Chapter 13
Participatory Culture, New Media, and Civic Engagement: A Generation Who Dares to Hope

Sibylle Gruber
Northern Arizona University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author focuses on how humanities teachers can, and should, adapt classroom practices that promote civic engagement by paying attention to the needs of a new media culture. The author uses examples from the 2007/2008 presidential campaign to show the possibilities of new media for joining together academic principles with the principles of a newly emerging participatory culture. The author points out that teachers can learn from Barack Obama's campaign to harness the interest, excitement, and staunch support of technologically savvy students, not only for political campaigns, but also for increasing students' participation in the communities of their choice. "Yes, we can!", even though it was a campaign slogan that could be interpreted in many different ways, allowed students—and voters in general—to hope that change is possible. Obama's strategies, and his ability to garner support and promote unprecedented participation in the election process in the 18-29-year population, should be a catalyst not for doing what Obama did but for revisiting and re-imagining how we create an environment for our students that promotes engagement and hope in the power of individuals to participate successfully in civic action. I conclude by providing an example that shows how engaged students and teachers contributed to positive change by believing in the "power of one" and by acting on that belief.
INTRODUCTION

The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.

The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference.

The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference.

And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference.

(Wiesel, 1986, para. 1)

With millions of others, I watched the election results on November 4, 2008. Barack Obama’s victory came early; his victory speech in Grant Park, Chicago, was hailed as inspirational by the 240,000 people at the park and millions who watched on TV or on their computers, hoping that the streamed video would not fail at this monumental time in U.S. history.¹ His previous acceptance speech as the democratic candidate on August 28, 2008, at the Democratic National Convention in Denver² was preceded by two and a half minutes of applause, and his words were met with continuous and rousing cheers. He was “the change that we need,” a phrase that was broadcast over and over on multiple media sources, and, in conjunction with “yes, we can,” became part of the motivation to participate in the electoral process. Obama’s speech on November 4, 2008, addressed that “he could”:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. —Obama, 2008, Nov. 5, para. 1)

Obama’s conviction that “all things are possible” can certainly be attributed to the power of U.S. democracy; it can also be attributed to how media outlets employed their power to disseminate information to a broad voter basis; and it can be attributed to the power of social networking media that were successfully used by the Obama campaign team.

As a teacher of rhetoric and writing who encourages students to use their knowledge in order to participate in civic society, I am especially interested in how students use social networking media, and how we as teacher can tap into students’ engagement in online communities and expand this engagement to offline communities as well. Here, I focus on how humanities teachers can, and should, adapt classroom practices that promote civic engagement by paying attention to the needs of a new media culture. I use examples from the 2007/2008 presidential campaign to show the possibilities of new media for joining together academic principles with the principles of a newly emerging participatory culture. I point out that teachers can learn from Barack Obama’s campaign to harness the interest, excitement, and staunch support of technologically savvy students, not only for political campaigns, but also for increasing students’ participation in the communities of their choice. “Yes, we can!”, even though it was a campaign slogan that could be interpreted in many different ways, allowed students—and voters in general—to hope that change is possible. Obama’s strategies, and his ability to garner support and promote unprecedented participation in the election process in the 18-29-year population, should be a catalyst not for doing what Obama did, but for revisiting and re-imagining how teachers might create an environment for students that promotes engagement and hope in the power of individuals to participate successfully in civic action. I conclude by providing an example that shows how engagement can shift to the classroom, and how engaged students and teachers contributed to positive change by believing in the “power of one” and by acting on that belief.
Related Content

The Application of Affective Computing Technology to E-Learning
www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-application-of-affective-computing-technology-to-e-learning/97758?camid=4v1a

Web-Based Collaboration and Decision Making Support: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach
www.igi-global.com/chapter/web-based-collaboration-decision-making/41425?camid=4v1a

A Theory of the Online Teaching Experience
www.igi-global.com/chapter/theory-online-teaching-experience/18670?camid=4v1a

Second Language E-Learning and Professional Training with Second Life®
www.igi-global.com/chapter/second-language-learning-professional-training/41386?camid=4v1a