

ORGANISED USE OF E-DEMOCRACY TOOLS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract – This paper concerns use of an online policy debating forum: part of a suite of e-democracy tools for a local youth parliament. These e-democracy tools have been used and developed over the last 5 years and are vital to the parliament, as it serves a large rural area. The forum enables the involvement of all young people in the region in the youth parliament’s policy and decision making. This paper compares 2 debates for which use of the forum was organised and structured in local secondary schools. One of these debates took place in June 2004 and focussed on the age of electoral majority for the Scottish Parliament. The other, in February 2006, focused on smoking cessation schemes for teenagers. Results indicate that organising use within lesson time in schools is a very effective way to involve young people, both in terms of contributions to the debate and students’ perceptions of the experience. It also encouraged some people to get involved in their own time. These results are reflected in other research we have conducted into young people’s engagement in policy-making through e-democracy tools. Young people value the use of online tools, like the policy debating forum, to be involved in certain issues. However, they prefer to do this in an organised group, rather than under their own impetus. The paper discusses these results in light of investigations into young people’s engagement online and highlights what is to be gained from this approach.

1. Introduction

The growth of the nascent field of e-democracy and young people’s perceived affinity with Internet technologies has led to projects which enable young people’s civic participation online. The extensive research in *UK Children Go Online* [e.g. 1] demonstrates that use of the Internet is no guarantee of success in fostering young people’s interest in public affairs or holding their attention. However, there may be cases where it makes sense to use online tools to gather input from young people and good practice should be investigated. Since the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child [2] was ratified in the UK in 1991, various organisations have been looking for ways to give children and young people more say in issues that affect them. At the same time, government bodies and public sector organisations have been looking for ways to consult young people on the services that they use, with a view to improving them. Youth parliaments and fora are currently in favour as mechanisms to support this dialogue. Tangential to this is the increasing importance of citizenship skills within schools’ curricula. The “Crick Report” of 1998 [3] outlined a range of values, skills, knowledge and aptitudes as desired outcomes of citizenship education. These should be acquired by experience, where possible. In Scotland these ideas moved forward via

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“*Education for Citizenship in Scotland - A Paper for Discussion and Development*” [4] which, in 2002, set out the basis for a national framework for school-based education for citizenship. These ideas have moved to the centre of the current curriculum review [5]. In our experience, teachers are willing to experiment with resources supporting these goals and keen to reuse those which students respond well to. This particular project concerns web-based e-democracy tools for a youth parliament. The parliament is based in a large and sparsely populated area, making frequent face to face meetings impractical. As the parliament’s sponsors are keen for all young people in the area to be involved, online tools have been used from its inception in 2000. This paper focuses on development and use of an online-policy debating forum, for the youth parliament. This has been in use for 5 years. During that time it has undergone workshop-based and observational evaluation, leading to 2 sets of functional improvements. Two ‘look and feel’ redesigns of the suite of e-democracy tools have also been undertaken with parliament representatives. Here, we look specifically at context of use. Structured use in lesson time increases the number of contributions. How does it impact on the quality of contributions and the students’ experience of using e-democracy tools? Our response is based on 2 periods of organised use of the forum within schools. It is also informed by our research into engaging young people in dialogue on radioactive waste management [6] and others’ research into young people’s experience of citizenship online.

2. Project history

In the Highland region of Scotland, a partnership of public bodies, centred on Highland Council, met with young people (12-18 year olds) to look for ways to give them more input and improve their experience of living in the area. The outcome of this was a youth parliament, Highland Youth Voice, with the first representatives elected in 2000. This partnership of public bodies (the Highland Wellbeing Alliance) became the parliament’s sponsors, staying involved with the parliament as well as supporting it financially. Resources limit full parliament meetings to 2 residential weekends a year. Between these meetings, its activities are guided by an Executive Committee (up to 16 parliament members) and overseen by staff at Highland Council. Highland is a predominantly rural region: 16,000 young people are spread across 26,000 square km, making face-to-face participation difficult. So, it was envisaged that e-democracy would play a crucial role. However, the aim is still to use ICT as an enabler of the parliament, rather than an end in itself.

