

The New Social Imaginary vs. the Education Activist:  
Social Media as a Conduit for Protest and Resistance

By  
Elizabeth Lynch

A Dissertation  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
In  
Literacy Studies  
At  
Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York  
2016

Approved as to the style and content by:



---

Debra Goodman, Ph.D.  
Chair of Dissertation Committee

Bess Altwerger, Ed.D.  
Theresa McGinnis, Ed.D.  
Alan D. Flurkey, Ph.D.  
Sharon R. Phillips, Ph.D.

ProQuest Number: 10256594

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10256594

Published by ProQuest LLC (2017). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

### Abstract

Social media has created a new generation of activism. Taking the lead from political activists who have been using social media as a means of protest and resistance across the globe, education activists increasingly rely on new literacy practices such as blogs, memes, Twitter, YouTube videos, and Facebook groups as a means to organize and mobilize. Just as Facebook and Twitter were instrumental in the Arab Spring Protests and Occupy Wall Street Movements in 2011, education activists now utilize social media tools and platforms to protest and resist policies driven by corporate led education reform. Focusing on social media based education activism in the United States, this study sought to determine how three digitally enabled education activist groups function as communities of practice and to consider their strengths and pitfalls. Within these groups, social media has served to function as a space for educating members, for sharing narratives, and for organizing for offline actions of protest and resistance. At the same time, these groups can be prone to disorders that can impact their effectiveness, such as self-interest, lack of shared identity, and an expectation of uniform thinking by members of a group, sometimes leading to internal strife.

Analyzing multimodal discourse in these online groups through screenshots of Facebook conversation threads provides a window into how such tools as memes and memetic videos are used as framing devices and as a means of political participation. This study suggests implications for the utilization of social media for education activists and researchers, including an understanding of how social media tools are used to frame positions and the need for awareness of potential pitfalls.

*Keywords:* social media, new literacy practices, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, memes

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to my beautiful, smart, and loving grandchildren: Aaron, Jillian, Mia and Kara. When the struggle seems too much, when my energy is waning, when my mind goes to the difficult place where I wonder if we can win this fight to preserve public education, I remember that I do this for you, for your education and for the wonderful future I imagine for all four of you. I am blessed to be your grandma, and I love you all more than words can describe.



### Acknowledgments

I have long been a collector of quotes, and it is fitting to share this quote that came to my attention on social media. “We all need people in our lives who raise our standards, remind us of our essential purpose, and challenge us to become the best version of ourselves.”

At this time I would like to acknowledge and thank some of the people who have held me to high standards, reminded me of my essential purpose in life, and challenged me to be the best version of myself.

Dr. Debra Goodman, my advisor throughout my Hofstra experience and my dissertation chair, continuously challenged me to produce my best work, posing thought provoking questions and guidance throughout my dissertation process. I am incredibly thankful for her willingness to mentor me as a researcher, for her generous sharing of her expertise, and for her friendship.

I can't say enough about Dr. Bess Altwerger's role in my study. Since we first met in 2011 she has inspired me, informed me, and encouraged me as an educator, a researcher, and as an activist.

The insights and suggestions Dr. Theresa McGinnis provided when I proposed this research were instrumental in shaping my thinking and assisting me in locating background information for my study.

Dr. Alan Flurkey taught me how to write a literature review and how to read research critically. He provided me with resources that were valuable in my study when I first considered this area of research early in my doctoral studies.

Dr. Sharon Phillips has consistently offered encouragement and I appreciate her interest and willingness to be a part of this process. I am grateful to all of my committee members for sharing their expansive knowledge and for participating in this journey.

I also want to thank Dr. Denny Taylor, Dr. Jeanne Henry, Dr. Andrea Garcia, and Dr. Joan Zaleski, who all played a role in my learning.

To the members of my cohort, especially Corydon Doyle, Virginia Gibbons, Jaimie Kanter and Ellen Semel: I will always be thankful for your friendship and will remember our conversations before class in Hagedorn and the numerous emails we shared.

Serena Cavolo, from that first long day we spent working on our shared research project, I knew we would be forever friends. Lissette Demm, our long conversations on our rides home from class were a highlight of each week as that time together created a lasting friendship. I will be forever grateful to both of you for your support when I wasn't sure I was going to finish this journey after my car accident.

To my long time friend, Dorothea Carney, thank you for believing in me and reminding me that I could do this. To my activist sisters, Gail Richmond, Rosemarie Jensen and Peggy Robertson, our frequent conversations, your friendship and your encouragement helped me more than you will ever know. I am blessed to have found such friendship in my life.

There are many activist friends I have met along the way who have informed me, inspired me and become true friends as we have shared our struggles and stories. Although there are far too many of you to mention by name, know that I am grateful for your presence and appreciate each of you for the gift of your presence in my life, whether virtual or in person.

Most importantly, I want to thank my son, William Lynch, and my daughter and son-in-law, Jennifer and Jim Petti. Your love, support, encouragement, and understanding when I was constantly busy writing are the reason I was able to see this work through to completion. Most of all, thank you for providing the inspiration for my activism and research: my four beautiful grandchildren, to whom I have dedicated this project.

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE Introduction	
Background.....	1
Why Study Activism through Social Media? .....	6
Overview of Study .....	9
Research Questions.....	10
Theoretical Framework.....	11
Summary.....	12
CHAPTER TWO Research Methodology: The Research Process	
Positioning Myself as an Activist and a Researcher.....	14
Expanding Research Methodologies for Studying Online Spaces .....	15
Collection of Data.....	18
Memes.....	21
Interviews.....	21
Participant Observations .....	23
Analysis of Data.....	24
Study Validity.....	27
Ethical Considerations in Studying Online Spaces.....	28
CHAPTER THREE Corporate Education Reform, a Historical Perspective	
From NCLB to RTTT to ESSA as Fulfillment of the Neoliberal Agenda .....	30
The Failed Promise of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).....	34
Race to the Top: The Standardization of Children .....	37

The Trojan Horse: The Common Core State Standards .....	37
High Stakes Testing and Teacher Evaluations.....	41
We Have Been VAM-boozled.....	43
Shared Attribution “Fails” a Teacher of the Year.....	45
Annual Professional Performance Review in New York .....	46
A Victory for One Teacher: The Lederman Case.....	48
Pathologizing the Language and Culture of Poor Children .....	51
The Negation of Human Agency .....	53
The Destruction of Teacher Autonomy .....	53
Privatization, Choice, and Disaster Capitalism.....	55
The Erosion of Student Privacy: Data for Sale.....	60
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Competency Based Education .....	63
The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) .....	65
Summary.....	66
<b>CHAPTER FOUR A Historical Overview of Teacher Activism in Offline Spaces and Political Activism in Online Spaces</b>	
Teachers as Activists: Voices of “The Others” and Praxis.....	68
Early Voices Speaking Out.....	68
Teachers as Activists in the New Social Imaginary.....	71
Early Acts of Resistance: Working in the Cracks & Teaching Against the Grain	71
Transformative, Democratic Education: Teaching as a Political Act.....	72
Social Justice Teacher Activism and Unions as Activist Communities .....	74
Teachers as Political Beings in Action: Organizing for Change .....	76
@ IS for Activism: The Emerging Role of Social Media.....	77

Social Media and the New Generation of Activism .....	77
Wisconsin and Public Unions in 2011 .....	79
Digitally Enabled Activism: Storytelling in Social Movements.....	79
Summary.....	81
CHAPTER FIVE Online Social Networks: Digital Activist Groups as Communities of Practice	
What Are Communities of Practice and How Do They Function? .....	83
Discourse, Power and Identity in Communities of Practice .....	88
Leadership, Producers and Consumers in Communities of Practice .....	90
Viewing Three Education Activist Groups Through a Research Lens.....	91
Facebook as a Social Media Platform for Education Activist Groups .....	93
Facebook Pages.....	94
Facebook Groups .....	94
Privacy Options in Facebook Groups .....	94
Background, History and Structure of Three Education Activist Groups .....	96
Save Our Schools.....	96
United Opt Out National.....	98
Lace To The Top.....	102
Summary.....	106
Community of Practice Indicators and Online Education Activist Groups.....	106
Privacy and Ethical Considerations in Sharing Data from Online Discussions ..	112
Online Education Activist Groups as Communities of Practice.....	113
Sustained Mutual Relationships.....	113
Shared Ways of Engaging in Doing Things Together .....	115

Rapid Flow of Information and Propagation of Innovation.....	116
Absence of Introductory Preambles.....	118
Knowing What Others Know and What They Can Do.....	119
The Use of Specific Tools, Representations, and Artifact.....	120
Use of Jargon and Shortcuts to Communication.....	121
Certain Styles Displaying Membership .....	122
Shared Discourse Reflecting a Certain Perspective on the World.....	122
Discussion.....	124
Mediation of Discourse, Censorship and Hierarchal Relationships in Online CoPs.....	124
Discourse, Censorship and Power Relationships.....	125
Moderating Discussions and Censorship: Save Our Schools .....	125
Moderating Discussions and Censorship in United Opt Out National .....	126
UOO Discussion Thread 1: Administrator Clarifies Group’s Mission....	127
UOO Discussion Thread 2: Accusation of Censorship.....	130
UOO Discussion Thread 4: Dyett Hunger Strike .....	132
Discussion.....	135
Moderating Discussions and Censorship in Lace To The Top.....	136
LTTT Discussion Thread 1: LTTT Does Not Support Opt Out .....	137
LTTT Discussion Thread 3: Connected Constellations.....	142
Discussion.....	146
Summary: Power, Identity and the Moderation of Discourse.....	147
Leadership and Power.....	148
Leadership and Hierarchy in Social Media Practices: Some of the Pitfalls .....	150

CoP Disorders in Online Activist Groups Through a Research Lens.....	152
Domain Disorders in Online Education Activist CoPs.....	154
Imperialism .....	154
Narcissism.....	157
Factionalism.....	157
Marginality.....	158
Community Disorders in Online Education Activist CoPs .....	160
Egalitarianism .....	161
Dependence.....	162
Stratification.....	163
Disconnectedness.....	165
Localism.....	165
Practice Disorders in Online Education Activist CoPs.....	166
Amnesia .....	166
Dogmatism.....	167
Mediocrity.....	168
Conclusion .....	169
Discourse, Identity and Power .....	169
Pitfalls and Disorders in Online Communities of Practice .....	172
 CHAPTER SIX Memes, Blogs, Tweets and Taking It to the Streets: How the Participatory Culture of Digital Education Activism Has Utilized On-line Literacies and Multimodalities	
The Internet Meme as Cultural Production and Transmission in Digital Activist Groups.....	175
Background: Defining Memes & Their Place in Political Participation.....	175

Memes as a New Literacy Practice .....	177
Memes as Political Participation.....	179
The Creation of Internet Memes .....	182
Memes and Framing .....	182
Memes as Metaphors .....	184
Internet Memes and Online Education Activist Groups Through a Research Lens .....	185
Prompt Questions Applied to Memes in Online Education Activist Groups .....	185
The Memes: A Sampling of Memetic Photos.....	188
What Are The Patterns and Themes Seen In Online Memetic Participation? .....	207
Videos, Blogs and Twitter As Online Tools for Education Activism .....	211
The Use of New Literacy Practices for Political Participation .....	211
Memetic Videos .....	211
Blogs and Twitter.....	213
New Literacy Practices In Digitally Enabled Education Activism.....	214
From Voice to Action: How Has Social Media-Enabled Education Activism Translated To Successful Offline Actions and Results?.....	215
Kenneth Cole and the NYC Billboard .....	215
When It Is Not Just About a Desk .....	219
An Social Media-Enabled Rallying Cry: “Opt Out” .....	222
Taking It To The Streets: Online Organizing for Offline Gathering .....	224
Marching on the Capital for the Right to Collective Bargaining – Wisconsin, 2011 .....	224
2011 Save Our Schools Rally and March .....	225
Students Not Scores Rally .....	225



“Our Schools - Our Community - Our Voice” .....	225
Conclusion .....	226
CHAPTER SEVEN Education Activism in a Digitally Enabled World: Where We Are and Where We Are Headed	
The Roots of the Journey .....	228
The Context In Which Education Activist Groups Were Established .....	229
Teacher Activism in Offline Spaces: Connecting to the Past .....	230
How Do Online Education Activist Groups Function As Communities of Practice? .....	230
Harmonious Relationships in Communities of Practice .....	231
Discourse, Identity and Power in One Online CoP Conversation .....	233
The Discourse .....	233
Power and Identity .....	235
Discourse, Identity and Power: What Was Visible In The Communities? .....	236
Moderation and Power in Online Education Activist Groups .....	239
Conflictual Relationships in Communities of Practice .....	241
Memes, Blogs and Tweets: We’ve Taken It To The Streets .....	243
Memes, Framing, and Metaphor .....	244
Memes Requiring Context and Prior Knowledge .....	245
Memes Providing or Building Knowledge .....	246
Blogs and Tweets .....	248
Taking It To The Streets .....	249
Where Do We Go From Here? .....	249
Limitations .....	251
An Afterthought .....	252

References.....	253
Appendix A: Interview Questions .....	277
Appendix B : Key to Facebook Discussion Threads .....	279
Appendix C: Community of Practice Indicators Table.....	280
Appendix D: Community of Practice Disorder Tables.....	281
Appendix E: Sample of Meme Templates .....	283
Appendix F: Memes Sorted by Topic.....	284

## Chapter One Introduction

*Discussion of the political impact of social media has focused on the power of mass protests to topple governments. In fact, social media's real potential lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere- which will produce change over years and decades, not weeks or months. (Shirky, 2011, p. 17)*

### Background

On August 17, 2013, approximately 2,000 individuals gathered under the sweltering summer sun to raise their voices in collective protest following the release of New York State test scores which perfectly matched the previously predicted failure rate of 70% (Slentz, field memo, March 2013). Parents, children, teachers, school administrators and a handful of elected officials met at Comsewogue Senior High School in Port Jefferson Station, New York. Groups of teachers wearing matching union issued t-shirts gathered in the parking lot, preparing to enter the rally together in a show of solidarity. Parents wheeled young children in strollers, while others walked alongside, many carrying signs bearing messages such as "Pearson, I AM College Material" and "Say NO to Pearson, Say YES to education!" Those trying to avoid the scorching heat gathered under the shade of the trees, while others took their places in the stands on the football field. An announcer cajoled the crowd, coaxing those on the sidelines to brave the sun and join the group so that the media would not take photos of half empty stands and report a poorly attended rally. For two hours, the crowd listened, waved signs, shouted along with the speakers, and drew strength from the resolve of other attendees, led by the words of Comsewogue School District Superintendent, Dr. Joseph Rella, who roused the crowd with the rallying cry, "Let August 17, 2013 be the day that we found our collective voice!"

The Comsewogue rally included expressions of anger at these high-stakes tests and at the NYS Education Commissioner John King, who supported policies that created these test results.

The rally represented a collective promise to continue to fight the consequences of education reform initiatives in our state as the crowd loudly verbalized an agreement with a resolution read by Dr. Rella calling for an end to high-stakes testing in the state. Events in New York have been framed within the backdrop of the nationwide impact of corporate education reform on public education.

In 2013 New York was the second state to administer high stakes tests based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), following only Kentucky. New York parents and teachers were outraged that these tests resulted in only 30% of students statewide in grades 3-8 demonstrating proficiency on the Mathematics and English Language Arts Assessments, using passing marks (cut scores) that were determined after the tests were administered and scored. Test data, such as raw score reports or itemized reports typically shared with teachers, were not released to the public so parents could view them. Teachers had no access to the tests after they were administered, nor did they receive specific information about their students' achievement in order to inform instruction. In fact, educators were under orders to not discuss test items with each other, with students or with parents, under the threat of termination. The Teachers' Directions for the assessments prohibited review, discussion or sharing of any of the contents of the test booklets (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/sam/ei/td-35ela14.pdf>). Teachers scoring the tests were asked to sign Confidentiality Agreements stating that they would not discuss the tests. As a part of the New York State teacher evaluation system, test scores were to be used to evaluate teachers and administrators. One result of this increased focus on testing has been large blocks of instructional time throughout the school year devoted to test preparation.

In one of her blogs, education historian Diane Ravitch (2013) summarized the cause of the outrage over the test scores in NY, writing:

Why would you want most students to fail?

Commissioner King has repeatedly warned superintendents, principals, and everyone else that they should expect the proficiency rates to drop by 30-35-37% and they did.

This is a manufactured crisis. We know who should be held accountable. It is Commissioner John King and Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch. They wanted a high failure rate. They got what they wanted.

The Students, Not Scores rally was planned and advertised through social media and executed in only one week. The August, 2013 Comsewogue, New York rally was only one example of education activism organized through social media and attended by education activists, with the following serving as just a few additional examples of how social media was utilized as a means to organize and promote gatherings of education activists to protest corporate education reform policies.

In July, 2011 I joined thousands of participants who attended the Save Our Schools Rally and March in Washington, D.C. The event was certainly larger and more organized than the Comsewogue event that followed it two years later. Planned as a protest of corporate education reform, the SOS rally embodied the guiding principles of the Save Our Schools group:

- Equitable funding across all public schools and school systems
- An end to high stakes testing used for the purpose of student, teacher, and school evaluation
- Teacher, family, and community leadership in forming public education policies
- Curriculum responsive to and inclusive of local school communities
- Professional, qualified, and committed teachers in all public schools (<http://saveourschoolsmarch.org>)

The Save Our Schools Rally featured well known education activists such as Diane Ravitch, Jonathan Kozol and Deborah Meier, as well as an appearance by actor Matt Damon. In the months prior to the event a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/OnTheMarchTo>)

SaveOurSchools) and website (<http://saveourschoolsmarch.org/>) provided information, assisted attendees in securing discounts for hotels and travel, and raised needed funding for the event. Participants also received e-mails about the event and were kept abreast of details throughout the planning. In addition to the large coalition of educators, parents and teachers in attendance from across the country, a large presence of Wisconsin teachers reflected their discontent with recent legislation in their state that effectively eliminated collective bargaining for most union employees (Bauer, 2011). Their arrival was met by large cheers of support from the crowd. After the march attendees and non-participants were able to view YouTube videos of many of the speeches and of the march to the White House. Those same videos have been shared on Facebook and through individual Twitter accounts. It is notable that these videos are still being shared and discussed on social media almost six years after the 2011 Save Our Schools event.

In April, 2013, a few hundred education activists gathered on the grounds of the Department of Education in Washington D.C. for United Opt Out's "Occupy the DOE 2" event. Founded in August, 2011, United Opt Out describes itself as "The movement to end corporate education reform." Over the course of four days we listened to speakers, met fellow education activists from across the country and shared our experiences. A march to the White House during the weekend drew attention as motorists beeped their horns in support and onlookers applauded from the sidewalks.

The event drew attendees from across many states through the sharing of event information on United Opt Out's Facebook page and their website. United Opt Out fights the corporate reform agenda by assisting parents as they refuse to have their children participate in high stakes testing. I discuss United Opt Out in detail in chapter 5. Just as it did for the 2011

Save Our Schools March, social media served as the vehicle for organizing and fundraising for this United Opt Out event.

In June, 2013, it is estimated that 10,000 members of the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) attended a rally in Albany, New York to protest the impact of high-stakes testing on education in the state. The event was complete with props, music, and souvenirs for participants in the form of hats and buttons. Although local unions encouraged participation in this event and supported it by supplying transportation, many first became aware of the rally through an announcement on social media, using the NYSUT Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/NYSUTUnited>).

The August, 2013 event in Port Jefferson Station did not compare to these previous events in terms of numbers or presentation. Yet there was something very unique about this grassroots gathering, something that has become the conduit through which grassroots activism has spread and grown exponentially since that first large gathering of education activists in July, 2011. Reminding the crowd that this event had been organized and publicized in a span of only one week through social media, Dr. Joseph Rella stated, “Social media is the way we will get our message out,” reminding the rally participants, “The new *here* is anywhere that we gather *out there*” [on social media].

And we connect on social media, again and again, resulting in education activists gathering in offline spaces to learn, to plan, to organize and to protest failed policies that are harming children and threatening the very existence of public education. As I wrote this chapter, I had just returned from the United Opt Out National Conference in Philadelphia, where almost two hundred of those who have been interacting through social media spent a weekend together focused on advocacy and activism. The event was another that was planned, shared, and funded

through social media. Throughout the event participants shared pictures and quotes from the speakers via Facebook and Twitter. Those of us who gather *out there* engage in conversations in critical spaces that enable us to inform, plan, participate in, fund, and document acts of protest and resistance by joining forces with large numbers of others who share the goal of taking back our schools.

### **Why Study Activism Through Social Media?**

Since my attendance at the Save Our Schools Rally/March in July of 2011, I have positioned myself as an educator who takes an active role in pushing back against those seeking to hijack our public education system for their own financial gain. Approximately four years ago, I began documenting some of the actions of protest and resistance taking place through social media as a record of my own experiences as a participant observer. During that time I observed a substantial increase in the number of non-educator parents joining activist groups on social media and then forming their own groups, often based upon a specific goal, such as ending the use of the Common Core State Standards in their states. Coalitions between parents and teachers have been built through connections fostered on social media platforms. In a few instances political figures and education activists have joined forces through relationships built on social media sites.

During my growing involvement with the online activist community I have remained informed about policy shifts, actions of both political and union leaders, and plans to resist or protest detrimental policies through social media platforms. As a result, I realized the potential of an inquiry into the use of social media for education activism and the need to pursue this area of research. My participation in digital activist groups while I simultaneously researched the history of education activism informed my realization that social media is the fabric that is currently



linking acts of protest and resistance. Jeff Bryant's (2013) use of the metaphor *Education Spring* for acts of protest and resistance against corporate education reform provides a link to the use of social media as a conduit for action during the Arab Spring uprising in 2011, during which thousands took to the streets in protest actions coordinated through social media (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). A study of social media as a conduit to education activism is both timely and relevant in the current climate of corporate education reform.

As our schools, the teaching profession, and public education as an institution are increasingly under attack from corporate education reformers (Altwerger, 2005; Shannon, 2007); education advocacy and resistance to corporate reform are most effectively enacted when based upon a sound understanding of the foundation of underlying issues and the successes and challenges of those who have acted before us. As I explored social media and connected with like-minded education activists through various groups and platforms, I began to consider how the relatively recent phenomenon of social media had been used for other causes, such as the Arab Spring, and how that knowledge could be applied to studying the role of social media in education activism.

Research involving activism in the age of social media is a relatively new area, ripe for exploration, but one that has seen a growing interest as activists use the internet as a means to connect, share messages, and plan events. Previous research has primarily considered various aspects of the role of social media in activism, often called digital activism, as a response to political and social issues outside of education and has primarily addressed activism outside of the United States (Earl and Kimport, 2011; Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthofer & Moreno, 2013; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Karpf, 2012).

There is also a body of research addressing education activism or the role of teachers in resisting changes resulting from corporate education reform. Dooley, (2005) wrote about teachers finding creative means to resist scripted curriculum. Similarly, Schniedewind & Sapon-Shenin (2012) wrote about resistance by *teaching in the cracks*. The motivation of teacher activists to fulfill a vision of social justice was one focus of Picower (2012). Teachers are described by Fleischer (2000) as natural organizers and she encouraged them to reach out to parents and communities for support. However, the role of social media was not explored in these discussions. There is a relative void in research connecting social media specifically to education activism, especially in response to recent reform-driven changes in our American public education system.

Montano, Lopez-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco, & Stillman (2002) described how effective teacher activists rely on the support of a larger activist community. Previous research has been conducted regarding dialogue and storytelling in communities of practice in spaces other than online education activist communities, such as workplaces or educational settings. Pan & Leidner (2003) studied communities of practice using information technology in occupational communities. Brown and Duguid (1991) studied problem solving in the workplace and focused on storytelling as a means to share and preserve knowledge in communities of practice. Chiu, Hsu & Wang (2006) focused their research on knowledge exchange and social capital in virtual communities. These studies support the relatively unexplored territory of online communities of practice, and specifically the discourse within digital education activist groups. Crisco's (2009) discussion of what she terms "activist literacy" provides insights into how discourse within social media activist groups can be viewed as activist texts, and how these texts lead to action.

Another significant area for exploration is the use of multimodal literacy in digital education activist communities. Shifman (2014) has discussed the politics of memetic participation and internet memes as language, but not within the context of their use in education activist groups. Shifman (2014) expands the previous definition of memes as “small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation” (p. 2) with his own definition of memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*” (pp.7-8). Through the use of this definition, Shifman views memes as “*socially constructed public discourses*” (p.8).

I believe there is a pressing need to understand this phenomenon. We need to explore both the narratives constructed in these digital communities and the relationships and rhetoric that create shared understandings and lead to action in order to fully maximize the potential of social media for this purpose. Viewing literacy practices in digital education activist communities through the lens of previous research may serve to inform and improve communication in the critical online spaces where important conversations occur. Informed participation in digital activism can serve to strengthen the effectiveness of this medium as we engage in actions to preserve public education in our country and to return autonomy and control of our classrooms back to professional educators.

### **Overview of Study**

As I describe in detail in the next chapter, in an effort to understand how digitally enabled education activist groups function as communities of practice, I analyzed screenshots of Facebook discussion threads for patterns, using Wenger’s (1998) indicators that a community of practice had been formed as a means to see how these online groups function as learning

communities. Interview data from leaders of three education activist groups also informed my study, with Save Our Schools, United Opt Out and Lace To The Top serving as the focus communities for this study. In analyzing this data, I will show how these groups utilize new literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, Gee, 2012) to negotiate meaning, share learning, and create offline actions. Finally, I will show examples of how these digitally enabled groups used the tools of social media to gather offline and to effect change in specific situations.

### Research Questions

In order to address multiple issues in viewing on line education activist social spaces, I framed my inquiry within the following research questions:

- How do on line education activist groups function as communities of practice?
  - As described by Wenger (1998):
    - what indicators that a community of practice has been formed are relevant to these online education activist groups?
    - what disorders common to communities of practice are demonstrated in online education activist groups?
  - What roles do participants play in online education activist communities; specifically, are their hierarchal relationships and how do the relationships between activist leaders and participants and the mediation of discourse vary in various groups?
  - How do distinct means of negotiating rhetoric in these groups lead to more successful engagement and actual action vs. virtual participation?
- How has the participatory culture of digital education activism utilized on-line literacies and multimodalities to communicate shared meanings, for example, through the use of videos or through memes which include both text and visual images?
- How has social media contributed to the proliferation of education activism in response to neoliberal policies that are reframing teaching and learning in our public schools?
  - What specific impact has social media had in addressing, modifying or ending specific education policies through actions that are consistent with the goals of the activist group?

- How do the various digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs interrelate and support each other in online activist communities?
- What are some specific examples of how digital activism has influenced policies and politics related to education?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Teacher activism has a rich history that can serve to contextualize current day education activism conducted through online social networks (OSNs). For the purpose of this study, education activism is framed historically within the context of sociopolitical theory (Altwerger, 2005; Shannon, 2007). Previous instances of teacher activism have been studied without the context of digital activism, and digital activism has been studied without the specific context of education activism and resistance to corporate education reform. This study seeks to inform understandings of digital education activism as a reaction to the current education climate of corporate education reform. In addressing previous instances of teacher activism for educational change and the events that led to the current day movement through a historical lens, this investigation is grounded in sociopolitical, sociocultural and social movement theory.

A sociocultural theory of literacy within this study encompasses the New Literacy Studies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2012) Knobel and Lankshear describe New Literacy Studies (2007), writing:

From this perspective, literacy practices both shape and are shaped by particular social, cultural historical and material contexts (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995)...include print-based and digital forms of communication (Kress, 2003, Lemke, 1998); and are implicated in the distribution of cultural capital (Luke, 2000; Luke and Freebody, 1997). (p.50)

This study is situated within theoretical perspectives that view digital activist groups as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) or affinity groups (Gee, 2004) again drawing upon the New Literacy Studies (Barton &

Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2012) in describing how activist online communities of practice function, and the role of multimodalities in conveying the information shared within these groups. The discussion of internet memes takes into consideration framing theory (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Chong & Druckman, 2002; Goffman, 1974; Harlow, 2013, Lakoff, 2004) as a means to interpret meanings within the overall context of the goals of the current education activist movement.

### Summary

This study is situated within the historical context of corporate education reform I describe in chapter three. In chapter four I discuss teacher activism prior to the advent of social media, providing a historical context for teachers as social justice activists. The bridge between offline teacher activism and the use of social media for activism is the use of social media for political participation, which is also discussed in chapter four. Chapter five will explain my findings in analyzing digitally enabled education activist groups as learning communities, describing their strengths and the pitfalls that come from the formation of these communities. Finally, chapter six will show how the participatory culture of digital education activism utilizes on-line literacies and multimodalities to communicate shared meanings, and how this had led to success in organizing offline action and creating change.

Social media has become a connecting point for education activists to respond to profit-driven corporate reform based education policies. In viewing how activists use these social spaces, consideration must be given to previous studies and literature related to the topics of this current inquiry. These include studies of policies that have resulted in the surge in education activism; studies of previous education activism in offline spaces, as well as inquiries into the use of social media platforms for activism not inclusive of education; and studies related to how

these social spaces function as on line communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), using multimodalities as tools for disseminating information and provoking others to action.

In order to maintain cohesiveness between previous studies and my inquiry, the traditional Review of the Literature section has been replaced with discussion of studies and literature pertinent to each of the area examined in my research in the individual chapters to which they apply.

## Chapter Two

### Research Methodology: The Research Process

#### Positioning Myself as an Activist and a Researcher

Throughout this qualitative study, I positioned myself as a participant-observer and an action researcher, consistent with Glesne's (2006) description of the current form of action research as one where "the researcher works with others as agents of change" (p. 17). In combining "investigation, education and action" (Glesne, 2006, p. 16), I engaged in critical ethnography, focusing on issues of social justice and power. Glesne describes critical ethnographers as those who "see research as a political act because it not only relies on value systems, but challenges value systems" (Usher, 1996 as cited in Glesne, p.16). According to Creswell (2013) critical ethnographers "study issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony and victimization" (p. 94). These are dominant themes in examining both the education policies that have resulted in the growth of activism in online spaces and how members of these communities interact in these spaces. This inquiry specifically fits the description of community-based action research, as online communities of practice are explored in depth in this study. "Community-based action research is presented, therefore, as a reemerging tradition that links processes of inquiry to the lives of people as they come to grips with the problems and stresses that beset them in their day-to-day lives" (Stringer, 1999, p. xviii).

In studying activist literacy in students, Crisco (2009) takes the discussion further by challenging previous definitions of the term "community" as it applies to activists, explaining:



Used in relation to the term “activist” I argue that “community” is a metaphor for the variety of groups within a democratic society that represent particular values and ideas. Activists do not respond to individuals; they respond to groups of people who have similar ideas that are located within our social structures. Thus, arguing for activist literacy in the “community” – or taking action in the “community” – allows for a broader understanding of the variety of spaces where activism can take place ... (p. 41)

Within the context of Crisco’s (2009) definition of activist communities, my inquiry conforms to the description of community based-action research conducted through critical and virtual ethnography.

Greenhow (2011) describes virtual ethnographic research as requiring the negotiation of the boundaries between participant and observer. Leander and Kim (2003) challenge the role of the participant observer as a *lurker* – one who reads without posting on social media sites – as opposed to a full participant. I position myself in this study as a full participant observer, actively engaging in the digital activist sites that are the subjects of my research. While authenticity in this stance has been called into question by Leander and Kim, I engaged and made myself visible as a participant in these groups prior to the initiation of this inquiry. My identity within these communities is authentic as “negotiated and sustained by the situation rather than as a fixed identity” (Leander and McKim, 2003, p. 216).

### **Expanding Research Methodologies for Studying Online Spaces**

Immersing oneself through participant observation in a new social world ethnographically is a process. It can be awkward at times, and usually involves a steep learning curve about the inhabitants of that world and their everyday lives. Immersion, participant observation and ‘the everyday’ are three ideas that are bound up with how we study social worlds... social worlds are never sealed off from other social worlds, or indeed from the rest of humankind in our massively interconnected world. (Pink, et al. 2016, p. 102)

As described by Geertz (1973), ethnographers observe, document and analyze a culture, interpreting signs used within a culture to understand their cultural meaning. For the purpose of this study, I draw upon Creswell's (2013) definition of culture as consisting of behaviors, language, and artifacts that groups make and use. Creswell contends that researchers attribute culture to a group when studying patterns in its social world. G. Hofstede, G.J. Hofstede & Minkov (2010) describe the manifestations of a culture as its symbols, heroes, rituals and values, as with practices as the visible part of all cultures. These same principles also apply to organizational cultures, the *communities of practice* previously described.

Recent discussions surrounding digital ethnography are indicative of the movement from ethnography conducted in offline spaces to that which documents online spaces. Pink et al. (2016) contend that existing ethnographic frameworks may not serve the social world viewed by digital ethnographers. And while social media has become ubiquitous and the field is ripe for exploration, much discussion of engagement with media tends to focus more on the use of media and how it changes the world, as opposed to how individuals engage and interact within online social spaces. Existing frameworks developed in conventional studies prior to the advent of digital media would not function autonomously to serve the purpose of my study as explained above. For this reason, I propose a blending of critical ethnography and internet ethnography, drawing upon insights from Pink et al.'s description of digital ethnography.

My study falls within the description of critical ethnography in a number of ways including: questioning and investigating lived experiences; focusing upon language that challenges social constructions which regulate who can speak and who must listen; and incorporating dialogue and critical reflection as a means towards "revealing unexamined assumptions and the ways in which people may be accepting explanations of the dominant

cultural group that serve to oppress those without power” (p. 16). Consistent with the description of critical ethnography is the involvement of participants as “co-researchers of sorts who combine investigation, education and action” (Maguire, as cited in Glesne, p. 16).

This study of digital activist groups meets both definitions of social constructivist and transformative views as described by Creswell (2014). The social constructivist perspective leads researchers towards inquiries into the processes of interactions among individuals in an effort to seek understanding of the world in which they live. The transformative view “holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs” (Creswell, 2014, p. 9) and to provide a voice for reform and change.

Leander and McKim (2003) encourage reworking ethnographic practices to reflect the fact that online social spaces are not static backgrounds in which human activity is enacted, but rather, “a rich process that draws upon multiple material and discursive resources, is imbued with relations of power, and is malleable through individual agency and imagination” (p. 212). Adapting constructs from spatial theory, ethnography and literacy studies, they propose the practice of *virtual* or *connective* (Hine, 2000 as cited in Leander & McKim, 2003) ethnography, viewing internet spaces as artifacts. It should be noted that Leander & McKim’s work preceded the 2004 creation of Facebook and the 2006 creation of Twitter, two of the platforms in which much of my inquiry is situated. As a result, their discussion of digital ethnography focused on the virtual world of the internet but was not inclusive of the platforms in which much of current digital activism occurs.

Pink et al. (2016) describe digital ethnography as an open ended and flexible design which crosses academic disciplines. It is shaped by the research questions it asks and by the way

participants in the research engage as they make and share meaning with each other in a collaborative process. As such, “digital ethnography is not a research ‘method’ that is bounded. Nor is it a unit of activity or a technique with a beginning or end. Rather, it is processual” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 11).

It is my belief that a variation of traditional ethnography is co-constructed through this current study of practices within digital activist groups, in a meshing of internet or digital ethnography and critical ethnography.

### **Collection of Data**

As a participant in multiple digitally enabled education activist groups since 2011, I noted distinctions between dynamics of various groups. Participating primarily through groups set up on Facebook, I began documenting some of the conversations I was viewing, as well as those in which I was a participant. I began collecting screenshots of Facebook conversations in 2012, labeling them with the name of the group and the date on which the discussion thread began. When I began this study I decided to focus on three of the groups in which I was a member: Save Our Schools, United Opt Out, and Lace To The Top. Those groups were chosen because, as a participant, I was aware that there were differences in how those groups were structured, and how they made use of various social media tools. This would allow for comparisons while also looking for commonalities. Interviews with a leader from each of the groups provided me with additional data and also enabled me to place the data I was viewing in a context of the group’s history.

Because I wanted to question how the use of social media tools such as memetic photos and memetic videos were utilized and how activist groups used various social media platforms,

such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogging sites, I began collecting samples of memes, downloading and archiving videos, and taking screenshots of Twitter exchanges. I collected screenshots of Facebook threads specifically for my study early in 2015, but decided to incorporate two Lace To The Top discussion threads I had saved from 2013 because of their relevance to my inquiry. One of those threads in particular invited close analysis because it provided documentation of the narrative shared by Lace To The Top cofounder Kevin Glynn in his interview and also demonstrated the intersection of online activist groups.

Data used for this study includes multiple sources, in order to span the broad spectrum of information available and provide the ability to address the questions of the study. Data was collected through:

- archived and newly retrieved samples of
  - relevant social media posts from Facebook groups, websites and blogs
  - Twitter activity (*tweets*)
  - memes consisting of the juxtaposition of print images and text & videos shared on social media
- interviews with prominent activist group leaders
- observation of online discussions as a participant and my own notes regarding the interactions
- on-line and print news or blogs documenting grassroots actions related to social media participation

My data includes documents in the form of screenshots of on line interactions, as well as blog posts, some of which were archived as I began documenting the use of social media for activism prior to formally beginning this inquiry. Newly obtained social media posts, memes and Twitter conversations were also collected throughout the study. Data that was considered for this study are those which provide a window into interactions within and between digital

education activist groups. Throughout the collection of data I sought to retrieve and to document examples of emerging patterns in digital activist groups that address my research questions. The focus on Facebook and Twitter enabled me to record and analyze the interactions between members communicating through these social media platforms, since a majority of on line activism is situated in these online spaces.

In addition to the previously mentioned archived data collected between 2013 and 2015, new data was collected early in 2016 to account for the rapid transformations in online spaces and how online interactions respond to offline events. This helped to ensure that the data remained relevant to timely analysis within the timeframes of their occurrence and within the sociopolitical context in which online interactions occurred.

As explained earlier, I began archiving screenshots of Facebook activist threads (on line conversations) in 2012 as a means of documenting my own participation for possible research and in an attempt to determine whether on line activism was resulting in true *action*, vs. the *interaction* I was witnessing in online education activist groups. I was also curious to see whether these online interactions were going beyond discussion and information sharing, resulting in changes in education policies, or whether they represented the phenomenon widely labeled as *slacktivism*. Since the purpose of *activism* is to create change, I wanted to see if these activism groups were having an impact, or were functioning more as discussion boards.

Initially I categorized these screenshots by the name of the group from which they were retrieved, which made the specific Facebook threads to be included in this study easily accessible. In determining which of the documents to include in this study, I considered both my research questions and the method I would use to code this data. Screenshots of threads which would provide the most information were selected for inclusion, resulting in the selection of

some of the lengthier threads, but also some shorter ones that demonstrated characteristics of interest for my study. I did have my research questions in mind when I selected the data, but I had not yet formulated the codes so the threads were not selected to be consistent with specific expectations of findings. My analysis included eight discussion threads from United Opt Out and five from Lace To The Top. As I explain in chapter five, the inability of anyone but specific group leaders to post new content on the Save Our Schools page and the low level of interaction on the page did not provide data for my analysis of discussion threads.

### **Memes**

Internet memes used for this study, both in print and video form, include both those previously archived and those newly encountered during my study. In order to provide a broad spectrum of print memes that could be analyzed for common themes and patterns a sample of 80 memes was collected, with the memes categorized by underlying theme or topic. The collected memes were obtained through both Facebook and Twitter posts, as well as those included in activists' blogs, if applicable. Videos were collected either from those embedded in Facebook and Twitter interactions, or directly through YouTube access. Where available, the use of date stamps, number of hits and/or comments posted on videos assisted in contextualizing the posts within pivotal events and the within the acts of protest or resistance surrounding them.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with three key figures in the education activism movement, focusing on the founders of some of the more prominent activist groups utilizing social media for this purpose. I selected interview subjects based upon my experience with the groups represented, drawing upon my knowledge that the groups have distinct styles of membership participation and distinct means of mediating discourse in their groups. The purpose of these

interviews was to gain more information about the background of these groups as well as to explore the perceptions of the specific leaders I interviewed about the use of social media in education activism. I chose to limit my interview to only three subjects in order to limit my focus to more in depth discussion and analysis of the represented groups. In addition to providing specific information about their structure, the interviews provided a way for me to check my perceptions, understandings and findings regarding the social history of these groups. Specific information about the interviews is discussed in chapter five.

My first interview was conducted with Peggy Robertson, a co-founder of United Opt Out National, which also maintains a Facebook page, a Facebook group, an active Twitter presence, and a website. United Opt Out's ability to translate online discussions to the physical action of a nationwide test refusal movement made Peggy Robertson a logical choice for inclusion in this study. The second interview was conducted with Kevin Glynn, one of the co-founders of the Facebook group Lace To The Top. This group began as one utilizing the symbol of green shoelaces to represent the rejection of high stakes testing, but evolved over time to embrace the message of test refusal. Lace To The Top also maintains an active Twitter presence and a blog. My participation in this group also began at its inception, and I interviewed Kevin Glynn to expand my understanding of the history of the group and its function as an online education activist group within the context of my research questions.

The final interview was with Bess Altwerger, a co-founder of the national Save Our Schools group, which has a Facebook presence, a website, and which uses other social media platforms to share information and coordinate actions, as I discuss in chapter five. I first met Bess Altwerger when she came to speak locally about the 2011 Save Our Schools March and I credit her with moving me from online activism to active participation. Having witnessed the



influence of Save Our Schools in both information sharing and in the proliferation of online education activist groups that arose after the 2011 SOS event, I knew Bess would have a great deal to contribute to my research.

The interviews were conducted through telephone conversations, with the same set of questions posed to each participant. Each interviewee had an opportunity to include additional comments at the end of the interview. The interview participants were aware of the purpose of this study and that their interviews were contributing to this research. The interview subjects had the option of having their information reported anonymously, but all three chose to have their names included in reporting this study. The interviews were fully transcribed, with off topic comments and unrelated discussions omitted for the purpose of continuity and adherence to the interview process.

### **Participant Observations**

Observations were conducted and documented during interactions in my role as participant-observer on social media sites used by education activists, as well as during my physical participation in actions, rallies and meetings. I have documented these interactions and actions through screenshots, my own notes, postings on my Facebook account, my Twitter account, my personal blog, and through photographs. I have not only studied social media for education activism, but have used that same social media to document some of my observations.

Chapter five includes a description of the various types of Facebook platforms and the roles of the administrators in those groups or pages. As a participant, I have worked ‘behind the scenes’ in some Facebook groups, serving as an administrator and sharing the private discussions and decision making about how discourse in those groups would be moderated. I

continue to be an administrator for two Facebook pages or groups and I actively engage in discussions in groups in which I am in a non-leadership role.

### **Analysis of Data**

All data was analyzed through the lens of previous research studies of online and offline activism, communities of practice, and multimodal literacies. Both interview data and online data were sorted and coded, with the data categorized in a manner that sought to reveal emerging patterns and to use precise categories that correspond to applicable conceptual frameworks.

The work of Wenger (1998) provided a framework for considering online education activist groups as communities of practice. Wenger listed specific indicators that a community of practice had been formed. For the purpose of this study, I selected nine of the fourteen Wenger described which are most applicable to online groups. The transcribed interviews and selected screenshots of Facebook threads were analyzed for the presence of the community of practice indicators and for the nature of each indicator observed.

As I began analyzing my data and continued to read to inform my understanding of how best to answer my research questions, I found myself refining some of my earlier thinking. Reviewing the conversations I had documented from the various social media sites, it became clear that there are multiple layers of power structures represented in these interactions. The groups themselves outwardly focus on issues of social or economic inequity, abuse of power, and political and social structures as they impact public education and children. As I began to view the discussion threads for the purpose of coding the community of practice indicators described by Wenger, I became aware that many of the same issues that were being addressed *by* these activist groups were present *within* them as well, played out through the interactions of the group

members. As an example, discussions within groups included issues of power struggles in schools, with top down decision making by administrators based on new state or federal mandates. At the same time, in some groups, the administrators - those who held the power in the group because of their ability to remove content of members - were exhibiting the same behaviors towards the membership.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) identified specific 'disorders' which can impact communities of practice, some of which are especially applicable to online education activist groups that are the subjects of this study. The authors described these disorders as Domain Disorders, Community Disorders, and Practice Disorders, with subcategories in each. From these categories I developed codes which were applied to both transcripts of the interviews and to the screenshots of threads from social media conversations in the Facebook groups included in this inquiry. The same Facebook conversation threads were used for the purpose of coding for indicators of communities of practice and for the identification of specific 'disorders' within those communities. The discussion threads and interactions are described in detail in chapter 5.

The interpretation of cultural signs discussed earlier and described by Geertz (1973) must be based on the "thick description" of those signs in order to see all the possible meanings. Thick description describes not only the reporting of an act (thin description), but the motives, meanings, contexts and circumstances of action. Data analysis for this study was conducted through thick description. This involved viewing threads and conversations enacted on social media platforms within the context of the events which precipitated them, or in which they were situated. My ongoing participation in these discussions on social media as well as my offline presence as an activist facilitated my ability to contextualize these interactions as they related to events that elicited the online responses.

In viewing Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) as a theoretical practice and not as a methodology, I analyzed the interactions within online education activist groups within the context and issues of power structures, social structures, ideologies, and resistance.

Fairclough contextualized Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within the current neoliberal political and economic climate, a widely acknowledged factor in the current corporate education reform movement. In his discussion, Fairclough describes Critical Discourse Analysis as:

a theoretical practice which produces theoretically based accounts of a range of other social practices with a focus on discourse, in a way that is informed by emancipatory struggles within those practices, and oriented to generating resources for those struggles whose uptake depends on the practical politics of those practices. (p.395)

He contends that critical analysis attempts to produce interpretations and explanations that both identify causes of social wrongs, and has the potential to mitigate or right them. For the purpose of my inquiry, this analysis will include social media conversations and interactions as well as discourse shared through memes.

Fairclough acknowledged CDA's application to the analysis of multimodal texts. My analysis of online memes included both print memes and videos. Online print memes related to education activism issues and spread through social media were categorized and coded, appearing in Appendix E. These memes were collected through their appearance in Facebook groups, through Twitter, or through inclusion in activists' blogs. It is notable that, consistent with the definition of memes, each of the selected memes appeared in multiple groups or on multiple platforms. Memes were analyzed using Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) prompt questions for discursively analyzing online memes. Borrowing from some of the terminology of Halliday's (1975) functions of language, Knobel and Lankshear focused on three distinct systems for analyzing online memes:

- Referential or Ideational System, where the focus is on the meaning of the meme
- Contextual or Interpersonal System where the focus is on social relations
- Ideological or Worldview System where the focus is on values, beliefs & worldviews

Although I focused primarily on print memes, I did also view some memetic videos for discussion as part of my data analysis. The discussion of these videos is more limited than the discussion of print memes, and includes some discussion of the number of views provided on YouTube for each video.

### Study Validity

Creswell (2014) describes multiple *validity strategies* in order to ensure *trustworthiness*, *authenticity* and *credibility* which I incorporated in this qualitative study (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). Glesne (2006, p. 37-38) also cites Creswell's verification procedures from a previous work. The procedures I utilized include:

- *Prolonged engagement and persistent observation*. I have been engaged in this research as a participant for approximately five years and have developed trust and learned the culture of the groups I studied.
- *Triangulation* – I used multiple data methods, multiple sources, and multiple theoretical perspectives.
- *Peer review and debriefing* – I utilized the benefit of external reflection and input on my research from my committee members.
- *Clarification of research bias* – Throughout this study I consistently reflected upon my own subjectivity and how my need to monitor it throughout the inquiry process.
- *Rich, thick description* – As mentioned previously, thick description not only involved the reporting of an act (thin description), but the motives, meanings, contexts and circumstances of action.

Situating my study in online spaces in which I am both familiar with many of the members and known to them is consistent with Glesne's (2006) description of *backyard*

research. While positioning myself as a participant observer who has been active in these groups over a period of years, I believe my familiarity with the culture of the groups, access to the groups and rapport with many of the groups' members outweighed any concerns of vision narrowed by familiarity. I began collecting data from online activist groups over four years ago, at a time when I was positioned primarily as an observer in these groups without any preformed assumptions. Collecting historical data over a prolonged period of time without preformed assumptions and the ability to challenge assumptions by objectively filtering newly acquired data through the lens of various theoretical perspectives serve to offset any anticipated problems associated with research in these spaces.

### **Ethical Considerations in Studying Online Spaces**

Issues of privacy and confidentiality related to postings in public online spaces are an area that is still under discussion in academic communities, as this form of research is still in its infancy. None of the information gathered in this study shares or personally identifies any sensitive information that conflicts with federal guidelines as to what kind of data must be considered personally identifiable information (PII) (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2013). McKee and Porter (as cited in Buchanan & Zimmer, 2013) note the distinction between person-based versus text-based subjects, using research variables such as public vs. private, sensitivity of the topic, degree of interaction, and subject vulnerability to determine where on a continuum of how text-based versus how person-based the research belongs.

The protection of privacy and confidentiality is typically achieved through a combination of research tactics and practices, including engaging in data collection under controlled or anonymous environments, the scrubbing of data to remove personally identifiable information, or the use of access restrictions and related data security methods. (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2013, Privacy section, para. 4)

It is my perception that data retrieved from social media spaces for document analysis fits the category of text-based subjects. However, personally identifiable information of participants in online conversations has been scrubbed to avoid identification of individuals represented in the interactions. I do not perceive any ethical issues with the interview participants, since their participation was voluntary, they were aware of their role in the research, and I clarified my interpretations with them during the interview process.

### Chapter Three

#### **The Ambitions of the Robber Barons and The Negation of Human Agency: Corporate Education Reform from a Historical Perspective**

*Big business has long been enamored of public education. Whether shaping systems of schooling along the lines of factory production, dictating what children should learn, or cultivating private-public partnerships to gain access to government monies, corporations and their owners have insisted on being key players in the formation of education policy and practice in the United States... Beyond their calls for students and workers to adapt to the global capitalist economy through increased competition and “accountability” in public schools, business leaders crave access to a publicly funded, potentially lucrative market – one of the last strongholds of the commons to be penetrated by Neoliberals. (Au & Hollar, 2016, p. 29)*

#### **From NCLB to RTTT to ESSA as Fulfillment of the Neoliberal Agenda: An Overview**

The current education activist movement is best understood within the context of an agenda that has been decades in the making. Over twenty years ago Berliner and Biddle (1995) described the mythological “manufactured crisis” of the failure of our educational system as a means to drive education policies by instilling fear that our public education system was *broken*. As part of Ronald Reagan’s conservative political agenda and the rise of neoliberalism during his Presidency, the 1983 *A Nation at Risk Report* provided misleading comparisons to international test results. This attempt to discredit public schools signaled the movement towards a national education system and corporate control of the curriculum in the United States (Bracey, 2003; Shannon, 2007).

As I describe later in the chapter, the corporate education reform movement is widely considered to be the result of a neoliberal agenda to dismantle and privatize the public education system, driven by both financial and ideological motives (Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011; Shannon, 2007; Weiner, 2012). According to Lipman, neoliberalism includes economic and social policies reflected in “discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest,



unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor” (2001, p. 6). Neoliberals promote the privatization of social goods and the removal of government from services, driven by the belief that competitive markets are more efficient and effective. Seeing neoliberalism as more than just a set of policies, Lipman (2011) describes neoliberalism as “the defining social paradigm of the past 30 years” (p. 6), an “ideological project to reconstruct values, social relationships, and social identities – to produce a new social imaginary” (p. 10). Lipman draws from Charles Taylor’s (2003) description of a social imaginary as the way ordinary people imagine their world, how they imagine their social surroundings and “carry them in images, stories and legends” (Taylor, 2003, p. 23). He describes a social imaginary as carried by large groups of people, if not an entire society. Taylor wrote:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p.23)

Current education policies are embedded in this neoliberal social agenda. When educational quality is framed in neoliberal terms, it is articulated as “individualistic, competitive and market-led” (Lipman, 2011, p. 162). Neoliberal ideology views education as a means of “human capital development... In this framework, education is investment one makes in one’s child or oneself to ‘add value’ to better compete in the labor market, not a social good for development of individuals and society as a whole” (Lipman, 2011, p.14-15).

The redefinition of the purpose of schools as a place to prepare future workers for their roles in the global economy (i.e. the current Race to the Top mantra of students as *college and career ready*) has led to business taking a robust role in educational decision-making (Edelsky,

2006; Ohanian, 2002; Shannon, 2007). And if the purpose of school is to satisfy the needs of the global marketplace, the reshaping of literacy to meet those needs appears to be a natural consequence (Edelsky, 2006).

George H.W. Bush's 1989 call for comprehensive school reform resulted in the Education Initiative issued by the National Business Roundtable, composed of CEOs of two hundred of the most powerful corporations in the U.S. The components of the initiative were explicit: rigorous standards which would be applicable to all students, assessing students and schools against those standards and using that information to create accountability, rewarding schools for success and imposing consequences for failure (Altwerger, 2005).

