Chapter 23
Using Online Collaborative Tools to Foster Middle School Students’ “Public Voices”: Payoffs, Perils and Possibilities

Nick Lawrence
East Bronx Academy, USA

Joe O’Brien
University of Kansas, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital participatory media offer urban social studies teachers a unique opportunity to foster students’ civic skills and public voice while enhancing their understanding of social justice within a democratic society. This case study addresses how an 8th grade U.S. history teacher in a New York urban school, when using wikis and online discussion with his students, came to realize that “what [technology] users need in order to take charge of their own online decision making is at best an art and, more often than not, a series of trial-and-error solutions” (Lankes, 2008, p. 103), while operating within two constraints identified by Bull et al (2008): “Teachers have limited models for effective integration of media in their teaching; and, only limited research is available to guide best practice” (p. 2). While using digital collaborative tools enabled students to develop collaborative and communication skills and begin to learn social justice oriented content, the teacher faced challenges related
Using Online Collaborative Tools

to technology integration, curricular alignment, selection of appropriate digital
tools, and fostering online academic norms among students. This chapter focuses
on a teacher’s three-year journey from his first day of teaching to his connecting
the use of technology to relevant curricular content to promote his students’ use of
online public voices for social justice.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

While digital participatory media in the classroom no longer is a revolutionary
concept, practitioners and researchers still are searching for best practices for how
to use such media to further student learning. This case study addresses the experi-
ences of a teacher in one of America’s most urban areas who over the course of
two years and in planning for his third year has sought to integrate technology into
his classroom so as to better align students’ academic experiences with their social,
online experiences.

In order to achieve this aim his students have used digital participatory media
not only for academic purposes and to develop online social skills, but also to
explore social justice themes. The latter has served as a way for the teacher to tie
together the curriculum at the urban school and to support a collaborative effort
by his students with students in a Midwestern suburban classroom. The case study
opens with the teacher’s first and second years in the classroom wherein he began
with smaller attempts to integrate technology into his curriculum and then gradu-
ally integrated more use of the technology as his management skills and confidence
improved. The case description then discusses how the use of technology in the
classroom and curriculum has been set up to support not only an expanded use of
the technology in the third year, but also has set up this teacher and a colleague to
explore in more depth the theme of social justice and to cultivate students’ online
public voice, the art and skill of persuading “other people—beyond one’s closest
friends and family—to take action on shared issues” (Levine, 120).

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The students attend a Title I new small school with grades 6-12 in a large city in
New York where more than 90% of them receive free or reduced lunch. The school
is working toward a 1:1 student to laptop ratio. Grants support much of the school’s
technology, which are used both to sustain current technology and to invest in new