Since 2000, there have been 3 major iterations of the e-democracy tools, though each version underwent formative evaluation and development during its lifetime. The first iteration was designed to support the first elections to the parliament. This included the facility to elect members through an e-voting system, online support for the elections and an issue-based discussion forum [7]. To create the second and third iterations, youth parliament members worked in teams with us, helping to create e-democracy tools that support the functionality they need, as well as reflecting their tastes. The second iteration consisted of a suite of e-democracy tools to enable involvement in the parliament. The three main functions were:

1. support for their elections, including an e-voting system and candidate manifestos;
2. an online policy debating forum, to give a voice to all young people in the area;
3. a content management system, enabling parliament members to disseminate information.

This iteration of the website hosted a series of discussions including, in 2004, “Should the voting age for The Scottish Parliament be lowered to 16?”. In 2005 the youth parliament’s e-

democracy tools were redesigned to restructure the navigation and update the user interface. This third and current iteration, including the online policy debating forum, hosted the second debate we discuss here: “Smoking amongst Scotland's youth is still a burning issue”, in 2006.

3. The online policy-debating forum

The Highland Youth Parliament’s issue-based discussion forum was designed to be used by the parliament and its sponsors to consult all young people in the region about issues that affect them, influencing the policy and actions of these organisations. It is the main way for young people in the area to be involved in the parliament’s business between elections. Over 20 consultations or policy debates have been held in the forum since its inception in 2001. The forum has been revised in light of feedback garnered during an evaluation, in 2002, and a workshop with parliament representatives, in 2003. Its design also changed in line with the redesign in 2005. These changes have supported the positive feedback on the forum’s usability we describe below. For example, by changing the reply mechanism, we have increased thread depth and discursive interaction: more replies than top-level comments. Each debate is accompanied by an introduction, detailing the reason for holding it, and background information to support informed debate. Space is provided for feedback from the instigators of the debate. ‘Expert Witnesses’ take part in each discussion. These are people with specialist knowledge of the topic. They help to provide the background information and bring their expertise into the heart of the debate through their comments. They are asked to write two or three opening questions, which help to define the debate and set up threads. The questions also inform people who neglect to read background information. Expert Witnesses also have active moderation roles and attempt to draw out participants’ reasoning.

4. Pilot use of HYV discussion forum in schools, June 2004

4.1. Methodology

In order to introduce more people to the online policy-debating forum and investigate its use within schools, a pilot research project was undertaken, in 2004. This involved using the forum within Modern Studies lessons in 2 Highland schools. Modern Studies involves studying political and social structures and issues. The project involved structured use of a forum debate titled “Should the voting age for The Scottish Parliament be lowered to 16?”. In this case the subject was chosen to fit with topics covered in Modern Studies, not for wider influence. Background information was provided by HeadsUp [8], who host UK-wide forums for young people. The Electoral Commission Scotland provided the Expert Witness. The students who took part were mostly 13 to 15 years old. Lesson plans were created which encouraged students to read the background information provided by asking them questions about it. They were then asked to use the forum and fill in a questionnaire about their experience of it. The aim was to assess whether the forum was easy and enjoyable to use, whether it had helped with the students’ Modern Studies and whether they felt that they were doing something useful. The sessions were observed by the author. Evaluation was based on observation, the completed questionnaires and the comments contributed to the forum.

4.2. Results

The sample group was small (32) and 31 students completed the questionnaire. Their answers indicate that they enjoyed using the forum, learned new things and felt that they were doing

something useful. 94% felt that making a comment was 'really easy' or 'easy'. 6% thought it was 'ok'. No one chose 'not easy' or 'difficult'. Asked whether they felt they were doing something useful by making a comment, 78% chose 'yes' or 'a bit', 19% chose 'not really' and only 3% chose 'no – waste of time'. Students were also asked about the deliberative elements of the forum. Asked how interesting was it to read the other comments and replies, 90% chose 'interesting' or 'very interesting' and 10% 'ok'. No one chose 'unpleasant' or 'boring'. Did reading the other comments made them change their opinion? 6% chose 'yes', 16% 'a little bit' and 10% went for 'No, it made me more sure'. The comments⁴ themselves are an interesting illustration of the students' interaction with the forum and each other. For example, one person backed up his point with information provided as background: *'Even if the voting age was dropped to 16 the UK wouldn't be the country with the youngest voting age (Iran's voting age is 15!)*'. Students also canvassed and interacted with each other's opinions: *"Now since I have read most of the comments in the forum I have mixed thoughts on if the age should be lowered to 16. When you're 16 you don't really care what goes on in the world of politics because u think it doesn't effect you and you can't be bothered watching 30 to 50 year old debating over things that aren't even close to you. I think now the age should maybe stay at 18 I don't really know though. What do u think"*