In his historical analysis, Hursh (2007) situated the 2001 No Child Left Behind act which, under the guise of accountability imposed mandates on public schools, within the rise of globalization (the spread of free markets throughout most of the world) and neoliberal policies. It is his contention that neoliberal policies have become dominant to the point where they are perceived as necessary and inevitable. Drawing upon the work of Bourdieu, Hursh explained that the dominant discourse of neoliberalism has been strengthened by the lack of an opposite discourse and by the presentation of neoliberalism as the only alternative. According to Hursh the reforms of NCLB required educational standards and standardized testing to provide quantitative data to those making decisions about and investing in education. This is consistent with the neoliberal idea that competition leads to better schools and that standardized test scores indicate the quality of education students are receiving. In studying the impact of neoliberalism on our schools and our social practices, Hursh cited the often repeated discussion of the need to compete with schools in China and India in order to achieve and maintain economic superiority and keep jobs in the United States. This has led to public education that focuses on providing job

skills. Hursh believes that an understanding of the historical context of education and the positioning of education in a globalized economy is required in order to understand NCLB. The NCLB requirement that all children would be proficient in reading by 2014 was reflective of the perceived needs of the market, but Hursh viewed the NCLB initiative as a failure in improving learning and one that has undermined democratic decision making, writing:

Moreover, not only has NCLB not resulted in improved learning, but its neoliberal premises also have the potential to radically transform democratic decision making. Neoliberalism undermines deliberate models of democracy, in which people participate in the decisions and processes that affect their lives and the use of their knowledge and skills to affect those around them. (p. 512)

During the Clinton administration during the 1990s, the government-imposed definition of literacy through the Reading Excellence Act included the term *scientifically-based reading research*, which narrowly defined the professional field of literacy instruction and imposed mandates for instructional programs that conformed to this “research” (K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, Shannon & Rapoport, 2004; Shannon, 2007). According to this definition, the scientifically based instruction would provide students with the skills necessary to become proficient readers. Scientifically based instruction was defined as teaching based upon quantitative, experimental studies, rejecting years of sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies (Goodman, K., Goodman, Y., Shannon & Rapoport, 2004).

As part of Clinton’s plan, all students would take annual standardized tests, schools would be required to disaggregate scores, schools failing to make adequate yearly progress would be required to file improvement plans in order to retain federal funding, students from failing schools would be able to attend other schools in the district, and failing schools would face sanctions such as having to replace administrators, teachers or curricula if improvement was not reached. Although the components of Clinton’s education plan did not pass during his

Presidency, they are recognizable as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of George W. Bush (Shannon, 2007).

The view of an intensified neoliberal world seeks a workforce with the ability to read technical information without questioning the content (Edelsky, 2006; Shannon, 2007). Strauss (2005) described this view of reading as a *working-class skill*, with NCLB legislated as a *workforce development bill* rather than an education bill. A narrowed definition of reading as a labor skill to serve the corporate market transforms education into nothing more than a tool for profitability. This chapter will describe the specifics of legislation that has negatively impacted public education as a means to provide the backdrop for the activist movement that is the topic of my study.

### **Many Children Left Behind: The Failed Promise of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)**

Passing bubble tests celebrates and rewards a peculiar form of analytical intelligence. This kind of intelligence is prized by money managers and corporations. They don't want employees to ask uncomfortable questions or examine existing structures and assumptions. They want them to serve the system. These tests produce men and women who are just literate and numerate enough to perform basic functions and service jobs. The tests elevate those with the financial means to prepare for them. They reward those who obey the rules, memorize the formulas and pay deference to authority. Rebels, artists, independent thinkers, eccentrics and iconoclasts—those who march to the beat of their own drum—are weeded out. (Hedges, 2011)

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 brought with it the concepts of accountability and school choice, and the requirement that standardized test scores become the primary measure in judging the performance of students, teachers, administrators, and schools (Ravitch, 2010).

Some of the key components included in the No Child left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) included:

- annual testing in reading and mathematics for students in grades 3-8 for all schools receiving federal funding

- disaggregation of test score data by race, ethnicity, income status, English proficiency and disability status
- a requirement that all schools and districts make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for all subgroups of disaggregated data based upon test scores
- sanctions for schools not meeting AYP with increasing penalties which included district funded transfers to a more “successful” school; district funded tutoring by outside providers; or corrective action such as curriculum changes, staff changes, and eventually restructuring, which could lead to converting to a privately owned and managed charter school
- the requirement and expectation that *all* students would reach proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of the 2013-2014 school year

Ravitch (2010, 2013) described the NCLB concept of proficiency as full mastery for the standards of a grade, an aspiration that was widely acknowledged as not only unreasonable, but one that has never been achieved by any state or country.

Mandated programs and the control of instructional, testing and test prep materials under NCLB have translated to huge corporate profits. Edelsky & Bomer (2005) discuss the corporate agenda and those who have benefitted financially from NCLB, citing as examples Reid Lyon’s influence in bringing Voyager Expanded Learning into the New York City schools, while the company’s executive staff consisted of Bush appointees and fund-raisers. Record profits were posted by textbook publisher McGraw- Hill, directly attributed to NCLB by George W. Bush’s transition team member and family friend, McGraw-Hill CEO, Harold McGraw III (Edelsky & Bomer, 2005).

The proliferation of corporate and personal profit through the sale of tests, instructional materials used for test preparation and mandated programs plays a significant role in the corporate education reform movement (Garan, 2002; Edelsky, 2006; Altwerger and Strauss, 2002). Further influencing education policy are the agendas of turning public education over to corporate owned private and charter schools and creating a labor force intended to serve the needs of corporations. As Strauss (2005a, as cited in Edelsky) described:

Privatizing public schools offers an additional avenue for corporate profit. And the kind of literacy curriculum that lends itself most easily not only to standards and high-stakes testing, but, importantly to the goal of preparing the right kind of labor force to maintain the world power of U.S. corporations, features phonics embedded in a behaviorist instructional model that teaches students to read for technical information. (p. 157)

Estimates in 2004 indicated that ultimately over 75% of our nation's public schools would eventually be labeled "in need of improvement" under the accountability standards of NCLB (Meier, et al.). Edelsky (2006) addressed this issue, stating,

Each subgroup within a school must make AYP or the entire school faces sanctions (i.e., one subgroup – frequently, the school's special education students or English Language Learners – can scuttle the ship). Because a few low scores have more of an impact on the average score of a smaller group, the more diverse the school (the more small racial, ethnic, linguistic subgroups), the more likely it becomes a failing school (p. 261).

As NCLB brought forth the concept of accountability, disparities in socioeconomic status have not been addressed when comparing one school or district to another, even though research has shown that socioeconomic status is a strong determinant in academic success on standardized tests (Perry & McConney, 2010). Further confusing the data that is meant to hold all schools in the nation to the same level of accountability is the fact that all students within a state, even those with special needs or those who have limited English proficiency, must take the same test to demonstrate a school's AYP. However, there is no uniform definition of proficiency from state to state (Reed, 2009). Not only do the tests vary from state to state, but the cut scores used to determine proficiency are not consistent. This continues to be the case, even with the advent of national standards under the Race to the Top initiative.

### **Race to the Top: Nationalized Education and the Standardization of Children**

Funded through the American Recovery and Investment Act, the Obama administration's \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTTT) program (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) continued the policies of NCLB, offering states the opportunity to compete for funds in return for compliance with strict regulations (Onosko, 2011). In order to be eligible for Race to the Top grant funds, states were required to show evidence that they would implement plans in specific education reform areas, which include common standards; a continuation of high stakes testing which would now be used to evaluate teachers; an increase in the number of charter schools in each state receiving RTTT funding; and the creation of longitudinal data systems to track student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). These provisions are discussed individually in the sections that follow.

### **The Trojan Horse: The Common Core State Standards**

The first requirement of RTTT was the adoption of common standards to “prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This served as the means to force the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) since there were no other *common* standards for states to use. Annual assessments were to be administered in reading and mathematics based upon these common standards for all students in grades 3-8. In 2010, two assessment groups, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), were awarded \$361 million to design the tests (Onosko, 2011).

Three organizations: the National Governors Association (NGA), the Chief Counsel State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve, partnered to “disseminate, organize, manage or otherwise outsource the Common Core and the assessments that go with it” (McDermott, 2013).

The working groups responsible for writing the Common Core Standards were staffed primarily by employees of major testing companies, with David Coleman as the architect of the standards (Au & Hollar, 2016). Of the 120 members of the two workgroups responsible for creating the CCSS, only five were classroom teachers, and their role in the actual writing of the standards is not clear (Schneider, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education funded the Common Core Standards through Race to the Top grants.

The Gates Foundation spent \$233 million in grants to the organizations involved as well as to think tanks who produced pro- CCSS reports and to strategists who promoted the standards and their adoption by states (Au & Hollar, 2016). Financial connections to the Common Core Standards include the Pearson Foundation, the Broad Foundation, The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the Walton foundation (McDermott, 2013).

The link between the CCSS, testing, and the creation of markets for corporate profit is demonstrated in a 2009 speech, in which Bill Gates stated:

When the tests are aligned to the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well—and that will unleash powerful market forces in the service of better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large base of customers eager to buy products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better. (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009)

The adoption of the CCSS and the national testing that followed under RTTT increased the top down control of literacy teaching and learning that occurred under NCLB (Onosko, 2011; Porter, McMaken, Hwang & Yang, 2011; Yatvin, 2013). The Common Core Standards “intend to influence the assessed and enacted curricula” (Porter, et al. 2011, p. 103). The criticisms of the English Language Arts (ELA) Standards include a lack of relevance to authentic reading, failure to address cultural and linguistic diversity, their assignment of adult qualities to young children (Tienken,2012; Yatvin, 2013), their attempt to standardize children, and their use as a vehicle for



increased high-stakes testing (Schniedwind & Sapon-Shevin; 2012; Tienken, 2011; Tienken & Zhao, 2010).

Referring to the false argument that our public schools are broken, Krashen (2013) describes the Common Core ELA Standards as a “bad solution to a nonexistent problem” (p. 24). He contends that these standards not only fail to bring about the expected improvement, but will prove to be harmful to children’s literacy development. He cites the loss of funding for libraries as money is allocated instead for Common Core aligned testing and to infrastructure required for online testing as a detriment to literacy development. Krashen has long been outspoken about the positive impact of libraries and access to books, particularly to children living in poverty. In expressing his concern regarding the diminished time spent in self-selected reading as more and more time is spent on testing and test prep, Krashen provided several sources of evidence that free voluntary reading has a positive impact on literacy, citing studies of sustained silent reading, case histories, and correlational studies. Drawing upon the premise that direct instruction in reading does not create literacy competence, Krashen argued that in aligning with the much criticized findings of the National Reading Panel, the ELA Standards require direct instruction.

Krashen (2014) also contends that the entire premise of the Common Core Standards is wrong, and invitations for educators, and particularly literacy experts, to debate the specifics of the standards are only meant as distractions. He believes that the standards were made unreasonably difficult on purpose, with tasks more suited to English majors, a sentiment echoed by many in education activist communities. Further discussion of the criticism of the ELA Common Core Standards as they are enacted in scripted curriculum is situated in the section regarding the destruction of teacher autonomy later in this chapter.

Just as many criticisms of the ELA Common Core standards focus on the belief that they are developmentally inappropriate (Yatvin, 2013), the Common Core Standards for Mathematics have also resulted in a great deal of negativity from those in education activist communities. Garelick (2012) echoes the concern of many parents and teachers surrounding the Common Core Standards for Math, calling the standards “an odd pedagogical agenda” that lead to delays as students do not learn traditional methods of computation under these standards until later in their school careers. Garelick described the Standards for Mathematical Practice embedded within the CCSS as habits of mind that develop as students learn to do math, not as separate entities to be taught as a prerequisite to doing math. Echoing the concerns surrounding the ELA Standards, he cautioned that some of the expectations of the math standards are above the ability of the students for whom they are intended, requiring sophisticated leaps in reasoning that are not developmentally appropriate. An example of this is the expectation that children in the lower elementary grades think abstractly to express theoretical situations algebraically, using mathematical symbols (Garelick, 2012).

Schneider (2015) argues that the Common Core Standards were not created in an open process; are inflexible, untested, and the result of top-down leadership; require the surrender of state sovereignty in governance of education matters to organizations and consortia; and are not necessarily superior to the individual state standards that they replaced. She also discussed the acceptance of wealthy individuals as *experts* in education because they use their money to influence policy that reflects their own personal preferences and agendas. She describes the thwarting of the democratic process that occurs when individuals or groups use their wealth and so-called philanthropy to exert influence over education affairs. A prime example of this is Bill Gates’ funding of the Common Core, although we will also see this enacted in other sections of

this chapter pertaining to privatization and the role of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in creating and promoting legislation to fulfill its education agenda.

The Common Core Standards are perhaps the most politically charged aspect of the resistance to the education reform movement, with the standards serving to both unite and divide educators and parents in online activist spaces. The discussion of the CCSS in these groups often focuses on the political ideology behind opposition to them, as demonstrated by data I will share in Chapter 5 from my research.

The Common Core Standards are often referred to in online education activist groups as a *Trojan Horse*. This is an acknowledgement that the close ties between these standards and high stakes testing result in the use of test scores based upon the flawed Common Core Standards as a means to identify schools and districts as failing in order to further the agenda of privatization.

As Au & Hollar (2016) explain:

...test scores become a form of currency, used as the basis of decisions about educational “choice” for school closures, charter schools, and the evaluation of teachers and schools. Within the Neoliberal education framework, test scores become both the means and the ends of education, alienating students and teachers from their labor while turning the test scores themselves into fetishized commodities that obscure the very people they purport to represent. (p.36)

### **High Stakes Testing and Teacher Evaluations: The Monster in Our Schools**

Standardized testing has swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole. Of course, on the late, late show, no one ever insists that the monster is really doing us a favor by making its victims more “accountable”. In real life, plenty of people need to be convinced that these tests do not provide an objective measure of learning or a useful inducement to improve teaching, that they are not only unnecessary, but highly dangerous . . . The more we learn about standardized testing, particularly in its high-stakes incarnation, the more likely we are to be appalled. And the more we are appalled, the more inclined we will be to do what is necessary to protect our children from this monster in the schools (Kohn, 2000, p.1).

The Race to the Top initiative added the provision that teacher effectiveness be evaluated through the use of gains in student test scores to the already burdensome mandates of NCLB. (Au & Hollar, 2016; Onosko, 2011). Since the initiation of the NCLB testing culture instruction has often been narrowed to focus on the specific skills that appear on the tests. Teachers who feel pressured to have their students attain passing scores on high-stakes tests may increase instruction on tested topics, often eliminating or decreasing instruction on untested topics. In effect, the test becomes the curriculum, representing a regressive move away from the best knowledge in the field of education (Coles, 2003; Kohn, 2000; McNeil, 2000).

The “emphasis on test results for individual teachers exacerbates the well-documented incentives for teachers to focus on narrow test-taking skills, repetitive drill and other undesirable instructional practices” (Baker, et al., 2010, p. 16). In reading instruction, test preparation often consists of identifying the main idea, sequencing events or responding with specific literal details, but the inferential or critical reading abilities that are essential to proficient reading are neglected (Baker, et al. 2010; Johnston & Costello, 2005; Lipman, 2004). Addressing the consequences of the increased emphasis on testing, Graves (2002) wrote:

The increased emphasis on testing and its attendant promise of rewards has led school systems to abandon the reading approaches that are more likely to produce lifelong readers... The pronounced emphasis on testing has created an enormous imbalance between skills and the purpose behind those skills. In short, children repeatedly lose a sense of the function of reading (p. 2).

As schools succumb to pressures to “raise the bar”, students are often sorted and labeled as achievers and non-achievers, based upon test scores (Ohanian, 2000). High-stakes testing undermines teaching and learning, especially for low achieving students, and does not improve literacy learning, since it restricts the curriculum (Johnston & Costello, 2005). And the stakes are indeed high when teachers’ careers depend on test scores, as discussed in the next section.

### **We Have Been VAM-boozled**

The use of value-added models operates on the premise that a formula can be applied to determine how much value teachers add to students' test scores. The use of value-added models (VAM) to determine the effectiveness of teachers has increased the importance of standardized tests since decisions regarding compensation, tenure and the continuation of employment are now determined by these scores for many educators (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Baker et al., 2010). Although studies have indicated that VAM is not a valid indicator of teacher effectiveness (Newton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, & Thomas, 2010; Yettick, 2014) the use of test scores to evaluate teachers was a requirement of both RTTT funds and the NCLB waivers sought by many states as relief from the impossible NCLB mandate that all children demonstrate reading proficiency by 2014.

Newton, et al. (2010) cautioned against the use of high stakes testing and VAM as measurements of teacher effectiveness, citing instability of VAM scores and variables outside of teachers' control that cannot be adequately isolated or perfectly measured. They question the validity of determining how much value a teacher adds to students when it is impossible to separate the effects of teachers and schools from factors such as students' socioeconomic status, language background, and family or neighborhood environments. In addition, they consider the limitations of the tests utilized for VAM scores and the non-random assignments of students to teachers as factors that call to question the validity of VAM methodology.

Amrein-Beardsley's (2008) criticisms of a common VAM model, the Education Value Added Assessment System (EVAAS), included the fact that this methodology was not made available for peer review, nor have there been enough studies of the method's validity. Since EVAAS developers hold the algorithms they use as proprietary information, it is impossible for

outside statisticians and researchers to attempt to replicate the results to confirm the validity of this model. In addition, Amrein-Beardsley pointed to the use of grade level assessments which are not accurate measures of growth since assessments become more unreliable in proportion to how far student learning is from grade level. Those teaching students who are well above or well below grade level are penalized as their growth is less visible. This contention became part of the basis for the judicial decision in the Lederman lawsuit I discuss later in this chapter.

Yettick's (2014) review of multiple studies of value-added measures reported that even when VAM is a part of multiple measure evaluation systems for teachers, there is no evidence of association between value added results of other widely accepted measures of teacher quality. She further contended that a study by Harris in 2005 and 2006 demonstrated that there is a weak correlation between principal ratings and value added models, with both having the potential to contain some measure of error. An interesting conclusion cited by Yettick is that "principal evaluations of teachers may capture results above and beyond those that are assessed by value-added measures" (para. 9). She noted that some of the areas prioritized by principals in evaluating teachers don't necessarily have much connection to student learning.

An example of this was evident in the New York State Union of Teachers (NYSUT) rubric utilized in New York, where teachers are scored on their participation in out-of-schedule activities as 'volunteers' or for their memberships in professional organizations (NYSUT, 2014). Also missing from the use of VAM in evaluating teachers is the variable of student behavior and the failure to account for the fact that students are not randomly distributed into classrooms, concerns that echo those of Newton, et al. (2010).

The American Statistical Association (ASA) issued a statement in 2014 which addresses the limitations of this method of associating test scores with teacher evaluations. While citing

multiple concerns about VAM, they acknowledged the many variables that impact test scores, stating:

VAMs should be viewed within the context of quality improvement, which distinguishes aspects of quality that can be attributed to the system from those that can be attributed to individual teachers, teacher preparation programs, or schools. Most VAM studies find that teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores, and that the majority of opportunities for quality improvement are found in the system-level conditions. Ranking teachers by their VAM scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality. (American Statistical Association, 2014, p. 2)

### **Shared Attribution “Fails” a Teacher of the Year**

Added to the concerns about the lack of reliability of VAM is the fact that in some cases, entire schools or districts are evaluated using ELA and math test scores, including music, art, physical education teachers or specialists. This practice, known as *shared attribution*, means that teachers who do not teach tested subjects are evaluated based upon the test scores of students they do not teach, a practice that has been widely criticized (Ravitch, 2015, March 20). An example of this is Kim Cook, a Florida teacher with almost 25 years of experience at the time her story was shared by Valerie Strauss (2012, December 3). Cook (personal communication, December 2, 2012) posted the picture below on her Facebook page with the following comment:

My final appraisal for the 2011-2012 school year:  
Evaluation summary scores:

Lesson Study:  $100/100 \text{ points} \times .20 \text{ (20\%)} = 20 \text{ points}$

Principal Appraisal:  $88/100 \text{ points} \times .40 \text{ (40\%)} = 35.2 \text{ points}$

VAM Data:  $10/100 \times .40 \text{ (40\%)} = 4 \text{ points}$

Total points = 59.2 (Unsatisfactory)

The VAM data comes from Alachua Elementary School's FCAT scores; children I NEVER taught, although my opinion wouldn't be different even if I had.



**Figure 3.1 (Used with permission)**

Cook was chosen by her school as Teacher of the Year in 2012, shortly before she received her evaluation for the 2011-2012 school year. Since only kindergarten through second grade students attend her school, teachers were evaluated using the test scores of third grade students in a nearby school. Although this was only Cook's second year in the school, where she taught first grade and therefore had never taught any of the children whose scores impacted her evaluation, the low scores in the third grade students resulted in an unsatisfactory evaluation (Strauss, 2012, December 3). This practice of shared attribution creates the possibility that teachers may lose their careers based upon scores of students they have never taught, which is one of the criticisms of the value added model and resistance to this component of RTTT.

### **Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) in New York**

Similar reasons for opposition to VAM were apparent in a presently unpublished three year study on the New York State Annual Professional Performance Review teacher evaluation system (APPR) Debra Goodman and I conducted beginning in 2013. At the time of the study, those teaching tested subjects, such as English Language Arts or Mathematics for grades 3 to 8, had 20% of their evaluations based upon their students' NYS test scores. In some cases, entire



schools were evaluated on those scores, including music, art, physical education teachers or specialists.

In collecting narratives from teacher participants across the state, comments reflected frustration with an evaluation system that lessened teaching time while teachers struggled to meet requirements of rubrics designed to score them as Highly Effective, Effective, Developing, or Ineffective (HEDI). Comments from the teachers addressed the impact of VAM on teaching and learning, on their relationships with their students, and on their morale. It is notable that in the second and third years of the study, when evaluation scores were available to teachers, they reported overwhelmingly negative feelings towards the evaluation process, although none of those responding were evaluated as Ineffective, and only two reported scores that designated them as Developing. The negativity did not seem to reflect dissatisfaction with their own scores, but rather awareness of how this process has harmed their students and impacted their careers in other ways. Some of the comments submitted in the survey were:

- The test scores of my students are statistical garbage. My students just colored in bubbles: not because they didn't care, but because the tests were years beyond their ability.
- It has stifled my creativity and willingness to "have a go" with new ideas. Learning is messy, unpredictable. Many times learning objectives change based on student interests. Feeling as though straying from the path will result in back tracking to document objectives results in frustration and resentment - with the perceived "thesis" that needs to be produced at year's end. It feels like a constant weight on my shoulders.
- Real learning and teaching (are) messy; it is about asking questions and solving problems and class discussion. It is about lighting a fire within each student that makes them interested and reflective. It is not something that you can easily clean up and standardize and evaluate based on numbers. It is the intangibles that make teachers successful ones not test scores.
- As always, the students are the ones who suffer for this after all is said and done. The tests are thinly veiled child abuse. Parents need to start getting involved and storming the state education dept. to force changes.

- It has made all teachers wary of what is next. I spend much more time getting the students prepped for the state tests. Then after the test, I have to deal with the trauma that the students feel with tests that were designed to pass 30% of those who took the test. It is cruel and unusual punishment for all.

### **A Victory for One Teacher: The Court Rules on the Lederman Case**

In November, 2014, Great Neck, New York teacher Sheri Lederman made headlines after filing a lawsuit against the state to challenge her evaluation for the 2013-2014 school year. A seventeen year veteran teacher at the time of the lawsuit filing, Lederman was considered an exceptional teacher by her administrators (Ferrette, 2014) and had received consistently excellent evaluations throughout her teaching career.

Lederman’s lawsuit sought to have her growth score and rating declared “arbitrary and capricious and an abuse of discretion” (Figure 3.2), thereby invalidating the evaluation. Another contention in her lawsuit is that with very similar test results in the 2012-2013 school year (Figure 3.3) and the 2013-2014 school year (Figure 3.4) her evaluation scores demonstrated a wide disparity (*Lederman v. King*, 2016).

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK COUNTY OF ALBANY	
-----X	
IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION OF	
SHERI G. LEDERMAN, Ed.D.	
Petitioner,	<b><u>AFFIDAVIT</u></b>
For a Judgment Pursuant to Article 78 of the CPLR,	
-against-	
JOHN B. KING, JR., Commissioner, New York State Education Department, CANDACE H. SHYER, Assistant Commissioner, Office Of State Assessment of the New York State Education Department	
Respondents,	
TO DECLARE PETITIONER’S GROWTH SCORE AND RATING FOR THE 2013-2014 SCHOOL YEAR (RATING PETITIONER AS “INEFFECTIVE”) TO BE ARBITRARY AND CAPRICIOUS AND AN ABUSE OF DISCRETION.	

**Figure 3.2**

In the 2012-2013 school year, Lederman had 16 students in her class with 68.75% of her students meeting or exceeding standards in both ELA and Math (Figure 3.3).

	ELA	Math
Level 4 (Exceeding Expectations)	4 out of 16 Students	5 out of 16 Students
Level 3 (Meeting Expectations)	7 out of 16 Students	6 out of 16 Students (including 1 ELL)
Level 2 (Approaching Expectations)	5 out of 16 Students (including 1 ELL)	4 out of 16 Students
Level 1 (Below Expectations)	0 out of 16 Students	1 out of 16 Students

*ELL = "English Language Learner"*

**Figure 3.3**

Based upon these test scores, for the 2012-2013 school year, Dr. Lederman received 14 out of 20 points on the growth measure = Effective.

In the 2013-2014 school year, Lederman had 18 students in her class and her students scored as follows, with 61.1% of her students meeting or exceeding standards in ELA and 72.2% meeting or exceeding the standards in Math.

	ELA	Math
Level 4 (Exceeding Expectations)	3 out of 18 Students	9 out of 18 Students
Level 3 (Meeting Expectations)	8 out of 18 Students	4 out of 18 Students (including 1 ELL)
Level 2 (Approaching Expectations)	5 out of 18 Students (including 2 ELL)	5 out of 18 Students (including 3 ELL and 2 ILDS)
Level 1 (Below Expectations)	2 out of 18 Students (including 1 ELL and 2 ILDS)	0 out of 18 Students

*ELL = "English Language Learner"*

*ILDS = "Identified Learning Disabled Students"*

**Figure 3.4**

Based upon these scores, for the 2013-2014 school year, Dr. Lederman received 1 out of 20 points on the growth measure, which labeled her as "Ineffective" although her test results did

not vary widely from the previous school year and her students' scores far exceeded the NYS average. Her students' test scores for the school year in question were more than twice the state average for the performance of fourth grade students (Ferrette, 2014).

The Lederman case was heard in a New York State court in August, 2015. Affidavits were submitted to meet the high burden of proof required by the judge, with written testimony from notable experts such as Linda Darling-Hammond, Aaron Pallas, and Carol Burris (Strauss, 2016). Finding that the burden of proof was satisfied, on May 10, 2016, New York State Supreme Court Judge Roger McDonough issued a thirteen page ruling in favor of Lederman. McDonough did not rule beyond the individual Lederman case, citing changes in the regulations of the evaluation system since the filing of the lawsuit. This ruling is considered a victory by educators because it represents the first time a judge has issued a ruling in a teacher evaluation case (Strauss, 2016).

Kim Cook's experience and the Lederman case demonstrate just some of the pertinent problems with the use of test scores to evaluate educators. At issue is also the judge's contention in the Lederman decision that there is "convincing and detailed evidence of VAM bias against teachers at both ends of the spectrum (e.g. those with high-performing students or those with low-performing students)" (*Lederman v. King*, 2016). This is consistent with the Amrein-Beardsley's (2008) previously discussed concerns about the unreliability of grade level assessments in proportion to how far student learning is from grade level.

While Sheri Lederman's growth score reflected high achieving students from a relatively high wealth district and small class sizes, many of the teachers who are being penalized for a perceived lack of student growth are those teaching in lower wealth districts with the lower performance Judge McDonough cited as being the subject of VAM bias. While a test and punish

culture negatively impacts students at every part of the spectrum, often those most seriously punished by these tests are those who perform poorly due to factors such as poverty or linguistic and cultural diversity (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Kuhn, 2014).

### **Pathologizing the Language and Culture of Poor Children: Diversity as Deficiency**

A serious concern for educators is the disproportionate number of students living in poverty and the linguistically and culturally diverse students who perform poorly on the high-stakes tests mandated by NCLB and RTTT. This has led to what Dudley-Marling & Lucas (2009) refer to as *pathologizing* the language and culture of poor children. John Kuhn (2014), a school superintendent in Texas, wrote extensively of the inequalities in education and addressed the issue of poverty and its impact on both students and teachers (2014). Kuhn discussed the need for all children to receive adequate health care, have a stable living environment and social supports. Kuhn challenged elected officials who are responsible for “education- compromising social conditions” (p. 22) to be accountable and to shrink the gaps.

Lawmakers in many states casually invest millions more in educating kids in rich neighborhoods than they spend educating kids in poor neighborhoods. Somehow they sleep at night, knowing that the teeth of the machine they’ve built chew up poor children who will eventually become brittle adults... The correlation between poverty and academic failure is direct. (p. 135)

The mandates associated with NCLB and RTTT have created a system that has labeled and stratified students by test scores, disproportionately affecting those who are already often marginalized by society: the culturally and ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged children (Bracey, 2003; Edelsky, 2006; Shannon, 2007). Educators who see student success linked to their own professional evaluations now often view “diversity” not as assets to school learning, but as deficiencies to be fixed in order to achieve passing test scores (Dudley-Marling

& Lucas, 2009). These students are most likely to receive instruction that is heavily focused on test-prep, and discrete, tested skills, with test prep materials substituted for regular texts (Dudley – Marling & Paugh, 2005; Lipman, 2004).

Novinger and Lilly (2005) described the voices of urban students telling their stories as they share their lived experiences with testing that contradict the official, dominant discourses surrounding the need for high-stakes testing and accountability. The children they wrote about expressed anger, frustration, and in some cases, total surrender to a system that has already marginalized them, and now shames them for “failure.” All too often, students in special education classes, poor children, students from non-dominant racial and ethnic groups, and immigrant children are disproportionately represented in the groups labeled as failing and receive an education that is based on test-preparation as they are blamed for putting their schools on failure lists (Meier, et al.; 2004; Rose, 2009). Kohn (2000) relates the story of a superintendent, who observed,

...when a low-performing child walks into a classroom, instead of being seen as a challenge, or an opportunity for improvement, for the first time since I’ve been in education, teachers are seeing [him or her] as a liability. Needless to say, if educators resent children who are likely, for one reason or another, to perform poorly, they cannot establish the nurturing relationship with those children that will enable the children to trust them. (p.28)

As the evaluation of teacher performance is increasingly tied to test scores, not only does the curriculum become narrower as teachers become more inclined to teach to the test, but teachers’ attitudes towards students who are less likely to produce passing test scores also have the potential to become an issue that further marginalizes the neediest students. Sacks (1999) criticized the concept of sorting children by test scores, and his discussion of the use of intelligence tests is equally applicable to the current climate of high stakes testing. He wrote:

Even if there were no standardized testing of any young children, anywhere, those born into less privileged social and economic circumstances are punished at least twice: first when they start life already behind their more privileged peers; and second, when the testing game's sorting, labeling, and screening of children begins. (p. 64)

### **The Negation of Human Agency**

Lipman (2004) studied the implications of high stakes accountability in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) from 1998 – 2002. Situating her study in “critical policy scholarship” (p.12) which she defines as generative of critical social action and “grounded in a commitment to transform unjust social relations” (p.13) she examined the impact of reform policies on teachers and education through case studies of four schools. Her data consisted of CPS documents and press releases; interviews with teachers, administrators, parents, students and community representatives and 118 classroom observations. Lipman concluded that, as a result of high stakes accountability, students had been reduced to test scores and teachers had become no more than technicians in an education assembly line, stating, “This system is about the negation of human agency” (p. 179). Citing neoliberal accountability, Lipman concluded that while teachers are *more* accountable, with the state shifting responsibility for improvement to teachers and schools, they now have less control over pedagogy and less ability to exercise their professional judgment, causing “devastating consequences for their morale, confidence and commitment” (p.44).

### **The Destruction of Teacher Autonomy**

While the existence of scripted instruction is not new, NCLB signaled the first time that the federal government empowered textbook publishers to determine the parameters of literacy instruction in our classrooms (Shannon, 2007). The requirements under NCLB support the belief that “only core reading programs are sufficiently scientifically based to direct classroom

activities during reading instruction” (Shannon, 2007, p. 178). Under the RTTT imposed Common Core Standards, the emphasis on informational texts and close reading reduces reading to a decontextualized, text dependent task (Ferguson, 2013). In practice, this typically means spending a great deal of time reading short passages rather than entire texts. The focus on scripted text-dependent questions and discussion in reading instruction serves to prepare students for standardized test questions. Ferguson asks, “For the sake of testing students on comprehension in the narrowest sense, what understandings about the world we live in are being forced out of the classroom?” (2013, p. 20).

In New York, the EngageNY initiative resulted in many school districts requiring the use of scripted Core Curriculum learning modules in an effort to boost test scores. These EngageNY modules, managed on a website by the NYS Education Department (NYSED) were created by four vendors who were paid a total of \$36.6 million funded by the RTTT grant. The modules have been criticized as developmentally inappropriate, error-filled, and too time consuming to possibly fit into a teaching day. According to Ravitch, (2015, July 22) teachers report the expectation that the modules be used with fidelity, leading to feelings of resentment about the lack of respect for their right to autonomy in their own classrooms. Paralleling criticisms of the ELA Common Core Standards, teachers have criticized the English Language Arts modules as heavily focused on close reading of informational texts, with minimal reading of rich literature. Katz (2014) described the focus of the Common Core ELA Standards, writing:

What Common Core does is take reading literature and purpose it *entirely* to close textual reading, which is a tool of *literary criticism*, especially for the New Criticism school of analysis. In New Criticism, the text is treated as self-contained, and it is the job of the reader to investigate it as an object to be understood via the structure of the text and without reference to external resources such as history, culture, psychology or the experiences of the reader. (para.11)



While the EngageNY modules were developed for New York, the availability of this free, scripted resource has led to the use of these modules in multiple states (Cavanagh, 2015).

Ohanian (2009) argued that teachers are professionals who should not be handed a script, told how to organize their classrooms or what books to choose for their students.

The tragic legacy of the data worship spawned by No Child Left Behind is that with no protection from their unions or professional organizations, veteran teachers lose sight of what professionalism was, and new teachers never know it. They know only powerlessness and obedience. (Ohanian, 2009, p.374)

It seems that it is no coincidence that the CCSS and the ensuing scripted curriculum to be assessed with high stakes testing were adopted at the same time those test scores were tied to teacher evaluations (Katz, 2014). A professional atmosphere where evaluations include teachers' compliance in implementing questionable policies leaves little room for many to assert their right to refuse scripted instruction and destroys the autonomy of teachers in their classrooms.

### **Privatization, Choice, and Disaster Capitalism: The Charter School Movement**

Support for privately owned charter schools was a key component to the competitive RTTT grants, and states had to demonstrate a willingness to increase the number of charter schools in order to qualify for grant money. The requirement to turn around the lowest achieving schools and the possibility of closure and takeovers by charter school operators for persistently “failing” schools paved the way for the privatization of public education (Ahlquist, 2011; DiMartino & Scott, 2013; Onosko, 2011). In studying privatization in New York City, Scott and DiMartino (2009) acknowledged the controversial nature of privatization and the vocal opposition from teacher unions, civil rights groups and some community based organizations. Advocates of privatization frame their argument in the narrative of public school failure and the need for options to address racial inequalities, based upon disparities in standardized test scores.

Scott and DiMartino argue that “prevailing definitions of educational privatization tend to underemphasize its political and social aspects,” (p. 433) instead depicting privatization in terms of fiscal management and economics.

As defined by Scott and DiMartino (2009) privatization involves the redistribution of resources and control from “traditional public governance structures to a disparate assemblage of parents, teachers, school leaders, community members, private sector actors and private organizations” (p. 433). There are competing ideologies present in the debates about privatization (Burch, 2006; Scott & DiMartino, 2009). While there is a long history of private sector involvement in education, arguments now tend to focus on the superiority of the private sector over public education, with discussion centered on whether the private sector functions as a rival or partner to the public sector (Scott & DiMartino, 2009).

The idea that market competition will provide educational options, thereby increasing student achievement, is grounded in the idea of education as a consumer market. Market ideology is the belief that school improvement requires competition with traditional public schools, positioning charter operators as rivals to public schools. “Ultimately, the goal of rivals is to expand their market share and put low-performing public schools ‘out of business’” (Scott & DiMartino, 2009, p. 439). If charter school “clients” are to achieve the high standardized test scores needed to keep the schools open, providers are incentivized to accept and retain those who will likely achieve that goal. This leads to the practice of rejecting or counseling out students who have special needs, who require intensive interventions, or who do not conform to strict behavioral guidelines (Bonastia, 2015). The concept of education as a marketplace aligns with neoliberal and conservative visions for education and redefines equity as the ability of parents to choose schools for their children (Scott & DiMartino, 2009).

The earliest concept of charters was introduced by Robert Kennedy in 1968 through the use of the term *competitive schools* which he suggested should be used to measure the progress of public schools (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). The presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush brought strong support for charter schools and vouchers, with both in favor of school choice. In a voucher system, money follows students so that tuition for privately owned schools is funded through taxpayer dollars. The first legislation granting charters was passed in 1991 in Minnesota and by 2009 there were approximately 5,000 charter schools in the United States (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). Race to the Top guidelines required states to lift their cap on charter schools in order to be eligible for grant funds. The most recent numbers provided by the National Alliance for Charter Schools (2016) indicates that there were over 6,800 charter schools across 42 states and the District of Columbia for the 2015 – 2016 school year.

Charter schools are defined as public schools because they operate with public funding derived from tax dollars paid to public school districts. However, in many respects they do not function as true public schools, since they operate outside of the financial restrictions and regulations of traditional public schools. Responding to the tension between seeing charter schools as rivals or partners, Tienken and Orlich (2013) shared the charter plan revealed in 2008 by former New Jersey Deputy Commissioner of Education, Andy Smarick. He described engaging allies from among groups that are entrenched in the corporate reform movement, such as Teach for America. His plan acknowledges the need to create a financial crisis in school districts that will become a political crisis, setting the stage for charter schools to replace public schools as opposed to collaborating with them. As the financial drain of charter schools places financial pressure on school districts, districts will become unsustainable and will either voluntarily transfer its schools to a charter provider, or will be forced to do so as diminished

resources lead to complaints from stakeholders. This is what happened in New Jersey as corporate interests began to dismantle the public school system with a transfer of public money to private hands (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). It would seem that this roadmap was not devised as a means to *partner* with school districts, but rather to serve as rivals and dismantle them.

Tienken and Orlich (2013) provide the following criticisms of charter schools:

- Charter schools do not perform better than public schools
  - Independent research since 2005 has consistently demonstrated that charter schools do not offer significant advantages regarding student achievement when studies control for socioeconomic status and the academic achievement of students prior to entering the charter school.
  - Among other studies, the 2009 report of the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) and Bracey's 2009 study indicated that the performance of charter schools was in most cases worse than traditional public schools.
- As a group, charter school populations are more segregated than public schools in the surrounding areas.
  - Charter schools have the ability to engage in a selective admissions process, and are known to counsel out students who are considered negative influences on the school's academic achievement.
  - Charter schools, as a whole, enroll fewer students with special needs than surrounding public schools.
- Under the guise of specializing as schools that teach specific languages and cultures, some charter chains, such as the Gulen chain, blur the lines between church and state.
- Charter Schools filter money away from neighborhood schools and marginalize community control.
  - Money taken from public school districts to follow students to the charter schools marginalizes both local public schools and the local control of tax dollars, as charter schools are not run by elected boards of education who are accountable to the taxpayers.
- Banks and wealthy investors take advantage of large tax credits instituted by former President Clinton, making windfall profits.
  - For profit education management organizations (EMOs) have been the subject of multiple scandals, as the decisions they make about schools revolve around generating profits and not around the needs of the students who attend the schools they manage.
  - Charter school investors donate large sums of money to lawmakers in return for charter friendly legislation, furthering the privatization agenda.

Another criticism of charter schools is the use of harsh “no excuses” disciplinary practices and a higher rate of suspensions than traditional public schools (Davis, 2014; Klein, 2016). According to Klein, during the 2011-2012 school year, a quarter of the student body was suspended at least once in nearly 400 charter schools in the United States. Davis (2014) described the use of law enforcement methods in some charter school networks, primarily in schools that enroll mostly black and brown students. Using the concept of no excuses discipline, many charter school teachers are required to enforce rigorous behavioral expectations which result in escalating punitive measures, eventually leading to suspension. The infractions that invite these measures are sometimes as minor as untucked shirts, students not “tracking” the teacher with their eyes, or not raising a hand in the required straight up position. Charter school chains such as KIPP and Uncommon Schools subscribe to this no excuses model of discipline, even for kindergarten students who are required to spend much of their school day sitting still with their hands in their laps. These privately managed charter schools are exempt from public school districts’ discipline regulations (Davis, 2014).

Shannon (1992) described proper behavior in schools that serve disadvantaged populations as submitting to authority, with compliance being the end goal of socialization. Since charter schools primarily arise in low socioeconomic districts and districts with predominantly black and brown children, this would seem to be a fitting description of socialization and discipline in charter schools. It would seem that the very schools that tout their existence as a means to address inequities serve to widen the gap between the classes and between various racial and ethnic groups.

Not to be ignored in the conversation is the rarely discussed racist history of the charter school movement. Bonastia wrote:

The now-popular idea of offering public education dollars to private entrepreneurs has historical roots in white resistance to school desegregation after *Brown v Board of Education* (1954). The desired outcome was few, or better yet, no black students in white schools. In Prince Edward County, Virginia, one of the five cases decided in *Brown*, segregationist whites sought to outwit integration by directing taxpayer funds to segregated white schools. (para. 2)

In contrast to this original intent of charter schools, current proponents claim that charter schools are a necessary alternative to struggling public schools. Incentives under No Child Left Behind were instrumental in the involvement of the private sector in education, as private contractors assisted schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress (Burch, 2006). Those supporting privatization argue for its cost effectiveness and for schools and parents, rather than the government, to have control of school finances. Others study privatization from an opposing point of view and focus on privatization as a threat to public education as these reforms exacerbate inequalities while providing wealth for corporations (Burch, 2006).

The neoliberal agenda of privatization has been furthered through the use of disaster capitalism, as in the case of New Orleans, which saw the public education system dismantled in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Klein, 2007). Klein defines disaster capitalism as “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (p. 6). Saltman (2007) described the application of market logic to leverage private sector investment using post-Katrina New Orleans as an example of a “smash and grab” neoliberal tactic of privatization.

### **The Erosion of Student Privacy: Data for Sale**

Another RTTT requirement was the building of data systems to measure student growth and success based upon test scores. This led to deep concerns from parents and educators as student privacy protections were eroded with the 2011 revision to the Family Educational Rights

& Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations for the purpose of facilitating longitudinal data bases of student information (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This was an issue that eventually led to the failure of the inBloom student data repository, particularly in New York.

Founded in 2011, inBloom planned to develop digital dashboards to collect student information which would become available to third parties. In yet another example of the far reach of “philanthropic” influence, inBloom was launched with \$100 million in support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Herold, 2014). As described on the parent Coalition for Student Privacy Website (<http://www.studentprivacymatters.org>), inBloom Inc. was created to collect large amounts of student and teacher information from across the country. This personal identifiable data included such items as students’ names, addresses, test scores, race, economic status, disciplinary records, grades, and special education status. The information was to be stored on a cloud run by Amazon.com with Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation subsidiary, Wireless/ Amplify providing the operating system for the data storage of information that would be shared with for-profit vendors (<http://www.studentprivacymatters.org>).

One of the important concerns was the storage of large amounts of private and sensitive student information on a data cloud, a platform vulnerable to being compromised. The original privacy policy for inBloom explicitly stated that there was no guarantee of privacy or protection against the interception of transmitted private information (<http://www.studentprivacymatters.org>). In addressing her concerns as a school principal, Carol Burris (2014) contrasted the data storage proposed for inBloom with the storage of student data that deliberately utilized unique identifying numbers that would protect student privacy and guard identities at the district level. Addressing her concerns about information that would be shared with inBloom, Burris wrote:

Names, addresses (e-mail and street) and phone numbers are to be sent. Schools are required to upload student attendance, along with attendance codes, which indicate far more than whether or not the student was absent or present. Codes indicate whether a student is ill, truant, late to school or suspended. Details about the lives of students are moving beyond the school walls to reside in the inBloom cloud. (Burris, 2014)

Initially nine states had agreed to store data with inBloom. Concerns about student privacy led to all but New York deciding not to participate by early 2014. Strong resistance in New York was led by parent activist Leonie Haimson, founder of Class Size Matters and co-founder of the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy. As a result, legislation was passed prohibiting the collection or storage of student information for use in a data dashboard or portal. The law also required the deletion of any previously shared student data (Stern, 2014). Within weeks of the New York legislation, inBloom announced that it was shutting down, providing a small victory for its opponents. However, the Race to the Top requirement for longitudinal data systems was not ended, and other vendors, such as Pearson's PowerSchool, continue to collect and store student data (Herold, 2014).

Proponents of the use of student data cite the ability of this information to drive instruction, pointing to the ability to tailor education to individual needs (Herold, 2014). They tout personalized learning as an improvement over traditional education, with data mining slated to become an integral part of the online classrooms of the future. Those who oppose the use and sharing of children's data share concerns not only about privacy, but about an agenda to move education towards the model of competency based education (CBE) which reduces education to computerized instructional modules with daily on line testing. The recently legislated Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) validates those concerns, as Competency Based Education and its related data mining are provisions of this legislation.



### **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Competency Based Education for All**

Although NCLB represented a massive wrong turn in federal education policy, ESSA is more like a change in drivers than a U-turn. The major elements of test and punish reform remain in place, but they are largely turned over to the states. The same grades and subjects must be tested, “challenging” standards must still be adopted and implemented, the “lowest performing” schools must be labeled and subject to intervention. But instead of the U.S. secretary of education, states and governors will be in charge of the pace and the details. (Karp, 2016, p.19)

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law, ending the authority of No Child Left Behind and the ensuing Race to the Top program of grants under NCLB. The 1,061 page ESSA document was only released for the public to read on November 30<sup>th</sup>, with the first vote scheduled for December 2<sup>nd</sup> (Schneider, 2015). While deconstructing this document could in itself be the topic of a dissertation, I will attempt to capture the most relevant provisions as they further the corporate agenda and have become the basis for resistance by education activists.

As mentioned in the last section, the focus on testing data and the use of technology to collect that data is linked to provisions of ESSA, and specifically to the topic of assessment. Under ESSA, states now have the authority to create *innovative assessment systems*, which are defined as including “competency based assessments, instructionally embedded assessments, interim assessments, or performance-based assessments that combine into an annual summative determination for a student, which may be administered through computer adaptive assessments” (ESSA, 2015, p. 84). Cutting through the language to explain what this means in terms of implementation in our classrooms, Krashen (2016, March 27) explains:

Competency-based education is not just a testing program. It is a radical and expensive innovation that replaces regular instruction with computer "modules" that students work through on their own. It is limited to what can be easily taught and tested by computer, and is being pushed by computer and publishing companies that will make substantial profits from it. (para.2)

Krashen is among those who believe that the competency based education (CBE) model has been introduced by those in political and corporate circles as a means to address current criticisms of over-testing and the use of high stakes tests. He cites a speech by President Obama decrying over testing and the suggestion by Pearson, creator of many of the currently administered tests, that end of year testing should be replaced by CBE (Krashen, 2016, March 26).

McDermott (2016) and Schneider (2015) have discussed some of the other provisions of ESSA, highlights of which include:

- declaring Arne Duncan's NCLB waivers null and void on August 1, 2016
- the use of Social Impact Bonds, which are also defined as "Pay for Success" and benefit investors who are paid when students are not referred for special education services
- the requirement that states have challenging academic standards aligned to academic achievement standards in order to qualify for Title 1 funding
- the continuation of yearly testing in math and ELA with results reported and data disaggregated by group (e.g., racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, disability, ELL)
- continuation of the NCLB requirement that 95% of students enrolled in each public schools participate in yearly tests
- acknowledgment that Title 1 funds can be used as leverage to ensure the 95% participation rate by penalizing states or districts passing parental opt out provisions; viewed by many as a means to quell the growing opt out movement
- grants for alternative teacher certification, and the use of non-profits as an alternative to schools of education for teacher development
- the expansion of charter schools while assuring them of a high degree of autonomy

At the time of this writing, there is much discussion of the recently released 192 page set of ESSA regulations, with concerns that the regulations conflict with some of the stated original intent of the law to reduce the federal role in education and return more

autonomy to the states. The regulations were open to public comment until August 1, 2016 (Strauss, 2016).

McDermott (2016) has described ESSA as opening the floodgates for neoliberal profiteers who seek not only to profit from public education, but to own it, citing the role of The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in devising ed reform policies. ALEC's education agenda was made clear in the group's 2011 annual conference. I discuss the role of ALEC and how the group operates in the next section.

### **The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC): The Robber Barons**

Current education activism has focused heavily on the need to respond to what many perceive as an organized, well-funded attack on public education. The scope and agenda of this attack on public education became increasingly evident in July, 2011 when the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) received copies of model bills drafted by the American Legislative Executive Council (ALEC) from a whistleblower (Dannin, 2012). Based in Washington, D.C., ALEC describes itself as a non-profit organization and is comprised of members who subscribe to Neoliberal ideology and pay for memberships as individuals, corporations, foundations or think tanks. The purpose of ALEC is to write model bills which are introduced by elected officials as their own, serving as "a very efficient mechanism for corporations to exercise political power..." (Underwood & Mead, 2012, p.52).

In studying model bills written by ALEC from a legal perspective, Dannin (2012) analyzed eight bills relating to the reshaping of public education and two bills targeting unions and collective bargaining for educators. The study provided ALEC's summary of each model law, the CMD assessment, and a discussion of events surrounding each. In each case, she concluded that the model bill would benefit a corporate interest at the expense of public

education, usually at the expense of students from marginalized populations. Agreeing that “ALEC’s positions on various education issues make it clear that the organization seeks to undermine public education by systematically defunding and ultimately destroying public education as we know it” (Underwood & Mead, 2012, p. 52), Dannin concluded that if ALEC succeeded in its goal of moving public services to the private sector, “(t)he result would be a new gilded age propelled by the ambitions of robber barons” (p. 530). Indeed, the “robber barons” seem to have public education in their clutches.

### Summary

The long standing neoliberal based corporate agenda of privatization and profiteering has put public education as we know it at risk. From the No Child Left behind Act to the current ESSA legislation, the control of our classrooms has been systematically turned over to corporate interests who make decisions based on their own financial bottom line. Teachers are targeted by corporate education reformers because they present a barrier to carrying out the neoliberal agenda. Reformers are attacking teachers’ unions, collective bargaining, and their right to due process as a prerequisite to termination (Ford, 2011). As he explained:

Teachers are the biggest obstacle in the way of the corporate educational coup, which is why the billionaires, eagerly assisted by their servants in the Obama administration, have made demonization and eventual destruction of teacher unions their top priority. Corporations hate collective bargaining, or working people’s power of any kind, but their vision goes way beyond simply neutralizing teachers unions. The billionaires, and the politicians they have purchased, want nothing less than to destroy teaching as a profession. (para.2)

As the corporate lobbyists strengthen their hold on public education, “(t)he American people are being conned by billionaire hustlers who are stealing the public schools – and the national future – right in front of our eyes” (Ford, 2011, para.4). As a result, many educators and

parents have begun to rise up and push back against policies that they see as harmful to children and destructive to public education and the teaching profession.

In the chapters that follow, situated within historical context as well as in history in the making, I will demonstrate how social media is playing a crucial role in this activism, discussing both specific successes as well as potential dysfunctions of social media activist groups that tend to impede the effectiveness of these online spaces.

## Chapter Four

### Connecting the Dots: A Historical Overview of Teacher Activism in Offline Spaces And Political Activism in Online Spaces

#### Teachers as Activists: Voices of “The Others” and Praxis

*Education and curricula are always political. Departments of education and locally elected school boards are overt political entities appointed and controlled by political figures. Politicians routinely use education as a major plank in their platforms...Curriculum inevitably includes prevailing hegemonic perspectives while leaving out the voices of others; especially those offering alternative visions of social organization. (Hyslop-Margison, 2005 as cited in Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2011, p.8)*

#### Early Voices Speaking Out

While the use of social media for education activism is a relatively new phenomenon, it is important to note that the *others*, those whose voices are marginalized, have long struggled to find critical spaces in which to have their voices heard. Early teacher activists such as Elizabeth Almira Allen and Marion Thompson Wright “viewed education as a vehicle for the enactment of ideals of democracy, specifically its aspirations to equity and justice for all citizens” (Crocco, Hendry, & Weiler, 1999, p. 75). These activists used education to act for social change in response to the conflict they witnessed between “the public rhetoric of democracy and the unjust realities of the social order” (Crocco et al., 1999, p. 75). Freire (1970/2009, 1985) asserts that teaching is a political act that is never neutral and that education is transformative as marginalized groups alter their consciousness about the world through praxis.

*Praxis*, a term adopted from Aristotle by way of Marx, requires one to practice what one theorizes while you are theorizing what one practices: reflective action and active reflection make for good praxis. Good praxis makes possible a self-sustaining, self-perpetuating social movement, a permanent revolution. (Weltman, 2003, p. 62)

Crocco et al. (1999) framed their biographical study of early women activists in feminist theory explaining, “building a career in education served as leverage for some women to live their lives as agents of change – change for themselves as workers and citizens, for students and professionals in schools, and for society at large” (Crocco, et al., 1999, p. 1). The women they studied were teacher activists from the period between 1880 and 1960. The authors assert that when viewing education as a mechanism for social and political reform, consideration should be given to the social-reconstructionist form of progressive education as it relates to the teachers’ activism in their schools, professions and society. While Crocco, et al. refer to Dewey as a social-reconstructionist, Stanley (2005) contends that Dewey believed education must have a social orientation, while rejecting the idea of using schools to impose a particular social order, unlike George Counts, who called upon teachers to create a new social order with a clearly defined purpose of social reconstruction.

