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Technology Uses in Campus Activism From 2000 to 2008: Implications for Civic Learning

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Journal of College Student Development

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 51, Number 6, November/December 2010

pp. 679-693

10.1353/csd.2010.0019

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

Abstract

This qualitative study examines use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as computers, cell phones, text messaging, and social networking sites, for campus activism. Participants were 22 student leaders representing eight campuses from 2000 to 2008. The focus of this study was two-fold: first, to describe the form and function of ICT uses among campus activists from 2000 to 2008, and second, to identify relational learning practices in online environments contributing to civic learning. Over the 8-year period, the use of ICTs in campus activism evolved considerably, bearing considerations for civic learning, democratic engagement, and leadership practices in the digital age.

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With a few exceptions (Astin, 1977; Keniston, 1969), the prevalent description of campus activism in higher education has been as disruptive rather than as complementary to educational outcomes (Chambers & Phelps, 1993). A developmental view emerged in the 1990s when educators, looking for social consciousness on campus, recognized an increased commitment to community service (Levine & Cureton, 1998; Levine & Hirsch, 1991), multiculturalism (Rhoads, 1998), and identity (Rhoads, 1997). Today, campus activism and "principled dissent" are considered desirable indicators of a robust civic learning environment (Keeling, 2004).

Using a phenomenological approach, this study sought evidence of civic learning among campus activists by exploring the forms and functions of information and communication

technology (ICT) use in the early digital age (2000–2008). A review of literature focused on developmental outcomes from campus activism and the role of technology in extracurricular learning follows. The key components of relational learning and leadership (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007) are used as a theoretical lens for examining civic learning in this environment.

ACTIVISM RECONSIDERED

Three studies advanced developmental considerations of campus activism. Hunter (1988) saw activism as a commitment to social consciousness, noting, "the activities of campus protest—rallies, debates, boycotts—provide college youth with opportunities for community and contexts for their exploration of personal growth" (p. 35). Chambers and Phelps (1993) found similarities between lessons learned in activist participation and involvement in traditional leadership roles, such as student government, fraternities, clubs, or other "institutionally accepted organized group[s]" (p. 19). Hamrick (1998) considered democratic theory alongside student activism, using a case study to point out core principles of democracy acted out in student unrest.

Building on this literature, contributors to *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) developed civic engagement outcomes. These included developing a sense of responsibility, committing to public life, engaging in principled dissent, and learning to be an effective leader. To encourage these outcomes, Komives

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