These results indicate that this students responded positively to the forum. Some students returned in their own time and students from other schools joined in of their own accord. The comments show considered and informed debate. However, the format of the lesson may have contributed to this, by guiding students through the information provided. Students were also asked whether they would like to take part in an online debate again and whether they would prefer to do this alone or in a group. Most (68%) wanted to do this again (29%: 'maybe') and most preferred a group context (58%). 39% didn't mind and only 3% chose 'on my own'.

5. Use of HYV discussion forum in schools, February 2006

5.1. Methodology

A discussion was instigated by a local health board project, with the aim of evaluating a smoking cessation scheme (STYNX) which had been running in some local schools. The discussion has the possibility of real influence on the future of STYNX and similar projects. Information was provided online in the form of an introduction, outlining the STYNX scheme and explaining why the discussion was being held, plus background information, which expanded on the introduction. Two Expert Witnesses took part, one from the project and one from the health board. They provided background information and introductory questions. In addition, the author provided some active moderation to encourage contributors to stay on topic. The issue of smoking was current in the news while the forum was live. It is banned in enclosed public places in Scotland from March 2006. The Westminster parliament voted, during this period, for a similar ban in England and Wales from 2007. Schools were invited to use the forum in Personal and Social Education lessons. Sessions consisted of an offline introduction to the subject and purposes of the debate, followed by use of the forum online. 118 students took part, mostly from 2 schools (33 in the 2004 study). Most students were 12 to 13 years old. An online evaluation questionnaire was completed by 36 students in one of the schools involved. The questions were designed, where applicable, to match those used in

⁴ http://itc2.napier.ac.uk/hyv_02-05/YourVoiceSection/YourVoicePages/ArchiveComments.asp?debate=12
Comments included here have had some spellings corrected to improve readability.

2004. Evaluation was based the completed questionnaires, comments contributed to the forum and feedback from teaching staff present during use. The comments are publicly available⁵.

5.2. Results

Feedback from teachers and completed questionnaires indicate that most students found the forum easy to use. Others needed a little instruction at first. Teaching staff suggested that some background information could be provided in a non-text format like video. Over 580 comments were made - many more than in any previous debate (148 in the 2004 debate). The comments are shorter and, on the whole, less considered than those in the 2004 forum. Many of the comments are social and 9% were removed for contravening the forum’s conditions of use⁶ (compared to 0.6% in 2004). Students seem to have had more difficulty engaging with the exact topic of the debate – evaluating smoking-cessation schemes – and tended to make comments more generally about smoking. One reason for this may be a lack of engagement with the information provided, compared to the more directed use in 2004. Another may be a combination of the complexity of the subject and the age range of the students. Pre-teens may have little understanding of addiction or the difficulty of designing effective support measures for rehabilitation: e.g. *“it’s their fault if they get themselves into a mess”* (comment in forum).