Two of the biographical studies included in the work of Crocco et al. (1999) viewed the early activism of New Jersey educators Elizabeth Almira Allen and Marion Thompson Wright. Allen led an activist life as she fought for teacher autonomy in the classroom, for tenure and pension rights, and for gender equity in the teaching profession in issues of compensation and power during a career that began in 1869 and spanned forty eight years. As a teacher, principal, union president and teacher educator, Allen worked in contested spaces where males dominated and held the positions of authority in public school and university settings. A central issue in her activist life was the underrepresentation of women in positions of power in the teachers’ union, which marginalized women teachers. Through her activism, Allen rose through the ranks to eventually become the New Jersey Teachers’ Associations first woman president and a pivotal

figure in the creation of both tenure and the first statewide teacher pension system in New Jersey (Crocco et al., 1999).

As an African American woman, activist Marion Thompson Wright struggled throughout her career with issues of both race and gender. She was influenced by the work of George Counts, believing “the purpose of education was the building of a new social order, one that brought equality to African Americans through education” (Crocco et al., 1999, p. 70). Wright was also influenced by Dewey’s belief that education must be for the purpose of democracy and must be democratic. She believed that her advocacy work could be instrumental in fulfilling the promise of social and racial justice for all citizens as education was reshaped through the democratic process (Crocco, 1997; Crocco et al., 1999). Wright’s 1941 dissertation is considered instrumental in policy changes leading to school integration due to its systematic evidence of school segregation in New Jersey. Her work was cited in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and also contributed directly to reform in her home state through its influence on the adoption of a new state constitution which addressed issues of segregation (Crocco, 1997; Crocco, et al., 1999).

The overarching message of the studies of Crocco (1997) and Crocco et al. (1999) is that activist educators shape their own identities by rejecting cultural descriptions and limitations and view education as a means for social transformation (Stanley, 2005). The positive impact of Allen and Wright in the areas of tenure, pension, improvement in gender equity for educators and school desegregation “offer testimony of the possibilities for all working in the field” (Crocco, et al., 1999, p. 76). We see much of this enacted in the work of education activists in the current struggle to preserve the institution of public education. The growing activist movement has also seen parents move beyond their former role as PTA members, field trip



supervisors or classroom volunteers (McGuinn & Kelly, 2012) to join forces with educators as stakeholders in resistance.

### **Teachers as Activists in the New Social Imaginary**

A consideration of the ways in which democracy is routinely conflated with capitalism and the ever-intensifying power of those who control global economic forces to shape education to suit their desires suggests the continued need to articulate and assert alternative values. Such efforts must be marshaled against the conventional wisdom of a society whose ideals of equality and opportunity are defined by a competitive and individualistic ethos that justifies a few as winners and many others as losers, that sees equity only in terms of uniformity, and that insists that one person's gain is always another's loss. (Crocco, et al., 1999, p. 121)

Those words, written in 1999, seem to aptly describe the current educational climate resulting from years of neoliberal policies controlling public education and the “winners and losers” created by the competitive grants funding of Race to the Top (Onosko, 2011). The challenge to respond to the threat to public education posed by corporate education reform and to “assemble what the classroom can teach us, articulate what we come to know, speak it loudly, and hold it fast to the heart” (Rose, 2006, p. 433) has been met by a growing number of education activists throughout the United States. Edelsky (2006) describes current activism as an “Education Rights Movement” (p. 268) and calls for political resistance and an umbrella movement to link acts of resistance together.

### **Early Acts of Resistance: Working in the Cracks & Teaching Against the Grain**

The earliest responses to the pressures of high-stakes testing and scripted programs which stripped teachers of autonomy in their classrooms focused primarily on acts of resistance in their classrooms and “working in the cracks” (Schniedwind & Sapon-Shevin, 2012, p. 85). Teachers created spaces in which they could engage in authentic instruction counter to the dominating discourses of high-stakes testing. An example of this early resistance was Campano's (2005)

experience in a low performing school, teaching a population of poor, migrant children. Facing the dilemma of a mandated curriculum which conformed to the tenets of scientifically based research, Campano created an alternative pedagogical space. Drawing upon the rich cultural experiences of his students, he constructed a classroom that reflected his beliefs about teaching and learning. Dooley (2005) describes “teaching against the grain” (p.178), in which teachers developed creative ways to resist the pressures of the testing mentality and packaged instruction, and taught in a manner that was informed by their own knowledge and theoretical frameworks.

Haberman (1995) spent over thirty years interviewing and observing teachers of children in poverty in urban settings across the country. He refers to those who did not fail or quit as “star” teachers. He describes these “stars” as using resistance to protect children, placing “themselves between their children and the gears of the mindless system ... the children in stars’ classrooms are engaged in real learning activities – many of which are against school policy or, more likely, unknown to the formal bureaucracy” (p. 66).

### **Transformative, Democratic Education: Teaching as a Political Act**

As mandates under Race to the Top “undermine the intellectual, social, aesthetic and emotional growth of most children (Onosko, 2011, p. 8), teacher activists have begun to rebel against imposed practices that are characteristic of what Haberman (1995) has labeled a “pedagogy of poverty”. This approach to teaching, which includes direct instruction, scripted lessons, worksheets and seatwork, order and control (Haberman, 1995) are in direct contrast to the transformative teaching described by Freire (1970, 2009).

In Freire’s (1970, 2009) view of transformative education, the dialogic relationship between teachers and students is a problem-solving process through which both the teacher and student learn. Gross and Shapiro (2009) echo Freire’s (1970, 2009) belief that the products of a

banking model of education, which is prevalent in the current accountability movement and is the antithesis of transformative teaching, will be the defeat of democracy. Without the ability to engage in critical thinking through dialogic relationships and transformative education, children are ill-prepared to take their place as thoughtful members of a democratic society. “Educated citizens have to know about the full range of issues that concern their society and they have to be able to understand the background of these issues” (Lakoff & Wehling, 2012, p. 86). In further connecting the accountability, high-stakes testing and privatization agendas as detrimental to our democracy, Lakoff & Wehling (2012) state:

A democratic education is widespread and deep. It is a social matter. Every day we depend on others being educated, both for the practical things in life, and for our political freedom... Students with good test scores may not be well-educated people, much less become better freedom. (pp 87-88)

Shapiro (2008) condemns the alienation, boredom and stress produced among students by No Child Left Behind and states that the concept of school reform as a movement towards a more socially just society is “the ideology of mass distraction” (p. 18). Shapiro argues for public education that embraces children of all races and social classes without the inequalities that are exacerbated by the sorting and labeling of No Child Left Behind. He calls for classrooms that are dialogic, with the sharing of opinions and ideas, writing,

Believing in democracy means believing in the right of young people to be offered more in their education than memorization, “well behaved” passivity, and subject matter that speaks little to the real problems and issues that confront us today. (Shapiro, 2008, p. 19)

Consistent with Freire’s view of teaching as a political act, (1970/ 2009) Giroux (1994) believes that teachers should take the lead and work in solidarity, recognizing “the political nature of their own work” (p. 37). In reiterating the problems of schools as reflective of “corporate values and imperatives of the marketplace” (1994, p. 38) Giroux frames his

discussion as a social justice issue which creates an imperative for teachers to engage in dialogue and connect pressing social issues to their teaching. Giroux suggests that teachers work to “open up progressive spaces within classrooms, but also [form] alliances with other cultural workers in order to debate and shape public policy at the local, state and federal levels of government” (1994, p. 44). Giroux describes cultural workers as those who are “engaged in the production of ideologies and social practices” (2005, p.71).

### **Social Justice Teacher Activism and Unions as Activist Communities**

Monty Neil describes current assessment as “a civil rights issue” (2012, p. 21), as he calls for activism with parents, educators, students and communities acting in solidarity to change the system that is undermining our educational system. Edelsky (2006) describes current activism as an “Education Rights Movement” (p. 268) and calls for linked acts of resistance under an umbrella movement. Today’s teacher activism *is* political as teachers stand up to the neoliberal agenda and against attempts to dismantle public education. Unlike the earlier activism of Allen and Wright, more recent activists have widespread support as they operate in larger activist communities (Montano, Lopez-Torres, DeLissovoy, Pacheco & Stillman, 2002; Picower, 2012).

The role of teachers’ unions as activist communities cannot be discounted in the discussion of teacher activists. Lois Weiner (2012) an educator, researcher and union activist, implores teachers to rise up and use the power of their unions to fight for equity and social justice for their students. Weiner describes the neoliberal agenda as an “assault” on public education and argues for the need to have unions move beyond local issues that are popular with members and address more widespread social justice concerns.

For the purpose of her discussion, Weiner considers all educators who belong to teachers’ union as “teachers”, including school counselors, social workers, librarians, paraprofessionals,

etc. It is Weiner's contention that because teachers are "idea workers" (2012, p. 21) a goal of the neoliberal project is to destroy teacher autonomy and the "space it creates for critical thought and for ideas of freedom and social justice". She sees this as a central reason why banks and corporations seek to control teachers and teaching – the ability of the teacher to educate students who can think for themselves can impact social arrangements and challenge "the authority of elites who have an interest in maintaining their own power and privilege" (Weiner, 2012, p. 22).

While admitting that variations between schools and districts makes it impossible for her to provide a formula for activism or for the creation of what she calls social movement unions, she warns that in the face of stunning forces working against us, we must have the courage to try new strategies, such as the *flash grade-ins* spreading across the United States in recent years. During these demonstrations, teachers gathered to grade papers in public spaces on weekends with signs to let the public know that this is what they usually do on their non-working days (Weiner, 2012). She cites the need for teachers to visibly defend the social and civic purposes of education by explaining our needs "as workers and professionals in human terms" (p. 67). Weiner also calls upon teachers to examine both assumptions and actions and to challenge the pervasive discourse that is being used to diminish our profession and dismantle our schools.

Montano et al. (2002) studied activist groups as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and viewed the relationship between social justice teacher activism and teacher education programs. Their inquiry into the skills and knowledge teachers attained while engaging in political work and social justice activism as opposed to those brought to activism from a formal teacher education program is consistent with the earlier discussion of *praxis* – practicing what one theorizes while theorizing what one practices - becoming transformative educators through activism (Montano, et al., 2002).

### **Teachers as Political Beings in Action: Organizing for Change**

Picower's (2012) study of nine members of grassroots teacher activist groups revealed that "there is no clear path and the most helpful literature is often split across many disciplines" (p. 562). Teacher activism is conducted through strategies which include conferences, protests, rallies, study groups and collaboration with other stakeholders as more activist groups arise "to create liberatory educational environments and to fight increased inequality and oppression" (Picower, 2012, p. 561). Picower refers to the 2011 Save our Schools March in Washington, D.C. and states that, although there were thousands of teacher activists in attendance demonstrating the strength of teachers united, "many will show up once and go home" (p. 572). She concludes that activists she studied are not motivated by achieving a specific outcome, and realize that they need to continue to fight even in the face of losses. Rather, they are motivated by their vision for justice and their need to push back against oppression even if they do not see results in their lifetime.

Fleischer (2000) describes teachers as natural organizers, and provides strategies for teachers to organize for change, citing the need to become more political and to reach out to parents and to organize within communities. Routman (1996) views teachers as political beings

actively and thoughtfully entering the educational conversation... having the language and the knowledge to move beyond our classrooms and schools into the wider public area to state our case, ...carefully listening with open minds and being responsive to the public's concerns and questions,...knowing how and when to communicate and who to seek out for support,...using research and reason instead of emotion and extremist views, ...being professional in the highest sense. (Routman, 1996, p. xvi-xvii)

Gale & Densmore (2003) believe that teaching is "politically engaged, radical, critical, collaborative, context-aware, and committed to empowering everyone" (p.vii). The next section describes how those who are politically engaged have used social media to further their cause.

## @ IS for Activism: The Emerging Role of Social Media

### Social Media and the New Generation of Activism

In this section I describe studies of online political activism. Research involving activism in the age of social media is a relatively new area to be explored, but one that has seen an awakening interest as activists use the internet as a means to connect, share messages, seek information, tell their stories, and plan events. Since social media evolved from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 (Dijck, 2013) activists have made use of multiple social media sites, also known as platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as blogs, petitions, list serves and websites. While Web 1.0 technologies were focused on publishing, content management and websites, Web 2.0 technologies focus on social interaction and participation in the exchange of information and knowledge (Gunawardena, et al., 2009).

In his 2012 book, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of Political Advocacy*, Karpf provides an analysis of what he labels “the new generation of advocacy groups” (p. 4). Karpf based his study upon several years of ethnography, informant interviews, and content and text analysis. If, as previously discussed, we are to view teaching as a political act, then the results of his work could certainly be applied to teacher activism. A few key points from Karpf’s study are relevant to the current discussion. In addressing the use of the internet as a medium for activism, Karpf (2012) writes:

Formal organizations are no longer necessary since individual tactics like e-petitions can now be organized online and information can spread virally through social media channels like blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. In other words, we are all our own publishers and political organizers now. (p.7)

McCaughey and Ayers (2003) use the term *cyberactivism* to connect use of the internet to political organizing and social change. They contend that not only have political activists incorporated the internet into their repertoire, but they have changed what counts as activism.

Their research explored areas of collective identity, political strategy, leadership, the framing of political issues, and what is considered democratic space in the use of online social spaces for activism. These are all areas that can be applied to an inquiry into the use of online spaces for education activism.

Vegh (2003) situated his work in anti-globalization cyberprotests against the World Bank beginning in 1999. In those protests the internet was used widely to distribute information, organize, lobby, form coalitions, and mobilize in offline spaces at virtually no cost. Vegh classifies cyberactivism into three categories: Awareness/Advocacy, Organization/Mobilization, Action/Reaction. Awareness/Advocacy pertains to the distribution of information on the internet as a means to overcome the bias of mainstream media that is primarily controlled by those perceived as the opposition. Organization/Mobilization may consist of calls to mobilize offline, online actions such as mass e-mails, or the signing of petitions. It may also involve calls to action that involve spamming sites to saturate servers with messages, although this type of mobilization also falls into the third category of Action/Reaction. This last category is not as relevant to my study and involves the use of online attacks through *hacktivism* to achieve desired change. Hacktivism involves the unauthorized access to computers or sites for the purpose of gaining privileged information or defacing or hijacking websites or web platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Vegh, 2003), a tactic that is not evident in social spaces utilized by education activists that are the subject of my study.

The following specific examples of the use of social media in political activism serve to inform our understanding of how cyberactivism is being utilized to advance the cause of education activists.



### **Wisconsin and Public Unions in 2011**

As I will discuss in depth in chapter six, the 2011 legislation in Wisconsin severely curtailing the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions in Wisconsin resulted large protests (Karpf, 2012). Karpf describes the use of social media as a critical factor within this social movement. Cyberactivism involved a MoveOn.Org petition to remove the governor; the use of flip cameras to take videos of local protesters and share them on social media and local news stations; and the sharing of information by numerous bloggers. This combination of activism the Wisconsin governor's approval ratings to such a low point that Indiana's governor decided against seeking a similar budget move. According to Karpf (2012), lessons to be learned from this incident include the fact that internet enabled political organizing moves rapidly and that "Internet-mediated political organizing is hardly limited to blog posts and e-petitions" (p. 6).

Shirky (2009) asserts that the availability of digital media is changing how we interact, making coordination more likely than long term planning. He positions coordination as a tool which serves the activist community well. "The more ubiquitous and familiar a communication method is, the more real time coordination can come to replace planning, and the less predictable group reactions become" (p. 175).

### **Digitally Enabled Activism: The Role of Storytelling in Social Movements**

Harlow (2013) studied the use of social media platforms during the Arab Spring in Egypt and how online spaces were used to spread the narratives that led to uprisings throughout the Arab world. The study included viewing narratives spread through the platforms of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, and the replication and spread of memes that moved individuals to action during the 2011 uprising in Egypt. She explained that storytelling and narratives function as essential component of social movements. "Within social movement literature, storytelling has

been shown to be useful for creating a sense of shared identity, and for mobilizing people to action by making activism seem normative, or at the very least, attractive” (p. 60). Harlow discusses narratives created through social media in activist groups. She describes framing as an important part of storytelling for social movements because it aids in the construction of meaning not only attracting potential supporters, but also assisting the audience in understanding the problems and possible solutions.

The use of online social media during the Arab Spring... and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States hint at a new form of and space for storytelling, demanding further exploration of the role of narratives and new media technologies in activism... (p. 60)

Harlow concluded that Facebook pages were integral to the Arab Spring movement, framing the uprisings as a “Facebook Revolution” (p. 75).

Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthoefer & Moreno (2013) discuss the emergence of online social networks (OSNs) such as Facebook and Twitter as tools for political protests in 2011, which led to *Time* magazine dedicating its 2011 Person of the Year issue to the protestor. Communication in online spaces connected those in these protest movements, leading to offline events that were coordinated through social media.

Because the leadership of these movements came from the bottom up, not from the top of an organization, the editors chose the anonymous protestor rather than a particular individual; highlighting the role that technology played as a crucial part of the mobilizations. (Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthoefer & Moreno, 2013, p. 944)

Earl and Kimport’s (2011) examination of online activism studied online tactics such as e-petitions, letter writing campaigns and boycotts to understand how the internet has driven changes to organizing and participating as activists. A major finding of their study is that use of online spaces is a cost-effective means to engage in protests and allows participants to act

together without the need to physically *be* together. They acknowledge that there are still gaps in literature on activism, and that the lack of studies on protest success makes it impossible to compare the success of off – line vs. online actions, except through anecdotal claims.

The role of social media in creating successful action in response to issues involving education will be explored chapter six, as I provide specific examples of how digitally enabled education activism has been successful in creating results.

### **Summary**

Teacher activism has a long, rich history during which activist educators have shaped their identities by using education as a means for social transformation (Stanley, 2005). The positive impact of early teacher activists such as Allen and Wright in the areas of tenure, pension, improvement in gender equity for educators and school desegregation (Crocco, et al., 1999) are reenacted in the work of education activists in the current struggle to preserve the institution of public education. The methods of protest and resistance available to early activists were constrained by the lack of technology in those times, and did not provide the opportunities that this inquiry will be analyzing.

Social media platforms have become increasingly dominant forces in political activism as seen in the Wisconsin protests or in the 2011 Arab Spring. In recent years, online activism has transformed to incorporate education activism in response to the corporate education reform agenda. Consistent with the concept of *praxis*, current education activists are engaging in reflexive action and active reflection (Weltman, 2003) as they use social media to attempt to create and perpetuate a social movement that will create sustaining change in the current test and punish climate of education. Chapter six will focus on how social media has fueled online education activism and how various platforms have been utilized with varying degrees of

effectiveness in this movement. Of particular interest is how online education activist groups function in a manner that is consistent with offline groups and how existing research about offline groups can inform our understandings of interactions in online spaces, as discussed in chapter five.

## Chapter Five

### Online Social Networks: Digital Activist Groups as Communities of Practice

Online education activist groups are comprised of individuals who use social media as a means to share knowledge, interact, and plan actions based upon common goals, consistent with the definition of communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). In this chapter I will explore three digitally enabled education activist communities to show how they conform to definitions of communities of practice, with both the strengths and pitfalls of offline communities of practice.

#### What Are Communities of Practice and How Do They Function?

Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning; from a tribe around a campfire, to a medieval guild, to a group of nurses in a ward, to a street gang, to a community of engineers interested in brake design. Participating in these “communities of practice” is essential to our learning. It is at the very core of what makes us humans capable of meaningful knowledge. (Wenger, 2000, p. 229)

“*Community of practice* is an elusive term. Clearly, the term involves *communities*-collectives of people – and *practices* – frameworks of doing” (Rock, 2005, p. 77). In examining socially situated activity, Lave (1991) described communities of practice as sites of learning. One of the guiding questions of my research was how online education activist groups function as communities of practice. Wenger (1998) created a list of indicators that a community of practice has been formed. Analyzing the data I collected for my inquiry through the lens of these

indicators provided a means to evaluate conformity to Wenger's criteria in the online education activist groups I studied.

Gee (2005, 2007) refined the concept of communities of practice, using the label *affinity groups* or *affinity spaces* to describe online communities. Gee describes communities of practice as groups where novices learn through their interactions with more experienced members in the group. In contrast, he describes affinity groups as gatherings of members with a shared passion, with a wide range of valued expertise and shifts in roles between expert and novice. Gee (2005) proposes a need for a description of social spaces that do not carry the connotation of "membership" that is inherent in the concept of communities of practice. He explains that the notion of membership is not helpful since membership has various meanings which vary from one community of practice to another. Gee also takes issue with the wide array of social forms described as communities of practice by others, which confuses the issue of what actually can be considered a true community of practice as described by Wenger (1998). I mention the differences between the views of Gee and Wenger for the purpose of clarity and to eliminate any perception that both perspectives were not considered when the lens of communities of practice was chosen as a means to view online education activist groups.

Gee's discussion of affinity spaces, with flexible roles of expert and novice among the participants in each group, applies to some online activist groups. Gee describes social activists as organizing in affinity spaces, with vague boundaries between leaders and followers, which he calls porous leadership (2005). My experience as a participant in education activist groups utilizing Facebook, the most utilized social media platform for education activism, has been more consistent with a description of communities of practice than with Gee's defining features of affinity spaces. As a result, the remainder of my discussion will align with Wenger's (1997)

work along with that of Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) and Lave & Wenger (1991).

The indicators most applicable to online activist groups are:

- sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual
- shared ways of engaging and doing things together
- the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
- absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process
- knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
- specific tools, representations, and artifacts
- jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones
- certain styles recognized as displaying membership
- a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world

Social movements have been characterized as very large configurations which cannot be considered as one community of practice, but rather, exist as small, interconnected communities that can be viewed as a constellation, with individuals having memberships in multiple communities (Wenger, 1998; Rock, 2005). Wenger (1998) further describes communities of practice as *shared histories of learning*. His contention is that participation in a specific community of practice does not preclude membership in multiple groups, nor do the boundaries formed by membership preclude connections with the world outside of the community of practice. In discussing these shared histories of learning, Wenger states:

Over time, such histories create discontinuities between those who have been participating and those who have not. These discontinuities are revealed by the learning involved in crossing them: moving from one community of practice to another can demand quite a transformation. But practice does not create only boundaries. At the same time as boundaries form, communities of practice develop ways of maintaining connections with the rest of the world. (p. 103)

Situating their study in workplace organizations, McLure Wasko & Faraj (2000) have suggested that electronic communities of practice exist to share knowledge as a common good, writing, “When knowledge is considered a public good, knowledge exchange is motivated by

moral obligation and community interest rather than by narrow self-interest” (p. 155).

Application of this research to digital activist groups can serve as a basis to consider the implications of community interest vs. self-interest revealed by examination of the narratives created in those spaces. The conflict between community interest and self-interests in education activist groups can manifest as prioritizing the mission of a group over the ability to use a group for personal agendas or self-promotion. This becomes especially relevant in a later section where I provide examples of some of the disorders observed in online activist communities of practice.

In a study situated within professional virtual communities, Chiu, Hsu, & Wang (2006) explained:

Virtual communities are online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge and engage in social interactions. It is the nature of social interactions and the set of resources embedded within the network that sustains virtual communities. (p. 1873)

Chiu, et al. (2006) integrated Social Cognitive Theory and Social Capital Theory in their inquiry as to what motivates participants to share knowledge in virtual communities. They define social capital in these communities as “the network of relationships possessed by an individual or a social network and the set of resources embedded within it” (p. 1873) suggesting that social capital strongly influences the sharing of interpersonal knowledge. They further contend that the cognitive dimension of social capital is “manifested as shared vision and shared language” (p. 1873) with knowledge sharing in virtual communities of practice categorized as either receiving knowledge through viewing or giving knowledge through posting, with members functioning in both roles in a dynamic process.

Korhonen (2010) extends this discussion by describing the role of dialogue in virtual communities, depicting dialogic literacy as another form of social capital that contributes to the



sharing of knowledge. Gee (2007) contends that learning “is not just a matter of what goes on inside people’s heads but is fully embodied in (situated within) a material, social and cultural world (p. 9). He refers to this as *situated cognition*, which parallels Lave and Wenger’s (1991) discussion of situated learning in communities of practice and the concept of legitimate peripheral participation.

Lave (1991) views situated learning as creating meaning through real activities in a social setting, writing, “People process, represent, and remember in relation to each other and while located in a social world” (p. 66). A common thread among varying discussions about learning as it applies to communities of practice is that learning is a process which occurs in a particular framework. The social nature of learning is addressed through the contextualization of learning as mediated by the perspectives of the participants in a community. Under this definition, it is those participating in the context of the community who learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Relevant to the study of online digital activist groups is Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation in which learning is a situated activity.

For the purpose of my study, the concept of learning follows Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description:

Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call *legitimate peripheral participation*. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practice of a community... “Legitimate peripheral participation” provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts and communities of knowledge and practice. (p. 29)

**Discourse, Power and Identity in Communities of Practice**

Wenger (1998) uses the term *repertoire* to describe the set of shared resources of a community of practice. This repertoire includes “discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members” (p. 83). Tusting (2005) analyzed issues of power in online communities, exploring the relationship between identity and power and how this relationship is used to negotiate meaning. She contends that attention to the language used in communities of practice can offer a stronger understanding of power relationships within the community. It is significant, however, that the communities under discussion in these previously mentioned works are focused on groups in the workplace or in educational settings, and not online social spaces. Since power relationships are revealed in the online narratives in many activist groups, the idea of viewing language to determine power relationships becomes an especially important discussion.

Gunawardena, et al. (2009) studied the workings of online communities of practice by exploring their own use of social networking tools as they formed an online community to conduct their study. Situating their study in online platforms that includes Facebook, Flickr, and blogging sites, they considered social networking applications as “collective intelligence tools” used to solve problems. Framing their research within the context of sociocultural theory and social constructionist theory, they concluded that communities of practice utilizing social media spaces are ideal means of facilitating collaboration. For the purpose of their study they defined social constructionist theory as a belief “that the world is shaped by the dialogue and discourse we have with one another” (p. 7). In attempting to develop a theoretical framework to understand how groups of individuals use social media towards common goals, they gave consideration to

previous definitions of communities of practice applied to offline spaces (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

One of the important findings of the Gunawardena et al. study was that every online community of practice has its own discourse, with the communities shaped by the language used in them and with identity and power intertwined in the negotiation of meaning. Their study viewed the learning in the communities they considered through the structural elements of domain, community and practice as previously described by Wenger et al. (2002). In this structural framework, the domain represents the topic or common ground that is the focus of the community; the community is the group of people learning and engaging in discourse together; and the practice is the specific knowledge developed and shared in the community.

An inquiry into the nature of knowledge creation and sharing in online activist groups can be framed within the sociocultural view of learning, drawing upon the work of Lave (1991), Lave and Wenger (1991) and Gee (2007). Some areas of exploration include the relationships between participants in the group, the interactions that can be observed through the narratives shared in the groups, and the actions they inspire. Of particular interest is an examination of the roles of the established members of the community and those who are new, and how power is structured in digital activism, usually through the ability to moderate and occasionally censor the discourse.

An understanding of the nature of the relationships in these online spaces and how their discourse is mediated can inform our understanding of the dynamics of such groups. Since the ultimate goal of activism is to create change and to move beyond internal communication within online communities, it is necessary to understand how knowledge is communicated, how

language is used in social media activist groups and how language both contributes to and reflects the power structures of online spaces.

### **Leadership, Producers and Consumers in Communities of Practice**

Consistent with Gee's (2005) description of communities of practice as groups with defined roles of novices and experts, issues of leadership and power arise in online education activist communities. Gerbaudo (2012) studied the use of social media during specific movements: the 2011 Arab Spring, the 15-M Movement in 2011- 2012 in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in 2011. Focusing on the use of political movements non-inclusive of education issues, he differentiated between Facebook and Twitter as two of the main sources of social media activism, and described them as *choreography of assembly*, writing

The adoption of the term “choreography” crucially serves to indicate that the process of symbolic construction of public space... has not been entirely “spontaneous” or “leaderless” – as many pundits, journalists, activists and academics alike had suggested... Influential Facebook admins and activist tweeps have played a crucial role in setting the scene for the movements’ gatherings in public space, by constructing common identifications and accumulating or triggering an emotional impulse towards public assembly. (p. 13)

Gerbaudo (2012) observed that leaders in these online communities often do not want to be seen as leaders, but are nevertheless responsible for bringing coherence to participation in protest movements. This soft leadership is evident in both Facebook and Twitter, with Facebook functioning as a recruitment and training platform, and Twitter functioning for internal organization in activist communities. According to Gerbaudo, digital activist groups have leaders who initiate social movements, inspire actions and act as focal points for the group members. He describes social media as being hierarchal, following a “power law distribution” (p. 143) in which a very small minority is producing what is consumed by the great majority.

It is also worth noting that weblogs, more commonly called blogs, appear to follow the same power law distribution previously mentioned, with consumers largely outnumbering producers of this content. Davies and Merchant (2007) describe blogs as serving the needs of affinity groups, or creating their own communities of practice among bloggers. For the purpose of my study, blogs were investigated only in relation to other forms of social media on which they are shared, in the context of how those narratives contribute to education activism. Blogs will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, as I explore how the participatory culture of digital education activism has utilized on-line literacies and multimodalities to communicate shared meanings.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder's (2002) discussion of offline community coordinators and "thought leaders" (p. 78) parallels the structures observed in my study of online groups using Facebook for education activism. The function of these *thought leaders* as group administrators is often to admit members, moderate conversations, and sometimes remove members or censor comments. Application of principals from these previous studies enlightens the examination of leadership roles in the education activist groups in my study: Save Our Schools, United Opt Out, and Lace To The Top.

### **Viewing Three Education Activist Groups Through a Research Lens**

Since I first began observing and participating in education activist groups in 2011, I have witnessed both the emergence and in some cases, the demise of online education activist communities dedicated to fighting some aspect of corporate education reform. I began collecting screenshots of conversations occurring over approximately three years of various Facebook activist groups in which I was participating as a member and in some cases, as a Facebook group

administrator. In order to determine whether the online education activist groups I included in my study met the criteria to be considered as communities of practice I decided that my primary focus would be on three groups: Save Our Schools (SOS) , United Opt Out National (UOO) and Lace To The Top (LTTT). I selected these three specific groups for a variety of reasons which include specific differences between the history and workings of each gleaned first from my own experience participating in the groups, and later from interviews I conducted with a co-founder of each of the groups: Bess Altwerger from Save Our Schools; Peggy Robertson from United Opt Out and Kevin Glynn from Lace To The Top.

I first became aware of Save Our Schools (SOS) when Bess Altwerger, one of the founders of the group, spoke at a gathering at Hofstra University in April, 2011. After providing information about corporate education reform for attendees who were not aware of the reform agenda, Altwerger described the Save Our Schools Rally and March in Washington D.C. which was planned for July of that year to protest the intrusion of non-educators into our classrooms and the reform agenda that was not beneficial to children. It was the first I had heard about the upcoming event, which I later attended along with thousands of other educators, parents and concerned participants. As a result of the meeting at Hofstra I also became a co-administrator of a local Save Our Schools Facebook page.

Altwerger has had a long history of education activism, which includes researching corporate education reform writing extensively on the topic, including the previously referenced *Reading for Profit*. The founding of Save Our Schools was the result of alliances she had built during her years of education activism. One of the results of the 2011 SOS Rally and March in 2011 was the emergence of newly formed activists groups, often comprised of those who had first met at the D.C. event. It was Altwerger who first introduced me to Peggy Robertson's blog,

Peg with Pen. Robertson also has had a long history of education activism and has documented much of her activity on her blog. In August, 2011, two weeks after I returned from the SOS march, Robertson blogged about a new group she had established along with others she had met at the SOS event. This new group was called United Opt Out National.

Unlike Altwerger and Robertson, Lace To The Top co-founder Kevin Glynn did not have a long history of activism prior to creating the group. Glynn's history includes a period where he wrote standardized tests for PARCC, Pearson, and CTB McGraw-Hill. Glynn had also spent five years as a hedge fund trader prior to his teaching career. He became a teacher activist after experiencing the impact of corporate education reform on public education. I first became aware of Lace To The Top in the days before the 2013 Students Not Scores Rally in Port Jefferson Station, New York, during which many of the participants donned the symbolic green shoelaces, as discussed in my interview with Glynn.

Each of the three groups represented in my interviews utilized the Facebook platform for their activism. Before discussing the use of Facebook by these online education activist groups, some background will prove useful in the discussion of the groups, as each had a unique means of using the Facebook platform. The following sections will describe the options Facebook provides in terms of structure and privacy settings for users.

### **Facebook as a Social Media Platform for Education Activist Groups**

In order to accurately frame the discussion of Facebook as a social media platform utilized by education activist groups, it is important to establish the difference between Facebook pages and Facebook groups and how privacy settings are enabled for each. Posts and comments in both Facebook pages and groups appear in the notifications of those who 'like' the page or join as members of a group.

### Facebook Pages

Facebook pages were created to make it possible for businesses, organizations, public figures, or special interest groups to create a public presence without the need for membership in a group. There are specific defining characteristics of a Facebook *page* that differ from a Facebook *group*, as described below (Hicks, February 24, 2010).

- Users interact by simply *liking* the page with a single click of a Facebook button.
- One must be an official representative of the entity creating the page and fake pages are removed once investigated by Facebook staff members.
- Page creators have the sole ability to control the content of the page by deciding who has the ability to post and by moderating the discussions on the page.
- Facebook pages are visible to everyone on the internet, unlike Facebook groups, which provide a variety of privacy options for users.

### Facebook Groups

Facebook groups are created for the purpose of communicating, sharing common goals or interests or expressing opinions. The characteristics of Facebook groups are described below (Hicks, February 24, 2010).

- There is no requirement that one be an official representative of an entity to create a Facebook group.
- Groups are formed for members to share common causes, issues, organize, post photos, and share content.

As discussed in the interviews I conducted with leaders of three education activist groups, both the page and the group format have been utilized for sharing knowledge and communicating to members of their offline organizations.

### Privacy Options in Facebook Groups

The creator of a Facebook group determines the privacy settings to be applied to the group, choosing from public, closed, or secret. As described on the Facebook help page



(<https://www.facebook.com/help/412300192139228/>), each privacy setting has specific characteristics.

- Public Privacy Setting
  - Anyone can search for the group, read the posts and comments in the group, and can request to join or be added by another group member.
  - Administrators may choose to approve the addition of new members.
  - One must become a member of the group in order to interact in the group by posting, commenting, or reacting to other members' posts.
  - This is the least private of all Facebook group settings.
  
- Closed Privacy Setting
  - Anyone can search for the group
  - New members must be approved by the group administrators.
  - Only current members can see what has been posted in the group, post new content, or comment
  
- Secret Privacy Setting
  - This is the least used setting, primarily reserved as an online meeting space for group administrators or for those who chose to share information with only a small select group of like minded activists.
  - Groups cannot be found in a search by anyone but current and former members.
  - Membership is only available through an invitation issued by a current member of the group.
  - Once a group reaches 5,000 members, privacy setting cannot be made less restrictive in order to protect members from having their posts viewed by unintended audiences.

The next sections will include discussion of the three digitally enabled education activist groups that were the focus of my study.

## **Background, History and Structure of Three Education Activist Groups**

### **Save Our Schools**

According to Altwerger, (personal communication, January 30, 2016) the Save Our Schools group began as an outgrowth of activist Jesse Turner's walk to Washington D.C. in 2010 under the banner of *Our Children Are More Than Test Scores*. Altwerger knew Turner professionally and they planned receptions to share Jesse's message in the D.C. area along with other activists, including Sabrina Joy Stevens, who became one of the founding members of Save Our Schools. During this period they discussed the possibility of a march the following summer, focusing on the idea of having a large number of people march to D.C. along with Turner.

As the idea and planning of a large event for 2011 began to come to fruition, other long time education activists joined the group including Anthony Cody, Rick Meyer, Laurie Murphy, and Bob George. During the initial year Save Our Schools functioned as a campaign, not as an organization, according to Altwerger. Over time an organizational plan was created, along with a committee structure with an executive committee and sub committees to do the required work to plan the event, which was called the Save Our Schools March and National Call to Action. This group of individuals who had a shared passion for the movement they were creating decided they needed demands, which have held as the group's principles to this day.

The Save Our Schools administrators immediately created a website and a Facebook page. They utilized Twitter to share information, but a primary source of ongoing contact with those who joined Save Our Schools was the platform Constant Contact ([constantcontact.com](http://constantcontact.com)) which allowed mass emails and announcements to be sent to all those added to the contact list. Altwerger described this as the group's main communication strategy because it allowed the group to contact all members without having to wait for members to visit the website or

Facebook page for updates. Another strategy to share information was the use of a group of volunteers serving as information coordinators, each handling the distribution of information in a specific area. Information coordinators attended regular online meetings which were held using the website Go To Meeting (<https://gotomeeting.com>), which provided the ability to share and edit documents, respond in a chat box, or interact through videos or audio exchanges. An online platform was also utilized for webinars, which became an important way to raise funds for the 2011 D.C. rally and march.

In discussing the value of Facebook as a platform for Save Our Schools, Altwerger described the page as one that has not been particularly effective for the group. The group's Facebook page restricts the ability to post to specific members within the organizational structure, which tends to discourage online participation by members. The need to rely on visits by members also negatively impacts both the Facebook page and the group's website.

As Altwerger explained:

I think when you open posting to anybody more people go to the page because they want to post something. Otherwise, if they don't turn on their notifications they don't know what is being posted. So that is a problem for us right now. It's not as effective as we'd like. And I don't think the website is as effective as it could be, although I think we have a really good website right now... Any use of social media where you have to trust they are coming to you rather than you going to them can be less effective than you want it to be.

As the structure of Save Our Schools changed to reflect the movement from a campaign to a formal organization with official nonprofit status the original executive committee was replaced by a steering committee. The leadership was elected by the members, making Save Our Schools the only education activist group I studied or participate in with an elected leadership. The steering committee is in charge of the day to day operations of the organization such as determining positions and actions, communicating with members, and running the website.

There is also a board of advisors with the specific task of performing as a means of checks and balances as they think through larger policy issues and provide oversight to the steering committee. Steering committee members and advisory board have sole privileges to post on the group's Facebook page.

In describing the organization's structure, Altwerger emphasized that theirs is a very democratic process. The national director, the secretary and the treasurer are also on the board. These officers attend board meetings and the information coordinators always have a representative with voting power sitting on the steering committee. In an effort to avoid previous issues where groups represented in the organization were able to caucus and gain control in the decision making process, a newly formed coalition of groups including Save Our Schools was structured to allow each organization represented, and not each individual, to have an equal vote as they planned an event in Washington D.C. for 2016.

#### **United Opt Out National:**

As described by Peggy Robertson (personal communication, May 5, 2016) the national United Opt Out (UOO) group was formed after Robertson attended the 2011 Save Our Schools event in Washington D.C., and began researching opt out movements and brainstorming a path to creating a national movement. The concept of opting out involves parents refusing to allow their children to take high stakes tests as a means of denying collection of data that can be used to sort and label children, teachers, schools, and school districts. While the term *opt out* is now well known, at the time there was not a great deal of discussion about the ability to refuse high stakes tests. Prior to the creation of United Opt Out, Robertson was a member of The Learning Network (TLN) list serve, which is an on line email exchange comprised of educators interacting to exchange ideas, experiences or to seek solutions to issues they encounter in their schools. In

August, 2011, Robertson asked fellow list serve members if there was any interest in helping to create a group to spearhead an opt out movement. Morna McDermott responded positively and offered to help. Robertson described the initial process:

So the idea I had was to start a Facebook group, have a file for each state and fill those files with information and specific legislation and educational statutes that would inform parents and teachers and anyone how to fight back and opt out of state tests. And so it started. ..I got the page up, I added Morna as an admin and we started helping parents. It went absolutely viral and we added more people to help us because we couldn't handle it and that's kind of how it began.

A Facebook group was chosen as the social media platform because members could be easily added; there were settings to control the privacy, which included the ability for administrators to determine whether the group would be public or closed; and there was an ability for members to add document or photo files. The ease of organizing and accessing files by state and the fact that the platform was free were factors considered when Robertson explored other options. Following the launching of the Facebook group, United Opt Out's social media presence expanded across platforms. At the time of our interview, UOO was utilizing both a Facebook group and a Facebook page. A secret Facebook group was also set up just for the Opt Out Leaders – those who assisted the group by creating the opt out guides for each state and functioning as contacts for specific state-related questions. United Opt Out maintained a vibrant Twitter presence which Robertson described as very useful, as explained in the discussion of Twitter in Chapter 6. The group utilized Google Docs to create a group to share information for their annual conferences. The organization had a website which was also the repository for the group's blog. Changes in leadership in the group since the time of my interview with Robertson have resulted in some shifts in the organization, including the creation of a new website that

differs from the website Robertson described in the interview. For the purpose of my research, I continue to discuss the group as it existed during my data collection.

Since a Facebook group allows members to post (begin new discussions, known as *threads* on Facebook) and comment on the posts of others, the UOO Facebook group invited much interaction and discussion. In choosing privacy settings for the Facebook group, Robertson explained that the Facebook group was set up as a *public* group, where anyone can access the page, see the list of members, and read the posts and comments. This served as a means to educate the public about opting out, while providing protection for those who feared being identified as members or commenting in a public forum. In explaining the reasoning behind the decision to create a public group, Robertson stated:

Our group is public because we decided that we'd rather have it public and get the word out than hide it and people not have access. Because I know a lot of people would go to that page and they don't join it, but they read it. We're so careful. We thought that was really important in the beginning and if people have things to say they can private message us... for people who don't feel comfortable putting it out in public.

As determined by the structure of the Facebook platform, those who wished to post or comment in the group had to join the group, which involved approval by an administrator. In order to be approved, a potential member had to be supportive of public education and aligned to the goals of the group. As discussed later, sometimes members who were not a good fit for the group were removed after joining. The public privacy setting enabled those who did not want to be found on the member list to read all of the content without joining the group.

Although opt out Facebook groups also exist for individual states or regions, the administrators of United Opt Out were not responsible for creating any of those groups.

Robertson felt that this speaks to the success of UOO, explaining:

We do not moderate or create any state pages and I think this is part of our success because we build leadership and confidence and trust and people go out and do this. I think that when you control all these pieces it becomes really, really difficult for people to feel empowered and take a leadership role... and I think that is part of our success because it truly became a people's movement. There's no control there.

In terms of structure and governance, United Opt Out had no more than eight administrators at a time. Robertson explained that some of the UOO administrators had been involved with the earlier Save Our Schools committees and felt that having so many people involved made it more difficult to have an efficient decision making process. There was a strong effort to ensure that the organization's leadership was diverse and represented elementary, high school and college level educators who share progressive values and were committed to the mission of reclaiming public schools and improving them. After the initial group of administrators assumed their positions, some left and new leaders were later added. Those remaining had to agree that they had complete trust that the newly recommended administrator shared their beliefs and goals. Decisions in the group were typically made by voting and agreeing on a course of action. While disagreements did occur, the connection and trust between the members usually resulted in amicable resolutions.

In addition to the eight administrators who are responsible for decision making about the organization, there were a few volunteers who assisted in the administration of the Facebook group by admitting new members and moderating conversations. Those members were not part of the organization's decision making process. I served in the capacity of Facebook group administrator for approximately eighteen months and gained additional insight into the group's workings during that time which further informed my understandings of this group as a community of practice.

**Lace To The Top:**

According to Glynn (personal communication, August 3, 2015) the seeds of Lace To The Top (LTTT) were planted with the NYS 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA test administered in April, 2012. In a widely publicized incident dubbed by some media as “Pineapplegate” (Haimson, 2012), a copy of a passage from the April, 2012 New York State English Language Arts Test for eighth grade was leaked and spread online. The passage, titled “The Hare and the Pineapple,” ended by stating that the moral was “Pineapples don't have sleeves” and was widely criticized as one that made no sense and required students to answer questions that were deliberately confusing (Chapman & Monahan, 2012) . The New York State Education Department responded by invalidating that passage and releasing the passage and questions for public view.

On June 8, 2013 approximately 10,000 educators, parents, and students traveled to Albany, New York to attend a rally in support of public education, sponsored by the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). Reacting to the Hare and the Pineapple fiasco, teachers Kevin Glynn and Anthony Griffin attended the rally dressed as a pineapple and a hare. In addition to making a statement about the validity of high stakes tests, Glynn had another reason for appearing in costume. As he explained:

Behind the scenes I had worked with state ed, I had worked for PARCC. I had worked for Pearson, I had worked for CTB McGraw-Hill making tests and I was somebody they really knew so it was ... basically like a coming out party. I explained to Anthony exactly how this was affecting kids in third grade. His son was moving into third grade and he could see a lot of it taking place and he wanted in on it. It started out as a gimmick, but what it did was it gave us a small audience.

On the bus ride home the pair read numerous social media posts about their costumed appearance, and enjoyed the large amount of positive feedback. But as Glynn explained, the excitement of the rally became overshadowed on the bus ride home by a focus on the Kentucky



Derby which was happening on the same day. Glynn and Griffin wanted to continue the momentum of the Albany event. They were aware that teachers' voices in New York were being silenced by state union leadership that was telling them speaking about refusing state tests, openly supporting the growing opt out movement, or criticizing the Common Core Standards could result in disciplinary action (personal communication, October 6, 2013). "We were told as teachers you cannot say opt out; you can't take a position against the Common Core. There was a lot of fear put into what teachers were told to keep them in place." Determined to find a message that teachers could embrace without fear of retribution, they decided upon the positive message that students are more than a test score, symbolized by the wearing of green shoelaces. Confident that this was a message that union leadership could support, Glynn and Griffin moved forward in creating the Lace To The Top Facebook group and began sharing the symbolism of green laces. The group's title was a deliberate pun, suggestive of the federal Race to the Top program that brought unpopular mandates, as discussed in Chapter 3. As Glynn explained this was a message that teachers could promote without being warned by NYSUT to remain silent.

The message was one embraced by the teachers' unions, including the incumbent NYSUT president, Richard Iannuzzi, who was hoping for a victory in an upcoming election. Iannuzzi donned green laces and, comfortable with a stance that did not directly counter the politically accepted education reform agenda, spoke at an August 2013 rally in Port Jefferson Station held to protest the manipulated test scores released in NY indicating that 70% of students in grades 3-8 were failures. And as the message spread, local unions asked to become part of the movement, with many purchasing green lanyards in support of the message for those who did not wear laced shoes. Similar to Robertson's comment about opt out being the people's movement,

Glynn encouraged others to own their own message and symbols, with no control by Lace To The Top other than the message *students are more than a test score*.

Unknown to those who joined Lace To The Top in its early days, the founders planned to flip the message to support the opt out movement once membership numbers grew. Glynn explained that the climate wasn't favorable at the time the group was founded for teachers to speak out against Common Core or in support of opting out. Many were fearful and felt safe in the Lace To The Top group because there was no risk in the positive message that children are more than test scores. Lace To The Top didn't initially emerge as an opt out or anti Common Core group because neither was considered permissible inside a school, but once the membership grew the atmosphere seemed more conducive to embracing the opt out movement. Glynn explained:

When your president of the entire teachers' union for New York is wearing these green shoelaces you're given a podium that most don't have and even though they may not love the fact that you're saying "Opt Out" they really can't take a position against you, especially since he (Iannuzzi) was up for reelection.

Early in 2014, Lace To The Top began sharing the opt out message, encouraging members of the group to refuse high stakes tests as an extension of the message that children are more than test scores. By the time of our interview, Glynn felt that LTTT had ceased to be a movement and had become more of a newsfeed, but also felt it had successfully spread the message that students were more than test scores and had successfully supported the opt out movement. Having grown Lace To The Top to accomplish his goal of support and awareness, he said he no longer even wears his green laces. In June, 2016, the administrators of the Facebook group decided to close the group's page, leaving posts available for members to read, but with no new posts permitted on the page.

When I asked Glynn about why a Facebook group was chosen as their social media platform, he said the success of other activist groups and the ease of creating a group and adding members were all factors. Initially LTTT was a public group, but some members felt that their interactions were being watched by their school administrators, so he changed the group's privacy setting to closed. Glynn emphasized that members were told that there is no way to protect anyone interacting on social media, but members have the perception that in a closed room they were keeping the enemy outside. The group also maintained a Twitter account and a blog (<https://lacetothetop.wordpress.com/>).

When asked about the structure of the group and how decisions were made, Glynn said that he and co-founder Griffin were very like minded and never had a disagreement about decisions. At the time of our interview there were two other administrators for the Facebook page: Rahana Schmalacker and Kristin Kirk Murphy. Although all four had the ability to approve posts, Schmalacker and Murphy usually deferred to Glynn and Griffin before allowing posts to appear. Since the group did not exist as a formal organization outside of the Facebook group, there was no official structure or hierarchy within the group.

One of the largest differences between the three groups I considered in this section was how each group approached their Facebook presence and the ability of members to post on their Facebook pages or in their Facebook groups. As stated previously, Save Our Schools maintained a Facebook page with no provision for members to post content, although they could comment on the page. United Opt Out maintained both a Facebook group and Facebook page. Both allowed any member who joined the group or liked the page to post and comment, without prior approval. Lace To The Top maintained a Facebook group and allowed members to post and comment, but posts had to be approved by one of the group's administrators prior to appearing.

Comments on existing posts required no approval but were monitored by the group's administrators.

### **Summary**

In viewing these education activist groups, it is apparent that the origins, organizational structure and use of social media are unique to each group. The next section will discuss the commonalities of these three groups within the context of Wenger's (1998) indicators that a community of practice has been formed. The issues of power, identity and censorship in online activist communities of practice will also be explored. A later section will view these same groups through the lens of the pitfalls described by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) as they studied common disorders of communities of practice.

### **Community of Practice Indicators and Online Education Activist Groups**

On October 18, 2015, a member of Lace To The Top Facebook group posted the comment "For those who said this was fake, there's more, along with a link to a New York Post article containing a photograph and the headline "Principal forbids teachers to sit – so she threw out their desks." This thread, which I refer to as *Principal Takes Desks*, was a discussion of information that had just been revealed on social media involving a situation in a New York City school, which I describe in detail in Chapter 6.

The discussion thread that ensued involved 78 different group members engaging over a period of approximately 40 hours. Fifty nine members *liked* the post, signifying acknowledgment that the information had been provided. In February, 2016, reaction emojis (small digital images used in electronic communications) were added to Facebook to allow members to express emotions evoked by a post, but until that time the only way to respond to a post without commenting was to hit the *like* button. As members responded to the original post, a section of

the comments shared below illustrates the discussions that occur in online education activist groups. For the purpose of anonymity, I have replaced names with commenter numbers.

Commenter 1: Wonder if the principal also gave up her desk and filing cabinet... just saying.

Commenter 2: This is appalling! Absolutely abusive! She should be fired and made an example of.

Commenter 3: The NYC Public Advocate office is going to investigate this.

Commenter 4: Is the teacher supposed to put all the kids work on the floor? Wear her pocketbook all day on her shoulder? Tuck pens behind her ear? This is the most ridiculous think I have ever heard.

Commenter 5: Thankful for the pictures as evidence. Isn't this abuse?

Commenter 4: Also - from a taxpayer stand- those desks belong to the taxpayers. They are not the property of the principal to do as she wishes. That is destruction of property and misuse of funds.

Commenter 5: Commenter 4 (identifies by name) you are so right. She can't just throw things out. She should be FIRED!!! I won't write the expletives I am thinking.

Commenter 4: Any person in her district should type out a bill and send it to her signed, "The Taxpayers."

Commenter 5: Get it started on social media – make it go viral. That is INSANE & INHUMANE! I am LIVID and I don't live in the Bronx!!!!

Commenter 6: Since a NYC principal tried to end my career (but failed) and since I am no longer in the BOE, I volunteer to go to the Bronx school and drag the principal's desk out into the garbage... and then follow it up by dragging the principal there as well. LOL

Commenter 4: What school is this do they have a Facebook page?

Original Poster: Guess teachers with disabilities like back problems need to sue for discrimination. Not kidding.

Commenter 4: I know! We can start calling the Assemblyman/woman of that district and demand the cost be refunded to the taxpayers of that district.

Commenter 7: I'd go sit at her desk to do the increasing amounts of paperwork they add to my job every semester. The staff should tape a schedule to the side of her desk and sign up to use it.

Commenter 4: What district is that school in? Who is the local elected officials – let's post on their page.

Commenter 4: Riverdale, NY.

Commenter 5: Hostile work environment! I'm sharing this far and wide. Sent it to folks running for office. We have lost all common sense and sense of human kindness. Demand her resignation! She shouldn't be anywhere near children, teachers, or animals!

Commenter 6: I agree... I wonder if she attended the Principal's Leadership Academy...

Commenter 4 then posted a link to the Facebook page of the Assemblyman for the district in which the school is located and commented that she had posted about the situation on his Facebook page. Others thanked her for the information and indicated that they were also commenting on the Assemblyman's Facebook page. For the next two hours comments focused on reasons why teachers need their desks and file cabinets, such as for grading papers, filing confidential documents and conferencing with students. As the conversation progressed, more comments focused on the principal and the disrespect for the teachers involved.

