, avatar technology, cell phones, instant messages, Facebook and blogs (Ming et al., 2014). The challenge is that how these communication methods can be appropriately used and how they can fit the defined course (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2012). What positive outcomes can be extracted and what potential negative effect can be minimized? Educators need to consider these questions before integrating e-service-learning in their courses for citizenship development of students (Ahmad et al., 2014). Along with these, it is also essential to teach the students about the appropriate use of technology (Gibson et al., 2005).

Researchers have highlighted that educators should decide that what rules, options and online ethics and etiquette needs to be followed by the students before and during using the digital tools for citizenship skills development (DiMaggio et al., 2004). Actually, by nature technology is neither bad nor good. It is the use of technology that makes it so. The fact is that there is no universal solution of these challenges attached with technology. However, these can be minimized by following the rules and laws of digital world (Warschauer, 2003). The ultimate benefit digital citizenship is that it provides the framework that helps the decision makers in better understanding and addressing the issues of online citizenship learning (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012).

2. Digital citizenship

Digital citizenship means participating in digital society activities online (Harouni et al., 2014). It is important for digital citizens to have regular access to internet as well as the necessary skills to use technology as a means for citizenship leaning (Meethongjan et al., 2013). For evaluation and use of the available information online, students must not only have access to high speed internet connection but also technical and critical thinking skills (Hargittai, 2002; Lung et al., 2014).

Online learning has become more complex today than it was yesterday, because, the way people connect to internet has different variety in it (Harouni et al., 2014). For example, in America, a survey study revealed that 62% of all white American have high speed of internet facility, while, others have less access to internet. So the issue of access to internet itself has a deep impact upon the citizenship learning of people (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Another issue is that there are variations in abilities of people to learn online citizenship. This variation has created further complexity for the educators to measure the modes of access for digital citizenship and to classify the abilities of learners (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012). Hence, there is a need to create a clear digital teaching and learning strategies to cope with this situation (Hargittai, 2002).

Another important aspect of digital citizenship is political awareness. To participate in the activities of online society or digital citizenship need economic opportunities and political participation (Nodehi et al., 2014; Brynjolfsson & Saunders, 2010). There are evidences that political and economic activities online have repercussions on citizenship learning. For example, internet use at home or work place has economic effects upon the users (DiMaggio & Bonikowski, 2008; Saba et al., 2014). Similar is the case with political participation. Individuals who have access to online news and reading facilities have

more positive tendency towards vote and other political activities (Bimber, 2003; Rehman and Saba, 2013; Boulianne, 2009; Rehman et al., 2014).

Online activities related to political participation are more useful. These activities add to essential human capital (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai, 2002). According to some writers, majority of members of the online society are young people who are going to be the future citizens of the society (Mossberger et al., 2012). There is a need to organize their activities around the notion of digital citizenship to enable them to play an active role as a responsible member of a digital society (Becker et al., 2010). In digital citizenship teachers, students and others use technology to learn about appropriate and responsible citizenship (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). There are different ways to achieve this goal such as frequent online conversation, digital communication, digital commerce, digital literacy, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities and digital safety (Rehman et al., 2009; Haron et al., 2011; Saba et al., 2010; Selamat et al., 2010; Peterson, 2010).

The concept of digital citizenship helps teachers, students and technology users to understand how to use technology to live in a digital society (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Hassani, 2006). The issue is not what the users don't know, rather, the issue is that how to maximize the appropriate use and minimize the abuse of technology as online citizens (DiMaggio & Bonikowski, 2008). According to Ribble and Bailey (2007), the concept of digital citizenship includes the elements such as digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, digital wellness and digital security (Hassani, 2006). The analysis in this paper provides that there are different forms of access and abilities for digital citizenship. But the best way is e-service-learning approach.