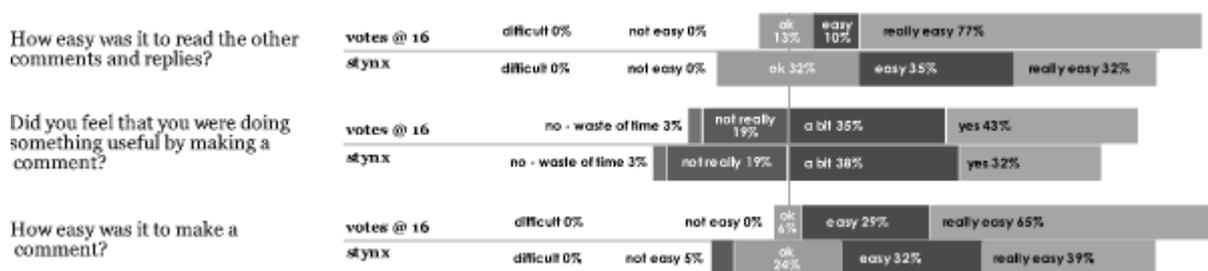


Figure 1: Comparison of questionnaire results

Questionnaire results are similar to 2004, though answers are consistently a little less positive. For example 4 students (12%) felt that reading the other comments was boring or even unpleasant, compared to 0 in 2004. This reflects our analysis above. Notably, most felt the forum was easy to use and that they were doing something useful. 71% felt that making a comment was ‘really easy’ or ‘easy’ and 24% thought it was ‘ok’. 5% chose ‘not easy’, but 0% ‘difficult’. Asked whether they felt they were doing something useful by making a comment, 70% chose ‘yes’ or ‘a bit’, 27% chose ‘not really’ and only 3% chose ‘no – waste of time’. Students were also asked about the deliberative elements of the forum. Asked how interesting was it to read the other comments and replies, 46% chose ‘interesting’ or ‘very interesting’; 42% ‘ok’. But 6% chose ‘unpleasant’ and 6% ‘boring’. Did reading the other comments made them change their opinion? 6% chose ‘yes’, 23% ‘a little bit’ and 20% went for ‘No, it made me more sure’. Answers to open questions mostly returned to the subject of smoking or gave positive feedback: *“i think it was good that everyone got to have their say and that it was all taken into account i think this is a really good website for a debate!!!”*, *“i thought it was interesting to see what people had to say about it all”* (questionnaire answers).

⁵ <http://www.highlandyouthvoice.org/YourVoice/readComments.asp?debate=23>

⁶ <http://www.highlandyouthvoice.org/YourVoice/conditions.asp>

6. Reasons for increased interaction

The 2 debates described above garnered a much higher level of interaction than others hosted in the forum. There were many more contributions and students engaged with both the topic and each other. Evaluation from students (via questionnaires) and observation, indicates that most found the forum easy and intuitive to use and enjoyed the experience. We surmise that ease of use stems from the ongoing involvement of young people in the forum's development. We propose that the main reason for the popularity of these 2 debates was their organised use in lesson time. This is backed up by our research into appropriate tools and techniques to engage young people in the 'dialogue on radioactive waste management'. Interviews and a literature review informed the research which included three focus groups of young people (14 to 21) from across Scotland. The focus groups took the form of scenario-based workshops assessing various tools designed to enable e-participation. One scenario described young people motivating themselves to access the tools in their own time; the other described organised use in a youth group setting. Full details of this project are available in the report [6]. Over all, participants favoured use of the tools within groups, recognising that they were unlikely to motivate themselves to participate online in their own time.

Other possible reasons for the success of these 2 debates are the relevance of the topics to young people and the possibility of real influence. Subjects which public bodies wish to consult young people on are often not of immediate interest to young people. Conversely, topics of interest to young people may be those which neither the youth parliament, nor its supporters, have much influence over. As Coleman puts it in 'Remixing Citizenship': "*Our starting hypothesis is that much of what is offered to young people in the name of active citizenship lacks appeal because it seems to be remote from their everyday experience and disconnected from the levers of power.*" [9]. Our research into engagement tools highlighted the importance of information about a topic's relevance to young people and the salience of outcomes. For example, focus group participants emphasised that specialists and decision-makers should be directly involved, such that young people could interact with them online. Context also seems to have an impact on quality: contributions to the 2004 debate, about lowering the age of electoral majority, were generally closer to the topic and more carefully argued than those to the 2006 debate, evaluating the smoking cessation scheme. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The lesson format in 2004 requested students read background information and answer questions about it. There was no such organised impetus to read information in 2006, although teachers started initial sessions with an oral introduction to the topic. Students involved in 2004 were mostly a couple of years older than those involved in 2006: a comparison of contributions from different year groups in 2006 indicates that better argued comments are contributed by older students, though this is obviously subjective. A third possible reason is the nature of the topics themselves, as outlined above.

