Epistemic Game Design for Democratic and Media Education

Jeremy Stoddard, The College of William & Mary, jdstod@wm.edu
Kimberly Rodriguez, The College of William & Mary, kjrodriguez@email.wm.edu
Mason Rayner, The College of William & Mary, mhrayner2@gmail.com
Zachari Swiecki, University of Wisconsin – Madison, zachariswiecki@gmail.com
David Williamson Shaffer, University of Wisconsin – Madison, dws@education.wisc.edu

Abstract: This paper applies the concept of epistemic games (Shaffer, 2006) as a model for designing PurpleState Solutions. PurpleState, a Virtual Internship simulation, utilizes the concepts of epistemic frames and communities of practice as models for learning in media and democratic education. PurpleState places students in the roles of interns at a strategic communications firm who are hired to develop a media campaign on a proposed fictitious state level "fracking" ban. This design-based research project utilized a team of contributors for the design and pilot of the project. Using epistemic frames based on the professional practices of strategic communications consultants provides a dynamic and authentic model for simulations that promote the skills, knowledge, and values for active democratic citizenship.

Introduction

The US Supreme Court ruling in Citizens United v. FEC (2010), which has allowed virtually limitless funding for political media and organizing campaigns, presents a major issue for democratic education. We need to prepare young citizens who are able to evaluate media messages as well as to know how to communicate, coordinate, and take action within the mediated and global political environment (Stoddard, 2014). This paper describes the design framework and process used to create PurpleState Communications, a Virtual Internship simulation focused on developing student skills, knowledge, and values related to media and civic education. For PurpleState, we sought to provide students the opportunity to develop an understanding of the dynamic nature of media in politics and help them to develop the skills and knowledge to be both more critical of the political media they engage with and more skilled and confident in using media strategies to take political action. We argue that the use of epistemic games like PurpleState in democratic education also work toward the goals outlined in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013) and Civic Mission of Schools report (Gould, 2011).

Theory and design framework

PurpleState was designed using the model of Virtual Internships developed by Shaffer (2006a, 2006b) that employs epistemic frames and communities of practice from professions as models of learning. Thus, according to Shaffer (2006b), the epistemic frame includes epistemic understanding as well as the ways of thinking and acting of professionals within communities of practice (Lave & Wegner, 1991). In this way, "epistemic frames are the organizing principle for practices" (Shaffer, 2006b p. 227) that lead to the development of expertise through modeling the relationship between discursive practices and structures of knowledge at the level of communities of practice. Therefore, an "epistemology of professional practice" may be a better model for democratic education than an epistemology based on an academic discipline such as history, or the roles within simulations modeled after national levels of politics and power (e.g., members of congress). As noted above, traditional government simulations are more effective at reaching common government and AP government curricular goals (e.g., Parker, et al., 2013) than the skills and knowledge needed for youth participatory politics (e.g., Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen, 2014).

Methods and design process

We use the epistemic game model to develop PurpleState in an attempt to meet the following objectives: 1) understand the institutions and structures of government as they influence modern politics; 2) have the ability to research, evaluate, and communicate using evidence with old/new media; 3) be able to discuss and deliberate controversial historical or contemporary issues; 4) and to be able to take action toward civic goals using media. We use the epistemic frames of strategic communications consultants, whose firms assist candidates, political action committees, and special interest groups to develop and implement media and campaign strategies; this epistemic frame emphasizes expertise in the skills, knowledge, and values that can transfer to young peoples' actions as citizens outside of school. This virtual internship, set within a simulated community of practice modeled on a strategic communications firm, was developed based on example Virtual Internships modeled on

journalism, engineering, and urban planning within STEM education (e.g., Hatfield and Shaffer, 2010) using a Virtual Internship authoring tool. As virtual interns, students work in these epistemic games with other interns and expert mentors to engage in authentic issues or problems within an immersive computer supported collaborative learning environment designed and used for the virtual internships identified above.

Results

In PurpleState, the virtual internship is modeled primarily on the work of interns from the political campaign and public affairs firms of one of the members of our design team. This member had previous experience in education and in running state level political campaigns before moving into the world of media consulting. Tasks, products, and concepts/terminology in the internship are based primarily on the work of actual interns in these firms. We also utilized sources from political communications, high school civics and government curricula (e.g., textbooks, AP Government curriculum), and work done on youth participatory politics research in the US and Europe (e.g., Binaji, Buckingham, Van Zoonen & Hirzalla, 2009; Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen, 2014). The balance between authenticity and functionality, along with maximum participation and engagement of students, was prominent in our design. We utilized an online learning environment structured similar to a project management system that allowed students to receive emails from their boss outlining tasks, to participate in chat discussions with their project team members and their online mentors (account managers), and to access materials and tasks needed as well as to submit products (deliverables).

Conclusion and implications

In this presentation we provide a framework, design process, and description of the PurpleState virtual internship that represent the first step toward developing epistemic games that work toward the goals of democratic education and media education. The conceptual framework of epistemic frames developed here, when operationalized through epistemic games, has the potential to significantly change the nature of how we teach young people to be citizens, in addition to serving as a dynamic model for reaching academic and skills goals emphasized in the C3 and Civic Mission for Schools. PurpleState is designed to engage young people in collaborative practice, a better understanding of the nature of media and its function in society and politics, and provide opportunities to engage in relevant contemporary controversial issues.

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Acknowledgements