3. The uses of e-service-learning

E-service-learning is defined as an electronic form of experiential education which is delivered online by using the internet and other related technologies that allows students, teachers and community partners to collaborate at a distance in organized, focused way that ultimately leads to promotion of civic responsibility (Ming et al., 2014). Among the stated benefits of e-service-learning is that it has provided students and community partners to work together at distance level to address the community needs which is cheaper, accessible and time saving as compared to the traditional community site service-learning where more time and more physical exercise was involved (Livingston, 2010).

Development and implementation of online service-learning course also provided new venues for updating and standardizing service-learning experiences across disciplines. This will also help the teachers of traditional service-learning courses in creating more opportunities for learners to learn citizenship online (Becker et al., 2010). In 2005, university of Illinois successfully developed and implemented an online service-learning course. This experience showed that students studying social justice as a part of citizenship education using online classroom reported positive impact on their digital citizenship development (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010).

4. Challenges to e-service-learning

Although e-service-learning is an effective way to promote digital citizenship, yet many challenges are involved in the process of digital citizenship. Some studies have shown that apart from having access to technology, it is essential that teachers and students must have access to more than a computer (Chun and Aun, 2014). There is a need to create collaboration via organizing chat rooms, discussions, email, blogs, or even video conferencing (Bimber, 2003; Brown et al., 2011). Finding the right online platform is the next challenge for citizenship learners in the digital divide. How this issue has been solved to some extent because, many platforms have been explored and developed in which the fact has been taken into consideration that the online e-service-learning class should not be different from any other online course. In this regard, those teachers who are trained technologically can help students to connect digitally and learn in an online environment (Sener, & The Sloan Consortium, 2007; Alqahtani, and Saba, 2013).

Before performing a service online, students will first identify an issue among the many issues mentioned in the online community site and plan how to address the issue more effectively. This provides the online students to think critically on the identified issue and conduct the service by different means (DiMaggio et al., 2004). They can suggest alternatives and come up with a new way of dealing with the problem at hand. This develops amongst them feeling of affiliation with a digital society as citizens (Boulianne, 2009). In this way each student will be able to identify ways and means how to be associated with an online community as a digital society member (Barab et al., 2004; Highline Public Schools. (2010).

Kaye (2010) has mentioned different stages about how to implement a service-learning project in his book "The complete guide to service-learning, 2nd edition". These proposed stages can be aligned with

the online service-learning course to help students develop citizenship skills and become digital citizens. This model will also help teachers to evaluate and measure the digital citizenship development. Another issue is the security of online learners (Wortham, 2011). The process of online service-learning involves interaction of students with online community through digital communication. There is a need that teachers must carefully locate the information and monitor the process and student interactions online and also verify that the face to face interaction is supervised by either parents or adults (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). Despite the many challenges, researchers suggest that it is high time to digitize the service-learning to maximize its benefits as a relevant teaching and learning approach. Offering an e-service-learning class to students who need help will enable them ample opportunities to learn citizenship as a member of a virtual community and become engaged citizens in a democratic society (Shulman et al., 2003).

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that e-service-learning is a powerful tool to promote digital citizenship. Students who participate in an online course develop sense of empowerment as participatory citizens of a digital society. E-service-learning also develops students' commitment to closing the digital gap. They also develop understanding of the complex issues of their societies through reflecting and critically discussing them online with their peers and community members. This study further provides the insight that those who participate in the e-service-learning activity develop essential citizenship skills such as effective communication, interpersonal skills and cultural competence. These are considered the essential elements of an engaged citizenship. This study found that e-service-learning also enables the students to think critically, about politics, social justice, citizenship rights and duties in the society by being involved in an intellectual discussion during the online service-learning activity. So, on the basis of the above discussion, this study argues that e-service-learning is more effective and relevant than the traditional service-learning in promoting citizenship among students of the 21st century when life has become digitized. The study informs that digitization of service-learning as a citizenship learning strategy will also be useful as it will ensure the possibility of survival of traditional service-learning as a relevant and effective teaching and learning method in the present information age when everything has been digitized.

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