Commenter 8: Another top notch decision maker who appears better suited for a charter school in Florida.

Commenter 7: She's afraid you'll have a place to keep the grievance paperwork you're going to file because she chucked out your desk. Pre-emptive strike.

Commenter 9: I bet she has a fantastic chair she gets to luxuriate in after ruining careers with rubrics.

Commenter 10: This is not about getting creative. This is about power and control.

Members shared the principal's email address and phone number from the school website, suggesting that those reading contact her. By the second day of discussion quite a few of the comments repeated those from the first day, suggesting that commenters weren't reading through the discussion thread before participating. The discussion ended when it was reported that the desks had been brought back into the school and stored in the basement. I discuss the resolution of this situation in chapter 6. This Facebook discussion thread provides useful information when analyzing relationships and interactions within this online community, as I describe in a later section.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, in analyzing the screenshots and interviews collected from each of the groups, I considered the list of indicators that a community of practice had been formed as described by Wenger (1998) in his discussion of workplace communities. I utilized nine of Wenger's fourteen indicators for the purpose of my study, focusing on those generally most applicable to online communities and omitting only those which were somewhat redundant or which didn't apply to online spaces. It should be noted that Wenger (1998) provided the list of indicators without a specific description of each, leaving definitions somewhat open ended. In order to view the groups through the lens of these indicators, I considered the information provided in the interviews as well as multiple screenshots of Facebook threads from the groups, where applicable. The screenshots considered for this study were collected over a two year period, beginning in October, 2013. Since Save Our Schools differs from United Opt Out and Lace To The Top in its use of social media and member comments are infrequent and do not generate extended threads, I applied the indicators to the Altwerger interview without the use of Save Our School Facebook threads.

Multiple screenshots from the United Opt Out and Lace To The Top Facebook groups were analyzed along with the interviews. This is consistent with Wenger's (1998) caution that viewing one specific conversation or activity attributes too much importance to the moment and fails to capture "broader continuities in time and among people" (p. 125). This sampling of online education activist groups provides a window into how these groups function as communities of practice as aligned with Wenger's indicators and provides representative data for limited use in application to broader continuities.

When applying Wenger's (1998) indicators to the above mentioned Facebook discussion threads and the interview transcripts, each community of practice indicator (CPI) considered for

this study was numbered from 1-9, resulting in the following codes:

- CPI 1 sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual
- CPI 2 shared ways of engaging and doing things together
- CPI 3 the rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
- CPI 4 absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process
- CPI 5 knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
- CPI 6 specific tools, representations, and artifacts
- CPI 7 jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones
- CPI 8 certain styles recognized as displaying membership
- CPI 9 a shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world

In order to analyze the interview transcripts, specific representative statements were coded to reflect Wenger's indicators. These same codes were then applied to the collected screenshots of Facebook threads (conversations) with specific posts or comments marked on the printed Facebook threads and recorded by indicator. In order to apply Wenger's indicators to online activist groups I created a table of Wenger's indicators, grouping each of the coded segments of the interviews and archived Facebook threads with the applicable indicators (See Appendix C). This provided a visual overview that enabled me to explore the nature of each indicator within these on line communities. The interviews were designated on the table by group and interviewee, with UOO-PR indicating the interview United Opt Out's Peggy Robertson, LTTT – KG indicating the interview with Lace To The Top's Kevin Glynn, and SOS-BA indicating the interview with Save Our School's Bess Altwerger. Where applicable, the interview question number was also coded for each indicator. The online discussions were numbered in chronological order for each group, with Facebook threads recorded as UOO 1-8



and LTTT 1-5 to represent eight United Opt Out discussion threads and five Lace To The Top discussion threads.

A key was generated for the thirteen threads, providing the group name, name assigned to the thread and the date of the original post (see Appendix B). The Facebook discussion threads are described briefly as follows:

- UOO 1: The original post began on April 29, 2015. A group administrator clarified the mission of the group and warned members that comments reflecting opposition to the group's mission would be deleted. Thirty three members engaged in the conversation over a period of approximately 24 hours, with six of the group's Facebook administrators included in the discussion.
- UOO 2: The original post began on June 22, 2015. The discussion revolved around a member's accusation of censorship because her earlier post, an advertisement for on-line schooling, was removed. Thirteen members engaged in the discussion over a period of approximately 7 hours with three of the group's Facebook administrators entering the discussion.
- UOO 3: The original post began on September 6, 2015. A member attempted to discredit bloggers and those sharing blogs in the group. Six members engaged in the conversation, which continued for eight hours, at which time the thread was deleted by a group administrator when the original poster became abusive.
- UOO 4: The original post began on September 18, 2015 when a member discussed the Dyett hunger strike in Chicago. Eight members were involved in the discussion, spanning approximately 26 hours. The thread ended without intervention by administrators.
- UOO 5: The original post began on September 19, 2015. A member posted an article defining "concern trolling" (participation by members for the purpose of creating dissent in readers) and warned members to remain alert for trolls in the group. Only six members engaged in the discussion, which spanned approximately eighteen hours. The thread was self limiting, with no intervention by an administrator.
- UOO 6: The original post began on September 20, 2015. The original post was a criticism that administrators need to "police" the page and disallow discussions not about opting out. In a discussion that spanned 6 hours, nine members participated, including two of the Facebook group administrators.
- UOO 7: The original post began on September 20, 2015. In a pattern that seemed to be a continuation of the previous thread, a member posted to complain about concern trolling and asked for censorship of all posts not directly about opting out. Fifteen members participated in the discussion over a period of three hours. Members discussed the appearance of numerous similar posts as deliberate trolling. The discussion terminated when an administrator of the Facebook group announced that the entire United Opt Out Facebook group was going to be deleted because of posts like this.

- UOO 8: The original post began on September 20, 2015 with an automatic Facebook post that the privacy setting of the group had been set to Secret. Twenty five members participated in a two hour discussion during which UOO founder Peggy Robertson explained that negative forces were co-opting the group's work and the administrators had to delete each member individually to delete the group. Members were directed to the group's Facebook page for continued participation and information.

A description of each of the United Opt Out National's Facebook discussion threads follows.

- LTTT 1: The original post began on October 6, 2013. Discussion revolved around UOO founder Peggy Robertson sharing opt out information in the Lace To The Top group and LTTT administrators stating LTTT did not support opting out. Eighteen members participated in the conversation which spanned 21 hours. The group administrators interacted throughout the thread which ended with one of the administrators calling the conversation a "productive debate."
- LTTT 2: The original post began on November 7, 2013 with a member discussing the need for more concern about the Common Core Standards. There were nineteen participants in the discussion, which spanned 15 hours. There was no input from the group's administrators.
- LTTT 3: The original post began on February 24, 2014 with a post by an administrator of a different activist group after discussions in the other group caused many members to leave. Serving as a strong example of the connection between groups – the "connected constellations" Wenger (1998) discusses, this discussion thread attracted twenty one commenters over a period of 10 hours. Although this was an extremely contentious discussion, at no time did any of the group administrators comment or moderate the conversation.
- LTTT 4: The original post began on March 29, 2015 with an article about UFT president Michael Mulgrew's response to the 2015 NYS budget, which was not favorable to public education. There were 24 participants in the discussion over a period of 11 hours. The administrators did not moderate the discussion, which included some strong criticism of teachers for not being outspoken enough against education reforms.
- LTTT 5: The original post began on October 18, 2015, with a post about the NYS school principal who removed desks from teachers' classrooms and had them thrown out. There were 78 participants in this discussion over a period of almost 40 hours. This incident is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

### **Privacy and Ethical Considerations in Sharing Data from Online Discussions**

As mentioned in my discussion of methodology in Chapter 2, when analyzing conversations in social spaces ethical considerations require the use of access restrictions and the

scrubbing of data to remove personally identifiable information. As in my earlier example, in instances where I discuss specific conversations to provide examples of interactions that reflect Wenger's indicators, actual screenshots are not shared but summaries or quotes from the conversation are included, or participants are identified only as *Commenter #x* without the use of participants' names.

## **Online Education Activist Groups As Communities of Practice**

### **Sustained Mutual Relationships**

The first of Wenger's indicators was *the presence of sustained mutual relationships, whether harmonious or conflictual*. For the purpose of this section I will avoid discussion of conflictual relationships, since this will be addressed in the later discussion of disorders in communities of practice. It should be noted that a group can still function as a community of practice if there is dissent within the group, as discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The *Principal Takes Desks* (LTTT 5) discussion thread that introduced the earlier Community of Practice Indicators and Online Education Activist Groups section is representative of many of Wenger's community of practice indicators, including the presence of sustained relationships. Although the Lace To The Top Facebook group is no longer active, access to the member list is still available to those who joined the group prior to the June 2016 closing. I was able to determine from the member list that eight of the ten participants in the *Principal Takes Desks* discussion thread are still listed and seven of the eight were members for three years. The eighth member joined two years ago. The total number of members remained consistent throughout the group's active period, hovering a little above the 13,000 mark, indicating sustained relationships between the members.

Interviews with leaders from all three of the activist groups I studied also revealed the

presence of these sustained mutual relationships, both in the leadership and in the general membership of the groups. In SOS, there have been sustained relationships among the general membership, the group's leadership, and the information coordinators, as described by Altwerger.

We had this thing we called information coordinators and we found that these were the people who volunteered to be the information distributors in each of the areas and at one point we had fifty, then a hundred, maybe more... and they would have regular on line meetings.

Over five years since its inception, Save Our Schools is still in existence much in its original form, although it has grown to be part of a coalition of other activist groups in addition to maintaining its separate identity. The relationships in this group were initially built around shared dissatisfaction with the impact of corporate education reform on public education and the desire to create change. The carryover of sustained mutual relationships that began in Save Our Schools resulted in the formation of United Opt Out. In speaking about the UOO founders and how they eventually formed their team of administrators, Robertson explained that many of the original group administrators had been on the "SOS beginning committees." As I will discuss at a later point United Opt Out has undergone changes since my data was collected, but the group in its original iteration was sustained for five years and still continues to function as an activist community. The relationships in United Opt Out were built around the common goal of refusing high stakes tests as a means to end corporate control of public schools and to deny the data needed to identify schools as failing and turn them over to charter school operators. At its height, the group had almost 20,000 members, many of whom joined when the group formed in 2011.

Lace To The Top was formed around a shared mission of using the symbol of green laces to signify that children are more than test scores. The group was rooted in dissatisfaction by

educators and parents with the emphasis on high stakes testing. As the group drew members who were in agreement about testing, online relationships were formed and sustained with new members joining and others leaving during the almost three years of its existence as a social media presence.

### **Shared Ways of Engaging in Doing Things Together.**

Wenger's second indicator is the presence of *shared ways of engaging in doing things together*. Members of the online education activists groups I studied participate through the shared social media platforms utilized by each group. The structure of those groups requires that some members post information to share knowledge or pose problems, and other members add to the post with their own comments. The posting of articles, blogs, photographs, memes, videos, and documents is a shared means of engagement in each group, both in the Facebook platform and the websites maintained by SOS and UOO.

Shared ways of engaging in doing things was seen in the *Principal Takes Desks* thread as members collaborated to create action to correct a situation they collectively viewed as egregious. While expressing their opinions about the situation, members also researched and shared contact information for the offending principal, provided contact information for the local Assemblyman, and reported back on the thread after taking action.

In the United Opt Out group, conversations have tended to focus on resources for refusing high stakes tests, legislation or actions by political figures related to education and opting out, and advice for those who were experiencing difficulty. Opt Out Guides, which serve as shared resources for addressing these issues, are stored in the Files section of the UOO Facebook group, with a guide for each state.

### **Rapid Flow of Information and Propagation of Innovation**

A third indicator that a community of practice has been formed is *a rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation*. Again using the *Principal Removes Desks* thread from LTTT as an example, the thread begins with a post intended to provide information about a situation that has been questioned as valid in prior group discussions. The original poster provides a link to an online article about the situation, with the comment, “For those who said this was fake – here’s more.” The entire online conversation spanned approximately 40 hours, and in that time participants provided:

- an article discussing the desk and file cabinet removal
- background of the school culture
- the history of the principal involved
- the timeline of events from the original incident to the return of the desks for storage
- information about how the story became known to the media
- a link to a blog which shared more details about the story
- contact information for the principal (email and school phone #)
- assurance that the NYC Public Advocate Office was investigating the issue
- contact information for the Assemblyman representing the area in which the school was located

The activist group leaders I interviewed described the initial purpose of their groups as sharing information, educating parents and teachers about corporate education reform and mobilizing members to enact means of resistance. Sharing in online groups is rapid because information is posted as it occurs, sometimes a minute by minute basis. Members can access information rapidly with a few clicks of a mouse. As one member commented in a UOO thread on April 29, 2015 “I joined so I can be educated more. There are some great eye-opening posts.” In some ways members of online activist groups have found social media a better source of information than mainstream media due to its accuracy and immediacy. As seen in the LTTT *Principal Removes Desks* thread, members update situations as they are occurring.

Glynn referenced this flow of information in his interview, describing Lace To The Top as a group where teachers could join under the umbrella of a safe message, easily become more informed, and through their knowledge, impact the lives of students in their classes and share what they learned in their own communities. He also addressed the use of social media as an effective means to inform members of boots on the ground actions, stating, “A movement can’t just exist on social media. If you do nothing with that action...it just dies on the page and the next story just becomes a news feed.” An example of a ‘boots on the ground’ action was the August, 2013 Comsewogue rally that was planned only a week in advance and had very large attendance due to rapid flow of information through social media.

Online groups can also be credited for the propagation of innovation as demonstrated by the rapid spread of the innovative means to resist the corporate education reform agenda through test refusals. Collecting experiences from people across the country provides information that goes beyond that which is provided by mainstream media. Robertson described the use of social media to spread the opt out message, and to help activists to connect the dots – to see emerging patterns that reveal who is involved in the agenda to dismantle public education, saying:

If anything I would attribute social media really beginning to get the word out [about opting out] because that became the word for people. What I think is interesting is that now people are so savvy, they go to Facebook to see what people have to say because that is where you get the real story. It was proof that they (mainstream media) were lying because we would hear from primary sources on our Facebook page. That was important - getting the word out and helping parents across the nation identify patterns because we could begin to see the patterns at work. It helped us, for example, to identify ALEC legislation when people started saying, “That’s the same law that’s here!” We were so isolated. The mainstream media never told us anything about ALEC. We started figuring it out. We used Facebook and we knew what parents were telling us.

Although members cannot post on the Save Our Schools Facebook page, the page administrators post information daily, and as in other groups, the posts include blogs, links to

online articles in mainstream media, and videos. Through their 2013 Campaign for Artful Resistance they also collected stories, poetry and art work to express the issues addressed by the movement. Lace To The Top also served as a repository for information as well as a space for members to learn from each other. Ideas and information are shared in every online discussion and information propagates as members cross post and share multimodal resources. This is evident not only in the presence of every thread used in my study under this indicator on the Community of Practice Indicators Table (See Appendix C). The use of blogs, memes, videos and other representations to share information will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Absence of Introductory Preambles**

A fourth indicator that a community of practice has been formed is the *absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process*. Throughout my participation in online activist groups I have noted a shared discourse that is particular to those familiar with both the issues that spurred the activism and the language created as a form of resistance. Often conversations occurring in these online groups begin with an original post that seems like a continuation of previous discussions which are not only ongoing, but also reflective of posts from other online activist spaces. This is in direct alignment with Wenger's (1998) characterization of communities of practice as interconnected communities or constellations, as well as Rock's (2005) contention that individuals are often members of multiple communities of practice.

The LTTT *Principal Removes Desks* discussion thread begins with the simple statement, "For those who said this was fake – here's more" with no explanation of what *this* is. None of the comments that followed indicated confusion or a need for explanation. Instead, members



joined the conversation as if they were continuing an ongoing discussion. This was the case in almost all of the discussion threads that appear on the table of indicators in Appendix C.

### **Knowing What Others Know and What They Can Do**

A fifth indicator, *knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise* is visible both in online discussions and from information provided by those I interviewed. In my interview with Altwerger, a repeated theme was knowledge of individuals who had shared beliefs as well as knowledge of specific strengths that SOS leaders would be able to contribute to the group. Altwerger specifically mentioned Laurie Murphy's strength in creating organizational plans in the group's early days, while Becky Smith was responsible for maintaining the SOS website. My interview with Robertson also reflected knowledge of the members and their ability to contribute in specific areas. Robertson and Morna McDermott handled United Opt Out's website. Michael Peña took responsibility for creating memes for the group and for managing their Twitter account. Similarly, in his interview Glynn revealed that while he and Anthony Griffin approved posts to the Facebook group, other members blogged, assisted with admitting members and moderated the group's Facebook presence. Each of these roles was based upon knowledge of how other members could contribute.

As demonstrated in the discussion threads I analyzed, members in online activist groups have an awareness of what other members know and can contribute to discussions. This was evident in the presence of this indicator CPI5 in multiple screenshots of conversations included in the indicators table in Appendix C. One of the means of determining the presence of this indicator is the *tagging* of members in Facebook groups when another member wants someone to weigh in or be included in a discussion. Tagging is a Facebook feature where a member of a

group or a friend's name is typed, and Facebook alerts the person that they have been mentioned in the conversation. The name appears in blue text to reflect the tag. There were multiple instances in the screenshots I studied of members being tagged in discussions, reflecting knowledge of other members of the groups and in some instances, tagging members who are known to have knowledge about specific topics under discussion. Tagging in discussions typically results in the tagged member joining in the conversation to provide insights or post resources.

As an example, in one particularly contentious thread in Lace To The Top which began on October 6, 2013 (LTTT 1), United Opt Out founder Peggy Robertson was challenged when she posted information about refusing high stakes tests. As explained in the interview I conducted with Glynn, the LTTT leadership was not initially ready to encourage opt out discussions due to warnings by the state teachers union of potential insubordination charges for publicly opposing school district policies. However, members were not aware of the plan to support opting out at a later date, and there was much confusion and some strong dissatisfaction expressed with this stance in the conversation which spanned approximately twenty one hours. In addition to multiple other tags in the discussion Robertson tagged a group of New York teachers who were vocal about test refusals, drawing us into the conversation and eliciting our input on the topic. Eventually the issue was resolved with a mutual understanding that, although the mission of LTTT was not to promote test refusals, Robertson would be permitted to share opt out information in the LTTT group.

### **The Use of Specific Tools, Representations, and Artifacts**

The use of *specific tools, representations, and artifacts* is another indicator that an online group functions as a community of practice. The next chapter will include a detailed discussion

on some of the tools and representations utilized in online activist communities, such as blogs, videos and memes. These tools and representations are included in many Facebook posts, as well as on Twitter, which is a social media platform that is a tool for many social media based education activist groups. In the LTTT *Principal Removes Desks* discussion, members utilized links to two online articles and a blog; screenshots of a Facebook page for an elected official and a Facebook emoji.

### **Use of Jargon and Shortcuts to Communication**

Wenger includes in his list of community of practice indicators the use of *jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones*, which is the seventh indicator I considered. Throughout the Facebook conversation threads of education activist groups I collected, there is evidence not only of jargon used by educators and by activists, but also abbreviations and the use of last names with no further identification of the individual required. No explanation is required when group members use terms such as *reformer, opt out, Common Core, charter school or high stakes tests*. Abbreviations have become so recognizable that most need no explanation. Those posting and commenting in online activist spaces know the meanings of *ESEA* (The Elementary and Secondary Education Act), *NCLB* (No Child Left Behind), *RttT* (Race to the Top), *ESSA* (The Every Student Succeeds Act) and *CBE* (Competency Based Education). No introductions precede names such as *Gates, King, Duncan, Walton, Broad or Koch* because it is assumed that members of on line activist communities are familiar with these individuals and their roles in the attack on public education. These shortcuts to communication without preambles or explanations streamline the communication process and occur frequently during interactions in online spaces. This indicator is evident through most of the discussion threads represented on the indicator table in Appendix C.

### **Certain Styles Displaying Membership**

An eighth community of practice indicator is the presence of *certain styles recognized as displaying membership*. Within Wenger's (1998) structural framework for communities of practice, the domain represents the topic or common ground that is the focus of the community. Membership in a community of practice reflects a commitment to the domain – in the case of the groups in my study, the domain of education activism. Members of a community of practice tell their stories and share experiences and strategies for solving problems as a shared repertoire within their communities. Online activist communities have similar membership styles in common in their function as a constellation of communities. The indicator for membership styles was present in each of the groups and in every discussion thread I considered (See Appendix C).

As an example, Robertson discussed the sharing of stories and experiences in her interview, crediting them with the ability of UOO members to connect the dots and realize the influence of ALEC in proposing identical legislation across the country. In the discussion threads from the two groups considered members tell stories, share experiences, and when applicable, discuss strategies for problem solving. In considering Wenger's (1998) discussion of constellations of communities, the commonalities across various education activist groups reveal similarities in styles of interaction and participation that are recognized as displaying membership in communities of practice.

### **Shared Discourse Reflecting a Certain Perspective on the World**

The ninth and final indicator I utilized to analyze the groups in my study was: *shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world*. United Opt Out National and Lace To The Top provided a mission statement, which appeared in the 'About' section of their Facebook groups to inform members of the shared perspective that is expected to be reflected in the

discourse of the group. Save Our Schools provides their demands for public education in the form of guiding principles on their website. Alignment with this shared perspective demonstrated through discourse consistent with the shared view becomes a means to display membership in the community; to show commitment to the community's domain.

In the previously discussed LTTT, *Principal Removes Desks* discussion thread, there is discourse that reflects shared perspectives throughout the thread. The underlying viewpoint is that public school teachers deserve respect, and the removal of desks and file cabinets from classrooms was a reflection of disrespect for the teaching profession. Throughout the entire online conversation, participants expressed shared outrage, a need to collaborate for positive action, and a shared discourse that reflected frustration with how this incident reflected the current state of public education. At one point, a member referred to the offending principal as someone who “appears to be better suited for a charter school in Florida.” The reference signals a shared understanding of the damage to public education created by charter schools, and their specific impact in Florida.

A reply to that comment stated, “You win the internet today.” Throughout this lengthy discussion there was not a single dissenting voice, as the discourse reflected solidarity with the teachers involved and common ground in the need to fix the situation.

In analyzing the thirteen Facebook threads, it was not uncommon for members or group administrators to remind those who were critical of a group's focus that perhaps the group is not a good fit for someone who is not displaying true membership in that community. In this case, membership requires a style of participation and discourse that signal that the member belongs in the community. Full membership implies supporting the group's mission, not just attaining admission to a group by clicking a ‘join’ button. In a community of practice, there can be

dissension and even disorders, as discussed later in this chapter, but the overall discourse reflects shared perspectives.

### **Discussion**

Wenger (1998) provides a means to view how online groups function as communities of practice through the lens of specific indicators. Using nine of Wenger's fourteen indicators and applying them to interview transcripts from three education activist groups and thirteen Facebook discussion threads, evidence of the nine indicators appears repeatedly throughout the transcripts and the screenshots of the Facebook threads.

The threads of Facebook discussions I analyzed for this study reveal many of the same characteristics I have witnessed as a participant in numerous digitally enabled education activist groups. Mindful of Wenger's (1998) description of communities of practice as *shared histories of learning*, we see these shared histories form a nexus between multiple online activist groups, centered around the domain of education activism. This is consistent with discussions by both Wenger (1998) and Rock (2005) regarding constellations of connected communities, which explain not only the similar membership styles and shared discourses across multiple groups, but the repetition of some of the exact representations and resources across these groups.

In the next section I will explore yet another commonality among online education activist groups: the mediation of discourse and how issues of power and identity are revealed and negotiated in these communities of practice.

### **Mediation of Discourse, Censorship and Hierarchical Relationships In Online Activist Communities of Practice**

The same interviews and screenshots of Facebook threads discussed in the previous section provide data relevant to how meaning is negotiated and how discourse is mediated in

these groups. Although shared discourse and perspectives are reflected in online communities of practice, it is not always the case that conversations are harmonious and without dissent or without visible acrimony. The next section will explore how language and unique discourses within the groups I studied provide insight into power relationships and issues of identity.

### **Discourse, Censorship and Power Relationships**

Gunawardena et al. (2009) and Tusting (2005) contend that every online community of practice has its own discourse which shapes and reveals issues of identity and power within the group and that studying the language used in online groups can offer a stronger understanding of power relationships within the community. In an attempt to better understand these roles and how power is structured in digital education activist groups I viewed some of the same conversation threads previously used to consider these groups as communities of practice. These same threads will also be analyzed in the discussion of disorders occurring in online communities of practice later in this chapter, so the presence of those issues will not be addressed at this point.

### **Moderating Discussions and Censorship: Save Our Schools**

As described by Altwerger in her interview, Save Our Schools utilizes a Facebook page rather than a Facebook group and restricts the ability post new content to specific leaders of their organization. Since Facebook pages exist for the purpose of creating a social media presence from authorized representatives of organizations or other entities they tend to engender less participation than Facebook groups. As a result of this lower level of online participation by members, Altwerger describes the SOS page as a “very civil forum” and said the page requires little moderation and has not had issues with a need to censor comments that are divisive or run counter to the group’s mission. Altwerger attributed the infrequent need to moderate comments

to the fact that members tend to read posts on the page without adding comments. In addition, she believes the group's clearly stated guiding principles discourage comments or arguments from those who might visit the page with other agendas. Those guiding principles are:

- Equitable funding across all public schools and school systems
- An end to high stakes testing used for the purpose of student, teacher, and school evaluation
- Teacher, family, and community leadership in forming public education policies
- Curriculum responsive to and inclusive of local school communities
- Professional, qualified, and committed teachers in all public schools

Altwerger believes that some of these guiding principles include stances that tend to attract only like minded activists to the page. The clearly stated platform seems to dissuade those who tend to disrupt other groups from interest in SOS in favor of participation in groups more in alignment with their personal beliefs and goals, such as groups focusing primarily on eliminating the Common Core Standards. As mentioned in the analysis of threads for indicators of communities of practice, since member comments are not common on the SOS Facebook page, my data does not include threads from the group.

### **Moderating Discussions and Censorship in United Opt Out National**

As mentioned earlier, during the time frame of this study, from 2013 to late 2015, United Opt Out's Facebook group was moderated by the eight administrators of the organization as well as three members who served as administrators of the Facebook group. When I interviewed Peggy Robertson in May, 2015 she commented that the administrators try to allow freedom of speech, but posts and comments that contained racist tones, bashed public education or teachers, or promoted values that opposed the group's mission resulted in deletion of those posts and comments. At one point the threads became "ugly" according to Robertson, prompting another UOO administrator to issue a warning to members that this type of rhetoric would not take over



the group, and administrators would be deleting these threads and removing offending members. Interestingly, rather than creating a loss of members, this announcement resulted in a spike in the number of new requests to join the group, suggesting that members prefer a group that is mission oriented and does not allow offensive comments directed at other members.

The incident referenced by Robertson occurred on April 29, 2015 after a number of contentious conversations in prior weeks. These discussions are not part of my data, but as a UOO Facebook group administrator who was actively involved in moderating the group during that time I am aware that the conversations involved were highly critical of public education, of public school teachers, and sometimes included racial undertones.

### **UOO Discussion Thread 1: Administrator Clarifies Group's Mission**

The April 29, 2015 Facebook post, which I labeled *Administrator Clarifies Group's Mission* (UOO1), began when an administrator (identified as Administrator 1 in the transcript below) reminded members that the group exists to support public education and that posts filled with hate, racism, teacher bashing, or comments counter to the group's mission would not be permitted in the group, stating, "Admins have the word to delete posts and permanently ban people who are unwilling or unable to work in collaboration with us and our vision." The administrator reminded members that those administering the Facebook group were progressives but did not force their political beliefs on members, and warned that those promoting political agendas counter to the group's pro-public education mission would be removed. This post was a response to previously deleted threads in which a few more right leaning, non-progressive members advocated for homeschooling as an alternative to "government schools."

The ensuing discussion, which spanned approximately 23 hours, revealed some interesting points about power and moderation of the discourse in the group. Some members

responded by thanking the administrator for clarifying the mission of the group and taking a stance meant to end discussion of homeschooling as a better alternative to public education.

Some of the comments from the thread were as follows:

- Commenter 1: Homeschool/Public School parent here. You can do both and support public education. Call me crazy, conservative, Tea Party, or Progressive, we're all in this together.
- Administrator 1: I agree with just about everything you have said. But we at UOO can no longer sit by and watch silently as people come in here with political agendas. We've never made an attempt to silence people based on our personal beliefs, but we're done watching as the message in here slowly dissolves into intolerance, bigotry and hate. We would love nothing more than to work with everyone. As soon as this situation can be discussed and remedied, we can again all move forward and work together.
- Commenter 2: Homeschoolers are who they are after next and religious schools. I am a public school mom fighting for both sides. I am not lucky enough to be able to home school, but we have to protect the ones who are because they are getting an education and I count on them being future leaders. You don't get an education in PS [public school] anymore. I am teaching mine the best I can at home to reinforce. This page is not a Progressive Page. Many people can say what they like and if someone here doesn't like it they move along.
- Administrator 2: Actually I am in this FIGHT for ALL children and not just my own. I am a member of UOO because they support all children and not just their own. This fight is for ALL children.
- Commenter 3: In that case let's call for discussion! It is so necessary! But please, don't call people crazy for their politics. Generalization is what we are all trying to work together to defeat!
- Administrator 2: [Commenter 2], many of us fell that our children are still getting educated in public schools.
- Administrator 2: [Commenter 3], when people post things that are against another religion, it is not o.k. When people state that home schooling is the only solution to the "government" takeover of public schools, it's not o.k. Thank you, [Administrator 1], for stating this!
- Commenter 4: Bravo! I 'm tired of scrolling and rolling. (winking emoji)
- Administrator 2: This fight is so much bigger than common core. These high stakes tests have been around forever and have impacted way too many children before this year or before common core.

- Administrator 3: See the mission statement. Fairly clear who we are and we have been extraordinarily tolerant but that time is over.
- Administrator 2: “United Opt Out National serves as a focused point of unyielding resistance to corporate ed. reform. We demand an equitably funded, democratically based, anti-racist, desegregated public school system for all Americans that prepares students to exercise compassionate and critical decision making with civic virtue.” (UOO mission statement)
- Administrator 4: If you don’t simply get that standardized tests are eugenically engineered tools to be used for blatant discrimination and anti public school propaganda then you don’t get opt out. If you don’t get opt out then maybe you don’t really belong with UOO.
- Commenter 5: I joined so I can be educated more. There are some great eye opening posts. But I am not going to sit and allow people to bash teachers. We work to gosh darn hard. We have been dealt with a crappy situation, but we are not giving up on your/our children’s education.
- Administrator 1: Look – I love intelligent discussion around ideas with people who I don’t agree with. I have ZERO issues with it. But this is a group focused with a purpose. We all agree with the idea of opt out, even if that comes from entirely different places ideologically. But we have to put aside party lines to get things done. ...I am against the idea of deserting our public schools. What we need is that kind of passion and effort FOR our schools. They are PUBLIC schools, people – they are our schools. All of ours, regardless of race or creed or socioeconomic status. They DO NOT belong to politicians or corporations.
- I want your child to have a world class education. And we can and do have that here. But we have outstanding teachers who are increasingly living under the yoke of political oppression. Let’s fight FOR those schools and those teachers. ...This is a group that uses opt out as a celebration of our freedom, our teachers, and our schools. This is a group that ops out as a fundamental right of parents for a quality education system.
- Commenter 6: I totally get what you’re saying... I respect whatever education any family chooses. When I read through strands and I see responses that say, “this is why I homeschool” it really doesn’t serve the purpose of the discussion. Let’s all work together and support ALL of our teachers and kids!

As the conversation continued with comments representing both sides of the issue, two more administrators of the Facebook group entered the discussion. At one point a member asked

for the names of all the administrators, which were provided as those administrators were tagged.

The member commented that she had been in the group for a year and didn't know which members were the administrators. The administrator creating the original post (Administrator 1) commented:

That you've not seen them is a testament to how smoothly the admins run this group. That my statements may alienate a segment of people in here is by design. And my sentiment of not abiding intolerance extends to either side of the political spectrum.

The discussion thread ended with one of UOO's founding organizers (Administrator 5) joining the discussion to state:

As one of the founding organizers of Unite Opt Out I can state that what (Administrator 1) has stated at the start of this thread reflects our original and current stance. We have faced attacks from those who wish to redirect our stance to serve something that we do not support and those who wish to revise our values. We stand by our original statement crafted years ago.

### **UOO Discussion Thread 2: Accusation of Censorship**

In June, 2015, under the guise of offering information about an alternative to public education, a member posted an advertisement for an online school. At some point after the post, an administrator removed the post with the ad. On June 22, 2015, the member (Original Poster) who had posted the ad began a new discussion thread with a post that drew swift responses from other members.

- Original Poster: Wondering who removed my post regarding Freedom Project Education's online open house? It was NOT a political post but informative for some of the 20,000 parents in this group looking for classical education as an alternative to the over-testing schools. Biased censorship, in my opinion.
- Commenter 1: This post needs to be removed. This is a public school group. Ads need to be removed.

- Commenter 2: On-line schools are a business – nothing free about it – if a local system is paying for the on-line service, they are undermining their own brick and mortar schools, thus undermining public education – teachers that work online schools get paid less and they don't have union representation – questionable benefits for children having increased screen time, even education screen time – many online schools require students to take the battery of standardized tests.
- Commenter 3: This page supports PUBLIC ed. That is not home school and not company run charter. Period
- Commenter 4: There was a reason the initial post was removed as well as this one should be. If you're not really sure, check out the group's mission statement.
- Commenter 3: No. This is not an educational resource page. This is a pro public school and anti test, anti corporate takeover page.
- Commenter 4: Wow, super tolerant open minded people here. \*Sarcasm\* What's wrong with discussing other options and learning and considering other ideas? We might all learn something. As long as it's done respectfully, it can only make us all more enlightened and help make more informed opinions and decisions.
- Commenter 5: The more resources I have at my fingertips, the more I can wield in my home town. I've learned a lot on these pages. The staunchness with which some posts are edited and deleted is not democratic to me. I am open minded when it comes to education ideas and closed to the testing and big corporate takeover. I owe it to my children to have an arsenal of options researched should things not go our way.
- Commenter 6: The problem, as someone already explained, is that exploring options which are NOT "let's make our public schools better" ultimately gives "them" what they want – a total dismantling of our public school system. If you are looking elsewhere, you are helping to weaken the system for the rest of us. (Sad emoji)
- Commenter 3: Further, FB [Facebook] is never democratic.
- Commenter 7: Okay. I am unfriending this Facebook page because I am a private school teacher, who believes that the testing ties the hands of public school teachers. I happen to be both pro public and private school, but if this is a public school only; goodbye. Never a good idea to divide the teaching profession in such a manner. Suffice it to say, I am not interested in dismantling the public schools. That helps no one specially the children.

At this point two of the organization's administrators entered the conversation.

- Administrator 1: I don't know who removed the post. As an admin, I would encourage everyone to read our mission statement. We are not a page to be a resource for alternative forms of schooling as we are PRO PUBLIC EDUCATION. No one here is dividing.
- Administrator 1: No one here is dividing. We do not believe public monies should be used for private or charter education. People should have every right to choose a private if they would like to pay for it. Charters and on line schooling are part and parcel of the privatization of PUBLIC education
- Administrator 2: The original post was a promotion for something beyond the scope of what this FB site endorses and fights for – we try to keep our message and our goals clear. I don't go to vegetarian FB sites promoting steak and call it censorship if they delete it. It's important that everyone is familiar with the "about" part of this site and post accordingly and respect that.

The discussion, which spanned seven hours, ended shortly after this admonition, with two members thanking the administrator for the last comment. In this thread, some participants engaged in a manner more consistent with the administrators of the group as they reiterated the group's mission and provided information to counter the statements of dissenting members. It was not unusual for UOO threads to become somewhat contentious without intervention by an administrator, reflecting Robertson's statement that the administrators try not to intervene unless comments become "ugly" or counter to the group's stated mission. As in other online activist groups, at times members step forward and mediate conversations before an administrator sees the thread and can intervene.

#### **UOO Discussion Thread 4: Dyett Hunger Strike**

An example of a thread that was left to be mediated and resolved by the members was one that began with a post on September 18, 2015, UOO # 4, *Dyett Hunger Strike*, in which a member referred to the ongoing Dyett hunger strike in Chicago. The hunger strike was a protest

in the aftermath of over fifty school closings in 2013 under the administration of Chicago mayor Rahm Emmanuel. At issue was the lack of response to the desires of the community to keep the high school open after a concentration of school closings in poor minority neighborhoods (Katz, 2015).

The original poster asked UOO members to send a message asking Pope Francis to intervene in the hunger strike. A portion of the discussion thread follows:

- Original Poster: If you use twitter please help send a message to Pope Francis to reach out to President Obama to intervene in behalf of the Dyett parents on [the 33<sup>rd</sup> day] of their hunger strike in Chicago.
- Commenter 1: Why are they on a hunger strike?
- Commenter 2: [Posts a link to an article about the hunger strike with no comment]
- Commenter 3: It saddens me that the majority of people still do not know about this.
- Commenter 1: I have never understood the concept of a hunger strike. They never accomplish anything but health issues for those participating. My kids tried them once, so at dinner time we made just enough for the hubby and I and ate like normal. The kids figured out really quick it wasn't feasible. I hope the community will be able to reopen the school AND actually provide a quality education.
- Commenter 4: Yes, it's sad that the school closed. However, how can anyone - educators or businesses - keep a school open that keeps failing? I'm not saying that money should be given/taken based on grades...but why should money be poured into a school that isn't doing well? The kids, I'm sure, still of school age were sent to other districts...so it's not like they're being denied an education. Running a school is expensive. If only 12 parents are on this hunger strike, then it shows how important it is - to a few people. Our high school services 300+ families...and if it closed, you can bet they'd ALL be there.
- Commenter 5: The school and the community were starved first. This is all by design, so to blame parents living in poverty for the condition of the school rather than those responsible for supporting the school and the students does not add up. If all 300 of your parents would show up at your school, that means they must not have much else to worry about in their lives. Good for them-but we are responsible for supporting out public schools. All of us.



Commenter 4: For you to make the correlation that all 300 parents have nothing else to worry about in their lives is asinine. They care about the education of their children - and their children's friends - because they know that no one else will if they don't. They are active in the PTA on a local and national level because they know that EVERYONE is affected by decisions that are made. I am not responsible for a school in Chicago - those parents in Chicago are. WE as a collective can't - and shouldn't - be responsible for the nation as a whole. We need to take responsibility in our own communities and petition for change or offer support. Only then will the entire system work...when we're all on the same page. If we don't hold EVERYONE accountable for the success of their own areas, then only those who are passionate about education will be doing all the work. Then they get burnt out and all of their hard work goes to the wind. THAT is what we're seeing now. In 2 or 3 years, those who are passionate now will be gone from the National scene because of a lack of support...and if you think true reform will happen in 2-3 years, then you need a reality check.

Commenter 5: Well, thank you for explaining your self-centeredness. You take no responsibility for your fellow citizens, which is un-American... What we need to shut down are the hacks that are exploiting our public funds for personal gain, yet don't want to pay their fair share of the burden.

Commenter 4: The opt-out movement is only as good as the participants. I can't opt-out for someone else's child - only my own. We all have to do our fair share in order for the movement to be successful. That is my point - I can't pull the weight of someone else. I can only do my part in my local area and hope that there are plenty of other people who feel the same and follow the same "protocol" for opting out.

Commenter 6: I agree with [Commenter 5]. And I support these parents. They are going on a hunger strike to draw attention to a situation they feel is important and out of control. A situation that needs attention. With all due respect, WE are responsible for this school in Chicago, because you are right; EVERYONE is affected by decisions that are made here. WE as a collective ARE responsible to be aware of and help each other thru this, because none of us know everything, and this is happening nationally. As long as we are making assumptions, I'll go out on a limb and say I'd bet that if this was happening in YOUR school, these parents would be getting your back (and it will if it isn't already on some level). And if you think you can wait 2-3 years, good luck. There may not be anyone left to get your back by then.

Commenter 7: [Commenter 4], schools are not businesses and children are not test scores.

Commenter 4: You're right - children are not test scores...that is why we're here.



Although there was disagreement in this thread, participants were able to find common ground about opposing testing without the intervention of a group administrator. Members with an understanding of the Chicago situation within the broader context of school privatization shared their perspectives and attempted to educate other commenters. In the absence of group administrators, a few members took a leadership role in guiding the discussion. This is an example of how members not in official leadership positions in an online group assume identities of leadership as they engage in discourse that clarifies the group's goals or challenge those posting or commenting in a manner that is counter to the group's stated purpose.

The online exchange in this thread is consistent with Wenger's (1998) description of communities of practice as learning communities, as members shared knowledge about the Dyett situation and the context in which it occurred. There is also evidence of Gee's (2005) concept of porous leadership in social activist groups organized in affinity spaces, as members who do not hold official leadership positions adopt leadership identities in online narratives.

### **Discussion**

Data from United Opt Out was collected during a period when founder Peggy Robertson was an administrator for the group, and at the time of our discussion she stated that the UOO Facebook group was not heavily moderated. In most cases discussions were allowed to progress without intervention by the group's administrators. Although group administrators sometimes participated in general discussions or shared information in the group, they did not moderate or censor conversations unless they became what Robertson labeled as "ugly." She characterizes ugly comments as those which were racist, critical of teachers, public schools or public education in general. Also moderated were comments reflecting a political agenda not supportive of public education or any other comments signifying opposition to the group's clearly stated mission.

Sometimes moderation took the form of clarification from one or more administrators and a reminder that those who did not agree with the group's platform were free to leave. At other times comments were deleted and members were removed from the group by administrators. According to Robertson, the removal of posts or comments usually occurred after a private discussion between two or more group administrators. In cases where a comment was especially concerning an administrator would delete it without consulting other administrators and the member was removed from the group and blocked from re-entering.

Although members who were called to task for unacceptable content sometimes complained of censorship, it is common for online activist groups to remove comments that do not coincide with the group's stated mission. That was visible in my data, but also through my own participation in multiple online education activist groups. It is usual that online activist groups are not run as democratic spaces with members having a vote on what content is considered acceptable. As one member commented in the UOO 1 thread, "Facebook is never democratic." That same reality was evident in my inquiry into the Lace To The Top group, as I describe next.

### **Moderating Discussions and Censorship in Lace To The Top**

When I asked Lace To The Top's Kevin Glynn how the group administrators respond when threads become contentious or inappropriate for the group's mission, he mentioned that unlike many other online groups, in LTTT original posts were always screened and approved before being shared with the members. Messages were sent to members when posts were not approved to inform them of the decision. At times there were complaints that this method of running the group constituted censorship, to which he responded to the offended party, "This is our group. Feel free to leave." While original posts can be screened for approval, Facebook does

not provide the ability to screen and filter comments, although they can be removed at the discretion of group administrators. Similar to Altwerger's discussion of SOS, Glynn mentioned that there wasn't too much of a need for moderation since the group was "pretty much like minded." Although the group didn't have posted guidelines for participation, Glynn stated that at times members had to be reminded that theirs was a site dedicated solely to protecting students, as in the thread discussed below.

### **LTTT Discussion Thread 1: LTTT Does Not Support Opt Out**

One of the first screenshots I saved from Lace To The Top began with a discussion on October 6, 2013, when the group was relatively new and before the group 'flipped' to support the opt out movement as Glynn described in his interview. Within minutes of being added to Lace To The Top, a United Opt Out administrator challenged the effectiveness of wearing green laces in promoting change. At the same time, a second UOO administrator entered the discussion and provided a link to UOO's Back to School Toolkit. The second UOO administrator also provided a link to the UOO website and directed LTTT members to the 50 state opt out guides available in the UOO files.

Although this discussion thread was lengthy and involved two LTTT group administrators, moderation of the discussion in this case involved statements of the group's position, clarification as needed, and a reminder that those who were not in agreement with the group's goals could choose to leave. This was a particularly interesting conversation because the earliest dissenting voices in the thread were United Opt Out administrators. Approximately one hour into the discussion about opting out, one of the Lace To The Top administrators entered the conversation to inform the UOO leaders that LTTT administrators could not support the opt out

movement. In a discussion thread that continued for a few hours, members supporting the opt out movement pushed for answers, and the administrators of LTTT pushed back, suggesting that those unhappy with their stance leave the group, remaining unwavering in the refusal to support opting out.

In providing comments from the conversation and keeping within the provision that identities be scrubbed when sharing online conversations, I identify the Lace To The Top administrators as LTTT Admin 1 and LTTT Admin 2. I identify the United Opt Out administrators as UOO Admin 1 and UOO Admin 2. One LTTT member who is not a group administrator is included in this transcript because her comments in the early part of the conversation moved the dialogue forward. That member is identified as Commenter 1.

- UOO Admin 1: I would like to see more than green laces.
- Commenter 1: Do you have suggestions?
- UOO Admin 1: Actions. Opt outs. Civil disobedience. There's very little time left for games.
- Commenter 1: I have opted my son out and will continue to do so. We cannot be a part of their [the ed reformers] plan. I see this as THE ONLY way to take back education.
- UOO Admin 2: All 50 opt out/refusal guides can be found at our website (provides link, which is no longer active due to a website change). Go [Commenter 1]!
- Commenter 1: Thank you [UOO Admin 2] for all your work on those guides. I appreciate all the action you have taken to combat testing and reform. It's time to back up our beliefs with strategic action.
- UOO Admin 2: You are welcome [Commenter 1]! Activism requires hard work – we spent the entire summer creating the 50 opt out/ refusal guides and our work is paying off now as parents use the guides to refuse the test for their children. No data means no profit. Refuse the TEST everybody!!!
- LTTT Admin 1: [UOO admin 2], this is not an opt out group. (Addresses first UOO administrator)
- UOO Admin 2: I am confused – I thought you were? What do you do? What is your action?

- LTTT Admin 1: We are against the tests that are hurting our kids. We wear laces to raise awareness at a grass roots level.
- Commenter 1: What else?
- LTTT Admin 1: We have been an active part of uniting unions, PTAs, superintendents, and other community groups. We are a symbol.
- UOO Admin 2: Why don't you promote opt out?
- LTTT Admin 1: Most of us are teachers as well as parents.
- UOO Admin 2: I am a teacher and a parent. I refuse the test for my own child and I speak/write anywhere I can to support others in taking direct action to reclaim our public schools. Opt out will end the game. I am sorry, [LTTT Admin 1], I just don't understand – can you explain more?
- Commenter 1: I am both as well – I wasn't a true believer in opting out right away, as my employer was also my son's school, but after time and research, I realized that just informing people wasn't ever going to change the system. It was, for me, akin to complaining but never taking a step to make my situation better...
- LTTT Admin 1: Opting out will not be supported by Lace to the Top.
- UOO Admin 2: I don't understand why? What is the issue w/your members being parents and teachers?
- Commenter 1: Raising awareness is a great first step in any issue. Then there are actions that follow... What's the next step to combat testing, after we raise awareness?
- LTTT Admin 1: [UOO Admin 2 and Commenter 1], I have stated out position. it is what we have chosen to do as our way to fight these terrible tests. I hope you will stay, but Lace To The Top will not promote opt I respect what you are doing and why you are doing it. Promoting opt out here hurts our mission. Please respect that.
- UOO Admin 2: Yes, I know your position now, but I simply don't understand why. What is the explanation? The opt out movement is growing – you have MANY members who could benefit from this information.
- UOO Admin 2: Could someone please explain why Lace To The Top will not support or promote opt out? I am told it is because there are parents and teachers here. But I am a parent and a teacher. I simply don't understand. Any support in understanding this is appreciated. Thanks in advance.

At this point a second Lace To The Top administrator entered the conversation.

LTTT Admin 2: As a parent, you have every right to make the decision for your child. It is not an agenda that a teacher can promote publicly for others. [UOO Admin 2] those words from a NY teacher would be grounds for insubordination - a charge they would have a very hard time defending. Given the climate, we are not going to offer that sacrificial lamb here. The battle is in the hands of the parents. Teachers will support children in the room regardless of their decision. LTTT's mission is to protect children and let them know they are more than a score. In doing so, we have exposed those tests for what they result are. A majority of parents are still in the dark about high stakes testing.

The last comment was a reference to information received by many New York teachers through their local unions that the state union representing NY teachers (NYSUT) had sent a warning about speaking out against any aspect of the education department's mandates. I mentioned this situation earlier in the chapter when discussing the history of Lace To The Top.

As the discussion continued, UOO Administrator 2 commented that many NY teachers promoted opting out, and a group of us were tagged in the comment, making us aware of the conversation. It was at this point that other Lace To The Top members joined the discussion, expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with the stance against promoting test refusals in the group. The discussion continued as more members weighed in about how powerful the group could be if it promoted action. The Lace To The Top administrators reiterated their stance as the discussion continued.

- LTTT Admin 2: If you don't respect or understand the mission of this group – please leave.
- LTTT Admin 1: We are neutral on the topic of opting out.
- UOO Admin 2: I thought you said you did not support it and did not want me to promote it on this page? Does that mean I can promote it on this page, [LTTT Admin 1]?
- LTTT Admin 1: It is a parent's decision.

Members continued to question and argued the impossibility of insubordination charges for what teachers do online on their own time as private citizens. During the conversation each of the LTTT administrators told UOO Admin 2 that she should leave if she wasn't happy with their decision. UOO Admin 2 told them it was ultimately their decision what they allow members to share, since they screen and approve posts. The discussion continued and by its end had eighteen members involved in the thread. The situation was resolved in a separate conversation between the administrators of the two groups, and reported on the LTTT thread by UOO Admin 2. The agreement was that information and resources about test refusals could be shared by United Opt Out in the Lace To The Top group, but the LTTT administrators would not be vocal about supporting the opt out movement.

Consistent with Glynn's discussion of how his group mediates the discourse on their threads, the LTTT administrators did not delete comments or remove members. Although the administrators were in disagreement with much of what the members were saying about opting out, there was no attempt to censor comments. Throughout the discussion, the tone of the members remained respectful. As in previously discussed threads from UOO, some LTTT members assumed an identity as unofficial moderators, mediating the discourse in a way that suggested they were attempting to work as peacemakers in the discussion. Suggestions were offered, knowledge was shared, and some members attempted to refocus the conversation on commonalities rather than the disagreements in the thread. One example was when a member commented:

I think it is reasonable to ask questions about each group's mission or approach, but not productive to argue. There is a comfort zone and a place in the struggle for everyone – it's fine that we are not "one size fits all" in our resistance. The more people learn, they will seek out all the potential options available and even create new ones until eventually those walls come down on reform.

The discussion ended without the group leaders feeling the need to remove comments or to delete the discussion thread. The final comment on the thread was from LTTT Admin 1, who stated, “We are on the same team, but play different positions. Productive debate tonight.”

### **LTTT Discussion Thread 3: Connected Constellations**

Wenger (1998) and Rock (2005) discussed constellations of communities of practice and membership by individuals in multiple communities. The Lace To The Top discussion thread, *Connected Constellations* demonstrates how memberships in multiple online communities of practice can cause situations from one group to be reflected in conversations and influence the discourse in another group. Many of the LTTT members were also members of the group known as BATs, (Badass Teachers Association), and its state-specific New York BATs Facebook group. The BAT groups also utilize social media to educate and organize members.

In February, 2014, New York’s Governor Cuomo announced his plan for an initiative to provide free college classes to those incarcerated in New York prisons. Led by one of the group’s founding members, administrators in the BAT group announced that BATs would now be creating their own prison education initiative to support the governor’s idea. On February 23, 2014, the BAT administrator who proposed the idea posted in the NY BATs group, writing:

Just a heads up: This week BATS will be starting it’s [sic] Prison Education initiative, clearly defining us as a group that is pro-union, anti Common Core, and pro prison education. If you are uncomfortable with this, you should probably find another group as a vehicle for your activism.

The top down tone angered many BAT members, resulting in multiple acrimonious discussion threads which caused a large exodus from the NY BATs group, some by choice and others through removal by the group’s administrators. Many BAT members condemned what one commenter characterized as an “It’s OUR way or the HIGHWAY” stance and the administrators’ collective refusal to allow discussion of opposing views by the membership. This



is another reminder of the non democratic nature of many Facebook groups. Although interactions in BAT groups are not a focus of my study, the conversations in NY BATs is relevant to this discussion because the acrimony spilled over to Lace To The Top. This corresponds with the concept of members of communities of practice participating in constellations of communities - in this case, multiple online education activist groups.

A Lace To The Top discussion which began on February 24, 2014, a day after the incident mentioned above, became contentious almost immediately. The same BAT administrator mentioned earlier posted in Lace To The Top, discussing his group's mission and ending his post with "BATS is a group that is committed to pushing excessive testing out of schools and bringing back joy and creativity."

Although there had been no discussion about what had occurred in the BAT groups (national and NY BATs) by members in Lace To The Top, the post by the BAT administrator incited outrage by those who had been part of the discussion in BATs. Immediately after the initial post by the BAT administrator in Lace To The Top, LTTT members entered the discussion with derogatory, angry comments fueled by the previous interactions earlier that day with this same person. While there was no mention of the BAT announcement of the prison education initiative in the original LTTT post, that issue became the entire focus of the discussion thread. Many LTTT members responding on the thread had either left BATs or been removed for voicing their disagreement and were obviously angered at having the conversation brought into Lace To The Top. The rancorous thread was punctuated by name calling and numerous references to discussions and events that occurred outside of LTTT. As the conversation continued, other administrators from BATs joined in, defending the first administrator and criticizing LTTT members participating in the discussion.