7. Discussion

In our experience, young people are more likely to participate online in an organised setting, such as lesson time. Organised use may also involve directed exploration of the topic, both online and offline, before contributions are made in the forum. Here we need to ask: *What is gained over a class-based offline discussion?*

One advantage is that participants are less confined by time and space, facilitating interaction with experts and decision-makers, as well as other young people: Expert Witnesses and decision-makers can join in when ever and where ever they are and students from other

schools can engage with each other in the forum. This aspect of online discussions has proved particularly useful for the Hansard Society's HeadsUp forum. One of their goals is to investigate how ICT might be used as a platform for dialogue between young people and elected representatives [10]. Over 10 Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament took part in the HeadsUp forum *European Union* (February/March, 2006). This involvement creates a 2-way conversation between young people and decision-makers. The 'UK Children Go Online' reports indicate young people's pessimism about their political influence: *"it is unclear what young people stand to gain from the opportunity to 'have their say' online. They wonder who is listening, what happens to their votes and what will follow from their engagement. Young people certainly feel pessimistic about this, again with exceptions."* [1, p17]. Coleman suggests *"A key message for government is that engaging young people in online debates and consultations is counter-productive unless there is a serious and authentic commitment to listen and learn – in sort to engage with them."* [9, p13]. Bristol City Council's research into young people and e-democracy suggests that this pessimism partly derives from the idea that they will not be taken seriously by decision-makers because of their age [11]. The forum may give young people extra confidence because their age is not obvious, but *"nothing will encourage young people to take an interest in speaking up about their issues if they do not believe action will be taken as a result"* [11, p5].

Another advantage of this use of e-democracy tools, may be opportunities for young people to hone both citizenship skills, such as deliberation and the specific class of these skills used online: skills increasingly recognised as essential for active citizenship in the 'Information Age' [12]. Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson suggest use of active citizenship websites to gain skills, recognising schools' ability to encourage sustained interaction over time [13]. Livingstone et al [1] suggest specific advantages in this for young people: *"Link online participation into curriculum activities in school... (whose key advantage is that of providing skills and support on a more equal basis than exists between young people in the home)"*[p18]. This is also one of the conclusions of "Democracy, what does that mean?" [11]: *"The key partner in this area of e-democracy seems to be the school."* [p41] Schools can support young people as they experience participation via e-democracy and this can be a valuable and enjoyable way to fulfil requirements of the citizenship curriculum. A third advantage of lesson-time use is the inclusion of offline activity: forum use may be preceded by offline discussions of the subject [11]. Appropriate provision of information is frequently cited as an enabler of participation [14], but students are often reluctant to read introductory text or background information. In evaluations some young people feel that e-democracy tools can be too text-based. Media, such as video, could be used at this stage [6].

However, there are also down-sides to using e-democracy tools in schools. In this case, the youth parliament has sought to maintain some independence from schools, in order to encourage involvement of young people not attending school. Too close an alignment of young people's participation and education could limit its range and influence. Also, participatory mechanisms within schools vary widely and students' experience may be negative: *"It is worth noting that it appears that this cynicism is partly fuelled by some of their experiences within school, as some young people feel that no-one in school, including teachers and heads of year, takes account of their views/concerns"* [11, p27].

8. Conclusions and Future Work

Organising structured sessions, to use the online policy debating forum in lesson time, encourages students to interact with each other on the debate topic. Because this interaction is

online, it is easier for experts and decision-makers to join in. Their presence can indicate that young people are being listened to and their input can have real consequences. Use of the forum may help students explore issues and deepen their knowledge. However, it is likely that students will become cynical if there is inadequate feedback about outcomes from their input. Evaluation indicates that using the forum in lessons is enjoyable and some students return in their own time. It may also increase skills associated with citizenship. An evaluation which indicates more specifically the extent to which citizenship skills are gained in these sessions would be a useful addition to our research program. To this end, teaching staff should be informed about debates and events supported by the youth parliament's e-democracy tools and evaluation should be pursued. However, the youth parliament should be aware that their independence from schools may be increasingly compromised.

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