The specific content of this thread is not as important as the fact that this discussion continued very actively for ten hours with no intervention by administrators from Lace To The Top. Consistent with Glynn's assertion that the LTTT administrators try to allow conversations to flow freely as long as they don't disrupt the group's mission, this thread ran its course with no moderation. Although not directly related to the mission of Lace To The Top, the lengthy argument seemingly did not cross a line that the administrators felt required any kind of limitation on the discourse. Throughout this thread no one stepped in to assume the identity of moderator, although one member reflected that groups don't belong to founders, they belong to the members. She stated, "Leaders lead, they don't dictate" in reference to her experience with the original poster from BATs on the thread.

An example of comments in this LTTT 3 discussion thread includes the following, all directed at the original poster.

- Commenter 1: Yes, Chairman [BAT admin/poster] has declared a purge of all wrong thinkers from his groups. I made the fatal error of questioning Dear Professor's heavy handed tone and was whisked away from NY BATS by his dwindling yet rabid red guard. He also had admins canned who suggested it might be acceptable to allow members to disagree with him. Quite a giant among us.
- Commenter 2: I too left that group [NY BATs] because of this new found agenda of giving prisoners a free education. My decision to leave was not so much about that as it was about how the administrators were treating people who disagreed with them. It's there [sic] own little sandbox that they wish to dominate.
- Commenter 3: I am in contact with white suburban moms and I stand by my estimate that you have behaved like an arrogant [expletive deleted].
- Commenter 4: And finally.....the wizard behind the curtain is exposed.
- Commenter 3: Dictatorship and egomania is not a "leadership style."

Commenter 5: Most of us are not here to debate BATs...I think the direction is clear and each individual has to decide whether to live with it or leave it...This [LTTT] is not the forum to debate the validity of BATs, but this became the forum because so many were either pushed out or chased out of BATs – not much difference.

There are a few interesting points to be made from this particular LTTT Facebook discussion, which was active for approximately ten hours with more than twenty commenters. As a participant in all of the discussions involved, it seemed that the reactions of the members of Lace To The Top were based upon previous negative experiences in the BATs group. Having lost many who had memberships in both NY BATs and LTTT, the only way for the BAT administrator to continue the conversation was to post in another group. Multiple issues of identity and power are revealed in this discussion. In the discussions on this topic in the BAT groups, the BAT administrators wielded all of the power, and many members were chastised, threatened with removal, and either left voluntarily or were removed. Although those BAT discussions were contentious they did not approach the vitriol of the LTTT conversation situated in a space where the administrators from the BAT group held no power to remove members. It is unknown whether LTTT members were emboldened due to their empowerment in this space where their ‘adversaries’ had no power to control the conversation, or whether festering anger spilled over, uncontrolled, in the LTTT forum.

It is also worth noting that even in a space where they held no leadership roles, the six BAT administrators involved in this LTTT discussion thread attempted to enact leadership identities by chastising LTTT members and commenting with lengthy diatribes to share their viewpoints. As a member of both groups at the time of this LTTT discussion, I noticed that the particular means of interacting and the membership styles I witnessed in BATs spilled over to

LTTT, where discussions tended to remain more respectful even when disagreements arose between members.

Although the Lace To The Top administrators did not enter into this particular discussion or attempt to mediate the discourse during this conversation, there were instances where that was not the case. Like Robertson, Glynn expressed a desire to keep an open mind and allow conversations to flow, but recognized the need to intercede when comments conflicted with the group's mission. In striving to keep the group's message and focus simple, the LTTT administrators attempted to prevent conversations that became political. According to Glynn, during the 2012 election for Governor of New York, Lace To The Top administrators deleted numerous threads and comments and also removed hundreds of members who refused to accept that the group was not going to take a position supporting candidate Rob Astorino. When asked about the criteria for removal of content or members Glynn explained:

[H]ow you decide is simple. You say I put so much time and effort in, we have a vision, we are a group, we are the leaders of this group. And we are not the only members of the group, but you needed to define *leader* at some point and you needed to define the message and you needed to go someplace and there is ownership here. And you put your foot down and you simply say, "No, you're done and I am going to throw you out. When it came time for Astorino I would say we removed probably about 600, 700 people."

## Discussion

The two examples of Lace To The Top discussion threads provide a small window into the mediating styles of the group's leaders. In the first thread, LTTT 1, the perception that a member's post did not coincide with the group's mission brought two of the administrators into the discussion until the matter was resolved. Although there were strong differences in opinion, the tone of the discussion remained respectful with the final comment reflecting that it had opened a "productive debate." The intervention of administrators to confirm and enforce the

mission of the group was consistent with Glynn's assertion that this is the only time they usually intervene and stop the free flow of discussion.

The second thread I provided was extremely contentious, but there was no intervention by the leadership of LTTT, possibly because nothing in the conversation specifically countered the group's mission. It is also possible that none of the administrators were monitoring the discussion during this period. As explained previously, although no one in the conversation held a leadership position in LTTT, administrators from the BAT group interacted in a way that was consistent with their leadership styles in the group they led. While the BAT administrators attempted to adopt a leadership identity in this LTTT conversation, LTTT members, fully aware that the BAT leaders had no real power there, acted in a manner that seemed to reflect a sense of empowerment.

### **Summary: Power, Identity and the Moderation of Discourse**

Gunawardena et al. (2009) contend that every online community of practice has its own discourse, with the communities shaped by the language used in them and with identity and power intertwined in the negotiation of meaning. Both Wenger (1998) and Rock (2005) discussed the multiple memberships of individuals participating in communities of practice and suggested that this has an impact on the discourse in these groups. In reviewing the analysis of my interviews with the founders of the three groups that were the focus of my inquiry, as well as the conversation threads from two of those groups, there were multiple occasions where the language used in the group was both shaped by the group and also served as an indication of the relationships among the members of the group.

Each of the groups has its own mission statement, a set of goals or demands that are meant to drive the discourse in the community. In communities of practice, there is the

expectation that members align with the goals of the group. In these discussions, we see those in official leadership positions reminding members that supporting the mission is a condition of membership, and the discourse of the group reflects that. At the same time, in the absence of group leaders in a discussion, members sometimes assume identities of leadership and attempt to mediate the discourse, even without the power of official leadership positions.

### **Leadership and Power**

Within the context of online activist communities, I define power as the ability to remove content, as well as to remove members who conflict with the group's stated mission. In each group there are official "moderators" (administrators) who function in the role of mediating the discourse and ensuring that comments fall within specific guidelines consistent with the mission or beliefs of the group. Reviewing discussion threads also reveals non-administrator members assuming leadership identities, even without the power to act as leaders in the group by removing offensive or distracting content. As explained in an earlier section, sometimes members tag administrators to make them aware of the problem in a discussion, serving as a call for intervention.

In multiple instances the crossover between online education activist groups was apparent, with discussions from one group continued in another, or with references to discourse from other groups. That crossover took on various forms. As witnessed in the LTTT1 and LTTT 3 threads, members may interact and discuss issues and events from other groups. Sometimes the connection between constellations of communities is more subtle, with members inviting like-minded friends from other groups into the community.

As evidenced by these threads, as well as others I have viewed as an online participant in over a dozen other education activist groups, each group has a unique style of moderating the

discourse. The two groups whose threads I studied for this section were led by individuals who sought to allow open discussion, but did not hesitate to step in when the talk became unacceptable in relation to the groups' goals.

In considering the higher level of moderation of discourse seen in the United Opt Out National threads as compared to Lace To The Top, it can be suggested that there are multiple factors at play having to do with logistics as opposed to just the moderating style. United Opt Out National had thirteen people monitoring the group's Facebook page, as opposed to only four Lace To The Top moderators at the time my data was collected. Another factor is the physical proximity of Lace To The Top administrators who all lived in the same state and therefore in the same time zone. This could potentially leave no one available to monitor threads occurring in the late evening hours or during working hours. The thirteen UOO Facebook group administrators spanned a geographic area from the east coast to the west coast, encompassing multiple time zones, and the Facebook group was monitored almost constantly for problems that required intervention. It would seem that the structure of these groups play a role in the level of moderation, with those having more moderators more likely to intervene and mediate the discourse in their groups.

The strengths of Save Our Schools, United Opt Out, and Lace To The Top as activist communities are highlighted in the interviews with the leaders of the three groups as well as through the discussion threads. Two major areas of strength emerged from those interviews:

- Sharing resources and funds of knowledge: Through interaction in the community, members acquire and deepen knowledge as consumers by reading and share knowledge as producers by posting or commenting. These social interactions both reflect the nature of the groups and individuals who belong to them, and at the same time, help to create the identities of participants through their interactions in these social spaces. Even when roles are not assigned, consistent with Wenger's (1998) indicator that a community of practice has been formed, members are aware of the knowledge and abilities of others.

- **Activism:** The purpose of activist groups is to create *action* beyond communication through social media. As Gerbaudo (2012) reminds us “In and of themselves social media do not automatically allow for collective action to unfold without becoming channels for the construction of common identities and thick networks of solidarity and trust” (p. 21). The success of specific collective actions as a result of education activists’ use of social media will be discussed further in the next chapter.

While the construction of common identities and networks of solidarity and trust are visible in digital education activist groups, as in other communities of practice, there are pitfalls which sometimes diminish the solidarity and trust within and between these communities. If, as McLure, Wasko & Faraj suggest (2000) knowledge exchange in online communities of practice is motivated by community interest and moral obligation and not by narrow self interest, there might be an expectation that we would not see evidence of self interest in participants of these communities. Mindful that shared discourse reflecting a common perspective of the world is indicative of a community of practice, within groups there have been multiple occasions where disparate views held by some members as well as self interest can work to disrupt or potentially derail the work of the community.

The next section will reflect the work of Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) as they describe the pitfalls of communities of practice and common disorders that appear in these communities. Just as offline indicators can be applied to online communities, the specific disorders they describe can also be observed in online communities.

### **Leadership and Hierarchy in Social Media Practices: Some of the Pitfalls**

Communities of practice, like all human institutions, also have a downside. They can hoard knowledge, limit innovation, and hold others hostage to their expertise ... It is important not to romanticize communities of practice or expect them to solve all problems without creating any. They are not a silver bullet. In fact, because communities of practice have always existed in organizations, they are more than likely to be part of the problems they are expected to solve. (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.139)



This quote was written about communities of practice within corporate organizations, but can be applicable to online groups as well. The findings regarding weaknesses and disorders in these offline communities have been manifested in online groups that I have been documenting over the course of the last three years, and those I viewed with an eye towards considering how power structures in specific online communities serve to strengthen or weaken those groups.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) discussed disorders of communities of practice within the context of the structural elements of domain, community and practice previously mentioned in this chapter. They considered both the common disorders of individual communities, and then expanded their discussion to include constellations of communities related by subject or affiliation. Wenger et al. (2002) cite two general reasons why communities can become disordered. The first is that the community may fail to arouse the passion in its members needed for forward momentum. Even more relevant to the study of online communities is the second general disorder - that of the human frailties of its members, which is reflected in their statement:

(C)ommunities of practice are not havens of peace or unbounded goodwill. They reflect all the strengths, weaknesses, and complex interrelationships of their human members. They have their share of conflicts, jealousies and intrigues. But even when there are tight bonds among the members, the results are not always positive (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 144).

Viewing the interactions of online groups through the lens of the work of Wenger et al. (2002) can assist in recognizing the impact of the human element on the groups' ability to promote offline action and change. The domain disorders discussed in the previous research by Wenger et al. include the temptations of ownership of a domain, which reflects how a community defines itself and how the community responds to the perspectives and to the interests of the members. Community disorders described by Wenger et al. impact the sense of

belonging in a community and the strength of the relationships among the community members. The practice disorders they describe reflect how knowledge is managed, updated and extended and how barriers are created for both participants and outsiders, especially when information presented and discussed does not fit the group's paradigm.

### **Community of Practice Disorders in Online Activist Groups Through a Research Lens**

In order to analyze interactions in online education activist communities of practice, I utilized the same three interviews and thirteen discussion threads that were considered for the application of Wenger's (1998) indicators that a community of practice had been formed.

Analyzing the same screenshots that were selected to observe community of practice indicators minimized the risk of selecting discussions specifically because they demonstrated the disorders or dysfunctions whose presence I was seeking to document. It was only after the screenshots were selected and coded for the presence of indicators that the process of coding for possible disorders began.

During this process, the interview transcripts and screenshots of Facebook discussion threads were coded to identify evidence of specific disorders as described by Wenger et al. (2002) appearing within these groups. As with the process of analyzing the data for community of practice indicators, the Save Our Schools Facebook page was not considered due to the inability of members to create posts and the lack of active commenting on the page, which would provide too small a data sample to analyze for these purposes. However, the transcript of the interview with Bess Altwerger was coded for signs of the disorders I discuss. As mentioned previously, ethical considerations and privacy issues prevent the sharing of intact screenshots, but sections of conversations that reveal these specific disorders are shared without identifying the posting or commenting members by name.

Disorders of communities of practice described by Wenger et al. (2002) were used to create codes which were applied to the collected screenshots of Facebook threads (conversations). Specific posts or comments were marked with these codes on the printed screenshots of Facebook threads and entered on tables created to match the disorders observed in the interview transcripts and Facebook discussion threads. In matching data from each of the three groups with the applicable disorders, interview participants and discussion threads were designated in the same manner as described for the coding of community practice indicators in Appendix C, again identifying the three interview participants, their groups, and the thirteen screenshots from United Opt Out and Lace To The Top. The tables reflect Domain disorders Community disorders and Practice Disorders (see Appendix D).

The codes developed for the community of practice disorders described by Wenger et al. (2002) and brief explanations of each are as follows:

DD: Domain Disorders

- Reflect how community defines itself in an environment
- Needs of the group lead to ignoring the perspectives and interests of members.

<i>DI</i>	Imperialism:	Belief only their perspective is the right one, knowledge police
<i>DN</i>	Narcissism:	One-upmanship, self-concern of members
<i>DM</i>	Marginality:	Gripe communities without ability to initiate change
<i>DF</i>	Factionalism:	Internal strife, special interests, emphasis on differences

CD: Community Disorders

- Affect a community's sense of belonging
- Reflects strength of relationships

<i>CE</i>	Egalitarianism:	Unity equated with uniform thinking/deviant thought = treason
<i>CD</i>	Dependence:	Dependence on leader(s), silencing of other voices
<i>CS</i>	Stratification:	Distinct classes within groups, lack of common identity
<i>CDS</i>	Disconnectedness:	Lack of shared identity, unengaged members
<i>CL</i>	Localism:	Boundaries define borders, lack of diversity of connections

## PD: Practice Disorders

- Knowledge loses value unless managed, updated, renewed and extended
- Efficiency creating barriers for participants and outsiders- what fits the paradigm?

PA Amnesia: Failure to document insights, participation feels unproductive  
 PD Dogmatism: Lack of adaptability, blind respect for authority within group  
 PM Mediocrity: Settling for less than cutting-edge, not “sharpening the saw”

### Domain Disorders in Online Education Activist Communities of Practice

As described by Wenger et al. (2002) in a community of practice the domain represents the topic or common ground that is the focus of the community. The domain for the online communities of practice used for my study is education activism. Domain disorders predominantly involve how the community defines itself. Wenger et al. contend that a well defined domain is necessary in order for members to be inspired to participate and contribute to the work of the community. Although the needs of the group may lead to the needs and perspectives of its members being ignored, in the groups I observed it was more common for individual members or small groups within the communities to display the four domain disorders Wenger et al. (2002) described.

#### Imperialism

One of the most common disorders in these discussion threads was *imperialism*, a belief by group members that their perspective is the only right one. Imperialism is often a result of members being passionate about their perspectives, but this also can impede the ability to find common ground and work towards the goals of the group as a whole.

An example of this *imperialism* occurred in a June 22, 2015 United Opt Out discussion, UOO 2 *Accusation of Censorship*, as described in the previous section. In this discussion thread a member asked who had removed her prior post offering information about an online school.

She accused the administrators of censorship for removing her information providing alternatives to public schooling. In the ensuing discussion, some members reiterated the mission of the group to support public education and not function as a resource page for alternative forms of education. Imperialism was evident in the comments of those who refused to accept the purpose of the domain to support public schools, insisting that their perspective that all methods of education should be discussed in the group was valid. In defining itself as a pro-public education community, the leadership of United Opt Out reserved the right to disallow discussions counter to the group's mission.

In another post in the United Opt Out Facebook group, *UOO 7 Troll Posts About Trolling*, a member complained about members posting information that she did not believe was directly related to opting out of tests. As other members tried to explain the group's mission and the fact that the group encompassed a vision that extended beyond just test refusals, the original poster responded:

(T)he title of the group is OPT OUT. I understand that the beast of corporate ed reform is a large umbrella. Not everyone on this page is here to discuss (or get cussed out) because of corporate takeover. I just want information about CC testing and a forum where I can get national information about the hoops parents have to jump through to refuse the test for their child... There are MANY different reasons parents might want information to refuse testing. MANY.

The member referred to a previous discussion thread which is not part of my data, in which a few members became angry and resorted to profanity in making their points, directing their comments at the administrators of the group. It should be noted that this particular discussion thread also demonstrated evidence of narcissism and factionalism, which are described later in this section, as the member and those who supported her continued to insist that their perspectives and agendas were correct and should be prioritized to determine the future direction of the group.

In analyzing the Lace To The Top discussion threads, imperialism was evident throughout the Facebook discussion thread LTTT 1, *LTTT Does Not Support Opt Out*. As described in the previous section about mediating the discourse and censorship in online activist spaces, a LTTT member who was also an administrator from United Opt out posted information about opting out of state tests, which was met by a LTTT administrator commenting that LTTT was not an opt out group. The conversation that followed was rife with imperialism as participating members held firmly to positions that reflected their own perspectives, with each side insisting its perspective was right. In this discussion imperialism was displayed both by the LTTT administrators and those who insisted on seeing support for opting out in the LTTT group. On three separate occasions in the discussion, LTTT administrators told members they could leave if they didn't accept the perspective of the leadership.

Most members were insistent that wearing a symbol was meaningless without action, while the group's administrators, the leadership in the community, insisted that they would not allow the use of their group as a vehicle for the opt out message. In this particular thread, factionalism was also present, as disagreements focused on the differences between the perspectives of members and the questioning of each other's goals and strategies. At one point a member stepped in to request that the arguing stop. The issue was resolved with an agreement that the group was not supporting the opt out movement, but would allow posts to share knowledge about test refusals with other members. The context of the LTTT1 thread and comments from a portion of that discussion appear in the previous section.

As I stated earlier in this chapter the presence of conflictual relationships within a community of practice falls under the realm of the first community of practice indicator:

*sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual*, and does not mean that a group isn't functioning as a community of practice.

### **Narcissism**

As seen in the previous example of the UOO thread from September 20, 2015, UOO 7 *Troll Posts About Trolling*, imperialism is often observed in the same discussion threads that reveal the domain disorder of *narcissism*. This is demonstrated through self-concern of members over the needs of the group, or the need to outshine other members in the activist movement. In the case of the groups I studied the disorders were more related to the general membership than to the leadership of the groups. Two examples from the data in the previous section are:

- UOO 2 *Accusation of Censorship*: a member attempts to direct United Opt Out members to online schooling, reflecting her agenda in opposition to the agenda of the group. The poster is a member of a Facebook group named Brick in the Wall, which describes itself as “dedicated to the destruction of the government run public school monopoly.”
- UOO 7 *Troll Posts About Trolling*: member comments about a group she founded and how well it is run compared to UOO, seemingly using the discussion as a means to recruit members to her own group and putting self interest before contributing to the discussion in the group.

The presence of narcissism is tied to other domain disorders in communities as those acting out of their own self interests display imperialism in an attempt to function as knowledge police. In demanding acceptance of their perspective, they often splinter members involved in the discussion, causing the internal strife that Wenger et al. (2002) labeled as factionalism.

### **Factionalism**

In some communities of practice disagreements arise as members or factions begin to fight for their own perspectives, special interests or agendas, which creates internal strife. When *factionalism* creates dysfunction in an activist group the community may become focused on differences, impeding the ability of the group to have a cohesive approach to problem solving

and action. In addition to the previously mentioned discussion threads, an additional example is the UOO 1 *Administrator Clarifies Group's Mission* discussion on April 29, 2015. As described in an earlier section, one of the group's administrators created a post calling for an end to posts or comments that were racist, hate-filled, or counter to the community's stated mission. The post included a comment that the administrators of the group were all progressive in their views and would not tolerate comments that reflected an unwillingness to collaborate with the group's vision. As shown in the transcript of a portion of the discussion thread earlier in this chapter, one member commented, "This page is not a Progressive page. Many people can say what they like and if someone here doesn't like it, they move on." As seen in the same discussion thread, another member demanded that more administrators weigh in and confirm the stance of the original post, prompting confirmation from other group administrators. The focus of the conversation became about political differences and this demonstration of factionalism led to some members deciding to leave the group.

The LTTT 3 Connected Constellations thread also provided examples of factionalism, as members aligned either in support or in opposition to the idea of free college classes for prisoners in NY at taxpayer expense. In this case the factionalism was strong enough to prompt a vitriolic tone by many participants in the conversation.

### **Marginality**

A real danger to the activist movement is *marginality* because these online communities exist for the purpose of offline education activism. If an education activist group functions primarily as a space to express unity in opposing harmful policies without functioning to initiate change, the group runs the danger of becoming nothing more than a gripe community. Overall, the specific groups represented in the discussion threads I collected have not been marginalized



in this manner, since all of the groups provide learning opportunities for members and work to organize offline engagement. Every thread I analyzed revealed the sharing of knowledge, which is in line with Wenger's (1998) description of communities of practice as learning communities.

The potential for marginality was discussed by Glynn (personal communication, August 5, 2015) in his comment that without action, activist groups become nothing more than newsfeeds. It is important to remember that communities of practice exist as spaces to share knowledge through social interaction, but activist communities exist to use that knowledge to create positive offline change. Through connections on social media, members have participated in the opt out movement, resulting in children across the country refusing high stakes tests. Forums and protests have been organized and advertised in online spaces, from small meetings in local venues to the 2011 SOS March and Rally attended by thousands in Washington, D.C. My findings did not include evidence of marginality in the groups I studied.

During their interviews Altwerger, Robertson and Glynn discussed disagreements, imperialism and factionalism within their respective groups. Altwerger explained that she felt Save Our Schools should present their platform as *demands* for public education and children. However, other leaders in the group considered that too militant a stance and instead, wanted their platform to reflect *principles*. As explained by Altwerger, the involvement of the national education unions (AFT and NEA) may have been a factor in that disagreement. Altwerger also mentioned disagreements over the speakers and the narrative that would be supported by the unions in the 2011 SOS rally, since they had given President Obama an early endorsement for reelection in spite of his pro-reform education policies, and the unions did not want any criticism of the administration. This is indicative of factionalism, as leaders divided on the issues, creating internal strife. The insistence on controlling the speakers and the statement of demands by those

representing the unions also is indicative of imperialism and narcissism, as the needs of the organization and the goal of saving public education were subverted to the agendas of the unions.

In a similar fashion, Robertson talked about issues that fit the description of imperialism and factionalism in United Opt Out's Facebook group, with internal strife caused by some who did not share the values of the group emerging in discussions. Glynn also mentioned specific incidents which fall under the domain disorders of imperialism, narcissism and factionalism when describing the removal of hundreds of members over turmoil caused in the group by those who demanded support for a specific political candidate. Many of the discussions that reveal these disorders center around political beliefs or agendas that contradict the mission of education activist groups. An example is those who do not support public education or the idea of equity for all children, but join groups with the expectation that the group's goal will be to fight the Common Core Standards, which they see as 'overreach' by the federal government. This has proven divisive in many groups, as members try to change the focus to one that aligns with their political views.

### **Community Disorders in Online Education Activist Communities of Practice**

In the structural framework proposed by Wenger et al. (2002) the community is the group of people engaging in discourse together and learning. Community disorders involve those that affect the sense of belonging in the community and reflect the strength of the relationships between members of the community. Wenger et al. explain that it can prove counterproductive to have too much of a sense of community, as there is the potential that cliques will form, with relationships among members dominating over the needs of the group. The dysfunction caused within communities may also be attributed to a failure to create a strong sense of community. Community disorders in the groups I studied tend to be interrelated, with each discussion thread

demonstrating multiple community disorders. Drawing upon the work of Wenger et al. (2002) the following descriptions of disorders visible in online activist communities of practice were generated, along with examples of each from my data.

### **Egalitarianism**

One of the disorders observed in online education activist communities is *egalitarianism*, which involves the perception that unity is only achieved through uniform thinking. Wenger et al. (2002) commented that in some cases, deviant thinking by community members is considered treason. In some of the discussion threads I studied, there was a clear sense that deviation from the dominant discourse of the group was equated with disloyalty or a lack of commitment to the goals of the group. At times this point is explicitly stated either by members or by the leadership of the group. Although Wenger et al. (2002) considered this as a community disorder; it is common for online activist groups to expect those who chose to join a group to support the group's mission. In many cases, the leadership of a group or other members step forward to remind a dissenting member of the purpose of the group, sometimes leading to the member choosing to leave the community. Since groups are created around specific goals or missions, it is not dysfunctional to have an expectation that those in the group support the goals. Support of a domain is an indicator of a community of practice and an expectation for members.

Egalitarianism comes into play in activist groups when an individual demands a focus that is not in line with the mission of a group. An example of this was demonstrated in the discussion UOO 6, *Police This Page For Off Topic Posts* in which a member demanded that the focus of the group be the discussion of how to refuse tests, with no discussion of the underlying social issues involving poverty, inequity or racism. The poster contended that only the topics of

opting out and Common Core Standards should be discussed or members would leave the group.

The member posted:

WHERE IS THE ADMINISTRATION OF THIS SITE. There is no way to report a post. Stop posting items unrelated to opting out of testing and common core. You will lose followers. I urge everyone who agrees to block these people posting various other causes, no matter how worthy, and I urge administrators to do your job and police these pages. if you do not, this cause will crumble.

When other members advised her to scroll past posts that didn't interest her or to leave the group, she reiterated her position, then left the conversation. In what seemed to be a concerted effort by a group of trolls, those who join groups for the purpose of disrupting the mission, similarly worded posts were noticed in the same day.

Another example of egalitarianism also was seen in the previously mentioned LTTT 3 *Connected Constellation* discussion thread from February 24, 2014, which became a continuation of a previous conversation in the New York BATs Facebook group. As described in a previous section, this very contentious discussion centered on the original LTTT poster's demand in a group he led that all members support the proposed New York initiative to provide a free college education to prisoners. At issue was the statement that members must support the group's position or leave, consistent with the Wenger et al. (2002) description of a lack of uniform thinking being equated with treason. Throughout the discussion thread, the original poster maintained his position that those loyal to the commitment of activism must adopt his way of thinking, a position which had caused major dissension in the BATs group where he originally stated his position.

### **Dependence**

Just as egalitarianism can serve to silence voices with demands for uniform thinking, *dependence* is a community disorder that is demonstrated when voices of members are silenced

or diminished by leadership that is so strong it dominates the group. Silencing the perspectives of community members is a threat to the progress of activist groups when members feel marginalized and lessen or end their participation in the community. Egalitarianism surfaces when a community demands uniformity while dependence is a function of community relationships in which members give up their voices and allow the voices of leaders to dominate. There was very little evidence of this in the data I collected. In a few instances, members deferred to leaders, or called them into discussions by tagging them for support. Even in cases where there was some dependence on community leaders, members' voices were not silenced or marginalized.

Although the Facebook activist groups I studied had defined missions and strong leaders, both Robertson and Glynn stated their belief in allowing open dialogue and an exchange of ideas and information in their groups, without the need to moderate threads unless they opposed the group's mission or detracted from the group's purpose. Evidence of this is found in the multiple threads I discussed where there was no intervention by administrators and members were left to work out disagreements or share information without interference. Even in the contentious LTTT 3 *Constellations of Communities* thread members were permitted to express themselves without the voices of the leadership entering or dominating the conversation. In six of the thirteen threads I analyzed, there was no intervention by administrators. In the cases where administrators did interact on the thread, voices of members were generally not silenced, although those who were deliberately disrupting the group were addressed by the administrators.

### **Stratification**

Some communities suffer from *stratification*, a lack of shared identity, which impacts the participation of the core group as the creation of distinct classes within the group prevents the

formation of the common identity needed to facilitate collective action. In some cases, this can involve the relationship between a group's leaders and its members, as seen in the previously discussed LTTT 1, *LTTT Doesn't Support Opt Out* thread where the group administrators asserted their right to define the nature of the group and discouraged discussion of opting out as a strategy. In other cases, a lack of shared identity can come from disparate views which cause groups to fragment into factions, based upon knowledge and beliefs. Stratification was noted to some degree in most of the discussion threads I collected, as individual experiences, beliefs, or agendas dominated the discourse. Some examples of those were :

- *UOO 1 Administrator Clarifies Group's Mission*: A statement by a group administrator stated that all of the groups administrators were progressives and there would be no tolerance for comments from "Tea Party/conservative Crazy" nor would racist comments or discussions about homeschooling be tolerated in a pro public school group. The lack of common political identity and common beliefs about education were reflected in discourse that became accusatory and divisive throughout the thread.
- *UOO 2 Accusation of Censorship*: Much of the discussion revolved around public education vs. homeschooling/online schooling. The rift between those assuming the identity of public school parents or teachers supporting public education and those assuming an identity as homeschooling parents or seeking education "alternatives" resulted in a member stating that the group was dividing members.
- *UOO 7 Troll Posts About Trolling*: As members try to explain UOO is concerned with issues of equity, racism and poverty, member states she is white and affluent and doesn't want discussion of anything other than opting out.
- *LtT 4 UFT/Teacher Bashing*: The thread became parents vs. teachers as parents accused teachers of being too timid and not refusing to administer tests and teachers saying this is the parents fight since they can refuse tests with impunity.

A lack of a shared identity within the community and the presence of the previously mentioned community disorders can lead to *disconnectedness*, another community disorder described by Wenger et al. (2002).

### **Disconnectedness**

When members feel disconnected, the response is either a lack of active participation in a group or the decision to leave the community. As seen in the discussion threads I collected, at times it is only the perception of the previously mentioned disorders that leads to the disconnection. When members enter a community with preconceived notions of the group's purpose that are sometimes at odds with the group's mission, disconnectedness is a common occurrence. The examples I provided under *stratification* led to disconnectedness as members frequently stated that they were leaving the conversation, and at times that they were leaving the group. Disconnectedness is closely related to stratification, as both are disorders stemming from a lack of shared identity with members of the group.

### **Localism**

*Localism* is a pitfall that arises when members of a community define their mission by their geographical borders. This is seen in some of the discussion threads where members attempt to narrow the focus of a conversation to the education issues that impact them locally and discount the experiences of others who are not familiar or struggling with similar problems. This also can lead to disconnectedness, as members do not feel a sense of common identity when their voices are marginalized due to a focus on local vs. more national education policies and issues.

In a previously mentioned discussion thread from September 20, 2015 in United Opt Out's Facebook group, as one member demanded an end to posts unrelated to her personal interests, a brief exchange between the original poster and another member involved their desire to focus on local and state groups rather than the national group. It is not uncommon for discussions to focus on local issues in groups that are created to share knowledge about

education issues and to create actions on a larger scale. Lace To The Top began as a local group, but as word spread about the group and the symbolism of green laces, members joined from across the country. The October 6, 2013 discussion regarding the ability to discuss opting out in the group was focused on a warning given to New York teachers by the state union. The decision to disallow opt out conversations in the group was made in the context of the NYSUT warning, a local issue which had little or no meaning to members in other states. At times, conversations in online education activist groups span local issues and are used to share knowledge on a state to state or region to region basis. But localism can also create barriers to the shared identity needed for cohesiveness in these communities. None of these disorders exist in a vacuum, as pitfalls related to a community's common ground, how the community learns and engages in discourse, and how knowledge is developed and shared in the community are all connected.

### **Practice Disorders in Online Education Activist Communities of Practice**

In the Wenger et al. (2002) model practice is the specific knowledge that is developed and shared within a community. In applying their structural framework to offline communities of practice, they provide the example of the specific language and experience of those working in the medical profession. While the specialized language and knowledge make communication efficient for those who share their knowledge, this same efficiency can become a barrier to those outside of the community, as well as inhibiting the ability of practitioners to see anything that does not fit into their existing paradigm.

#### **Amnesia**

Of the three categories of disorders representing the structural framework of Wenger et al. (2002) practice disorders were the least prevalent in the data I collected, most likely because of the way online communities function in a manner that is different from offline communities of



practice. *Amnesia* is a practice disorder that arises from a failure to document insights that are developed, resulting in time wasted in reworking ideas previously addressed by a group. Since members of online communities of practice interact through shared texts via Facebook posts and comments or through knowledge shared on websites or in emails, insights are documented in every online communication. However, the nature of Facebook discussions sometimes leads to posts being ‘lost’ and new discussions being generated that reiterate what has already been stated and documented. Members sometimes call attention to this occurrence, confirming Wenger et al. (2002) in their contention that this *amnesia* often makes members see participation in a community as unproductive.

In his interview, Glynn addressed the potential for amnesia in online communities when he described the need to tie the discourse in groups to action. He expressed the view that a movement can’t exist only on social media; that without offline action discussion “just dies on the page.” The LTTT 1 discussion on October 6, 2013 also displayed some level of amnesia with the failure of the leaders to document their opposition to opt out discussions until a national opt out leader attempted to share information in the group. This led to confusion, some dissension, and eventually was resolved with a compromise by the Lace To The Top leadership.

### **Dogmatism**

A lack of flexibility in communities can lead to the disorder of *dogmatism*, which Wenger et al. (2002) describe as “an unbending commitment to established canons and methods” (p. 149). This can be the result of loyalty to leadership figures in a community or a reflection of blind respect for their views. Since most online activist communities are formed around specific beliefs and goals they tend to attract and retain like minded members making this less common than some of the other disorders I have discussed. However, in cases where members join with a

misunderstanding of the group's mission or with the idea that they can shift the focus, there is some evidence of dogmatism in the discussion threads I analyzed as leadership refuses to adapt to views that counter the vision of the group. This was in evidence, for example in the UOO 1 and LTTT 1 discussion threads.

Although it is not dysfunctional of a group to adhere to its mission and goals, limiting perspectives that will be accepted in the community may be perceived as dogmatism. For example the United Opt Out administrators were unyielding in their stance when members insisted that discourse in the group must be limited specifically to refusing tests in threads UOO 6 and UOO 7. Most members involved in the discussions supported the administrators in their message that the group's vision included issues of equity and social justice and was larger than just talking about how to refuse tests.

### **Mediocrity**

The last practice disorder is *mediocrity*, which comes into play when knowledge in a community does not grow because members are not engaged in continuous learning. In online education activist communities, this can translate to not remaining informed about ever shifting developments and their impact on public education, while groups remain entrenched in conversations and actions that do not reflect knowledge of recent policies and legislation. This disorder is evident in discussions where members have not remained current with developments either in education policy or in activist communities.

Although participation in online education activist communities provides members with a wealth of current information, the discussion of the Dyett hunger strike in Chicago revealed a lack of knowledge about the purpose of this protest. A member posted in United Opt Out's Facebook group on September 19, 2015, asking for support for the protestors during the hunger

strike. As a member questioned the purpose of the hunger strike, another commented, “It saddens me that the majority of people still do not know about this.” While the practice disorder of mediocrity was not visible in most of the discussion threads I collected, the few exceptions were representative of the potential for a lack of information to create barriers to action in these online activist communities.

### **Conclusion**

Online education activists groups conform to accepted definitions of communities of practice (Rock, 2005; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). In using social media as a conduit for education activism, these groups exist to share knowledge as a common good and to operate as a means to organize offline actions. These communities of practice function as learning communities, with the sharing of knowledge situated in a social and cultural world (Gee, 2007; Lave, 1991) where learning is mediated by the perspectives of participants in the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As in communities of practice situated in the workplace or in education environments, online education activist communities each have their own discourse and their own style of creating shared understandings through the mediation of that discourse. The discourse of a group and how or whether it is managed reveals issues of identity and power in the group, as discussed in the next section.

### **Discourse, Identity and Power**

Using social media platforms such as Facebook, where much of the interaction takes place, activist communities have the potential to collect and share a vast amount of information through posts, comments, links to blogs or articles, and through online discussions. The discourse in these groups promotes a sense of membership and shared identity in like-minded members. Members create shortcuts to communication through the use of related jargon

(Wenger, 1998) which is often based upon the knowledge they have gained through participation in online activist communities. As an example, activist members in these groups know the meanings of VAM, ESSA or CBE. Often an understanding of this terminology is gained through knowledge shared in online groups with novices asking more experienced activists for clarification or definitions as needed. Full participation in a community of practice requires shared language, and members often move to full participation after acting 'peripherally' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), first viewing without commenting; then commenting on existing posts; and finally by posting new content. This movement from novice to full participant is evident through statements by members that they have been watching without commenting until they read and learned about the group and its goals.

Relationships between group members and between the general membership and leaders of the communities are revealed by examining the language used in online communities of practice (Tusting, 2005). Attention to how discourse is mediated reveals issues of identity and power, as evidenced by the collection of Facebook discussion threads from the online communities I studied. The mediation of discourse and the roles of group leaders and members were distinct in each group and revealed how meaning was negotiated within the selected groups

Just as each online community of practice has its own discourse which shapes and reveals issues of identity and power within the group (Gunawardena et al., 2009; Tusting, (2005) the level of moderation of discourse in Facebook activist groups is also unique. In Lace To The Top, all original posts had to be screened and approved before members could see them. Once posts were approved, the administrators of the group attempted to allow free discussion with minimal intervention. Comments were removed only when they disrupted or opposed the stated mission of the group. Control of the content that was posted seemed to result in few contentious

discussion threads, as this practice tended to avoid topics antithetical to the group's purpose. This structure resulted in some accusations of censorship, but also attracted members who sought a focused group without the distraction of disruptive content.

United Opt Out did not screen or approve posts, allowing all members to post content without restriction. The closing of the group in September 2015 was a result of those who were working to disrupt the group, those labeled *trolls* on social media, as multiple posts demanded that the group not address issues of social justice and only focus on test refusals and eliminating the Common Core Standards. The ability to post unrestricted content resulted in a higher level of moderation of discussion threads. In many cases, multiple administrators entered a discussion to inform, diffuse situations, and sometimes remove posts, comments, or members. Issues surrounding disruption and a lack of focus on the group's mission resulted in the deletion of the United Opt Out Facebook group in September, 2015.

Issues of power and identity surface in these online communities as group administrators exert their influence to mediate the discourse in a number of ways. At times moderating threads involves educating members about the purpose of the group and the expectation that members support the stated mission. At other times, as evidenced in UOO 3 discussion thread, posts are deleted by an administrator when a commenter's discourse became abusive. Robertson and Glynn both reported removing content and members from their groups, with Glynn reporting the removal of hundreds over a contentious NY political race in 2014.

There were instances in the discussion threads I analyzed where members enacted identities of leadership in the absence of a group administrator. Functioning without the power to delete content or remove members, these participants worked as unofficial leaders to preserve the sense of community. This could take the form of reminders of the mission of the group, of

providing information to correct perceptions that were not in agreement with the group's mission, and occasionally, 'tagging' an administrator for intervention.

In these discussion threads members enact multiple identities, with many acting in roles as activist parents, activist educators, or a combination of activist parent/educators. This can be both a unifying and a dividing factor, visible in the discussion transcripts. Educator parents often share both perspectives, while those interacting under only the sole identity as parents or educators tend to adopt discourse that reflects their positionality in the group. The sense of community is sometimes shattered temporarily in discussions that reflect extremes in those identities. One such discussion, the LTTT4 thread, became contentious as a few parents blamed teachers for the current state of education, accusing them of not standing up for their students by refusing to follow harmful policies. In that same thread, teachers responded by calling this the parents' fight, saying they had the ability to refuse policies, such as testing, without consequences.

### **Pitfalls and Disorders in Online Communities of Practice**

Online communities of practice share some of the same pitfalls and disorders as their offline counterparts (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). It is inevitable that communities of practice will have challenges and disorders. Wenger et al. (2002) suggest that this can occur because some disorders are extensions of qualities that lead to successful communities. For example, what may be considered as dogmatism in the expectation that all members will conform to the mission and beliefs of a group can also be a strength in keeping a group mission focused and able to achieve its goals without disruption or distraction. Acknowledging disorders and working to correct them can lead to growth and improvement in effectiveness of the community. Negative interactions and disagreements within groups do not necessarily negate

their positive impact of their work, but they can serve to temporarily impede the group's progress. The purpose of these activist groups is to use knowledge creation and sharing as a means to promote offline action and change. In analyzing the groups I studied, some disorders were more apparent than others.

Among domain disorders (Wenger et al., 2002) which reflect how a community defines itself and responds to its members, the discussion threads demonstrated evidence of imperialism, narcissism and factionalism, with the three often tied together in the same discussions. The disorder that was least visible is marginality, although Glynn discussed the potential for this pitfall in his interview. Marginality involves communities becoming gripe communities without the ability to create change. Online discussions such as LTTT 1 or LTTT 3 included disagreements and negative rhetoric, but as described earlier, were resolved in a manner that did not impede the progress of the groups in their ability to share knowledge and sustain action.

Community disorders (Wenger et al., 2002) reflect the sense of belonging in a community and the strength of the relationships among the community members. Of those disorders, stratification was the most prevalent in the threads I analyzed, with a lack of common identity sometimes seen between members and leaders, or between the members themselves based upon social class or political ideology. Dependence was the least noticed, as the leaders in the groups I studied did not dominate the group or silence the voices of members. In both groups whose discussions I analyzed, there was minimal intervention by the leaders, and only in cases where the mission of the group was being challenged or disrupted.

Practice disorders (Wenger et al., 2002) reflecting the management of knowledge and how barriers to learning are created were overall the least likely to be encountered in the online spaces I analyzed. Since online interactions document insights as they are shared, amnesia, a

failure to document, resulting in wasted time to rework ideas, is not a common issue. There have been instances where information is 'lost' in an abundance of Facebook threads, but this is usually solved when a member calls on others to locate the missing thread. Although Facebook activist groups can sometimes be perceived as suffering from dogmatism (Wenger et al., 2002) these communities are organized around specific goals and missions, and when functioning well, they tend to attract like minded members. Requiring adherence to the group's focus does not constitute a disorder, and I saw no evidence of a requirement of conformity in either group beyond supporting the mission. The lack of knowledge sharing and growth labeled as mediocrity by Wenger et al., (2002) was not visible in discussions from these groups because every online interaction resulted in sharing of information and afforded the opportunity for members to learn.

In the next chapter I will discuss how the various digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs interrelate and support each other in online activist communities. I will show how the participatory culture of digital education activism has utilized on-line literacies and multimodalities to communicate shared meanings, for example, through the use of videos or through memes which include both text and visual images. Finally, the next chapter will include specific examples of the impact social media has had addressing, modifying or ending specific education policies through actions that are consistent with the goals of the activist group.

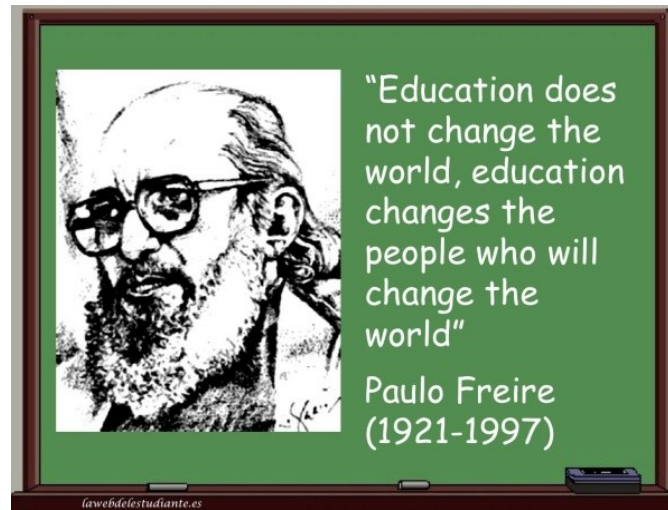


## Chapter 6

### Memes, Blogs, Tweets and Taking It to the Streets: How the Participatory Culture Of Digital Education Activism Has Utilized On-line Literacies and Multimodalities

#### The Internet Meme as Cultural Production and Transmission in Digital Activist Groups

The concept of a “meme” itself has become something of a meme online. Among internet insiders, meme” is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language, “move” or some other unit of cultural “stuff”. (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 202)



#### Background: Defining Memes and Their Place in Political Participation

Memes were discussed long before the existence of digital media. The term was first used by biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins defines memes as small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation, comparable to genes. Some of the examples Dawkins provides are cultural artifacts such as clothing styles, melodies, or texts, such as nursery rhymes and jokes. He also includes abstract beliefs, such as Democracy or the concept of God; as well as practices, such as religious rituals (Shifman, 2014).

Shifman (2014) expands the definition of memes to reflect their presence on the internet by describing them as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*” (pp.7-8). Through the use of this definition, Shifman views memes as “*socially constructed public discourses*” (p.8) which represent diverse voices and perspectives. In order for internet memes to spread successfully and not become extinct, they must be suited to their sociocultural environment (Shifman, 2014).

There is no agreement on an exact definition of a meme as the term is currently used. Shifman (2014) devotes an entire chapter of his book to differentiating between what he terms as *memes* vs. *virals*, acknowledging that the terms *meme* and *viral* are commonly used interchangeably. However, he prefers the term *viral* for a single object or text that is widely spread in online spaces. Shifman refers to the commonly accepted idea of a meme as a memetic photo – the juxtaposition of text and graphics that we see in wide use in online platforms - or to YouTube videos. For the purpose of my study, I will adhere to the commonly used term *meme* to discuss these memetic photos and videos that meet the criteria of Shifman’s definition.

Shifman points out that the language used to discuss memes reflects Dawkins background as a scientist. Shifman discusses the biological analogies, writing:

The meme-as-virus analogy sees a similarity between memes and disease agents. Taking *epidemiology* as its model, it considers memes as the cultural equivalents of flu bacilli, transmitted through the communicational equivalents of sneezes. In Internet culture, this metaphor is prevalent in the highly visible discourse on viral content. (p. 11)

This epidemiology-based discourse leads to the popular use of terms *viral* for memes that spread widely and rapidly, and for the labeling of those who view and share memes as *infected* by a meme.

### **Memes as a New Literacy Practice**

Barton and Hamilton (2000) describe literacy practices as “the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense, literacy practices are what people do with literacy” (p. 7). Written words in texts are now often supplemented by images as modes of representation, with visual images a central mode in a new communication culture (Korhonen, 2010). This serves as an effective description of internet memes. As discussed in the previous chapter, communities of practice are social spaces for knowledge construction and sharing. Korhonen states, “knowing and literacy practices are developed further in the shared communication processes between humans and within domains of multimodal information” (p.212).

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) describe online memes as a *new literacy practice*. They consider the possibilities that memes hold for literacy educators in terms of enacting activist literacies, seeking to understand memes as a cultural phenomena and as a new literacy practice. In describing the characteristics of successful memes they situate their research within the context of Gee’s (2004) concept of affinity spaces to prevent their study from becoming too text-centric and to ensure that the focus remains on memes as part of social interaction and ways of prompting others to action. The previous chapter discussed the parallels between Gee’s affinity spaces and communities of practice. Dawkins (1976) describes the three key characteristics of successful meme as copying-fidelity, fecundity and longevity (p. 194-195). Copying-fidelity refers to the ability of memes to be readily copied and transmitted relatively intact, to be *memorable* although not necessarily truthful. Dawkins refers to memes as “not high-fidelity replicators” (p. 194) as users change the emphasis, blend them with other ideas, and twist them to suit their purposes. Fecundity reflects the ability of a meme to be spread rapidly. Knobel and

Lankshear (2007) describe fecundity as a function of relevance of the meme to current events, the meme's interest and value to those using the spaces where the meme is shared, and the openness to the underlying message by those who view the meme. Longevity refers to the ongoing transmission of the meme, with those surviving for a lengthy period through the process of copying and sharing considered the most successful (Dawkins, 1976; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) cite Gee's (2004) description of affinity spaces as places where "literacies – and new literacies especially – are constituted and experienced more generally by the people engaging in them" (p. 206) to their study of memes. They assert that affinity spaces play an important role in the fecundity of memes that are distributed online. In discussing memes as a new literacy practice, Knobel and Lankshear avoid entering into current debates regarding how memes are defined; focusing instead on identifying the characteristics of successful online memes which primarily involved the juxtaposition of images either in print or video format. Gerbaudo (2002) reminds us that the widely used platform of Facebook for digital activism is one that favors visual material. This includes photos, videos and memes created through the juxtaposition of images and print.

According to Bezemer and Kress (2008), "Still (as well as moving) images are increasingly prominent as carriers of meaning...and writing is being displaced by image as the central mode for representation" (p. 166). Jenkins (2006) recognizes the power of Photoshopped images and videos as a means to spread social and political messages.

Activists, fans and parodists of all stripes are using the popular graphics software package Photoshop to appropriate and manipulate images to make a political statement. Such images may be seen as the grassroots equivalent of political cartoons - the attempt to encapsulate topical concerns in a powerful image. (p. 231)

Korhonen (2010) reiterates Gee's (2007) position that images and words often convey different meanings, stating "The reading of images doesn't follow the same linear path as the reading of written text. The interplay between words and images also is complex. Two modes of representation communicate things that neither of the modes separately would" (p.216). This seems to be the case for internet memes in which written text and images are juxtaposed.

### **Memes as Political Participation**

The web was invented so physicists could share research papers. Web 2.0 was invented so we could share cute pictures of our cats... With web 2.0, we've embraced the idea that people are going to share pictures of their cats, and now we build sophisticated tools to make that easier to do. As a result, we're creating a wealth of tech that's extremely helpful for activists. There are twin revolutions going on – the ease of creating content and the ease of sharing it with local and global audiences. (Zuckerman, 2008)

Zuckerman (2015) discusses the use of social media for activism, explaining that not only do some governments censor online speech, but commercial owners of the platforms utilized also censor activists' speech. His "Cute Cat Theory" suggests that rather than designing online platforms for activism, activists should use existing social media tools. His reasoning is based on the difficulty in censoring platforms that were designed for non-political purposes since governments couldn't shut them down without also censoring innocuous content, which would alert non-activist users to the censorship. Zuckerman further suggests that the use of tools such as Facebook and Twitter could lead to non-activist users creating and disseminating activist content. He describes this "latent capacity" for activism as an effort to convert voice to influence. In examining activists in China and Tunisia, Zuckerman concludes that "resilience to censorship may be a less important benefit than the ability to leverage participation, remix, and use humor to spread activist content to wide audiences" (p. 133). At the same time, he cautions that owners of the digital platforms may engage in nongovernmental censorship of activist content.

Zuckerman's discussion of the use of humor to spread activist content widely on digital platforms dovetails with research by Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Shifman (2014) which confirms that humor is an important component of successful memes, both in the form of videos and memetic photos. Zuckerman (2015) contends that messages that include images survive longer than those that are just text.

In discussing memes as political participation, Shifman (2014) explains that the perception of what constitutes political participation has been transformed by the rise of digital media, which has spurred practices such as commenting on political blogs or posting political jokes. It is noteworthy that *Time* magazine's 2011 "Person of the Year" was "The Protestor" (Shifman, 2014), which was a reflection of protests occurring around the world, such as Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street. Regardless of the messages shared or the reasons for the protests, digital media has been used worldwide for organizing and mobilizing protestors and for persuading them to join a specific cause.

Drawing upon Zuckerman's Cute Cat Theory, (2008) Shifman (2014) regards political memes as the merger of cute cats and hard core politics, writing:

(W)hile some political memes are framed in a humorous manner, others are deadly serious. But regardless of their emotional keying, political memes are about making a point – participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there. (p. 120)

Shifman acknowledges the important role memes have played in social media based political participation. He classifies political based memes shared on social media by their interconnected functions of persuasion and advocacy, grassroots action, and as a means of public discussion and expression. These classifications have been evident in digital education activist groups as memes have been used to advocate for public education and students; to spread the word about

grassroots actions such as attending rallies, contacting elected officials, and participating in the opt out movement; and as a means to spread knowledge and express and discuss members' views. In an earlier work, Shifman (2013) describes the attributes of memes as

- passing from person to person, gradually scaling into a shared social phenomenon
- reproducing by various means of imitation, with content spread through forwarding, linking or copying on social media
- diffusing through competition and selection, determined by the meme's adaptability to the sociocultural environment in which they proliferate.

He views memes as complex signs, although "while each meme is comprised of signs, not all signs are memes" (p. 374) and suggests future research might focus on "ideologies, textual conventions and communication forms" conveyed by memes (p. 373). In discussing the importance of social media presence during the 2013 Arab Spring, Harlow's 2013 study echoes Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) and Shifman's (2013) descriptions of successful memes.

Like a gene, memes can self-replicate and mutate as they carry cultural ideas and information. And like in evolution, the "best" memes are those that are replicated and spread- and thus highly infective – while the other lesser memes become extinct. (Harlow, 2013, p. 63).

Bennett and Segerberg (2013) note that crowd-enabled networks sustain action through the use of specific memes, citing the example of the Occupy protest 99% meme "that enabled messages to flow across networks and offered easily shared scripting for endless personal and collective activities on-and offline" while functioning as "persistent personal action frames" (p. 183). They describe personal action frames as individual reasons why participants contest situations that they believe need to be changed, without the need to persuade or to bridge differences between their reasons and those of others. Bennett and Segerberg contrast personal action frames with collective action frames, which involve calls to action that require joining established groups. They further explain that personal action frames can lead to collective

actions, suggesting that personal action frames and collective action frames are paired in social movements and in the spread of memes. They state:

While the idea of memes helps us to focus on the transmission mechanisms involved, we will refer to the conceptual pairing of personal action frames and collective action frames to locate this discussion alongside the well-established social movement literature on framing. (p. 39)

### **The Creation of Internet Memes**

The creation of memes by members of online activist groups is facilitated through online resources or meme generators, which allow the creation of content using templates. These online image makers allow the addition of custom text to images. In line with the definition of memes as being imitated and transformed (Shifman, 2014) meme creators often use meme generators to add captions to established memes. This sometimes results in the same memetic image spreading across the internet with varied captions. Users can also upload their own images as templates and can customize their memes. One such site, *imgflip*, (<https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>) adds a removable watermark so viewers can see where the meme was created. Some commonly used templates shared in education activist communities include *The Most Interesting Man In the World*, *Creepy Condescending Wonka*, *Confused Man*, *Homework Kid*, and *Unhelpful High School Teacher* (See Appendix E).

### **Memes and Framing**

The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing is the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue. (Chong & Drucker, 2007, p. 104)

Chong and Drucker (2007) studied framing in communication, both in advocacy communications from social movements and in mass media sources. They contend that framing



should be conceptualized as a process that evolves over time so that new issues can be separated from previously debated issues. This is important because people are continuously exposed to competing frames and tend to choose the frame that is consistent with their own beliefs and values. When an issue is new, the public may be unsure of how competing frames match their values. “In the formative stages of an issue, opposing sides may each contend that its position is consistent with the core values and priorities to (those) it is targeting (Chong and Drucker, 2007, p. 113).

Harlow (2013) discusses framing in social movements as an important part of storytelling, explaining that framing assists in the construction of meaning and helps the audience to understand problems and possible solutions. In examining the role of storytelling in the 2011 Egyptian uprising, known as the Arab Spring, Harlow explores the sharing of stories by protestors using Facebook, which resulted in the offline protests. These narratives on Facebook created a shared story - a combination of personal and collective action frames (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) which brought protestors into the streets. Memes, primarily in the form of YouTube videos, helped to frame the narrative during the Arab Spring and created the sense of community that led to mass protests (Harlow, 2013).

Lakoff (2004) defined framing as language that expresses the user’s worldview, with ideas as the center of the frame. Ideas are carried and evoked by language. Reality is constructed in social movements through the organization of experience into frames (Goffman, 1974). Goffman (1974) refers to frames as the *schemata of interpretation* which gives meaning to events that would otherwise be meaningless. Individuals interpret issues differently, as frames highlight some aspects of reality and exclude others (Borah, 2011). Before the advent of social media, Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson (1992) stated that facts and images take on meaning

by being embedded in frames which act as a larger system of meaning. They emphasize the importance of images as a means to convey a frame. In an earlier study which also predated the internet, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) characterized the devices used for framing as the metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices, stating that we encounter these devices not in isolation, but as *interpretive packages*.

In sum, people draw their opinions from the set of available beliefs stored in memory. Only some beliefs become accessible at any given moment. Out of the set of accessible beliefs, only some are strong enough to be judged relevant or applicable to the subject at hand. Framing can work on all three levels, by making new beliefs available about an issue, making certain beliefs accessible, or making beliefs applicable or “strong” in people’s evaluations. (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 111)

Chong & Druckman (2007) suggest that the power of a frame is dependent on the strength and repetition of the frame, individual motivations, and competing frames. Since internet memes are also evaluated in terms of their success or strength based upon repetition as they are spread, this discussion of framing is relevant to studying memes. In applying framing theory to internet memes; it would seem that memes are utilized as devices to frame issues while also reflecting the frames of the creator and those who spread the memes.

### **Memes as Metaphors**

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.3)

As mentioned previously, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) characterize metaphors as one of the devices used for framing. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) contend that metaphors play “a central

role in the construction of social and political reality” (p. 159). They describe metaphors as understanding and experiencing things in terms of each other, with metaphors requiring an experiential basis in order to be comprehended. Allbritton, McKoon, & Gerrig (1995) studied metaphors in written text in an attempt to prove that readers use metaphor-based schemas to link experience to metaphors. They consider the possibility that instead of schemas being available as already existing knowledge structures; metaphorical schemas may be created during the comprehension of metaphors. This consideration is consistent with Knobel and Lankshear’s (2007) view of memes as existing within contextual and interpersonal systems; as one of the questions they consider when analyzing memes is what a specific meme assumes about the knowledge of the viewer within the particular context in which it is situated. This will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

### **Internet Memes and Online Education Activist Groups Through a Research Lens**

Shifman (2014) discusses the politics of memetic participation and internet memes as language, but not within the context of their use in education activist groups. Viewing these discourses as a multimodal means of political participation in education activist groups using social media as a tool can extend the current body of research previously conducted outside of the education activist community. In the following section I will attempt to provide insights gained by analyzing a sampling of the memes that have become a form of multimodal discourse in education activist communities.

### **Prompt Questions Applied to Memes Shared in Online Education Activist Groups**

My focus was on viewing memes as a multimodal new literacy practice using Knobel and Lankshear’s (2007) systems and questions which were loosely borrowing from some of the

terminology of Halliday's (1975) functions of language. Knobel & Lankshear used three distinct systems for analyzing online memes: the Referential or Ideational System, with the focus on the meaning of the meme; the Contextual or Interpersonal System, with the focus on social relations; and the Ideological or Worldview System, with the focus on values, beliefs & worldviews. The codes used for the analytical questions which were adapted from Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) prompt questions for analyzing online memes were as follows:

Referential or Ideational System (R-I S) The focus is on the meaning of the meme:

- **R-I S 1**                      What idea or information is being conveyed?
- **R-I-S 2**                      How is this idea or information being conveyed?
- **R-IS 3**                        What does this meme mean or signify (within the space, for certain people, at this particular point in time)?

Contextual or Interpersonal System (C-I S) The focus is on social relations:

- **C-IS 1**                        Where does this meme "stand" with respect to the relationship it implies or invokes between people readily infected by this meme?
- **C-IS 2**                        What does this meme tell us about the kinds of contexts within which this meme proves to be contagious and replicable?
- **C-IS 3**                        What does this meme seem to assume about knowledge and truth within this particular context?

Ideological or Worldview System (I-WS) The focus is on values, beliefs & worldviews:

- **I-WS 1**                        What deeper or larger themes, ideas, positions, are conveyed by this meme?
- **I-WS 2**                        What do these themes, ideas, and positions tell us about different social groups?
- **I-WS 3**                        What do these memes tell us about the world, or a particular version of the world?

A total of 80 memes were included in my inquiry, each selected because it had been shared using the online tools of Facebook and/or Twitter. The memes were collected from various education activist Facebook groups, including the two that were the focus of my study;

from personal Facebook pages; and from Twitter. These selected memes were categorized based upon the central topic they addressed. Each category was coded with an abbreviated form of identification to facilitate the inclusion of the memes by category in a spreadsheet created to address the questions used for analysis.

The categories represented with their respective labels were:

- Privatization/ALEC/Reformers: P-A-R
- Opt Out – OO
- Common Core: CC
- Cuomo, King, Tisch, Elia - NYS
- Testing and Pearson – TP
- Duncan & Gates – DG
- Union Support and Issues - USI
- Child Development, Education & Teaching - CET
- Activism/Call to Action – CtA

Memes were organized on the spreadsheet and coded based upon the system under which they fell and by the questions (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) which were used to analyze them. For the purpose of my study I will include an in depth analysis of representative memes from each category of topic.

In providing a brief overview of the patterns and themes noted across the 80 samples, will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, a few characteristics emerged across the samples analyzed. All of the 80 memes were created to respond to specific issues or events relevant to the timeframe in which they were shared. The memes included both images and text, with images often used as the primary carriers of meaning (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). Many of the memes relied on comedic humor to convey a message. The memes assume both common knowledge and common values shared by those creating them and those spreading them. When

shared in online education activist groups, there is also an assumption that the memes are consistent with the mission of the group. The 80 memes analyzed reflect an awareness of the most current issues in education and the roles of individuals portrayed in the memes.

### The Memes: A Sampling of Memetic Photos

The charter school meme from the Privatization/ALEC/Reformers category (Figure 6.1) was widely shared in multiple Facebook activists groups, as well as on the pages of individual members. The charter school movement has continued to grow and has become a central issue in many online discussions in activist spaces. Memes have been created to represent the threat privatization is posing to public education as tax dollars are taken from public schools and paid to charter schools.

In viewing this meme through the lens of the referential or ideational system, where the focus is on the meaning of the meme, we see workers carrying bricks from an open wall of a public school building to a building being newly constructed a few feet away. Children are watching from inside the public school through the newly created hole in the wall. A sign states, “UNDER CONSTRUCTION ANOTHER GREAT CHARTER SCHOOL.” The underlying meaning of the meme is implied by the image: charter schools take resources from public schools.



Figure 6.1

In considering social relationships conveyed the meme implies that those infected by the meme share the belief that charter schools harm public schools by taking resources from them. This meme is contagious and replicable in online education activist communities and it was created with the assumption that those viewing the meme have prior knowledge of how charter schools operate and how the means in which they are funded harms public education.

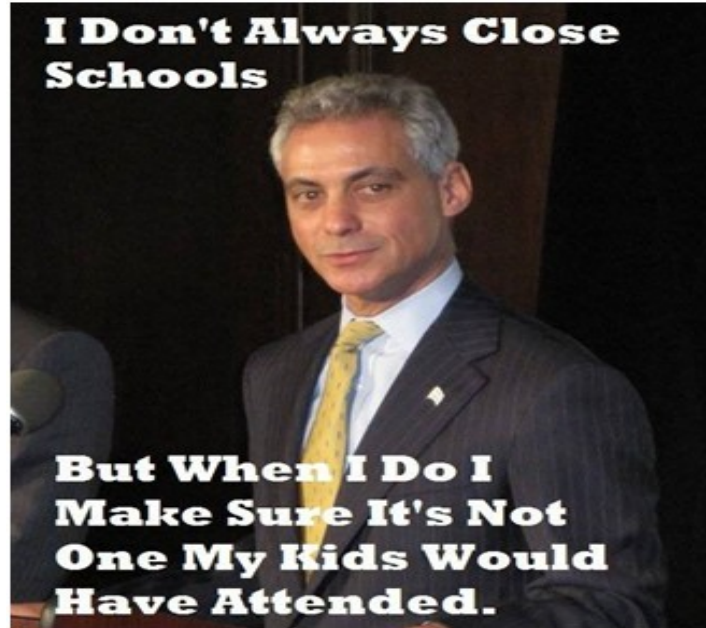
The larger theme conveyed by the meme is that charter schools exist because money and resources are funneled from taxpayer funded public schools. It signifies the current issue of public education vs. privatization through the charter school movement. In analyzing what the theme tells us about different social groups, the meme reflects solidarity among activists who support public education and oppose charter schools. The worldview represented by this meme is twofold: knowledge of the reality that charter schools exist for profit at the expense of public education and a worldview is that this is not acceptable.

Another meme from the Privatization/ALEC/Reformers category depicts Chicago mayor Rahm Emmanuel and imitates the common meme *The Most Interesting Man in the World* (See Appendix E) as a template (Figure 6.2). Shifman's (2014) concept of memes as imitation is evident in the repeat of the "I don't always... but when I do..." phrase that usually accompanies the original *Most Interesting Man* meme. Transformation is evident in the replacement of the male subject in the meme with Emmanuel.

In analyzing the meme through the lens of Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) questions, the meme portrays an image of Rahm Emmanuel with the juxtaposition of text. The message of the meme is conveyed with the photograph and text which is not an actual quote, but is intended to illustrate a point. The text reads, "I Don't Always Close Schools, But When I Do I Make Sure It's



Not One My Kids Would Have Attended.” The meaning of the meme is that Emmanuel, like other reformers, shields his own children from his policies by placing them in private schools.



**Figure 6.2**

Within the realm of contextual and interpersonal systems, this meme is intended to invoke negative feelings towards Emmanuel based upon his policies. The previous chapter included a discussion of the closing of Chicago schools in the analysis of the United Opt Out UOO 4 Facebook discussion thread. The implied relationship between those infected by the meme is one of mutual understanding of the message as well as opposition to closing schools and privatization. This particular meme is contagious & replicable in online education activist communities in the context of opposition to charter growth. The meme seems to assume that the viewer is aware of the political agendas in Chicago and recent events there.

From an ideological or worldview standpoint, the deeper theme or idea of this meme touches upon the education reform privatization agenda and knowledge of how reformers shield



their own children from policies that they impose on other people's children; in Emmanuel's case, primarily minority children living in poverty. The theme has been shared throughout education activist communities, signifying that members posting, showing approval by *liking*, or sharing the meme are united in opposing policies reformers don't want for their own children. The worldview represented by the meme is recognition of a class system where the children of the wealthy receive a different/better education than those living at or near the poverty level.

The *Thank a Teacher* meme (Figure 6.3) encouraged viewers to thank a teacher by refusing state tests. As the opt out movement has grown nationwide over the past few years, numerous memes have been created to reflect the reasons for refusing high stakes tests. Presented in a cartoon format, the meme uses images and text that portray administrators, a teacher and a student all sweating profusely as the student takes a test and the others stand over him discussing the consequences and prodding him to do well. The meme signifies that these tests can cost teachers their jobs, impact schools and communities negatively, and create stress while killing the joy of learning.

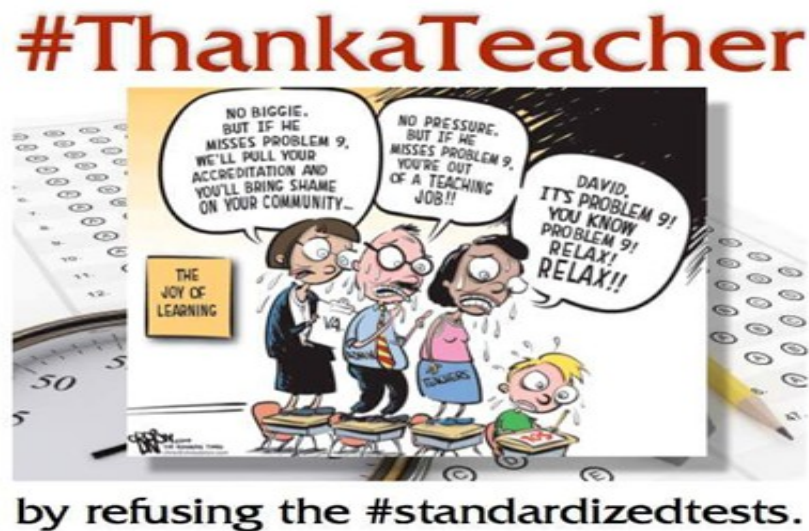
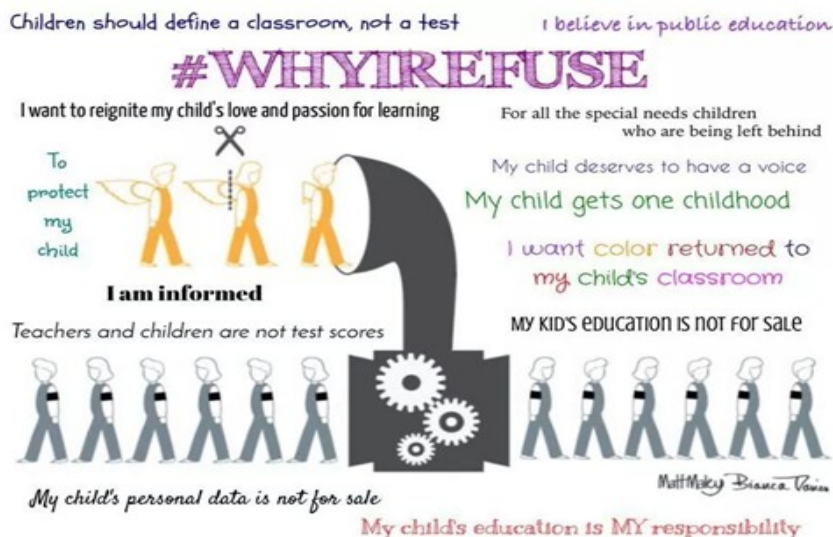


Figure 6.3

The meme implies that the relationship between those infected by the meme includes both a shared support for teachers and opposition to high stakes tests and the use of these tests to evaluate teachers and schools. It is contagious and replicable in online education activist communities by those who support teachers and public education. There is an underlying assumption that those viewing the meme understand that student test scores now carry great weight in evaluating teachers under the new evaluation systems. In addition, there is an assumption that those infected are aware of their right to refuse the tests.

In terms of the ideological system, the larger theme conveyed through this meme is the belief that evaluation by test scores is not a fair or accurate reflection of the effectiveness of teachers or schools and an awareness that this creates additional stress for all those involved. The ideas and positions reflected in this meme tell us that those in groups sharing or *liking* the meme are supportive of each other and have shared goals. The worldview represented by the meme is the dissatisfaction with high stakes tests that are destroying the joy of learning. It is part of a version of the world that acknowledges the reduction of education to passing a yearly high stakes test as opposed to creating the joy of learning in schools.

The *Why I Refuse* meme (Figure 6.4) also focused on test refusals with a great deal of information packed into a small space. Following an activist campaign that began on Twitter in October 2014 to oppose high stakes tests (Brown, 2014) the hashtag #whyirefuse began appearing in tweets and on memes to spread the opt out message. This meme portrays students having their wings clipped as they entered a machine from which they all emerged appearing uniform and robotic. Text in the meme provided reasons for refusing tests from the #whyirefuse campaign. The meme signifies beliefs about why high stakes testing is harmful.



**Figure 6.4**

In the context of social relations, the meme implies that those infected share beliefs about why current testing models are detrimental to children. Since the content was created from statements taken from the #whyirefuse campaign, the meme also signifies knowledge of the negative impact of testing. This meme is especially contagious and replicable in online education activist communities that focus on the opt out movement. The meme assumes that viewers have prior knowledge of issues surrounding testing, or that they are seeking to learn about reasons for test refusal.

As a reflection of an ideological system, the inclusion of many aspects of the education reform agenda, such as data mining (“my child’s personal data is not for sale”) and the focus on test scores, reveals the underlying theme that these changes are harmful and can be resisted through test refusals. This theme tells us that the social groups involved are informed and determined to control their children's education.

One of the many memes arising from dissatisfaction with the Common Core Standards focused on the perceived absurdity of the math standards (Figure 6.5). The *Common Core Math*

meme depicts a cat with a nonsensical math word problem, and uses humor to spread activist content (Zuckerman, 2015). The information is conveyed both through the graphic and through the text providing the math question. The meme signifies the outrage of parents and some educators about standards which are considered confusing and inappropriate.



Figure 6.5

The meme reflects confusion created by the CCSS for Math, which has made it difficult for parents to assist children with their homework and has engendered complaints from parents and educators alike that these standards require confusing, developmentally inappropriate methods for problem solving. Consistent with Wenger's (1998) indicators of communities of practice, the meme reflects shared values and beliefs. The meme is contagious and replicable in online education activist communities among those whose own children or students experienced difficulty with the math standards. The meme assumes the viewer is aware of the types of math problems children encounter under the CCSS.

A deeper theme of the meme is that these standards are not teacher written, as discussed in chapter 3, and therefore, do not reflect how children think and learn. This larger theme tells us that those sharing them in online activist groups have an awareness or experience that allows them to understand the meaning of this meme and that they share negativity about the Math Common Core Standards. The ideology behind this meme extends beyond a problem as incomprehensible nonsense. It reflects an underlying belief that the CCSS for Math are inappropriate, written without knowledge of child development, and are confusing and stressful to students.

Another meme addressing the Common Core Standards (Figure 6.6) uses the *Confused Man* template. The text juxtaposed with the photo of the man asks why two trade organizations own the rights to the CCSS if they were state led. The meme signifies awareness that the narrative of state led standards is false. I discussed the origin of the Common Core Standards in Chapter 3 and the fact that their copyright is held by the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), two trade groups.

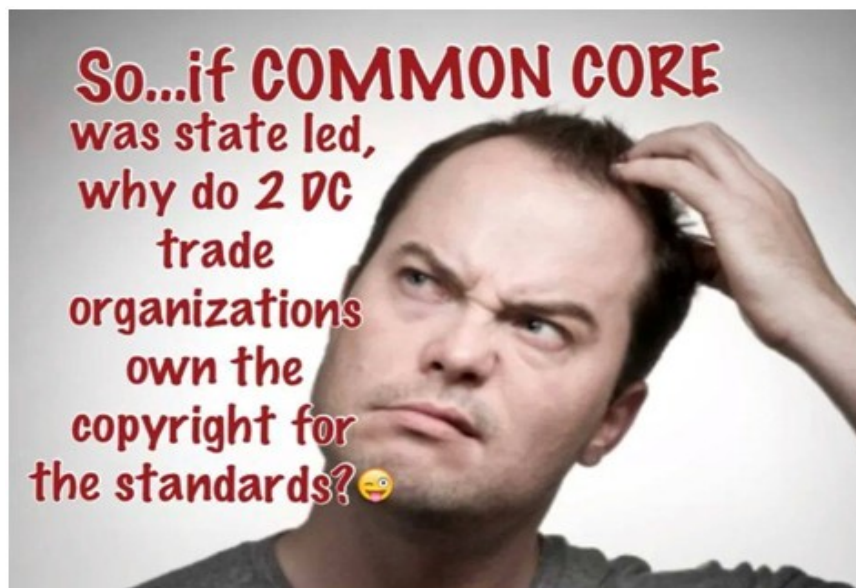


Figure 6.6



Education and politics in New York resulted in the creation of numerous memes targeting NY Governor Cuomo; Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents Merryl Tisch; the New York Commissioner of Education, John King; and MaryEllen Elia, who replaced King when he moved on to work first as Arne Duncan's Deputy Secretary and later as his replacement as U.S. Secretary of Education. King's ascendancy to the national level focused attention on his record in NY, which was familiar to many activists due to discussions shared on social media. As discussed in chapter 3, King was the defendant in the 2015 court case *Lederman v. King*, a lawsuit challenging the legality of the NYS teacher evaluation system (APPR) instituted under King's tenure as the NYS Education Commissioner which was monitored across the nation as a groundbreaking lawsuit.

One of the memes arising from King's promotion served as a reminder that many felt he was driven out of New York because his test and punish policies resulted in NY leading the nation in the number of test refusals. The meme (Figure 6.7) depicts King speaking, with a backdrop that suggests a courtroom – a reference to the NYS lawsuit. The text conveys the message through a direct statement. The meme signifies concern that he now has risen to a higher position with more ability to harm public education.

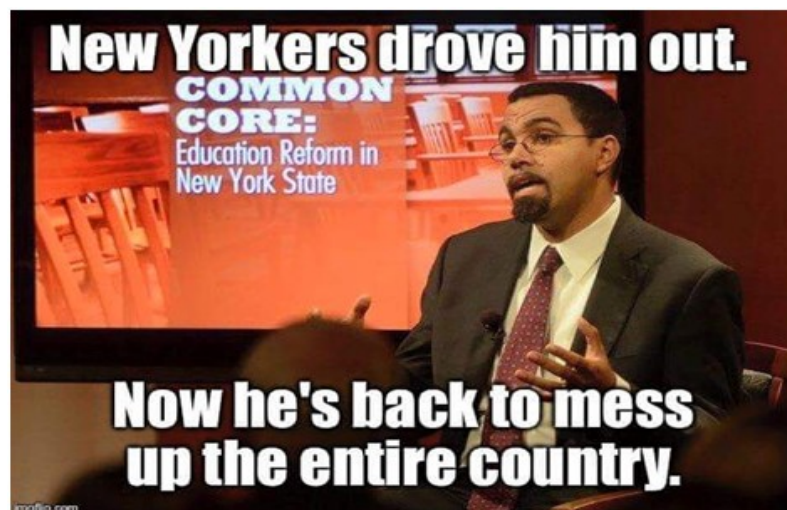


Figure 6.7

In viewing this meme from a social perspective, we see both shared concern and information about King's history in New York. Although his policies initially were an issue local to New York activists, the meme is contagious and replicable within education activist groups across the country because King's influence extended to the national level. In considering assumptions of knowledge and truth in the creation of this meme, King's record in NY is verifiable. The meme was created as King was appointed and the statement about the national level was predictive, assuming knowledge of his past history.

The meme conveys the position that education activists do not consider King an acceptable choice for the national position and suggests the expectation that the opt out rate will rise across the nation with King Education Secretary. This meme reflects a view that the expected extension of NYS policies to the national level by King was unwelcomed.

Another meme targeted Meryl Tisch. *The Just Sayin'* meme (Figure 6.8) is the juxtaposition of photos of Dolores Umbridge and Meryl Tisch with quotes attributed to each. The meme signifies the belief by activists that Tisch is the equivalent of the evil Dolores Umbridge character in the Harry Potter novels (Rowling, 2004).



Figure 6.8

From a social perspective, the meme implies shared knowledge of Tisch and agreement about content of the meme and the veracity of the quote, which is verifiable. The meme was primarily contagious within New York based activist communities, although it did travel outside of New York groups. There is an assumption that those viewing the meme have knowledge of both Tisch and the Umbridge character. This meme would have appeal to Harry Potter fans.

The sharing of this meme tells us that a common element in education activist groups is concern for children. A larger theme conveyed by the meme is the common perception by activists that those in charge of education policy don't care about the well being of children in general and don't care that their policies make children unhappy in school.

Many memes are reactions to specific events. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's negative comments about teachers in early 2015 resulted in multiple memes, such as the *I'm Hunting Teachers* meme (Figure 6.9). Using humor, the text in the speech bubble juxtaposed with a cropped photo of Cuomo hunting mimics the speech of the popular culture Looney Tunes cartoon character, Elmer Fudd. The meme signifies Cuomo's clearly stated contempt for New York teachers and their union.



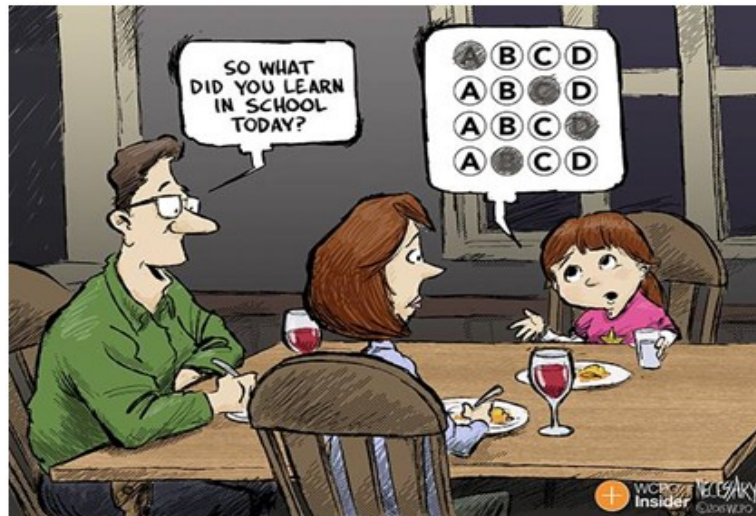
Figure 6.9



As an indication of the relationship between those infected by the meme, there is a suggestion that those sharing the meme in groups support public school teachers. The meme was contagious and replicable in online education activist communities where most members support teachers and public education. The meme uses humor and is not intended to be taken literally or to be factual. It is reflective of the shared knowledge that Cuomo dislikes public school teachers and that he has expressed this freely. This meme is one example of activists using humor as a means to make their point that Cuomo is not viewed as a friend to the teaching profession.

This meme was a response to public comments Cuomo made about teachers, and the underlying theme is that Cuomo is “coming after” teachers. One belief reflected by the meme is that an elected official considers it acceptable to publicly air his dislike of teachers, but activists do not consider this acceptable. The portrayal of the governor as a hunter gunning down teachers also conveys the message that the Cuomo’s rhetoric against teachers is destructive and unacceptable.

The topics of high stakes testing and Pearson’s control of much of the testing have been addressed in numerous memes. As discussed in chapter 3, high stakes testing provides lucrative contracts and large profits for corporations such as Pearson Education. The use of these tests to evaluate teachers, schools and school districts has resulted in a focus on test preparation in many schools. One meme circulated to reflect the impact of testing on education uses a cartoon format and speech bubbles to depict a child telling her parents that all she learned in school that day was to fill in bubbles (Figure 6.10). The underlying meaning is that children are receiving a test prep education. The meme is a strong illustration of how images can be powerful carriers of meaning with writing “displaced by image as the central mode for representation” (p. 166).



**Figure 6.10**

The sharing of this meme by both parent and teacher activists demonstrates their similar views about the emphasis on high stakes tests. The meme was created and shared within the context of increased emphasis on a test prep curriculum. It is contagious and replicable in most education activist groups, especially in groups focused on refusing high stakes tests, and it assumes knowledge of the impact of high stakes tests on education. Parents and teachers viewing this meme would understand this meme and most likely agree with it.

The larger theme or idea is the focus on test preparation in schools as opposed to the learning that took place before the advent of the corporate reform agenda. The meme serves as a contrast between test prep and real teaching, and suggests that considering test prep as learning is absurd. Through the sharing of this meme we see activists united in the position that education should consist of more than test preparation, sharing the worldview that testing has taken over education and is detrimental to children because it narrows education to filling in bubble sheets.

In the *So Creepy* meme, (Figure 6.11) a photo of a man using a device attached to a wall combines with the text to convey the idea that someone was spying on students after school hours. In order to recycle test questions and maximize their profits, Pearson Education has taken

extraordinary measures to provide test security. In March, 2015, information was released that Pearson admitted to ‘monitoring’ social media to see if students were discussing test content on social media after school (Strauss, 2015).

This meme was a reaction to the well publicized revelation that Pearson representatives were monitoring students’ social media activity to look for security breaches. The meme signified that students’ right to privacy outside of school hours was being compromised by Pearson.



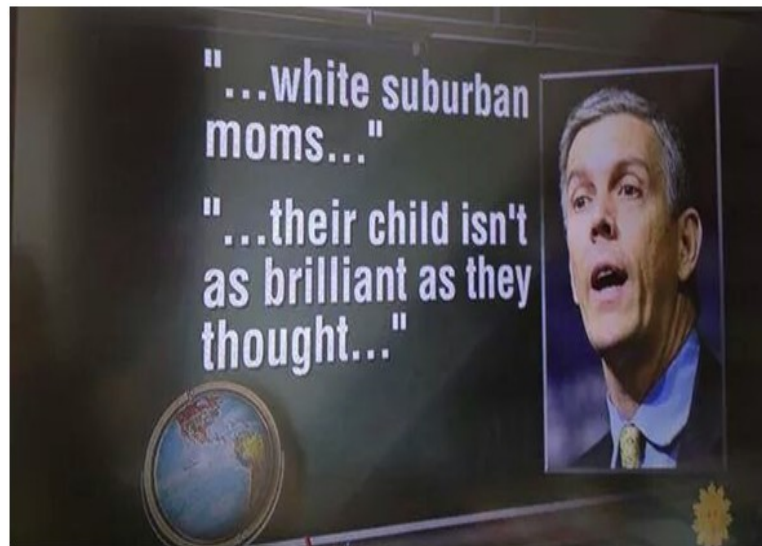
**Figure 6.11**

The meme implies that those infected are mutually displeased with Pearson monitoring students on private social media accounts. It is contagious and replicable in online education activist communities, specifically by parents and teachers familiar with the underlying situation. There is an assumption that those in groups sharing the meme are familiar with Pearson Education, the PARCC test, and the incident that sparked the meme.

The larger theme is that student privacy is being violated by Pearson over concerns about their profits if test questions are shared. The meme tells us that activist groups are opposed to

intrusion of student privacy and have concerns about Pearson's role in education. The larger worldview is that profits are prioritized over students, and Pearson assumes the right to violate student privacy to safeguard the integrity of its tests.

A statement by Arne Duncan that angered parents in November 2013 (Strauss, 2013) resulted in a meme with his photo juxtaposed with part of his quote. The *White Suburban Moms* meme (Figure 6.12) reflected Duncan's view of the motivation of mothers who criticized the Common Core standards, spurring strong reactions that signified outrage at the comment. The underlying meaning of the meme is that Duncan believes refusing tests is a reflection of white middle class mothers' disappointment in their children's test scores, reducing their concerns to a personal agenda unrelated to issues of pedagogy and politics. His statement discounted the dissatisfaction of urban and non-white parents of both genders with policies he had implemented.



**Figure 6.12**

While those infected by the meme shared anger at the Duncan quote, it especially impacted the “white suburban moms” to whom Duncan referred. The meme spread across education activist communities since the comment angered parents everywhere. There is an

assumption of knowledge of the quote and the context surrounding it. Also assumed is that the viewer will recognize Duncan and be aware of his position and policies he has enacted.

The larger theme expressed was Duncan’s attempt to deflect and discount the anger parents were expressing at his policies by saying it was due to their realization that high stakes tests proved their children were lacking. The groups sharing this meme demonstrate that members resent Duncan blaming them and children for failures of his policies and their refusal to participate in high stakes tests. The meme tells us that policymakers such as Duncan prefer to blame parents rather than accepting responsibility for policies they have instituted that are negatively impacting public education.

Memes have been shared that support the idea of unions as a whole while others reflect dissatisfaction with the actions of specific unions. One such meme, the *Survey and Nae Nae* meme (Figure 6.13) was spread after the New York State Teachers Union (NYSUT) encouraged members to participate in a survey that would be shared with the governor’s Common Core Commission and to take videos as they danced the Nae Nae to share on social media as a means to support public education (<https://mac.nysut.org/iampubliced-nae-nae-challenge>). Many members were outraged that the union’s claim of “fierce advocacy” was so ineffective.

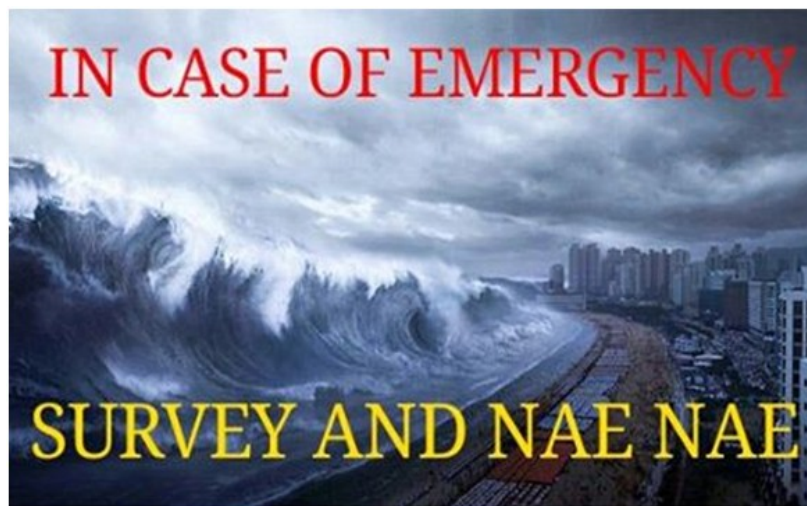


Figure 6.13

The meme consists of a photo of a huge wave about to make landfall, along with text. Using the metaphor of a tidal wave about to strike, the meme signifies the belief that education in New York has become an emergency and the union has suggested ineffective actions.

The meme implies that those infected share dissatisfaction with NYSUT's initiatives. It is contagious and replicable in online education activist communities, especially those in which many are NY teachers, although awareness of the situation was spreading through social media and many teachers from across the country were aware of the situation. The meme comes with the assumption that the viewer is aware of these initiatives and why they are opposed. It assumes knowledge of the NY Governor's Common Core Commission and the perception that survey information would not be used to effect desired change. It also assumes knowledge of the request by NYSUT that teachers videotape themselves doing the Nae Nae and sharing it as a means to support public education.

The underlying theme is dissatisfaction with the union's suggestions. This meme tells us groups do not support NYSUT leaders or the suggested activities as a form of activism. This is part of a larger view within the context of recent events that many teacher union leaders are not responsive to needs of rank and file, and are losing the support of members. The metaphor of the wave suggests that in a crisis, the union was offering no protection from the "tidal wave" of reforms sweeping the state.

An interesting meme in the category of Education and Teaching includes the juxtaposition of two heads, one depicting the effect of learning; the other the impact of testing (Figure 6.14). The use of color in one head as opposed to the inclusion of a testing bubble sheet in the other conveys the idea that learning that is rich and colorful includes the arts, while testing



results in black and white, multiple choice thinking. It also suggests that the two are diametrically opposed.

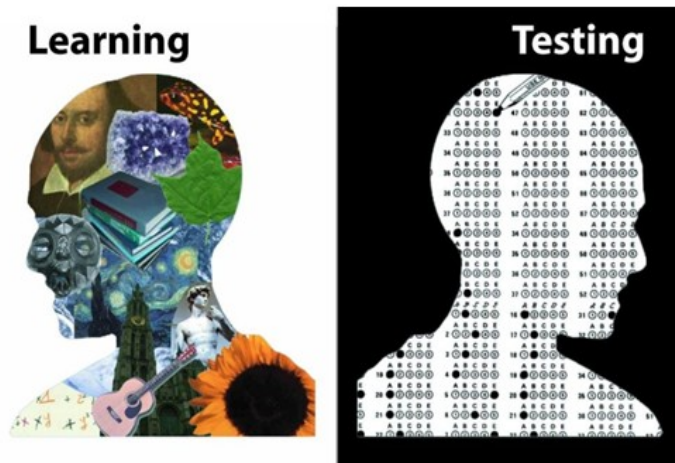


Figure 6.14

The meme implies that those infected by the meme understand the value of a well-rounded education that includes the arts, and also realize the damage of education focused on test preparation. This is another example of a meme that used an image to convey the meaning without the needs for words. The meme is one that spreads in the context of communities where parents and teachers have similar goals for education. There is an assumption that the viewer will recognize the metaphor – a head filled with color and richness and a head filled with test bubbles as the contrast between a rich, colorful education and a bland, test focused education. It assumes that there is truth in this comparison.

The larger theme is that the focus on standardized testing is providing an inadequate education that will prepare students to take tests and see the world in black and white. The positions conveyed by the theme suggest that parents and educators want more than a test prep

education for their children and students. The meme tells us that the world is one in which much is being lost in our schools as testing crowds out a full and rich curriculum.

The last category considered was memes that serve as calls to action. One such meme featured a photograph of Bill Gates looking frightened, along with text that entreats the viewer to organize. The *What Do Corporate Reformers Fear the Most* meme (Figure 6.15) calls upon those infected to organize against corporate reformers such as Bill Gates. The meme states that corporate reformers fear the truth and large groups of protestors standing at the doors of their corporations.



**Figure 6.15**

The meme reflects a call to action for group members to work cohesively against corporate adversaries such as Bill Gates. Contagious and replicable in online education activist communities, especially those where members engage in off line activism, it assumes that the viewer recognizes Gates and is aware of the issues surrounding his influence in education. It also assumes the truthfulness of the claim that reformers fear organized protests.



A larger theme addressed by the meme is the need for offline organized actions and the need for activists to become a physical presence at the doorsteps of corporations and reformers. This idea tells us that activist groups must move beyond online interaction and use social media, including the spreading of memes, as a means to organize for boots on the ground actions. Although the meme contains both a visual image and text, this is another powerful example of the power of image to convey meaning, since the fearful expression of Gates in the meme provides a message before the viewer even reads the text. Gates is symbolic of the larger world of corporate reformers, and may have been chosen because he is closely associated with the Common Core Standards and is recognizable to those in online activist communities since he is the topic of much discussion in those activist spaces. In viewing the version of the world revealed by the meme, we see the power of organized activists as a physical presence is recognized and possibly feared by corporate reformers.

### **What Are The Patterns and Themes Seen In Online Memetic Participation?**

In order to observe patterns or themes in all of the print memes used for this study, I entered all 80 memes into a spreadsheet, as described previously. This allowed me to apply the same questions to every meme in each topic category to look for similarities and differences. The 80 memes were originally selected based upon a representative sample of those addressing various topics. Themes and patterns emerged from the memes and were not used to guide the selection of those to be analyzed. An overview of the memes within the context of the questions adapted from Knobel & Lankshear (2007) revealed patterns and themes consistent with the memes selected for more in depth analysis.

Within the context of the referential or ideational system where meaning is the focus, the following basic patterns and themes emerged:

- All of the 80 memes studied are contextualized within specific issues or events that precipitated the creation and spreading of the memes. Some were calls to action, but spread within the context of a perceived need to act at the point that the meme spread.
- The memes use multimodalities, with interplay between images and written words in order to convey the desired message. Only three of the 80 memes relied on written text without the inclusion of an image or word art.
- Of the 80 memes, 35 attempted to use comedic humor or sarcasm to illustrate a point.

Although some memes were created in the context of responding to a specific event, as they spread they became less event-responsive, and more reflective of ongoing issues. For example, the meme of John King previously analyzed and discussed was a direct response to his appointment to replace Arne Duncan as U.S. Secretary of Education. Over time that same meme became symbolic of activists' frustration over the continuation of failed policies and their plan to use test refusals as a means of protest.

More than half of the memes utilized humor, an important component of memes that spread and have longevity (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014). In addition to the two memes that made use of the popular culture characters Elmer Fudd and Dolores Umbridge, additional memes included Peppermint Patty from the Peanuts cartoons, the Kool Aid Man from advertisements, Glinda the Good Witch from "The Wizard of Oz" and the Tauntaun creature from the earlier Star Wars movies.

Almost all of the memes include images, which aligns with Zuckerman's (2015) contention that messages with images survive longer than memes only containing written text. The leaders of the three activist groups I studied were in agreement regarding the effectiveness of memes as multimodal tools in digitally enabled activist groups. Each focused on the ability of images to convey powerful messages in a concise manner.

Altwerger discussed memes as a framing device and their ability to not only share a message, but to sometimes reframe positions, stating:

It is a framing device. Memes frame in one visual display – they can encapsulate a message and kind of cement it in people’s minds and they have a visualization that I think they can internalize. Good memes, using the notion of framing theory, can help you to frame a position, an argument, a way of looking at things that can have a lasting impact. It kind of changes the underlying metaphors and can help you to view things in a unique and different way.

Glynn reiterated Altwerger’s view that memes impact thinking, and added that memes can serve as a kind of ‘hook’ to spur interest in a topic. Glynn described memes as follows:

I think they’re wonderful. It’s a snapshot, it’s quick, and when you’re on Facebook you’re not looking to read a thesis. You are on there to get a quick feel for things... They are used for a lot of different reasons. You can get a graphic that makes people wonder and gets them thinking and they can read more if they like it. It’s a quick snapshot and I think it’s crucial. It’s really what we’re into today – it’s like a commercial on Facebook – something in between the discussions.

Robertson discussed the power of memes within the context of their ability to convey information and elicit both emotional and intellectual responses from the viewer.

I think one of the reasons they are so powerful is because, of course, they are visual and because it’s a simple, simple sound bite. We are told again and again if your article is over 500 words they’re going to quit reading. It’s really hard to stop yourself from writing more. But the meme kind of forces us to consolidate and simplify our thinking so that it is so clear, either a picture or a one liner. I think it’s an incredibly powerful and creative way to fight back because it really hits people emotionally or intellectual

A common thread in all three discussions is the value of the meme as an alternative to lengthy text in order to share information, to pique interest in relevant topics, and to move members of groups to action. Altwerger’s discussion of framing is consistent with the earlier discussion in this chapter of framing theory and the relationship to internet memes.

In viewing the memes through the contextual or interpersonal system, which focuses on social relations, there are also patterns and themes observed.

- The memes imply that those infected are sympathetic to the position expressed in the meme, as evidenced by the spreading of the memes between activists and their online communities as well as from activist communities to members’ individual Facebook pages.

- As with the individual memes I analyzed in depth, each of the 80 collected memes is contagious and replicable in online activist groups where members share the beliefs and mission represented by the meme and where members have prior knowledge that enables them to understand the meaning of the meme.
- Seventy three of the eighty memes assume that those viewing and sharing the meme have prior knowledge of the events or situation that inspired the message without providing additional information or explanation.
- The remaining seven memes are either strictly informational, were created to teach the viewer; or include facts in the text to augment the viewer's knowledge and interpretation of the meme. Those providing facts contain information that can be verified through other sources.

As discussed in chapter 5, online education activist communities of practice are learning communities. Since online memes spread through affinity groups (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) or communities of practice, much of the content of these memes relates to issues or events that members have already viewed or discussed online. Memes are created to inform, to inspire, and sometimes to entertain while spreading a message. Although many members first encounter these memes in online activist communities, they are also distributed through postings on members' individual Facebook pages, spreading the message and the information outside of the online activist community. This boosts the effectiveness of memes in spreading the activist message and helps to draw new members to online activist communities.

In the ideological or worldview system the focus is on values, beliefs & worldviews.

Viewing the memes through the prompt questions for the ideological system revealed the following:

- Memes have been created to address numerous larger themes or ideas, and for each large idea there are usually multiple memes. Some of those broad themes are demonstrated by the topics I used to organize the memes I used for my study, although these same memes could have been organized under broader or more specific topics than those I chose.
- Overall, the memes all relate to larger ideas involving current issues and discussions surrounding public education, the teaching profession, and the impact of corporate education reform.

- The memes suggest that the groups in which they are replicated and shared operate under a common or similar belief system regarding the issues represented by the memes.
- As seen in the memes selected for more in depth analysis, the remaining memes also reflect a worldview which demonstrates an awareness of current issues in education. Most reflect a determination to fight the dismantling of public education.

Although the discussion thus far has been limited to the use of memetic photos, also known as print memes, videos can also spread as memes. The next section will discuss how videos, blogs and Twitter are used as tools in education activism.

### **Videos, Blogs and Twitter As Online Tools for Education Activism**

Whether by using the internet to take part in a worldwide expression of dissent and disgust, to divert corporate agendas and militarism through the construction of freenets and new oppositional spaces and movements, or simply to encourage critical media analysis, debate, and new forms of journalistic community, the new information and communication technologies are indeed revolutionary. (Kahn and Kellner, 2004, p. 93)

### **The Use of New Literacy Practices for Political Participation**

#### **Memetic Videos**

Shifman (2014) includes videos in his discussion of memes, suggesting that one of the qualities of memetic videos is the ability to provoke high-arousal emotions, with those evoking anger most likely to result in action, such as sharing the video. As an example, the “Kony 2012” video launched a campaign to end Joseph Kony’s abusive policies and child abductions in Uganda and reached 100 million viewers in six days (Shifman, 2014). Emotionally evocative videos tend to spur online actions such as using Twitter to generate public support for a cause. Again using the “Kony 2012” example, Shifman states that the ability to use social media to assert influence by contacting policymakers led to the viral sharing of the video. He states, “This

additional activity deepened people's sense of involvement, vital for any political campaign" (p. 72).

Just as the discussion of print memes used in political participation focuses on the digital platform of Facebook, the discussion of memetic videos seems logically linked to a discussion of YouTube as a digital platform and a social network. According to Burgess and Green (2009) YouTube was initially created for the purpose of sharing videos on other social networks. They describe YouTube as "a high-volume website, a broadcast platform, a media archive, and a social network" (p. 4). Videos related to education issues and uploaded to YouTube are shared as memes in Facebook activist groups, on Twitter, and in activists' personal blogs. Video blogs, called vlogs, are sometimes used to spread knowledge or make political points. As Burgess and (2009) explain:

The vlog (short for 'video blog') is an extremely prevalent form of 'amateur' video in YouTube. Typically structured primarily around a monologue delivered directly to the camera, characteristically these videos are produced with little more than a webcam and some witty editing. (p.145)

Shifman (2014) considers YouTube as a social community as well as a broadcasting platform. He explains that viewing videos produced by ordinary people leads to the perception that we are communicating with peers in a social setting, resulting in more imitation, sharing and responses than when we view videos created by celebrities. Jenkins (2006) discusses the effectiveness of YouTube as it functions in relation to other social networks such as Facebook, blogs, or the once popular platform MySpace to reframe content and initiate discussions. He credits YouTube with being the first tool to bring three levels of participation together in one platform: production, selection and distribution of content. He further contends that YouTube directs attention to the role of everyday people in a changing media landscape.

### **Blogs and Twitter**

The term ‘blog’ is short for Weblog, a form of grassroots online expression which involves providing information and challenging assumptions, often linking to other blogs or sites (Jenkins, 2006). Davies and Merchant (2007) describe blogs as a new form of social practice. They define blogs as *interactive texts* which are “jointly composed and which are interwoven with other texts” (p. 167) and which serve the needs of affinity groups while creating their own communities of practice among bloggers. They view blogs as a new screen-based literacy practice and as multimodal texts, incorporating not only the printed word, but may also images, sound, and videos. Blog operate as part of a social network and are often shared in multiple online platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter. Many include a blog roll, which is a sidebar list of other hyperlinked blogs, usually related to the interests or online identity of the blogger (Davies & Merchant, 2007).

Although political bloggers have been able to influence decision making, Kahn & Kellner (2004) do not see this as the most important indicator of the success of blogs. Instead, they state:

(T)he success of blogging should not be judged solely on whether it generates obvious political effects... bloggers are expanding the notion altogether of what the internet is and how it can be used. Increasingly, bloggers are not tied to their desktops, writing in virtual alienation from the world, but posting pictures, text, audio and video on the fly from PDA devices and cellphones. (p. 93)

Twitter is considered a *micro-blog* where members can post updates, called *tweets*, in 140 characters or less. Twitter is used to share messages, blog posts, memes and videos to an extended network. As Bennett and Segerberg (2013) explain, “Twitter and other technologies that traverse and connect networks can be important for organizing large-scale connective action in a variety of ways” (p. 90). They discuss the use of hashtags (#phrase) as a means to allow other users to search for a topic and to make a topic *trend*. Hashtags can draw traffic to specific

conversations on Twitter and direct the flow of information packets by carrying links or resources to other networks (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Karpf, 2010). Twitter streams may include links to news sites, activist organizations, blogs, and videos. Members can build their list of followers by retweeting the content of other members, so that their Twitter identity, shown as @twittername will become visible to other users, who may then follow them (Karpf, 2010). As discussed in chapter 4, Twitter has been a useful tool in organizing by political activists in situations such as the 2013 Arab Spring or in the Occupy Wall Street movement (Harlow, 2013, Shirky, 2009).

### **The Use of New Literacy Practices In Digitally Enabled Education Activism**

Videos, especially those archived on the YouTube platform, have become useful tools for online education activist communities, as my interviews with Altwerger and Robertson revealed. In considering the use of memetic videos by Save Our Schools, Altwerger discussed the videos of the 2011 SOS March, which are available on YouTube. Five years after the pivotal event videos of speeches from the rally are still being shared on the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter. One of those videos, *Matt Damon speaks before SOS March* (2011, July 31) has had over 150,000 views. The video is footage of Damon's comments to the crowd as the rally ended and thousands of participants were about to march to the White House.

Robertson discussed a video created by United Opt Out cofounder Morna McDermott. The video, titled *Walking the Labyrinth of the Corporate-Owned-Common Core* (McDermott, 2013, July 23) was shared on United Opt Out's YouTube channel and had almost 20,000 views by October, 2016. It was spread across multiple Facebook activist groups, on individual activist's Facebook pages, and on Twitter. This was the most viral of UOO's videos. In the video, McDermott displays a chart which was used to explain the connections of people and



corporate interests involved in the creation and adoption of the Common Core Standards. A transcript of this ‘vlog’ was also shared on McDermott’s personal blog (2013), demonstrating how various social media platforms intersect to share content.

You Tube videos, blogs and Twitter have been instrumental in creating political action as they intersect with the Facebook platform to share information and coordinate users across online education activist spaces. In the next section I will provide examples of how these social media tools have been effective in creating successful offline actions and results for education activists.

### **From Voice to Action: How Has Social Media-Enabled Education Activism Translated To Successful Offline Actions and Results?**

#### **Kenneth Cole and the NYC Billboard**

What does a billboard for a fashion company have to do with education activism? When the billboard is an advertisement from a famous clothing designer, who is also the brother-in-law of the New York State governor known for his attacks on the teachers and their unions, it becomes an issue for activists. A blog post (Cromidas, 2012a) began to spread on Facebook revealing that clothing designer Kenneth Cole’s company had posted a large billboard on the West Side Highway in New York City (Figure 6.16) which portrayed a woman dressed in red with the pun “SHOULDN’T EVERYONE BE WELL RED?” Under the quote, attributed to Kenneth Cole, were the words “TEACHERS’ RIGHTS VS. STUDENTS’ RIGHTS...” followed by direction to a website, WhereDoYouStand.com which posed a survey question, “Should under-performing teachers be protected?” Those visiting the webpage were asked to respond yes or no.



**Figure 6.16**

As word of the billboard spread across Facebook, education activists began writing about it on Twitter, some using the hashtag #boycottkennethcole. The angry tweets discussed Cole’s connection to Cuomo and the fact that Cole sends his own three children to private schools. Tweets included links to a petition created by activist Sabrina Stevens demanding removal of the billboard. The petition was titled, “Take down your hurtful ad, Kenneth Cole!” and included the demand that the billboard, which pitted students against teachers, be taken down.

Many who responded to the billboard on social media believed that the intent of the advertisement was to imply that the right of teachers to due process conflicts with the rights of students – an implication that hit a nerve when framed in the context of the very public anti-teacher rhetoric coming from the NY governor and being repeated across the country. Change the Stakes, a New York City based activist group, tweeted a reminder that teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions (Figure 6.17).

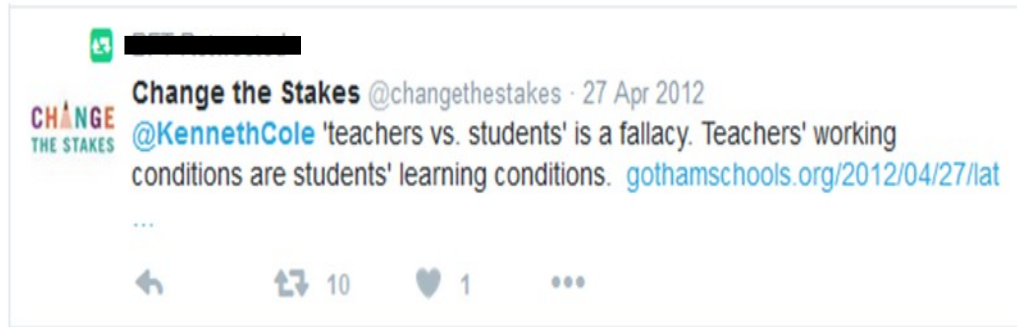


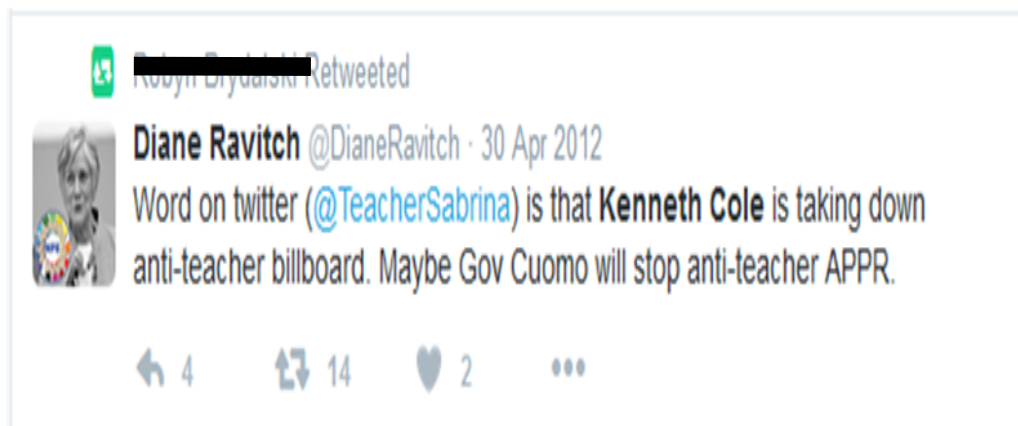
Figure 6.17

The backlash did not only include teachers in New York. As the story spread rapidly on Facebook and Twitter and in the blogs embedded on those platforms, activists from across the country joined in, tweeting their dissatisfaction to Cole, threatening to boycott his products, and demanding removal of the billboard. Many commented negatively about the ad on the blog posts which further escalated the situation. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten joined the discussion, tweeting, “Don’t pit teachers against students and take down your hurtful ad, Kenneth Cole” (Cromidas, 2012b). As the petition reached 600 signatures and the social media calls for a boycott of the company grew, Kenneth Cole tweeted a simple statement to petition creator Stevens (Figure 6.18) stating that the billboard would be taken down. This was the result of three days of focused activity on social media.



Figure 6.18

The news that the billboard was being removed spread rapidly on social media as Cole's tweet was retweeted, shared on Facebook, and discussed on blogs. Cromidas updated the story on her blog to announce that the outcry from educators had been successful in facilitating the removal of the billboard (April 30, 2012). Well known blogger Diane Ravitch mentioned it briefly in one of her blog posts, and shared the news on Twitter (Figure 6.19).



**Figure 6.19**

If there was any question that the social media campaign was at the core of the decision to remove the billboard, a blog post the same day the removal announcement was made appears to validate the connection.

“We have listened closely to the many comments from teachers across the U.S,” a spokeswoman for Kenneth Cole Productions said in a statement. “We understand that we misrepresented the debate—it is an issue that is far too complex for a billboard. We have made the decision to take the billboard down.” (Gershman, 2013, para. 5).

### **When It Is Not Just About a Desk**

Chapter 5 was introduced with the transcript of a portion of a Facebook discussion thread from *Lace To The Top*, LTTT 6 *Principal Removes Desks*, in which members of the activist community reacted to an incident that had been shared on social media. In mid October, 2015, Donna Connelly, the principal of P.S. 24 Spuyten Duyvil School in the Bronx (part of the NYC public school system) announced that she was having all of the teachers' desks and file cabinets removed from their classrooms on the following day. According to teachers in the school, many were required to empty their desks and file cabinets during time when students were in the room, creating confusion and upsetting the teachers and the students. This may have gone unnoticed and uncorrected were it not for one teacher, Michael Flanagan, from a nearby school who photographed the pile of desks and file cabinets tossed into a common area between the two schools. Flanagan, a member of the BATs activist group, shared the photos on Facebook and wrote the following in a blog post (2015) one week after the desks were removed:

I notified my union district rep (as I am a union chapter leader for the UFT) and then posted the pictures I took to my Facebook page and then onto the national BATs group page. The photos went viral. I was asked to push the issue by several members of the school, as they have been the recipients of bullying tactics by this principal for years... Several journalists such as Susan Edelman of the NY Post became interested and also helped publicize the issue. (para.3)

Edelman (2015) wrote about the incident and the story was picked up by multiple online sources, including EdWeek and Diane Ravitch's blog. Outraged teachers and parent activists shared the story and took to Twitter, using the hashtag #PS24deskgate to express their anger at the situation. One tweet was sent to Letitia James, Public Advocate for the City of New York (Figure 6.20), who responded by asking that the person who photographed the discarded desks call her.



Figure 6.20

Memes were created from the photographs of the discarded desks and file cabinets and shared across social media platforms, which also spread in Facebook activist groups, individual pages, and on Twitter. A meme about the incident is depicted in figure 6.21.



Figure 6.21

This particular meme is the most representative of the underlying issues involved in this incident. As Michael Flanagan (2015) wrote in his blog post:

If we as educators are not safe and autonomous in our own classrooms, then we are no more important than the file cabinets or blackboards. When I took the pictures of the desks, I knew they were not just desks. Metaphorically, they were the teachers, thrown out on the curb like so much trash. There for all of the students in the school to see, the message being “your teachers are garbage” ... Sometimes a desk is not just a desk. Sometimes it represents pride, dignity, and professionalism. Teachers are not trash, and we will not be thrown to the curb. Ever. (para. 4)

And just as the removal of the desks from teachers’ classrooms served as a metaphor for the lack of respect, lack of autonomy, and attack on their professionalism, the return of the desks became the metaphor for taking back their power and standing up to bullying by administrators.

Through the viral online sharing and the media attention drawn to the incident, word reached the district superintendent, Melodie Mashel, who ordered the desks returned. News of the return also spread across social media with Education Week (McNeil, 2015) reporting the desk removal and the mandated return in one article. The author specifically referenced the hundreds of comments from outraged citizens who became aware of the issue through social media as a factor in the return of the desks.

In a later development also shared widely on social media, under pressure from her superiors the offending principal retired effective on November 1, 2015, just two weeks after the incident occurred (Perez, 2015). As reported by Perez, the situation with the desks was not the only problem with Connelly, as evidenced by her removal from two other schools in her career with the NYCDOE. The timing of Connelly’s retirement, just days after the resolution of the desk incident, strongly suggests that the outrage on social media played a strong role in her resignation as well as in the return of the desks.



### **A Social Media-Enabled Rallying Cry: “Opt Out”**

Probably one of the most visible testaments to the effectiveness of social media in spurring offline action is the opt out movement. Although the concept of refusing high stakes tests as a means of protesting the focus on testing began to spread as a message through United Opt Out, state and local groups formed to grow the movement. Harris and Fessenden (2015) wrote about the surge in test refusals in New York, but also mentioned other areas where social media has resulted in an increase in test refusals, such as Colorado and New Jersey. Responding to test refusals in Colorado, legislation was passed to eliminate some tests and to require districts to allow parents to refuse state tests for their children. In New Jersey, almost 5 percent of third through eighth graders refused state tests, along with 14.5 percent of 11th graders, according to the new Jersey State Education Department (Harris and Fessenden, 2015).

New York was one of the first states to administer Common Core testing, beginning in 2013. As discussed in Chapter 1, the test scores from the 2013 exams perfectly matched the previously predicted failure rate of 70%, (Slentz, 2013), angering parents who felt their children were set up for failure. The successful passing of provisions by NY Governor Cuomo that increased the importance of tests in evaluating teachers and in tenure decisions was also a concern as parents became frustrated at the emphasis on testing that would result (Harris and Fessenden, 2015). In discussing test refusals in New York, Harris and Fessenden, (2015) wrote:

A surge of activity on social media, especially Facebook, helped show parents a way to protest if they believed their school system overemphasized testing... “We’ve written letters to legislators for years, until we were blue in the face, and they didn’t listen,” said Eric Mihelbergel, a founding member of New York State Allies for Public Education, a test-refusal group. “But they’re listening now, now that we’re opting our kids out.” (para. 16)



Over 200,000 students refused one or more of the New York State tests in 2015, a refusal rate of 20%. Harris (2015) reported that the number of students in New York State refusing the 2015 tests quadrupled from the previous year, establishing the state as the center of the opt out movement with the largest refusal rate in the nation.

United Opt Out founder Peggy Robertson credits social media not only with the ability to widely share knowledge about events and policies involving public education as they unfold, but also with the overall success of the opt out movement. Social media was instrumental in UOO's ability to inform parents of their right to refuse high stakes tests and was used to provide individual state resources to assist parents with test refusals. Through UOO's utilization of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and blogs, the opt out movement spread nationwide, with individual state and community groups created by those who agreed with the opt out message.

As social media has been a factor in the growing opt out movement, there has been mounting political pressure on lawmakers to listen to the demands of parents. In 2014, legislation was passed stating that schools cannot base promotion or placement decisions on test scores, and cannot record state assessment scores on students' permanent records (Harris, 2015). After the number of test refusals quadrupled in 2015, Cuomo responded to mounting pressure by creating a Common Core Task Force, with appointed members traveling the state to attend 'listening' meetings to hear the concerns of stakeholders (Taylor, 2015). A report resulting from those meetings has resulted in some minor changes in policy and in those in positions in the state's education department. As parents and educators wait to see whether their concerns will be addressed, the opt out message continues to spread across online activist groups.

### **Taking It To The Streets: Online Organizing for Offline Gathering**

#### **Marching on the Capital for the Right to Collective Bargaining – Wisconsin, 2011**

While Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's 2011 legislation to severely limit collective bargaining for most public employees in the state did not target only teachers, it was perceived as an attack on the teaching profession and the teachers' unions in the state. Tangwall (2011) shared the documentation provided by Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) editor and social media strategist, Bill Hurley as he tracked the use of social media and the growing number of teachers attending protests at the Wisconsin capital. As the number of Facebook views and interactions in the form of comments or likes increased, the number of protestors grew from 1,000 on February 14, 2011 to a report of 100,000 marching on the capital on Feb. 26, 2011 (Tangwall, 2011).

Tangwall shares Hurley's perception of the role of social media in organizing the WEAC members to protest, writing:

Hurley says, "Social media became the only feasible way in which we could communicate. It was impossible to keep up with the amount of emails coming in. At one point I had to delete a block of about 800 emails. Teachers from other states were asking how they could help. We told people to 'like' our Facebook page, follow the news there and provide words of support to our members who felt they were under attack from the governor and Republican legislators."

WEAC also utilized YouTube and Twitter for outreach and to spread their message. They created an activities page to share information about local activist events. Their communication staff created videos and shared videos from other sources on a YouTube channel. Although the protests and demonstrations were not successful in stopping the passage of Walker's agenda, the group learned a great deal about the use of social media and Tangwall shared lessons learned by the WEAC leaders about how to be prepared to use social media for a crisis situation.

### **2011 Save Our Schools Rally and March**

As mentioned in chapter one, information about the 2011 Save Our Schools Rally and March in Washington, D.C. was spread through social media. That event was estimated to have 8,000 attendees. Through social media I became aware of the specifics of the event such as travel to the area, hotels, where we would meet, and the schedule for the day of the rally. Two years later, in June, 2013, the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) sponsored the One Voice Rally which drew a crowd of approximately 10,000. Much of the information about the event was shared on the NYSUT's Facebook page

### **Students Not Scores Rally**

When test results for New York were released in August, 2013, indicating that the cut scores had been set to create the 70% failure rate that had been predicted months before, online activist groups exploded with anger and calls for some form of action. In the span of one week, the Students Not Scores Rally in Port Jefferson Station, NY was planned, advertised on social media, and held, with approximately 2,000 people attending. We were reminded at the rally of the power of social media, as our offline gathering was facilitated by our discussions in online spaces.

### **“Our Schools - Our Community - Our Voice”**

In 2015, a Facebook event page was set up for a forum to be held in the Patchogue-Medford school district on Long Island New York. The “Our Schools - Our Community - Our Voice” forum in March, 2015 had confirmed attendance of a few hundred on the Facebook event page. To the surprise of the organizers, the shared message on social media drew a crowd estimated at 4,000. Attendees filled the auditorium, two cafeterias, a gymnasium, and even classrooms and hallways where speeches were shared through the school's intercom system. The

event had been shared on Facebook through multiple local activist groups for just a few weeks before the event, which was postponed for almost a week from the original date due to a blizzard. The ability of social media to notify potential attendees of the hastily rescheduled event is yet another example of how social media is instrumental in mobilizing education activists to gather offline.

### **Conclusion**

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) describe online memes as a *new literacy practice*. The widely used platform of Facebook for digital activism is one that favors visual material, which includes photos, videos and memes created through the juxtaposition of images and print (Gerbaudo, 2002). Through the juxtaposition of images and text, memetic photos have the capacity to communicate powerful meanings in a way that words alone would not (Korhonen, 2010).

Memes can serve as metaphors and play a role in shaping the social and political realities of those viewing them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since metaphors involve connecting things in relation to each other, comprehending them requires an experiential basis. Memes can be used for framing issues as well, as the spread of memes in online activist communities assists viewers in gaining an understanding of issues, or rethinking their positions about issues.

In the eighty memes I analyzed, there were some common themes and patterns. All of the memes either provided information for the viewer, or were shared with an assumption of prior knowledge about the issue represented by the content of the meme. Almost half of the memes utilized humor, with some including images from popular culture to increase the meme's appeal and resulting spreadability. Memes with images are more likely to spread, and all but three of the eighty memes included images.

The memes were spread in online communities where like-minded activists participated. Members of online activist communities also posted the memes on their personal pages, on Twitter, or in blogs as a means of spreading knowledge gained in the online community in spaces outside of the community. Memes are the most contagious when they include images and when they speak to issues that evoke emotional responses, such as the stress children feel over excessive testing or the financial impact of privatization on public education. Memetic videos also play a role in spreading knowledge as they are shared in online communities of practice and spread to individuals outside of those activist spaces.

As in the examples provided in the previous section, new literacy practices are instrumental in carrying the message of education activists online and also to organize, mobilize, and engage in offline actions and protests. Memetic photos and videos can serve as multimodal means of political participation, creating shared a discourse that can frame positions using both text and images, and through the use of metaphors, shape and alter perceptions. Through social media, education activists engage in political participation and receive information that enables them to move from participation behind a keyboard or on a personal device to offline attendance at protests, rallies, marches and forums.

In the next chapter I will connect my findings from all areas of my study to discuss the effectiveness of social media as a conduit for protest and resistance. I will attempt to link

- my findings about online education activist groups as communities of practice
- the disorders and pitfalls that can challenge the ability of education activist groups to remain strong and viable and
- the use of multimodal means of expression within those online communities of practice to effect real change.

**Chapter 7**  
**Education Activism in a Digitally Enabled World:**  
**Where We Are and Where We Are Headed**

**The Roots of the Journey**

I began this research journey in the hope of discovering how digitally enabled education activist communities function, how they use online tools that are considered new literacy practices, and how these online activist communities can best be utilized to create change. Vegh (2003) situates online activism in a “power struggle of control and resistance between the power elite and the public” (p. 71). It was my intention to combine an understanding of the ‘power’ involved in the struggle of those fighting for the very existence of public education with an understanding of how the public uses social media as a means of protest and resistance.

The beginning of my research unintentionally coincided with my personal journey into education activism. Even before I first envisioned this study, my discomfort with the direction public education was taking led me to begin researching policies that were impacting my classroom: an emphasis on high stakes testing, the loss of autonomy in our classrooms, scripted curricula, and new accountability measures. Shortly after I began my quest for information I became aware of groups forming on social media to counter mandates that were perceived as harmful to children, to the teaching profession, and to public education. I saw educators and parents who understood the inequities that were growing in our country and how under resourced schools were being blamed for not producing the same ‘results’ as their well resourced neighbors. I saw the gaps between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ widening in my own school district, while politicians and corporate reformers were talking about ‘achievement gaps.’

Intrigued by the discussions I was observing in activist spaces on Facebook, I had a sense that this was something important, that my participation was something I should document

because the resistance to education reform policies was a movement that seemed destined to grow. And grow it did, as parents, educators and concerned citizens joined groups, formed new groups, and began devising tools to spread their messages of protest and resistance. As I expanded my own use of social media to participate as an activist, I began compiling screenshots, downloading memes and videos, and archiving all of it for possible use and analysis. It was from this collection of data that the idea from this study arose. The journey began for me with research into the circumstances that had led us to a point where we needed to join together in a fight to save our public schools.

### **The Context In Which Education Activist Groups Were Established**

In chapter three I provided the historical background to demonstrate how corporate education reform is a struggle between the power elite and the public (Vegh, 2003), funded by billionaires and enacted by political figures in the form of legislation and mandates imposed on our public schools. In considering the continued and escalating attacks on public education that I outlined in chapter three, the voices of educators and parents have been ignored in favor of the voices of the power elite.

The evolving threat to public education through events and mandates that were set in motion with *A Nation At Risk* and continue today in the form of ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) triggered a surge in education activism that seemed to coincide with the implementation of the provisions of Race to the Top such as the Common Core Standards, tying teacher evaluations to student test scores, and the creation of longitudinal data systems to track student achievement. In an era of technology and widespread use of social media, much of this activism occurs in online social spaces as sites for virtual ‘meetings’, discussions, learning experiences, and the planning and execution of offline actions. Online activists are able to use tools and platforms

such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube that were non-existent until a little more than a decade ago. Prior to the proliferation of social media, teachers working in contested spaces were more likely to work within the system as change agents, relying primarily on face to face contact.

### **Teacher Activism in Offline Spaces: Connecting to the Past**

Chapter four provided an overview of previous examples of teacher activism prior to the advent of social media. Early activists, such as Elizabeth Almira Allen and Marion Thompson Wright believed that education should be a vehicle to enact the ideals of equity and social justice for all citizens (Crocco, Hendry, & Weiler, 1999). Standing up for those ideals, they acted for social change as a response to the conflict between the rhetoric of democracy and the reality of injustices they witnessed. Freire (1970/2009, 1985) viewed teaching as a transformative, political act that is never neutral. The current discussion of education activism embraces the ideals of early activists.

Some of the earliest issues addressed by education activists were the need for teacher autonomy in the classroom, tenure and pension rights, and issues of race and gender equality. As I noted in chapter four, we see much of these same issues and concerns enacted in the work of education activists in the current struggle against the power elite to preserve the institution of public education. One overarching message is that these early activists shaped their own identities while using education as a means for social transformation (Stanley, 2005). This is important in the discussion of power and identity in online activist communities of practice.

### **How Do Online Education Activist Groups Function As Communities of Practice?**

Communities of practice have been broadly defined as groups of people sharing common concerns or passion about a topic and interacting in an ongoing basis to share knowledge



(Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Reviewing the discussion threads I had collected from two Facebook groups and the transcripts of my interviews with leaders of each of the three groups I studied provided insights into how these online groups function as communities of practice. Although earlier research on communities of practice was focused in the work place and in educational settings, much of the knowledge gained from observing these spaces can be applied to online communities, and specifically, to online education activist communities.

### **Harmonious Relationships in Communities of Practice**

Online education activist communities are built around sustained relationships. Most of those relationships are harmonious, as members unite over shared concerns and commit to shared actions, both online and offline. Education activists share knowledge in these groups, construct learning from the material presented by fellow members, and create new understandings through sharing of stories. They use multimodalities to facilitate these processes, such as written text, images, and videos. We see this in action as activists use the online platforms of Facebook, Twitter, blogging sites, and YouTube. The online groups are formed primarily on Facebook, which has become a digital meeting place for education activists. Interacting in these groups and documenting interactions has provided multiple examples of how education activists come together in these online communities, build relationships, and form alliances.

Analysis of the Facebook discussion threads from the groups I considered and data from interviews with group leaders revealed that these online activist communities of practice are spaces where members meet to share information, to discuss issues, and to plan actions. Replicating the characteristics of offline communities of practice, digitally enabled education activist groups allow for the rapid flow of information, with a shared discourse that generally reflects the perspective of the group. Members converse in a manner that reflects participation in

an ongoing process with most members aware of the language being used and its context in relation to education reform and activism. Consistent with the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, seasoned members lead many of the interactions with newer members often easing into discussions after a period of first viewing, then responding to the posts of others.

These online activist communities of practice are not gathering places where members share family pictures or discuss personal business unrelated to education. Even when the tone in the activist community is collegial as members become more familiar with each other through frequent interactions, these groups tend to be all business as they focus on shared goals. While members may use their individual Facebook pages for cute cat pictures (Zuckerman, 2008, 2015), family pictures, or recipes there is an unspoken rule that content posted in online education activist groups must be related to issues of education and should relate to the stated mission of the group.

While interactions within these online communities tend to be mission oriented, online friendships and offline alliances have frequently been forged from interactions in these activist communities. These bonds are sometimes formed when members of online groups connect in person at meetings, forums, conferences or protests. The sense of *community* in these online groups, fostered by shared passion for a cause, has led to many friendships outside of the space of the activist groups. Wenger (1998) described communities of practice as *shared histories of learning*, proposing that boundaries formed by membership in a particular community do not preclude memberships in other communities or connections with the world outside of the community of practice. This may explain the extension of members' shared histories to connect them to form social relationships with other community members outside of the group.

It has become common for online activist group members to become Facebook friends, giving those they have met in online communities access to their personal Facebook pages on which they share the details of their lives. These online friendships are revealed by the Facebook feature of showing users how many mutual friends they share with other users. It is also not uncommon for those who have forged online friendships through activism to develop offline friendships, meeting in person for purely social purposes. The crossing of boundaries from activist colleagues to personal friendships is one of the results of harmonious relationships witnessed in online communities of practice.

### **Discourse, Identity and Power in One Online Community of Practice Conversation**

#### **The Discourse**

Harmonious relationships in online activist communities serve to create offline action through discourse that leads to shared understandings which inspires the resulting action. Facebook discussion threads serve as narratives that share stories across broad online spaces. Harlow (2013) considers storytelling and narratives as essential components of social movements, crediting them with creating a sense of shared identity that helps mobilize people to take action. When a member of Lace To The Top posted an article and image in the group about a New York City principal removing teachers' desks and having them thrown in the trash members discussed the situation and shared their outrage at the lack of respect and totalitarian leadership this demonstrated towards the teachers involved. The shared narrative in the discussion thread focused on both the story of the specific incident and stories shared about similar incidents experienced by group members.

The discussion, documented in the discussion thread *LTTT 5 Principal Removes Desks* operated on two distinct levels. On one level, those participating in the discussion focused on

their anger over the situation and generalized it as an insult to all teachers. Members expressed their outrage at the decision to discard usable furniture paid for with taxpayer money and at the disrespect this demonstrated for the teachers involved. They extended the incident to encompass more than a conversation about desks and file cabinets, discussing the principal's actions as a metaphor for a lack of respect and support for the teaching profession as a whole. As often occurs in these online discussions, the sharing of stories connects individual incidents to systemic problems, allowing members to frame issues and arrive at possible solutions (Harlow, 2013).

In discussing the discarded desks, members shared information about the history of the principal involved. Using their shared knowledge of provisions of corporate education reform, they made references to the principal being more suited to leading a charter school in Florida, where charter schools have a poor reputation. They commented that the principal was probably luxuriating in a "fantastic chair" after "ruining careers with rubrics" - a reference to new evaluation systems that grade teachers using rubrics. The discussion moved between anger and humor as the members suggested possible ways to fix the problem.

On another level, throughout the discussion members were making suggestions and providing strategies to turn the situation around. That information included the offending principal's contact information at school, with the suggestion that they bombard her with calls and emails. Contact information for the district office was provided. A member posted the Facebook page information for the Assemblyman representing the area, and stated that she had posted about the situation on his page. Another member commented that the NYC Public Advocate had been made aware of the situation and was investigating. As the discussion continued, the teacher who took the original picture of the desks and was interviewed by the

media about the situation entered the conversation to share his story. The media learned of the situation through the efforts of education activists who shared the narrative in online spaces - posting on Facebook, sharing the pictures on Twitter, and blogging about the incident. As a result of all of the negative attention focused on the issue by activists and the media the desks were returned and the principal ‘retired’ within days. This incident and the positive outcome for the teachers involved serves as a powerful example of how social media can serve as a conduit for resistance when members of a community share their narratives and create the sense of shared identity that helps mobilize them to action.

### **Power and Identity**

The discourse during the discussion *Principal Removes Desks* discussion thread provides a window into power and identity during this set of interactions within this group. The discussion continued for over a day without any input by the group administrators, the official ‘leaders’ of the group. United against the perception of a common *enemy*, members maintained respectful and cohesive discourse throughout the thread.

One member seemed to take the lead early in the discussion, assuming the identity of leader or organizer as she suggested that residents of the school district should send the principal a bill for the desks, and sign it “The Taxpayers.” The same member

- asked if the school had a Facebook page
- provided information about the Assemblyman
- reported that she had posted on his Facebook page and asked others to do the same
- reported information from the media article and clarified misunderstandings about the situation

This soft leadership introduced by this member early in the conversation appeared to set the tone for the interactions in this discussion thread. It is also interesting that in the absence of

an administrator during the discussion, there was no struggle for power. All members acted as equals, and accepted the unofficial lead taken by the member who stepped forward to make suggestions about how to proceed. Gerbaudo (2012) observed that leaders in online communities are responsible for bringing coherence to participation in protest movements. That certainly seemed to be true in this case. At one point during the discussion some members expressed their frustration at the lack of respect for teachers and compared the amount of time they had remaining before they could retire. As they shared narratives and discussed possible actions to change the situation, they calmed each other with jokes, commiserated with each other, and worked cohesively as a community with a shared mission.

Similar scenarios played out in other discussion threads I analyzed. While there are individuals who have positional power based upon their ability as official group administrators to remove content, remove members and even block them from a group, it is not unusual for members to step into positions of leadership without having administrative power in a group. These online education activist communities seem to function most effectively when members feel free to assume leadership identities and move the group forward towards action when needed.

### **Overview of Discourse, Identity and Power: What Was Visible In The Communities?**

Gunawardena et al. (2009) and Tusting (2005) contend that studying the language used in online communities can offer a stronger understanding of power relationships within the community. The online conversations I analyzed revealed patterns of discourse which shape and reveal issues of identity and power within the group. As seen in the previously mentioned discussion thread, leadership styles have the potential to influence interactions and results in online communities. Officially designated leaders are not always present during discussions, and

it is quite common for members without the official moderating power in Facebook groups to assume leadership identities. The outcome of this depends on the context and how the individual attempts to ‘lead’ in the discussion. There were multiple incidents in the threads I analyzed where members, even in the presence of group administrators, adopted leadership identities in providing information, reminding dissenting members of the group’s mission, and even defending the administrators. In those cases, the leadership identity enacted by the member contributed to the group and helped to reestablish a sense of cohesiveness in the group.

There were also threads where discussions were not moderated by an administrator, but members took on leadership roles and provided information or resolved disagreements before an administrator could become involved. One such discussion occurred in the United Opt Out Facebook group (UOO 5 “*Concern Trolling*” Article) in which a member shared information about concern trolling because she saw evidence of it happening in the group. Concern trolling, where a group member asks a question or raises an issue that is meant to challenge or detract from a group’s mission under the guise of “concern” has become increasingly visible in online activist groups. During this Facebook discussion thread, another member attempted to defend paid trolls who remain “on topic” and was swiftly reminded by another group member that in real life, “If your attitude or ideas are too wildly out of step with the group, you’re going to encounter resistance,” shutting down the conversation with her comment.

In some of the discussions, members attempted to take control of the conversation in a manner that was divisive and disruptive. The United Opt Out posts where members demanded that only issues about test refusals be entertained or in which a member complained of censorship because an ad she placed for an online school was removed that went against the group’s mission was removed are examples. In cases where members misinterpreted the mission

of a group, or attempted to change the mission of the group they were challenged and sometimes reprimanded by other members.

Each online activist community has an identity which is visible in the group's mission statement or description of itself in the Facebook "About" section for the group. Both Lace To The Top and United Opt Out leaders expressed the desire to allow conversations to flow freely without unnecessary interference by the group moderators. In both groups, there was some evidence of *trolls* who clearly entered the discussions for the purpose of diminishing the effectiveness of the groups, challenging their missions, or at times, attempting to derail the goals of the group entirely.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, this was less evident in Lace To The Top, where original posts had to be approved by a group administrator and trolls only had the opportunity to enact their agendas through comments on the posts of others. In United Opt Out, the level of trolling became so significant that a decision was made to disband the group and later reopen it with stricter guidelines and limited availability of membership. Only those who appeared to be in agreement with the group's goals, based upon information gleaned from their personal Facebook pages, were admitted to the new group which continues to have a small, carefully selected membership.

The appearance of trolls, as groups begin to widen their influence and experience success, underscores the need for vigilant moderation, while also existing as a sign that these groups may be perceived as a threat to the very power structures the groups are fighting against. While it is not unusual for some members to challenge or even disagree with some aspects of an activist community's mission, the presence of trolls is a deliberate effort to cast doubt about a group's goals or effectiveness or to interfere with the group's mission or offline actions. On-line



communities can be especially vulnerable to trolling and disruption because they are easy to join and don't require a physical presence for disruption to occur.

### **Moderation and Power in Online Education Activist Groups**

There are few important considerations when looking at how groups are moderated. It was evident as I looked through the threads that United Opt Out was more heavily moderated than Lace To The Top. There were far more incidents in United Opt Out where one or more administrators stepped into a conversation to mediate the discourse, sometimes even shutting it down. Since the structure of the Save Our Schools Facebook page does not result in many comments from members, a minimal amount of monitoring has been necessary. SOS has primarily utilized email through Constant Contact and its website to communicate with members.

The structure of the groups and the number of people actually holding power in the group make a significant difference in the level of moderation. In a Facebook group, only those who are official administrators have 'power' in the group. While other members may come forward to take on leadership identities in a discussion, only an administrator has the power to delete content and remove members from a group. Members enter conversations knowing this and are usually aware of the group administrators' identities. This information is available to any member of the group by clicking on 'Members' in the group. In the threads I analyzed there were times when members would tag administrators because they believed a discussion needed intervention. There were other times when administrators became aware of the issue and entered to handle the problem. While members can come forward to behave as leaders, they do not have any actual power in an online group.

United Opt Out had thirteen Facebook administrators who had the potential to use the power of their positions in the group to moderate conversations. Those members spanned multiple time zones – with members on both coasts and in between. Although there was no requirement for any administrator to be ‘on duty’ at any time of the day there was usually someone checking in. This led to a fairly consistently moderated group.

Even though its membership represented many areas of the country, Lace To The Top had only a handful of people keeping an eye on the interactions and they were all based in the same geographic area, leading to periods where no one was available to moderate the group. The decision of the administrators to limit posts to those they had screened and approved led to less of a need for moderation of posted content.

This means that the level of moderation is not necessarily a reflection of a group’s desire to mediate or control the discourse, but may well be just a function of the number of individuals who have volunteered to perform in this time consuming role. As mentioned previously, the difficulty in keeping conversations aligned with the goals of the group and to end disruptive and divisive discourse led to the deletion of United Opt Out’s Facebook group in late 2015. The organization continued to function without a Facebook group for a period of time, relying on its Facebook page and its website to share information. It later reopened with a new name that more strongly reflected the vision of its leaders.

Issues in moderating a Facebook group became equally difficult for the Lace To The Top administrators because pre-approving posts in order to minimize trolling was a very time consuming proposition, especially when the structure of the group made it difficult to moderate during the day while the administrators were working. Initially the cofounders made the decision to delete their group, but a few volunteers agreed to take over when members reacted negatively

to the closing. After less than a year the decision was made to close the group to new posts and just leave the existing content available for members to read.

While analysis of discussion threads from both United Opt Out and Lace To The Top indicate that they functioned as online communities of practice, both were vulnerable to many of the same disorders or pitfalls that impact offline communities. The increasing need for moderation and for negotiating the rhetoric in these groups to maintain a focus on the goals, and specifically to encourage offline actions, led to the leaders of both groups deciding to limit or end interactions in their groups. At the time data was collected from both of these groups, there was no indication that this would happen in either group. The shared narratives that arose from these groups led to offline actions, such as the refusal by over 200,000 parents in New York to allow their children to participate in high stakes testing in 2016, and a growth in the opt out movement nationwide. This suggests the possibility that the increased effectiveness of both groups in spreading the opt out movement and galvanizing tens of thousands of parent and teacher activists led to increased trolling meant to detract from the goals of both groups, eventually resulting in the shutdown or revision of both LTTT and UOO.

### **Conflictual Relationships in Communities of Practice**

Relationships in online education activist communities of practice are not always harmonious, as seen in discussions that become contentious and sometimes vitriolic in nature. A few of the conversations I collected during my research process reflect this. Although there is ample evidence of some of the disorders that have been attributed to offline communities in these online activist groups, in most cases the presence of dysfunction has not precluded successful action and an overall sense of cohesiveness among group members.

The purpose of identifying areas of weakness, the pitfalls, should be to use that awareness to overcome the areas of dysfunction that could impede an activist community's progress. As defined by Wenger et al. (2002) domain disorders reflect how communities define themselves and respond to the perspectives of its members. Many of the difficulties in the groups I studied fell under this category, as both groups displayed evidence of imperialism, narcissism and factionalism. The discussion threads analyzed in chapter 5 indicate that both LTTT and UOO experienced individuals who attempted to impose their personal or political agendas on the groups (factionalism), while some individuals reflected a belief that only their perspective should be valued (imperialism). In some cases there was evidence of members seeming to believe their opinions were superior to those of others, or putting self-concern above the goals of the group (narcissism).

Even Save Our Schools, which is not focusing primarily on Facebook as the means of communication, has dealt with these domain issues. It is almost inevitable that when groups grow and members have not completely framed the issues in the same manner, there will be dissension and disagreements among some of the members. During the interview, Altwerger described how the national teacher unions became involved in the 2011 SOS March, becoming a faction that protected its own interests over the mission of the larger organization. Some members of the SOS steering committee did not approve of the early endorsement of Obama for reelection in 2012 by the NEA and AFT and wanted speakers at the rally to address the education policies of the Obama administration. However, the union members on the steering committee and their supporters voted in a manner that reflected both imperialism, with some members insisting that only *their* perspectives were right; and factionalism as internal strife

developed over opposing views due to special interests. As a result, no criticism of the president was allowed at the 2011 rally.

The community disorders that demonstrate the strength of the relationships of the members are not as common as domain disorders. In the groups I considered, stratification was the largest visible issue, with distinct classes visible in groups, sometimes leading to a lack of shared identity. Where factionalism involves conflict based upon core beliefs, stratification is based on status within society that is reflected in the group. In one case a woman described herself as affluent and indicated that she didn't feel the need to act on behalf of marginalized children in an inner city community. There is also stratification seen in groups with lines drawn between parents and educators, often with those having the dual identity of parents and educators caught somewhere in the middle.

The least visible in these groups were the practice disorders, because online spaces are not as vulnerable as offline communities to issues involving the management of information. Since online interactions all involve sharing of written words or images, there is documentation of all knowledge being shared in these spaces. Digitally enabled activist communities, with all of their strengths and disorders, serve as learning communities where a rapid flow of information is enabled and offline action may be inspired. In the next section I will discuss how new literacy practices have enabled activists turn online interaction into offline action.

### **Mememes, Blogs and Tweets: We've Taken It To The Streets**

Within the learning environments of online communities of practice, education activists are using social media to connect, to share knowledge, and take action against policies they frame as damaging to children and to the institution of public education. Using new literacies,

education activists access online tools that were not available until relatively recently. The participatory culture of digital education activism has utilized on-line literacies and multimodalities to communicate shared meanings, for example, through the use of videos or through memes which include both text and visual images, sharing these across the platforms of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogging sites.

### **Memes, Framing, and Metaphor**

“Framing is the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong & Drucker, 2007, p. 104). Goffman (1974) refers to frames as the *schemata of interpretation*, giving meaning to events that would otherwise be meaningless. We are constantly exposed to competing frames and most likely to choose frames that are consistent with our own beliefs and values. Framing is language that expresses the worldview of the user, with ideas and perspectives evoked by language (Lakoff, 2004). Central to the discussion of framing in social movements is its role in story-telling, as framing assists in the construction of meaning and helps the audience understand problems and possible solutions (Harlow, 2013).

Print memes and memetic videos are examples of how ideas can be carried by language, which includes images as well as words. In analyzing the eighty memes that I collected, the patterns that emerge are consistent with this concept of framing. To reiterate Altwerger’s statement during her interview:

It is a framing device. Memes frame in one visual display – they can encapsulate a message and kind of cement it in people’s minds and they have a visualization that I think they can internalize. Good memes, using the notion of framing theory, can help you to frame a position, an argument, a way of looking at things that can have a lasting impact. It kind of changes the underlying metaphors and can help you to view things in a unique and different way.

All but a handful of the memes include images, which aligns with Zuckerman's (2015) contention that messages with images survive longer than memes only containing written text. In aligning with Wenger's (1998) contention that communities of practice members use shortcuts to communication, the meme is a perfect example of how a visual frame and display can encapsulate an idea, an argument, or a worldview.

The use of humor is a common element in these activist print memes. Humorous memes are more likely to spread and to survive (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014) over time. The use of online meme generators favors the use of previously created templates, many of which rely on humor to make a point. The ability to replicate a previous meme and add captions to established memes without the requirement of copying-fidelity (Dawkins, 1976) results in the production of memes that signal humor through the image, even before the viewer reads the accompanying text. The activist memes I considered also made use of popular culture figures, such as Elmer Fudd, Dolores Umbridge, Peppermint Patty, Kool Aid Man, Glinda the Good Witch and the Star Wars Tauntaun. These memetic photos serve a purpose only if they spread widely, so the appeal to humor and to pop culture is a device to promote spreadability.

### **Memes Requiring Context and Prior Knowledge**

An analysis of memes illustrated what the viewer must know about the content of the meme in order to comprehend it. All of the memes I analyzed fall within one of two categories. The first is memes that require prior knowledge on the part of the viewer in order to comprehend the message of the meme. Since memes are snapshots and not extended text, they do not contextualize the metaphors represented. Examples of this are the *Survey and NaeNae* meme, which applies specifically to a situation involving New York, but spread across platforms as a symbol of the unresponsiveness of teachers unions to pressing issues. Another example is the

*Common Core Math* meme. The juxtaposition of text reading, “If you have 4 pencils and 7 apples, how many pancakes will fit on the roof? Purple. Because aliens don’t wear hats” would appear nonsensical to a viewer not aware of the widespread conversations in online communities about Common Core math. Created to represent the perception that much of what children are being asked in math problems is incomprehensible, the meme uses humor to frame an issue that has been the topic of a larger discussion. All of the memes incorporating humor fall into this category, suggesting that memes sometimes function as inside jokes between those viewing and sharing them. Memes that are created and shared with the assumption of context and knowledge also tend to rely on images to convey or support the message.

Of the eighty memes I analyzed, seventy three required context or prior knowledge to enable the viewer to fully comprehend. Because storytelling is a vital element of online activist communities the context for a meme has already been built before a meme is shared. Mindful of the fact that these memes don’t spread in a vacuum, but rather, through vibrant activist communities, members generally have an awareness of the underlying metaphors and the perspective being framed. Since the memes are shared across social media platforms such as Facebook, community members have the opportunity to question and occasionally challenge the meaning of a specific meme. Questioning usually occurs when a member doesn’t have the context for comprehension, while challenging is usually a reflection that the meme doesn’t fit the viewer’s frame.

### **Memos Providing or Building Knowledge**

The second category of memes is those providing or building knowledge. Only seven of the memes I analyzed fell into this category. These memes assume little or no context or knowledge and rely primarily on words to convey information. In many of these if an image is



provided, it seems incidental to the text rather than a necessary or supportive component. It is possible that images are embedded in these memes for the purpose of increasing appeal and spreadability. An example of this type of this is the *I Refuse* meme which compares testing times for the Law School Admission Test and the Common Core Math and ELA assessments administered to children as young as 8 years old and lists reasons why these tests have no value.

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) takes between 4 and 5 hours.

Section	# of sections	# of questions	length	content
Logical Reasoning (Arguments)	2	24-26	35 min.	analyze statements for logical errors
Analytical Reasoning (Games)	1	24	35 min.	solve complex logical deductive puzzles
Reading Comprehension	1	20-28	35 min.	read passages and answer questions
Experimental	1	Depends on section	35 min.	Depends on section
Writing Sample	1	1	30 min.	Write an essay on a topic

Source: <http://www.lsac-center.com/lsat-page1.html>

**EXCESSIVE TESTING THAT ....**

- ADDS **NO VALUE** TO YOUR CHILD (Tests results given **NEXT** school year).
- ADDS **NO VALUE** TO TEACHERS (**NO** access to the test results for diagnostic use).
- IS **CLOCKED IN SECRECY**.
- IS **MAINLY USED TO RATE TEACHERS**.
- IS **MAINLY USED TO RATE SCHOOLS**.

The Common Core Tests for Math & ELA take between 8 and 10 hours.

CCELA
Each Testing Day (3 days) will be scheduled to allow 90 minutes for completion.
CC Math
Day 1 and Day 2 will be scheduled to allow 60 minutes each for completion.
Day 3 will be scheduled to allow 70 minutes for completion.

Source: EngageNY - Test Guides for English Language Arts and Mathematics

**We Therefore Say**

**iREFUSE!**

[www.StopCommonCoreinNewYork.com](http://www.StopCommonCoreinNewYork.com)

Figure 7.1

As mentioned previously memes are widely distributed through Facebook, but also spread through blogs and Twitter. These social media platforms have also been useful in spreading messages and sharing knowledge, and will be addressed in the next section.

Although my focus was on print memes and not on memetic videos, much of the same analysis applies to videos shared by education activists. Videos are visual, and they have the potential to encapsulate a large amount of information in a relatively short time span. However, the time required to view videos can detract from their value in a world where social media consumers rely on quick sound bites and condensed components to obtain information. Glynn

commented that he finds videos less effective than other means of communication because those in activist groups usually don't produce the best quality videos. Videos that do seem to spread are those of moments captured in real time, such as members testifying at Board of Education meetings, or videos of protests.

### **Blogs and Tweets**

Blogs serve as grassroots online expression, serving to provide information and challenge assumptions. Davies and Merchant (2007) describe blogs as *interactive texts* which serve the needs of affinity groups while creating their own communities of practice among bloggers. Blogs are multimodal texts, incorporating not only the printed word, but also videos or images such as memes. Operating as part of a social network, blogs are shared through Facebook, Twitter, or other blogs. The value of blogs in offline activism is the use of blogs to post content anywhere and anytime using personal devices.

The *micro-blog*, Twitter, allows for the quick spread of information. The limitation of tweets to include only 140 characters of text in becomes less of an issue to users due to its ability to connect networks and share blogs, memes or videos. The use of hashtags to draw attention to an issue has been instrumental in organizing large scale action in political activist communities, and is growing in its success in education activist communities. The #whyIrefuse hashtag opened conversations about why high stakes tests should be refused. Those conversations spilled over to Facebook as members of activist communities posted their tweets. The use of intersecting social media tools and platforms for education activism expands the ability to share information, support positions, and organize members for actions intended to create change.

### **Taking It To The Streets**

Although the goal of removing destructive federally mandated policies has not come to fruition as a result of digitally enabled education activism, there have been small victories and instances where online activists have worked on or offline to effect change. As I described in Chapter 6, a small action such as facilitating the removal of an offensive billboard that demeaned teachers shows the power of social media to have an impact.

The incident I highlighted in Chapter 5 and 6 involving the removal of teachers' desks and file cabinets is another example of how digital platforms can intersect to allow users power to effect change. Through Facebook, Twitter and blogs, the story spread rapidly. In the span of less than two weeks the incident was resolved, the furniture was returned to the building, and the offending principal was removed. I find it unlikely that this would have been the case without the intervention of social media.

As described in Chapter 6, social media was largely responsible for the massive protests in Wisconsin around the issue of the minimization of teachers' rights to collective bargaining. The 2011 save Our Schools March was organized, publicized, funded and scheduled using social media platforms. The June, 2013 New York State United Teachers One Voice Rally drew a crowd of approximately 10,000, many of whom became aware of the event through the NYSUT Facebook page. And at many of these events, photos and videos of speeches were shared using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, providing coverage of events largely ignore by mainstream media.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

In considering the wider implications of all of this, the message may very well be that we have seen the successes of social media in both sharing and changing narratives around issues in

public education. We have seen direct actions resulting in some small victories, such as those I mentioned previously. It was the voices of activists that forced many administrators to back away from “sit and stare” policies requiring children who were refusing tests to sit at their desks for hours of testing, doing nothing. It was the voices of activists, empowered by online activist communities, who spoke out at board of Education meetings, at forums, and at rallies. It was the voices of activists empowered by the strength of numbers who learned of events through social media who protested and picketed outside of government offices, school administration buildings, or corporate offices all over the country over issues that matter to them.

We can embrace the disorders within activist communities as signs that the group is strong and vibrant enough to withstand some differences opinion. If there is agreement on and adherence to the overall goals of the community, we can to maintain a cohesive movement. In doing this, we must also be mindful that the best use of the digital tools at our disposal is to continue to grow and learn as an activist community.

Future research may focus on considering how the disorders or pitfalls seen in online education activist communities are impacting the effectiveness of these groups and how we may best mitigate the damage to the activist movement. As activists are beginning to form broad coalitions to increase their power in fighting back against the harmful impact of education policies being enacted, it would be expedient to consider how other groups are aligned with financial and personal interests represented by partnering groups, and how disorders I have described may serve to weaken their own group’s effectiveness. I consider this to be a critical area to continue to explore as more and more information comes to light and is shared on social media about how current education reforms are being funded and legislated.

In December, 2015, after I had completed my collection of data, ESSA was signed into law. This legislation brings with it many new threats to public education and will require new strategies on our part. Some activists have been researching and warning us about these new proposals for reform for a long time. The strategy of refusing tests will not be effective when children are required to spend the day in front of computers with daily assessments, as the ESSA component of Competency Based Learning will require. Wenger et al. (2002) describe the practice disorder of mediocrity as settling for less than cutting-edge and not *sharpening the saw*. I see this as the biggest danger we face in education activism today. If activist communities remain invested in strategies that worked to solve problems that no longer exist, while failing to consider the need for new strategies to keep up with changes, mediocrity might be the disorder that leads to failure of the activist movement.

### **Limitations**

Although I have participated in dozens of online activist groups in the past five years, it would be impossible to describe and analyze all of them. My data was collected from groups that I considered as representative of various perspectives and structures. I eliminated any groups which served to only represent one perspective, for example, anti-Common Core groups which are rife with dysfunction as politics and anti-public education sentiments control the discourse in the group. It is my belief that the groups I chose provided an overview of various ways in which these online activist communities function and use multimodal tools to further their cause. It cannot be stated with certainty that the results would have been the same if I had chosen other groups. It is also important not to generalize these findings as absolutes meant to represent all groups. The distinct structure, mission, and discourse of each activist community create a unique

experience for community members which results in members joining multiple groups and interacting within those connected constellations.

One of the issues in studying online spaces is the speed at which things move and the inability to see every post, every meme, every tweet or read every blog as a massive amount of information spread across social media platforms. As a result, research conducted in online spaces relies on a slice - a picture from representative groups and interactions. It is my hope that this 'slice' can provide insights into communities as we move forward.

### **An Afterthought**

In 2009, Gerald Bracey expressed his frustration at the lack of response by the educational community and unions to the destruction of our public education system. He asked why, as a profession, we have chosen to "play dead."

Today the voices of protest are weak and scattered. In the ordinariness of defeat, this day appears as any other in a century of days, and the ordinariness of this of this day mutes any instinct to cry out at the loss. (p. 231)

As activists join forces through social media, forming communities of practice to "cry out at the loss," the voices of protest are no longer weak and scattered.

## References

- Ahlquist, R. (2011). The “empire” strikes back via a neoliberal agenda: Confronting the legacies of colonialism. In Ahlquist, R., Gorski, P., Montano, T. (Eds.), *Assault on kids: How hyper-accountability, corporatization, deficit ideologies, and Ruby Payne are destroying our schools* (pp 9-32). New York: Peter Lang.
- Allbritton, D., McKoon, G. & Gerrig, R.J. (1995). Metaphor-based schemas and text representations: Making connections through conceptual metaphors. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 21 (1), 612-625.
- Altwerger, B. (Ed.). (2005). *Reading for profit: How the bottom line leaves kids behind*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Altwerger, N. & Strauss, S. (2002). The business behind testing. *Language Arts*, 79 (3), 256-262.
- American Statistical Association (2014). ASA statement on using value-added models for educational assessment. Retrieved from [http://www.amstat.org/policy/pdfs/asa\\_vam\\_statement.pdf](http://www.amstat.org/policy/pdfs/asa_vam_statement.pdf)
- Amrein-Beardsley, A. (2008). Methodological concerns about the education value-added assessment system. *Educational Researcher*, 37 (2), 65-75.
- Au, W. & Hollar, J. (2016). Opting out of the education reform industry. *Monthly Review*, 67 (2), 29-37.
- Baker, E. L., Barton, P. E., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E., Ladd, H., Linn, R., . . . Shepard, L. (2010). EPI Briefing Paper: *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers*. Washington D.C.: Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from: <http://www.epi.org/publication/bp278/>

- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy Practices. In Barton, D., Hamilton, M. & Ivanic, R. (Ed.). *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*, (pp.7-15). New York: Routledge.
- Bauer, S. (2011, March 1). Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker officially cuts collective bargaining. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/11/AR2011031101016.html>
- Bennett, W.L. & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The logic of connective Action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Berliner, D. & Biddle, J. (1995) *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2009). Bill Gates – National Conference of Legislators Retrieved from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/media-center/speeches/2009/07/bill-gates-national-conference-of-state-legislatures-ncsl>
- Bonastia, C. (2015). The racist history of the charter school movement. Retrieved from <http://www.alternet.org/education/racist-history-charter-school-movement>
- Borah, P. (2011). Conceptual issues in framing theory: A systematic examination of a decade's literature. *Journal of Communication*, 61, 246-263.
- Borge-Holthoefer, J., Rivero, A. & Moreno, Y. (2012). Locating privileged spreaders on an Online Social Network. *Physical Review E*, 85. DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevE.85.066123
- Bracey, G. (2003). *On the death of childhood and the destruction of public schools: The folly of today's educational policies and practices*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Bracey, G. (2009). *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality. Transforming the fire consuming America's schools*. Alexandria, Virginia: Educational Research Service.



- Brown, B. (2014, October 20). #whyIrefuse. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://beebaleeb.wordpress.com/2014/10/20/whyirefuse/>
- Brown, J.S. & Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities of practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation. *Organization Science*, 2 (1), 40-57.
- Bryant, J. (2013, September 17). America's 'Education Spring' goes mainstream. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://ourfuture.org/20130917/americas-education-sprg-goes-mainstream>.
- Buchanan, E. & Zimmer, M. (2013). Internet Research Ethics, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-internet-research/>.
- Burch, P. (2006). The new educational privatization: Educational contracting and high stakes accountability. *Teachers College Record*, 108 (12), 2582 – 2610.
- Burgess, J. & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Burris, C. (2014, January 3) Student privacy concerns grow over 'data in a cloud'. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/01/03/student-privacy-concerns-grow-over-data-in-a-cloud/>
- Campano, G. (2005) The second class: Providing space in the margins. *Language Arts*, 82 (3), 186 - 194.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movement in the internet age*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Cavanagh, S. (2015). N.Y. 'Open' education effort draws users nationwide. *Education Week*, 34 (34), 1,14.

- Chapman, B. & Monahan R. (2012, April 19). Talking pineapple question on state exam stumps...everyone. *The Daily News* . Retrieved from <http://www.nydailynews.com>
- Chiu, C.-M., Hsu, M.-H, & Wang, E. (2006). Understanding knowledge sharing in virtual communities: An integration of social capital and social cognitive theories. *Decision Support Systems*, Volume 42 (3), 1872-1888.
- Chong, D. & Druckman, J. (2007). *Framing theory*. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10, 103-126.
- Coles, G. (2003). *Reading the naked truth: Literacy, legislation and lies*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013) *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup>. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Crisco, V. (2009). Activating activist literacy: Discovering dispositions for civic identity development. *Composition Studies*, 37 (2) 31 – 51.
- Crocco, M. (1997). Mary Ritter Beard and Marion Thompson Wright: Shaping inclusive social education. *Theory and research in Social Education*, 25 (1) 9- 33.
- Crocco, M. S., Munro, P., Weiler, K. (1999). *Pedagogies of resistance: Women educator activists, 1880-1960*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Cromidas, R. (2012a, April 27). Latest skeptic of teachers unions is clothing label's city billboard/ [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2012/04/27/latest-skeptic-of-teachers-unions-is-a-clothing-labels-city-billboard/>

- Cromidas, R. (2012b, April 30). facing outcry from educators, Kenneth Cole to remove billboard. [Web Log Post] Retrieved from <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2012/04/30/facing-outcry-from-educators-kenneth-cole-to-remove-billboard/>
- Dale, J. & Hyslop-Margison, E. (2011). *Paulo Freire: Teaching for Freedom and Transformation: The Philosophical Influences on the Work of Paulo Freire*. New York: Springer.
- Dannin, E. (2012). Privatizing government services in the era of ALEC and the great recession *University of Toledo Law Review*, 43, 503- 531.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Davies, J. & Merchant, G. (2007) Looking from the inside out: Academic blogging as new literacy. In Knobel, M. & Lankshear, (Ed.) *A new literacies sampler*, (pp. 167-197). Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Davis, O. (2014, October 17). Punitive Schooling : The education reform movement has brought “broken windows” policing into the classroom. *Jacobin*. Retrieved from <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/punitive-schooling/>
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- DiMartino, C. & Scott, J. (2013). Private sector contracting and democratic accountability. *Educational Policy*, 27 (2), 307-333.

- Dooley, C. (2005) One teacher's resistance to the pressures of test mentality. *Language Arts*, 82 (3) 177-185.
- Dudley-Marling, C. & Lucas, K. (2009) Pathologizing the language and culture of poor children *Language Arts*, 86 (5), 362-370.
- Dudley-Marling, C & Paugh, P. (2005). The rich get richer; The poor get direct instruction. In Altwerger, B. (Ed.) *Reading for profit: How the bottom line leaves kids behind*, (pp.156-171). Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Earl, J. & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the Internet age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Edelman, S. (2015, October 18). Principal doesn't want teachers sitting - so she threw out all their desks. *New York Post*. Retrieved from: <http://nypost.com/2015/10/18/principal-forbid-teachers-to-sit-so-she-threw-out-their-desks/>
- Edelsky, C. (2006). *With literacy and justice for all: Rethinking the social in language and education*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Edelsky, C. & Bomer, R. (2005). Head they win; tails we lose. In Altwerger, B. (Ed.) *Reading for profit: How the bottom line leaves kids behind* (p. 11-20). Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub L. No. 114-95
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Ferguson, D. E. (2013). Martin Luther King Jr. and the Common Core. *Rethinking Schools*, 28 (2), 18-21.

- Ferrette, C. (2014, November 3). Great Neck teacher sues state over teacher evaluation system. *Newsday*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newsday.com/long-island/education/great-neck-teacher-sues-state-over-teacher-evaluation-system-1.9581397>
- Flanagan, M. (2015, October 22). When a desk is not just a desk. [Web log post]. Retrieved from: <http://badassteachers.blogspot.com/2015/10/when-desk-is-not-just-desk-by-dr.html>
- Fleischer, C. (2000). *Teachers organizing for change: Making literacy learning everybody's business*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Ford, G. (2011, May 19). The Corporate Dream: Teachers as Temps. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2011/05/29/corporate-dream-teachers-temps>
- Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power and liberation*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Freire, P. (2009). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum. (Original work published in 1970).
- Gale, T., & Densmore, K. (2003). *Engaging teachers: Towards a radical democratic agenda for schooling*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Gamson, W.A., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W. & Sasson, T. (1992). Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality *Annual Review of Sociology* , 18, 373-393.
- Gamson, W. A & Modigliani A. (1989). Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (1), 1-37.
- Garan, E. (2002) *Resisting reading mandates: How to triumph with the truth*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

- Garelick, B. (2012, November 20). A new kind of problem: The Common Core Math Standards. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/11/a-new-kind-of-problem-the-common-core-math-standards/265444/>
- Gee, J.(2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. London: Routledge.
- Gee, J. (2005). Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces: From the age of mythology to today's schools. In Barton, D. & Tusting, K. (Eds.). *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power and social context*. (pp. 214-232). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J. (2007). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gee, J. (2012) *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. (4th ed.).New York, NY: Routledge.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The interpretation of cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gershman, J. (2012, April 30). Kenneth Cole Pulls Ad. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303916904577376573731056932>
- Giroux, H. (1994). Teachers, public life and curriculum reform. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 69 (3), 35-47.
- Giroux, H. (2005). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon

- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gonzalez-Bailon, S., Borge-Holthofer, J. & Moreno. (2013). Broadcasters and hidden influentials in online protest diffusion. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57:943-965.
- Gonzalez-Bailon, S., Borge-Holthofer, J. Rivero, A. & Moreno. (2011). The dynamics of protest recruitment through an online network. *Scientific Reports*, 1:1-7.
- Goodman, K., Goodman, Y., Shannon, P., & Rapoport, R. (2004). *Saving our schools: The case for public education*. Oakland, CA: RDR.
- Gotham Schools. (2011, July 31). Matt Damon speaks before SOS march. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7Jh3Z52KV0>
- Graves, D. (2002). *Testing is not teaching: What should count in education*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Greenhow, C. (2011) Research methods unique to digital contexts. In Duke, N. & Mallette, M. (Ed.) *Literacy research methodologies*, (pp.70-86). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Gross, S.J. & Shapiro, J. P. (2009) Fear vs. possibility: Why we need a new DEEL for our children's future. In Shapiro, H.S. (Ed.) *Education and hope in troubled times: Visions of change for our children's world*. (pp. 90-103). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gunawardena, C., Hermans, M., Sanchez, D., Richmond, C., Bohley, M & Tuttle, R. (2009). A theoretical framework for building online communities of practice with social networking tools. *Educational Media International*. 46 (1), 3-16.
- Haberman, M. (1995). *Star teachers of children in poverty*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Haimson, L. (2012, June 6). The lessons of Pineapplegate. [Web log post] Retrieved from <http://www.wnyc.org/story/301545-the-lessons-of-pineapplegate/ow>

Halliday, M.A.K. (1975). *Learning How to Mean*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harlow, S. (2013). It was a “Facebook revolution”: Exploring the meme-like spread of narratives during the Egyptian protests. *Revista de Comunicación*, 12, 59-82.

Harris, E. (2015, August 12). 20% of New York State students opted out of standardized tests this year. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/nyregion/new-york-state-students-standardized-tests.html>

Harris, E. & Fessenden, F. (2015, May 20). ‘Opt Out’ becomes anti-test rallying cry in New York State. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/21/nyregion/opt-out-movement-against-common-core-testing-grows-in-new-york-state.html>

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Hedges, C. (2011, April 11). Why the United States Is Destroying Its Education System. *Truthdig*. Retrieved from [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/why\\_the\\_united\\_states\\_is\\_destroying\\_her\\_education\\_system\\_20110410](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/why_the_united_states_is_destroying_her_education_system_20110410)

Herold, B. (2014, April 21). inBloom to shut down amid growing data-privacy concerns. *Education Week*. Retrieved from [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2014/04/inbloom\\_to\\_shut\\_down\\_amid\\_growing\\_data\\_privacy\\_concerns.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2014/04/inbloom_to_shut_down_amid_growing_data_privacy_concerns.html)

Hicks, M. (2010, February 24). Facebook Tips: What’s the Difference between a Facebook Page and Group? [Facebook note]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/facebook-tips-whats-the-difference-between-a-facebook-page-and-group/324706977130/>

Hofstede, G, Hofstede , G.J. & Minkov, M. (2010) *Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival*. USA: McGraw-Hill.

Hursh, D. (2007). Assessing No Child Left Behind and the rise of neoliberal education policies. *American Education Research Journal*, 44 (3), 493-518.



Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Johnston, P. & Costello, P. (2005). Principles for literacy assessment. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40, 256-267.

Kahn, R. & Kellner, D. (2004). New media and internet activism: From the 'Battle of Seattle' to blogging. *New Media & Society*, 6: 87-95. DOI:10.1177/1461444804039908

Karp, S. (2016). ESSA: NCLB Repackaged. *Rethinking Schools*, 30 (3), 18-19.

Karpf, D. (2010). Measuring the success of digital campaigns. In Joyce, M. (Ed.) *Digital activism decoded: The new mechanics of change*. (pp. 151-164). New York, NY: International Debate Education Association.

Karpf, D. (2012). *The MoveOn effect: The unexpected transformation of American political advocacy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Katz, D. (2014, September 19). Dear Common Core English Standards: Can we talk? [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://danielskatz.net/2014/09/19/dear-common-core-english-standards-can-we-talk/>

Katz, D. (2015, September 16). #FightForDyett: What Would You Sacrifice for a Fully Supported, Fully Public School? [Web log post]. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danielkatz/fightfordyett-what-would-\\_b\\_8141514.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danielkatz/fightfordyett-what-would-_b_8141514.html)

Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. New York, NY: Picador.

Klein, R. (2016, March 17). School suspensions contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/charter-school-suspensions\\_us\\_56e9939ee4b0b25c91841ed5](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/charter-school-suspensions_us_56e9939ee4b0b25c91841ed5)

- Knobel, M. & Lankshear, C. (Ed.).(2007). *A new literacies sampler*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *The case against standardized testing*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Korhonen, V. (2010). Dialogic Literacy – a sociocultural literacy learning approach. In. Lloyd, M. & Talja, S. (Eds.). *Practising information literacy: Bringing theories of learning, practice and information literacy together*. (pp. 211-226). Wagga Wagga, Australia: Center for Information Studies.
- Krashen, S. (2013). Access to books and time to read versus the Common Core State Standards and tests. *English Journal*, 103 (2), 21-29.
- Krashen, S. (2014). Common Core: Ignoring education’s real problems. *Talking Points*, 26 (1), 26 – 27.
- Krashen, S. (2016, March 26). Pearson's Plan to Close the Achievement Gap. [Web log post]. <http://skrashen.blogspot.com/2016/03/pearsons-plan-to-close-achievement-gap.html>
- Krashen, S. (2016, March 27). Take a closer look at competency-based education. [Web log post]. Retrieved from: <http://skrashen.blogspot.com/2016/03/take-closer-look-at-competency-based.html>
- Kuhn, J. (2014). *Fear and learning in America: Bad data, good teachers, and the attack on public education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant*. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Lakoff, G. (2008). *The political mind: Why you can't understand 21<sup>st</sup> century American politics with an 18<sup>th</sup> century brain*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

- Lakoff, G. & Wehling, E. (2012). *The little blue book: The essential guide to thinking and talking Democratic*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. (2007). Sampling “the new” in new literacies. In Knobel, M. & Lankshear, C. (Ed.). *A new literacies sampler*, (pp. 1-24). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Lave, J. (1991). Situating Learning in Communities of Practice. In Resnick, B, Levine, J. & Teasley, S. (Ed.) *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition*, (pp. 63-82). Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Leander, K. & Kim K. (2003) Tracing the everyday “sittings” of adolescents on the internet: a strategic adaptation of ethnography across online and offline spaces. *Education, communication & Information*, 3 (2), 211-240.
- Lederman v King, NY slip op. 26416. (May 10, 2016)
- Lipman, P. (2004). *High stakes education: Inequality, globalization and urban school reform*. New York: Routledge.
- Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race and the right to the city*. New York: Routledge.
- McCaughey, M. & Ayers, M. (2003). *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice*. New York: NY: Routledge.
- McDermott, M. (2013, July 23). *A labyrinth of corporate interests in the Common Core*. [Video File]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=walking+the+labyrinth+of+the+common+core](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=walking+the+labyrinth+of+the+common+core)

- McDermott, M. (2013, July 25). A labyrinth of corporate interests in the Common Core. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://educationalchemy.com/2013/07/25/a-labyrinth-of-corporate-interests-in-common-core/>
- McDermott, M. (2016, June 2). Step-by-step privatization and profit: ESSA delivers schools to Wall Street with a bow on top. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://educationalchemy.com/2016/06/02/step-by-step-privatization-and-profit-essa-delivers-schools-to-wall-street-with-a-bow-on-top/>
- McGuinn, P. & Kelly, P. (2012). *Parent power: Grass-roots activism and K-12 education reform*. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/publication/parent-power-grass-roots-activism-and-k-12-education-reform>
- McLure Wasko, M. & Faraj, A. (2000). "It is what one does": Why people participate and help others in electronic communities of practice. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, (9), 155-173.
- Mc Neil, E. (2015, October 20). Principal Has All Her Teachers' Desks Thrown Out. *New York Post*. Retrieved from: [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching\\_now/2015/10/principal-goes-on-anti-desk-crusade.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2015/10/principal-goes-on-anti-desk-crusade.html)
- McNeil, L. M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- Meier, D., Kohn, A., Darling-Hammond, L., Sizer, T., Wood, G. (2004) *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and our schools*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Montano, T., Lopez-Torres, L., DeLissovoy, N., Pacheco, M., & Stillman, J. (2002). Teachers as activists: teacher development and alternate sites of learning. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, (35) 3, 265-275.
- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2016, 3 February) Charter Public Schools Serving 250,000 New Students in 2015-16. Retrieved from: <http://www.publiccharters.org/press/new-closed-report/>
- Neil, M. (2012). A child is not a test score: Assessment is a civil rights issue. In Au & Tempel (Eds.) *Pencils down: Rethinking high-stakes testing and accountability in public schools*. (pp. 21-30). Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- New York State Department of Education. (2016). *2016 Common Core English Language Arts Tests Teacher's Directions*. Retrieved from: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/sam/ei/td-35ela16.pdf>
- Newton, X., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E. & Thomas, E. (2010) Value-Added Modeling of Teacher Effectiveness: An exploration of stability across models and contexts. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 18 (23). Retrieved 5/27/16 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/810>.
- Novinger, S. & Lilly, C.C. (2005). Telling our stories: Truth to power. *Language Arts*, 82 (3), 195-203.
- NYSUT (n.d.) #IAMPublicEd Nae Nae Challenge Retrieved from <https://mac.nysut.org/iampubliced-nae-nae-challenge>
- NYSUT (2014). The NYSUT Teacher Practice Rubric. Retrieved from <http://www.nysut.org/resources/all-listing/2012/september/nysut-teacher-practice-rubric>

Ohanian, S. (2000) You say stakeholder; I say robber baron. *Language Arts*, 78 (2), 148-157.

Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

Ohanian, S. (2002). *What happened to recess and why are our children struggling in kindergarten?* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Ohanian, S. (2009). On assessment, accountability and other things that go bump in the night. *Language Arts*, 86 (5), 371 – 381.

Onosko, J. (2011). Race to The Top leaves children and future citizens behind: The devastating effects of centralization, standardization and high stakes accountability. *Democracy & Education*, 19 (2), Article 1. Retrieved from: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol19/iss2/1>

Pan, S. & Leidner, D. (2003). Bridging communities of practice with information technology in pursuit of global knowledge sharing. *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 12, 71-88.

Parent Coalition for Student Privacy. (n.d.). Retrieved May 22, 2016, from <http://www.studentprivacymatters.org/>

Perez, C. (2015, October 28). Desk-dumping principal gives herself the heave-ho. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://nypost.com/2015/10/28/desk-dumping-principal-gives-herself-the-heave-ho/>

Perry, L. & McConney, A. (2010). Does the SES of the school matter? An examination of Socioeconomic status and student achievement using PISA 2003. *Teachers College Record*, 112 (4), 1137-1162

Picower, B. (2012). Teacher Activism: Enacting a vision for social justice. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 45 (4) 561- 5

Pink, S., Horst, H., Postil, J., Hjorth, L. & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital Ethnography, Principles and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication Ltd.

Porter, A., McMaken, J., Hwang, J., & Yang, R. (2011). Common Core Standards: The new U.S. intended curriculum. *Educational Researcher*, 40, 103–116.

Rainie, L. & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked: The new social operating system*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ravitch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system*. New York: Basic Books.

Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Ravitch, D. (2013, August 9) Who Set the NY Cut Scores—and What We Still Need to Know [Web log post] Retrieved from <https://dianeravitch.net/2013/08/09/who-set-the-ny-cut-scores-and-what-we-still-need-to-know/>

Ravitch, D. (2015, March 20). Laura Chapman: Ohio State Superintendent promotes sham methods for testing students and evaluating teachers. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://dianeravitch.net/2015/03/20/ohio-state-superintendent-promotes-sham-methods-for-testing-students-and-evaluating-teachers/>

Ravitch, D. (2015, July 22). Teacher: Beware EngageNY curriculum: It's no good! [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://dianeravitch.net/2015/07/22/teacher-beware-engageny-curriculum-its-no-good/>

Reed, D. (2009). Is there an expectations gap? Federalism and the demographic distribution of proficiency cut scores. *American Education Research Journal*, 46 (3), 718-742.

- Robertson, P. (2011, August 17). Opting out of the State Test: You Can Do It. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.pegwithpen.com/2011/08/optiming-out-of-state-test-you-can-do-it.html>
- Rock, F. (2005). "I've picked some up from a colleague" Language, sharing and communities of practice in an institutional setting. In Barton, D. & Tusting, K. (Eds.) *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power and social context*, (pp. 77-104). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, M. (2006). *Possible lives: The promise of public education in America*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group.
- Routman, R. (1996) *Literacy at the crossroads: Crucial talk about reading, writing and other teaching dilemmas*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rowling, J.K. (2004). *Harry Potter And The Order Of The Phoenix*. New York, NY: Scholastic Publishing.
- Sacks, P. (1999). *Standardized minds: The high price of America's testing culture and what we can do to change it*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press
- Saltman, K.J. (2007). *Capitalizing on disaster: Taking and breaking public schools*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.
- Schneider, M. (2014, April 25). A tale of Two NGA press Releases, and then some. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://deutsch29.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/a-tale-of-two-nga-press-releases-and-then-some/>
- Schneider, M. (2015). *Common Core dilemma: Who owns our schools?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.



- Schneider, M. (2016, December 1). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Some eleventh-hour observations. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://deutsch29.wordpress.com/2015/12/01/the-every-student-succeeds-act-essa-some-eleventh-hour-observations/>
- Schniedewind, N. & Sapon-Shenin, M. (2012). *Educational courage: Resisting the ambush of public education*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Scott, J. & DiMartino, C. (2009). Public education under new management: A typology of educational privatization applied to New York City's restructuring. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84, 432-452.
- Shannon, P. (1992). *Becoming political: Readings and writings in the politics of literacy education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shannon, P. (2007). *Reading against democracy: The broken promises of reading instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shapiro, S. (2008). It's time for a progressive vision of education! *Tikkun*, 23, 17-72
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18,362-377.
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Shirky, C. (2009). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media-Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change, The. *Foreign Affairs*, 90, 12. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from <http://www.bendevane.com/FRDC2011/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/The-Political-Power-of-Social-Media-Clay-Sirky.pdf>

- Slentz, K. (2013). *Transition to Common Core Assessments* [Field memo]. Retrieved from: <https://www.engageny.org/resource/field-memo-transition-to-common-core-assessments>
- Stanley, W.B. (2005). Social studies and social order: Transmission or transformation? *Social Education*, 69 (5) 282- 286.
- Stern, G. (2014, April 2). State ends inBloom deal to keep student data in cloud. *The Journal News: LOHUD*. Retrieved from: <http://www.lohud.com/story/news/education/2014/04/02/state-education-department-abandons-inbloom-data-sharing-plan/7204567/>
- Strauss, S.L. (2005). Operation No Child Left Behind. In Altwerger, B. (Ed.) *Reading for profit: How the bottom line leaves kids behind*, (pp.33-49). Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Strauss, V. (2012, December 3). A ‘value-added’ travesty for an award-winning teacher. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2012/12/03/a-value-added-travesty-for-an-award-winning-teacher/>
- Strauss, V. (2013, November 16). Arne Duncan: ‘White suburban moms’ upset that Common Core shows their kids aren’t ‘brilliant’. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/11/16/arne-duncan-white-surburban-moms-upset-that-common-core-shows-their-kids-arent-brilliant/>
- Strauss, V. (2015, (2015, March 14). Pearson monitoring social media for security breaches during PARCC testing. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/03/14/pearson-monitoring-social-media-for-security-breaches-during-parcc-testing/>

- Strauss, V. (2016, May 26). New rules, old fight: Critics say U.S. proposals on implementing education law are heavy handed. [log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/05/26/new-rules-old-fight-critics-say-u-s-proposals-on-implementing-education-law-are-heavy-handed/>
- Stringer, E. (1999). *Action research: A handbook for practitioners*. CA: Sage Publications.
- Tangwall, D. (2011, November). Under attack: Using social media to respond to a public relations crisis. [Web log post]. Retrieved from: <http://smbmad.org/under-attack-using-social-media-to-respond-to-a-public-relations-crisis-recap-smb-madison-nov-2011/>
- Taylor, C. (2003). *Modern social imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, K. (2015, December 10). Cuomo panel calls for further retreat from Common Core Standards. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/nyregion/cuomo-task-force-signals-further-retreat-from-common-core-school-standards.html>
- Tienken, C. (2011). The Common Core State Standards: The Emperor has no clothes, or evidence. *Kappa Pi Delta Record*, 47 (2), 58 - 62.
- Tienken, C. (2012). The Common Core State Standards: The Emperor is still looking for his clothes. *Kappa Pi Delta Record*, 48 (4), 152-155.
- Tienken, D. & Orlich, D. (2013) *The School Reform Landscape: Fraud, Myth, and Lies*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tienken, C. H., & Zhao, Y. (2010). Common core national curriculum standards: More questions...and answers. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 6(4), 3-13.

- Tusting, K. (2005). Language and power in communities of practice. In Barton, D. & Tusting, K. (Eds.). *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power and social context*, (pp.36-54). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Underwood, J. & Mead, J. F. (2012). A smart ALEC threatens public education. *Kappan*, 93 (6), 51-55.
- U.S. Department of Education (2002). *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education (2009). *Race to the Top Executive Summary*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education (2011). December 2011 *Revised FERPA regulations: An overview for parents and students*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/pdf/parentoverview.pdf>
- Valenzuela, S. (2012). *Protesting in the age of social media: Information, opinion expression and activism in online networks*. Paper presented to the 5<sup>th</sup> Latin American Public Opinion Congress, World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), Colombia, Retrieved from [http://www.academia.edu/2014086/Protesting\\_in\\_the\\_age\\_of\\_social\\_media\\_Information\\_opinion\\_expression\\_and\\_activism\\_in\\_online\\_networks](http://www.academia.edu/2014086/Protesting_in_the_age_of_social_media_Information_opinion_expression_and_activism_in_online_networks)
- Vegh, S. (2003), Classifying Forms of Online Activism: The Case of Cyber Protests Against the World Bank. In McCaughey, M. & Ayers, M. (Eds.). *Cyber Activism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*, (pp. 71-96). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Weiner, L. (2012). *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.

- Weltman, B. (2002). *Praxis imperfect: John Goodlad and the social reconstructionist tradition*. *Educational Studies*, 33(1), 61-84
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems. *Organization: The Critical Journal of Organization, Theory and Society*. 7(2), 225-246.
- Wenger, E. (2010) Communities of practice and social learning systems: the career of a concept. In Blackmore, C. (Ed.) *Social Learning Systems and communities of practice*, (pp. 179-198). London: Springer Verlag and the Open University.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Weltman, B. (2002). *Praxis imperfect: John Goodlad and the social reconstructionist tradition*. *Educational Studies*, 33(1), 61-84
- Yatvin, J. (2013). Warning: The Common Core Standards may be harmful to children. *Kappan*, 95 (6), 42-44.
- Yettick, H. (2013, May 13). Studies highlight complexities of using value-added measures. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/05/13/32value-add.h33.html>
- Zuckerman, E. (2008, March 8). The Cute Cat Theory Talk at ETech. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech/>
- Zuckerman, E. (2015). Cute cats to the rescue? Participatory media and political expression. In Allen D. & Light, J.S. (Eds). *From Voice to Influence: Understanding citizenship in a digital age*, (pp. 131-154). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

**APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about the history of your group. Can you describe how your group got started? Who was involved and what were the circumstances and events?
2. What social media platform did you choose to found your group (website, Facebook group, Facebook page) and why was that particular platform selected? How was this platform more or less productive for your group?
3. What social media platforms is your group utilizing now? Which do you find to be the most successful in attracting members/participants? Which social media platforms have you found to be the most successful in leading to action?
4. What successful action/actions by your group, if any, do you attribute to the use of social media?
5. Is there a blog linked to your Facebook group, and if so, who is responsible for the blog posts?
6. Can you describe your perception of the role of internet memes in terms of educating members of your group or calling members to action?
7. Has your group made use of videos shared through social media, and if so, can you describe any of those videos or how they were used to create actions?
8. How is your group organized in terms of leadership and membership? Is your Facebook group an open or closed group? Why did you choose that type of membership?
9. Are posts and comments on your Facebook page or group moderated? If so, who does the moderating and what is your criterion for intervening if a thread becomes contentious?
10. Does your group have posted guidelines about interaction and if so, what do your guidelines state?
11. Do you censor comments by asking posters to remove them? Do you delete comments? Do you ever remove members from the group? How is that decided?

12. Can you describe the power relationships in your group? Are there leaders? Is there a hierarchy among the leaders? How are decisions made in your group?

13. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

\_\_\_\_\_ I grant permission to have my name used in the reporting of this information.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give permission to report the information from this interview, but wish to remain anonymous.



## APPENDIX B

### KEY TO FACEBOOK THREADS USED IN APPENDIX C & APPENDIX D

A more detailed description of each of the discussions referenced can be found in chapter 5.

#### United Opt Out (UOO) Facebook Discussion Threads

- UOO 1: Administrator Clarifies Group's Mission April 29, 2015.
- UOO 2: Accusation of Censorship June 22, 2105
- UOO 3: Concern Trolling About Bloggers September 6, 2015.
- UOO 4: Dyett Hunger Strike September 18, 2015
- UOO 5: "Concern Trolling" Article September 19, 2015
- UOO 6: Police This Page For Off Topic Posts September 20, 2015.
- UOO 7: A Troll Posts About Trolling September 20, 2015.
- UOO 8: Privacy Change/Group Deletion September 20, 2015

#### Lace To The Top (LTTT) Facebook Discussion Threads

- LTTT 1: LTTT Does Not Support Opt Out October 6, 2013.
- LTTT 2: Common Core Standards Discussion November 7, 2013
- LTTT3: Connected Constellations February 24, 2014
- LTTT4: UFT / Teacher Bashing March 29, 2105
- LTTT5: NYC Principal Removes Desks October 18, 2015

## APPENDIX C

## COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE INDICATORS TABLE

Community of Practice Indicators								
CPI 1	CPI 2	CPI 3	CPI 4	CPI 5	CPI 6	CPI 7	CPI 8	CPI 9
Sustained relationships	Shared Engagement	Info Flow	Conv./ Interaction	Knowledge of others	Tools/ artifacts	Use of jargon/ shortcuts	Membership styles	Shared discourse/ Perspectives
SOS- BA #1,2,9	SOS- BA #2	SOS- BA #2	SOS-BA #9	SOS- BA #1,2	SOS- BA #9	SOS-BA	SOS- BA	SOS- BA #1,2,9
UOO –PR # 1,3,8	UOO – PR #8	UOO – PR # 2,4		UOO – PR #8,9	UOO – PR #12	UOO-PR #3	UOO –PR #3	UOO –PR #4,8,12
LTTT-KG #1,3,8,9	LTTT-KG #1,9	LTTT-KG #1,5,8		LTTT-KG #1,8	LTTT-KG #1	LTTT-KG #1,5	LTTT-KG #1,2	LTTT-KG #1,3,8,9
UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1	UOO # 1
UOO # 2	UOO # 2	UOO # 2			UOO # 2		UOO # 2	UOO # 2
UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3	UOO # 3
UOO # 4	UOO # 4	UOO # 4	UOO # 4		UOO # 4		UOO # 4	UOO # 4
UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5	UOO # 5
UOO # 6	UOO # 6	UOO # 6	UOO # 6	UOO # 6	UOO # 6		UOO # 6	UOO # 6
UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7	UOO # 7
UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8	UOO # 8
LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1	LTTT # 1
LTTT # 2	LTTT # 2	LTTT # 2	LTTT # 2		LTTT # 2		LTTT # 2	LTTT # 2
LTTT # 3	LTTT # 3	LTTT # 3	LTTT # 3	LTTT # 3		LTTT # 3	LTTT # 3	LTTT # 3
LTTT # 4	LTTT # 4	LTTT # 4	LTTT # 4			LTTT # 4	LTTT # 4	LTTT # 4
LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5	LTTT # 5

## APPENDIX D

## COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE DISORDERS TABLES

Document Group and Identification Code	Domain Disorders			
	DI Imperialism	DN Narcissism	DM Marginality	DF Factionalism
	SOS – BA # 1		SOS – BA # 1	SOS – BA # 1
				UOO – PR #9
			LttT – KG # 3	LttT – KG # 1, 11
	UOO # 1			UOO # 1
	UOO # 2	UOO # 2		UOO # 1
	UOO # 3	UOO # 3		UOO # 2
	UOO # 4	UOO # 4		UOO # 3
	UOO # 5			
	UOO # 6	UOO # 6		
	UOO # 7	UOO # 7		UOO # 7
	UOO # 8	UOO # 8		
LttT # 1			LttT # 1	
LttT # 3	LttT # 3		LttT # 3	
			LttT # 4	

Document Group and Identification Code	Community Disorders				
	CE Egalitarianism	CD Dependence	CS Stratification	CDS Disconnectedness	CL Localism
			SOS – BA # 1	SOS – BA # 1	
			UOO – PR #9	UOO – PR #9	
			LttT – KG #11	LttT – KG # 1, 11	
			UOO # 1	UOO # 1	
	UOO # 2		UOO # 2	UOO # 2	
			UOO # 3		
			UOO # 4	UOO # 4	
			UOO # 5		
	UOO # 6		UOO # 6	UOO # 6	
	UOO # 7		UOO # 7	UOO # 7	
			UOO # 8		
				LttT # 1	
LttT # 3				LttT # 3	
		LttT # 4	LttT # 4		

Document Group and Identification Code	Practice Disorders		
	PA Amnesia	PD Dogmatism	PM Mediocrity
LttT - KG# 1, # 4			
	UOO # 1		
	UOO # 2		
		UOO # 4	
	UOO # 5		
		UOO # 6	
LttT # 1			

**APPENDIX E  
SAMPLE OF MEME TEMPLATES**



**The Most Interesting Man In the World**



**Creepy Condescending Wonka**



**Unhelpful High School Teacher**



**Confused Man**



**Homework Kid**

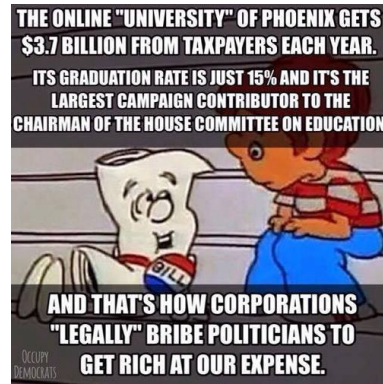
APPENDIX F

MEMES SORTED BY TOPIC

Privatization/ALEC/Reformers: P-A-R



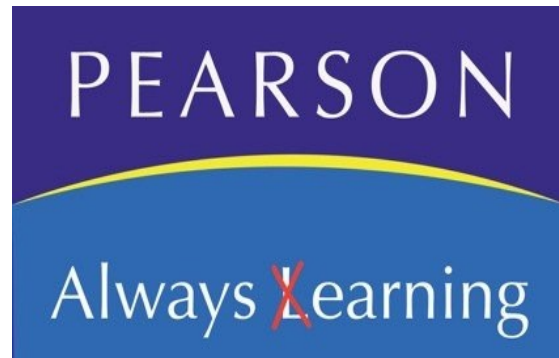
1



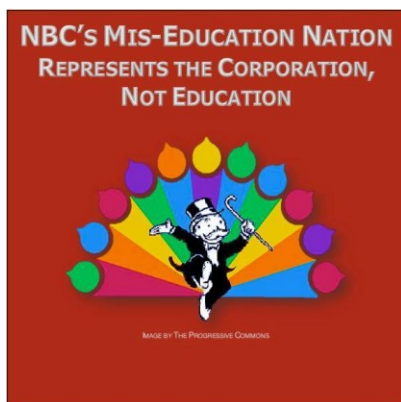
2



3



4



5

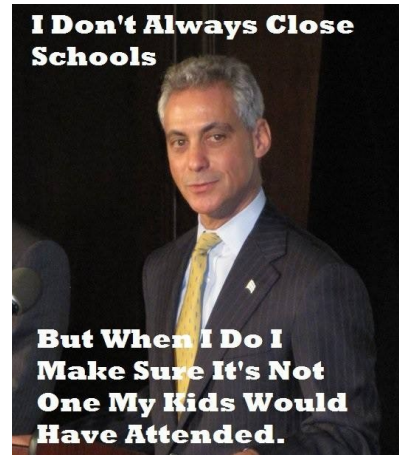


6





7



8

### ALEC's Agenda

<b>Promote the rich</b>	Shrink investments in public education and other avenues working and middle class families use to gain upward mobility.	
<b>Silence educators' voices</b>	Through their union, educators fight to give students a rich learning experience. If you weaken the union, you silence their voices.	
<b>Dismantle public education</b>	Vouchers/tuition tax credits schemes rob public schools of the funding necessary for providing students with a quality education.	

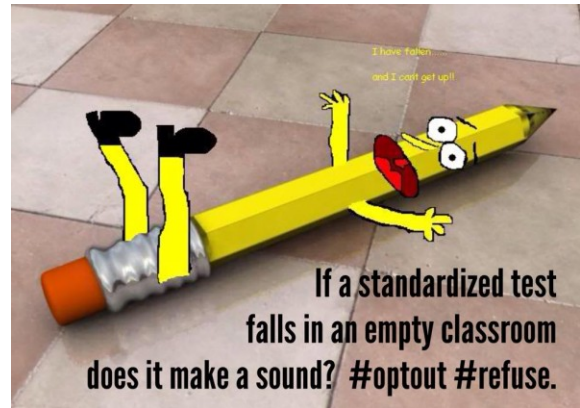
STAND UP! ALEC  
Education Votes  
www.ETimes.org

9

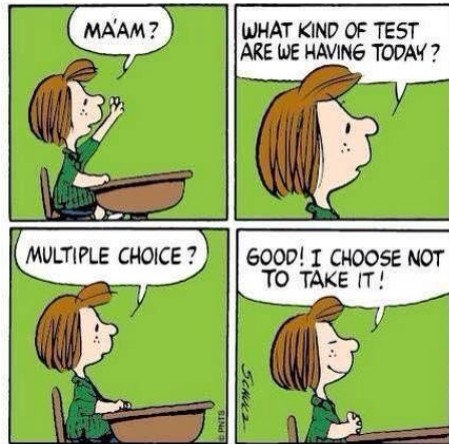
Opt Out - 00



1



2



3

#ThankaTeacher



by refusing the #standardizedtests.

4

Children should define a classroom, not a test *I believe in public education*

## #WHYREFUSE

I want to reignite my child's love and passion for learning *For all the special needs children who are being left behind*

To protect my child *My child deserves to have a voice*

**I am informed** *My child gets one childhood*

Teachers and children are not test scores *I want color returned to my child's classroom*

*My child's education is NOT FOR SALE*

*My child's personal data is not for sale* *My child's education IS MY responsibility*

*Millie Moley Bianca Reina*

5

The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) takes between 4 and 5 hours.

Section	# of sections	# of questions	length	content
Logical Reasoning (Arguments)	2	24-26	35 min	#Multiple statements for logical errors
Analytical Reasoning (Games)	1	24	35 min	solve complex logical deduction puzzles
Reading Comprehension	1	26-28	35 min	read passages and answer questions
Experimental	1	Depends on section	35 min	Depends on section
Writing Sample	1	1	35 min	Write an essay on a topic

Source: <http://www.lsac-center.com/lsat-page1.html>

The Common Core Tests for Math & ELA take between 8 and 10 hours.

CC ELA
Each Testing Day (3 days) will be scheduled to allow 90 minutes for completion.
CC Math
Day 1 and Day 2 will be scheduled to allow 60 minutes each for completion.
Day 3 will be scheduled to allow 70 minutes for completion.

Source: EngageNY - Test Guides for English Language Arts and Mathematics

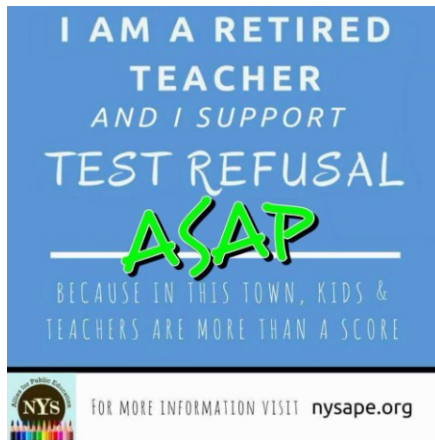
**We Therefore Say**

**iREFUSE!**

[www.StopCommonCoreinNewYork.com](http://www.StopCommonCoreinNewYork.com)

6



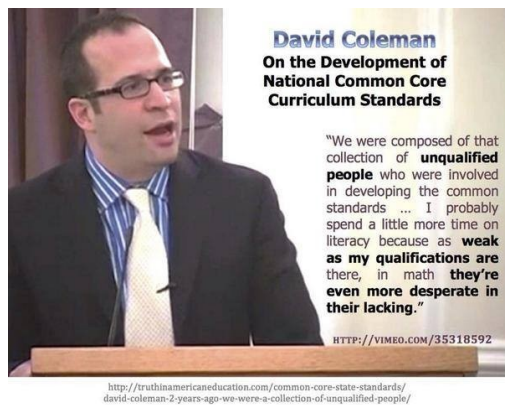


7



8

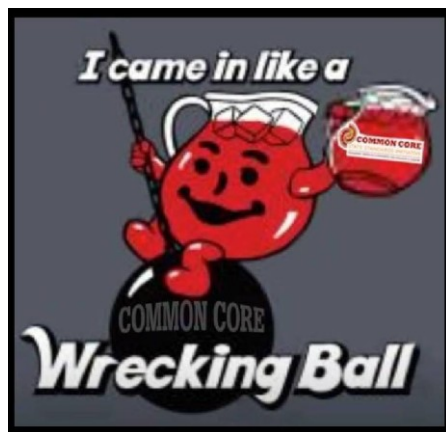
Common Core : CC



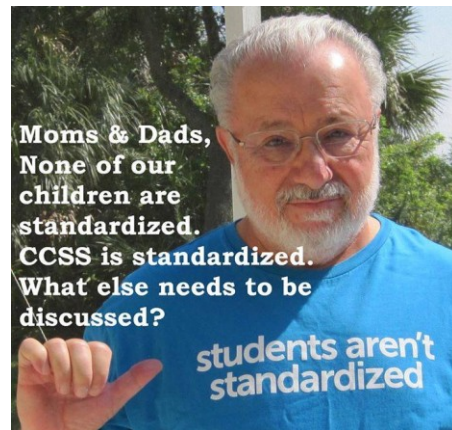
1



2



3



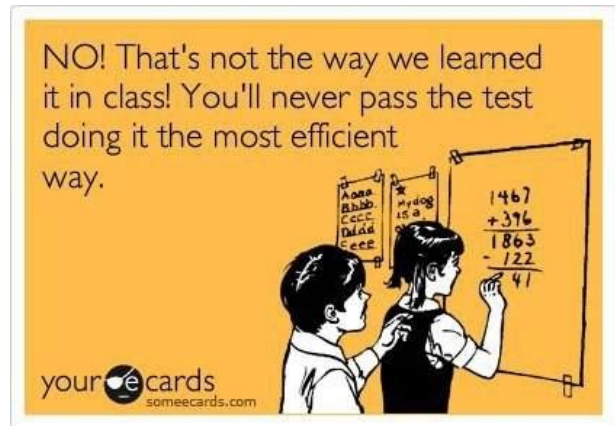
4

# Common Core Math

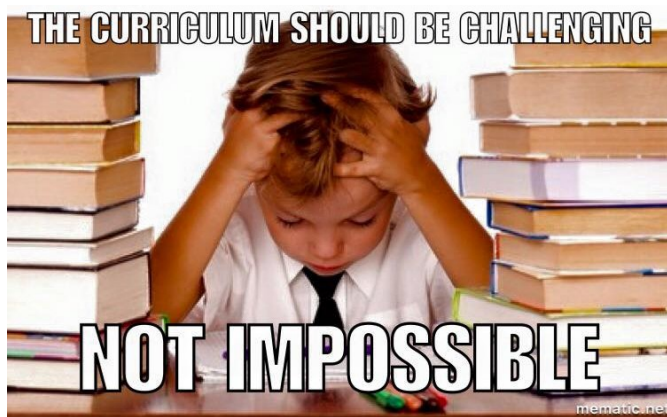
**"IF YOU HAVE 4 PENCILS AND 7 APPLES, HOW MANY PANCAKES WILL FIT ON THE ROOF? PURPLE. BECAUSE ALIENS DON'T WEAR HATS."**



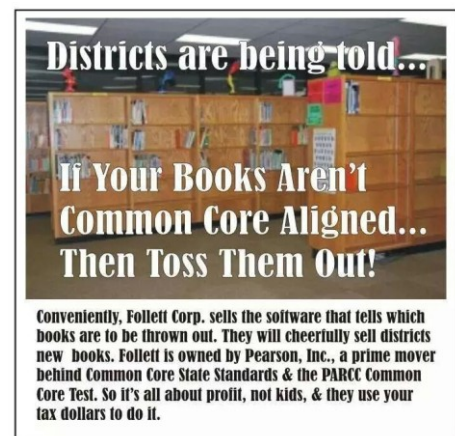
5



6



7



8

NYS – VAM, Cuomo, King, Tisch, Elia - NYS

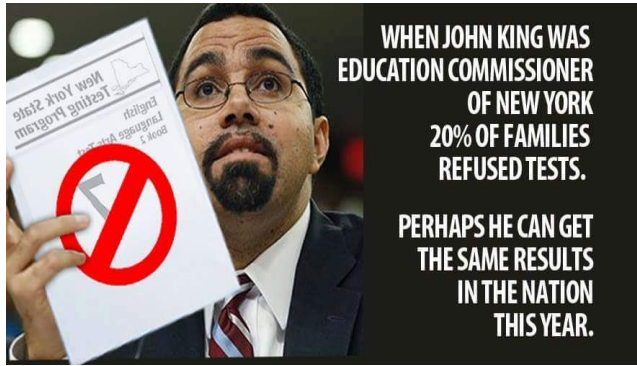


1

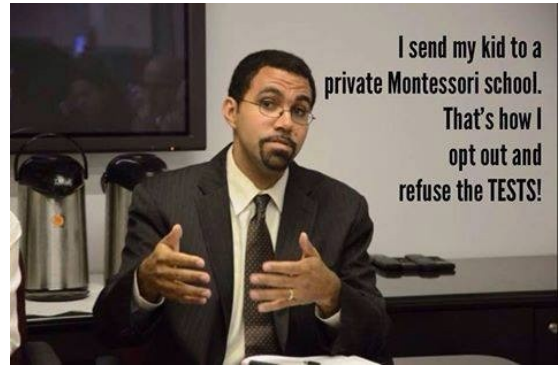


2

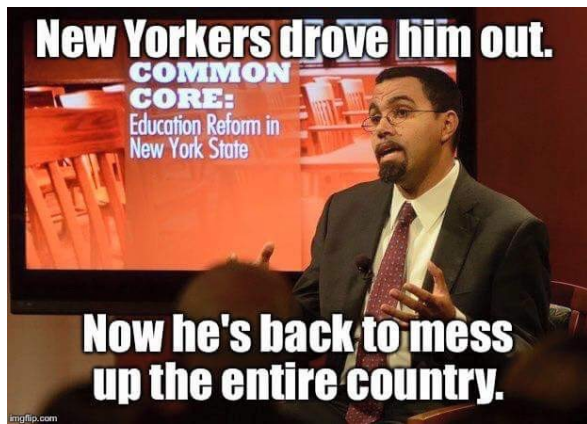




3



4



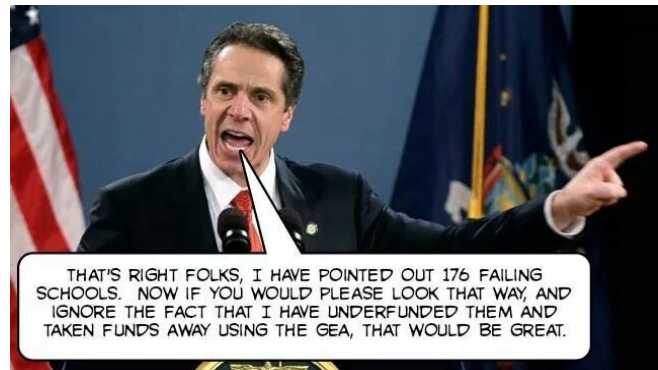
5



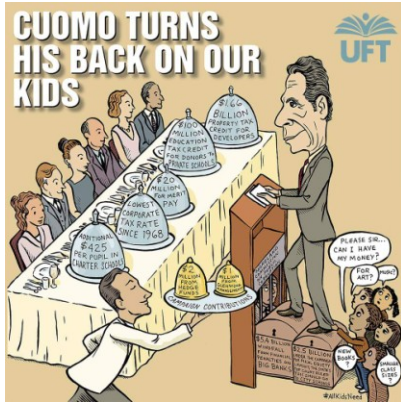
6



7



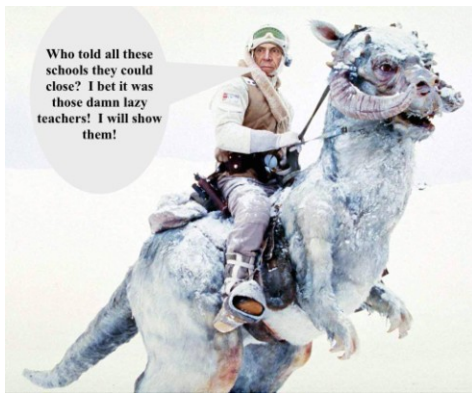
8



9



10



11



12



13



14



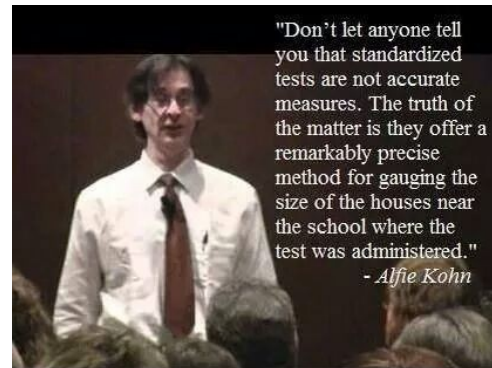
15



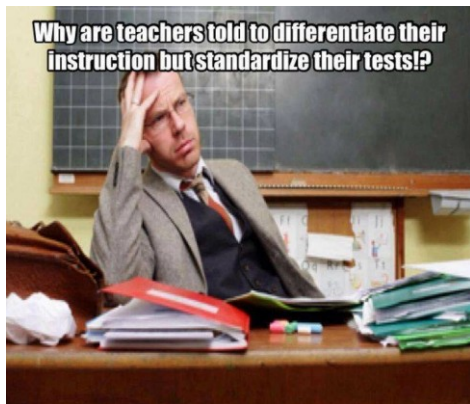
Testing and Pearson – TP



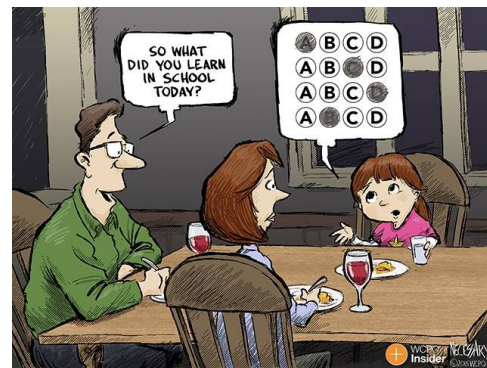
1



2



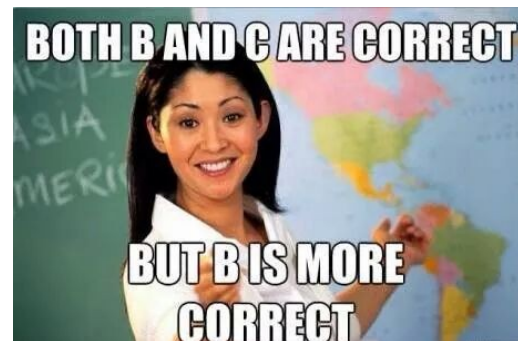
3



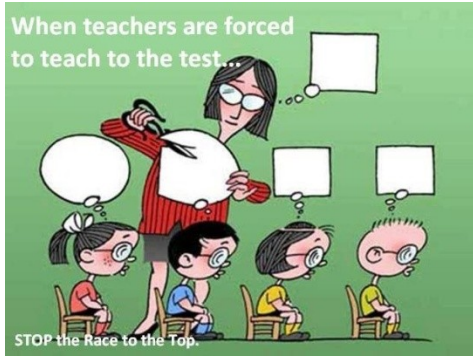
4



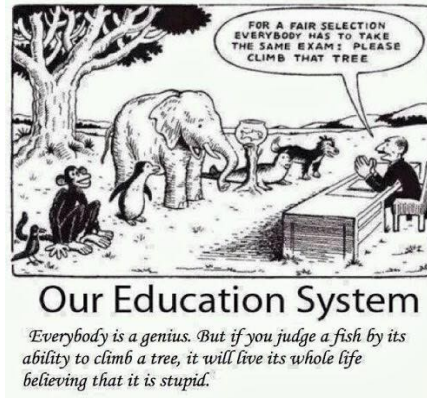
5



6



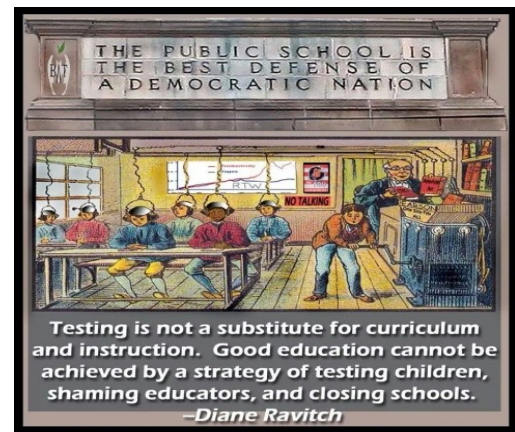
7



8

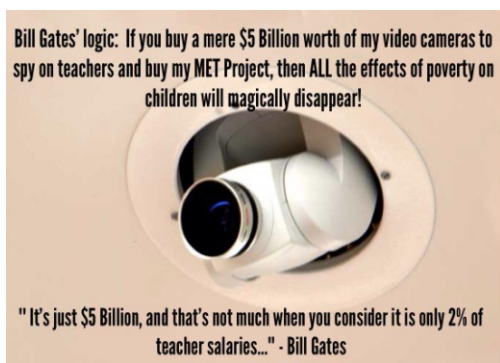


9

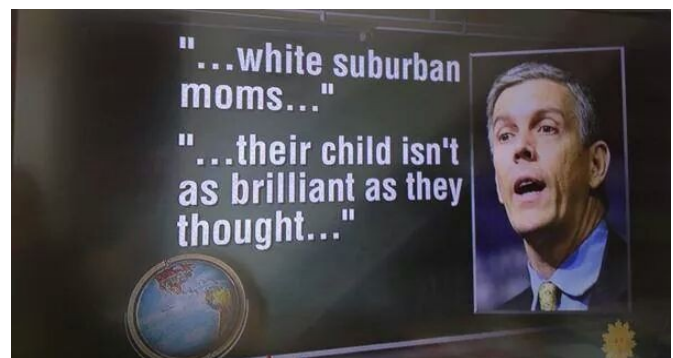


10

### Duncan & Gates – DG

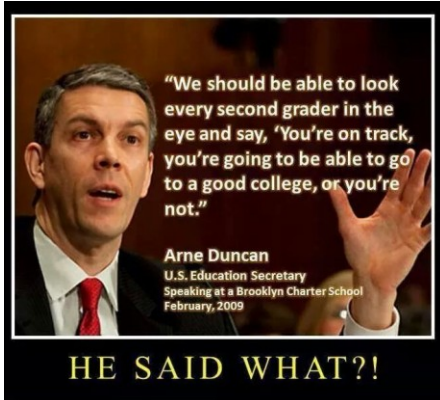


1

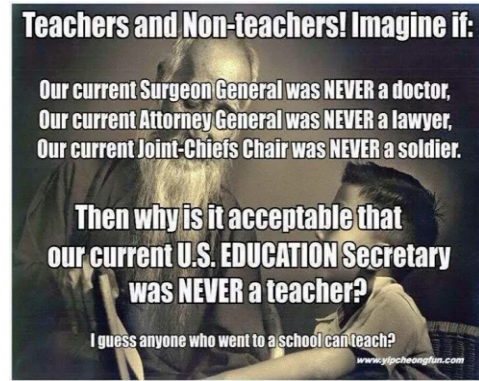


2





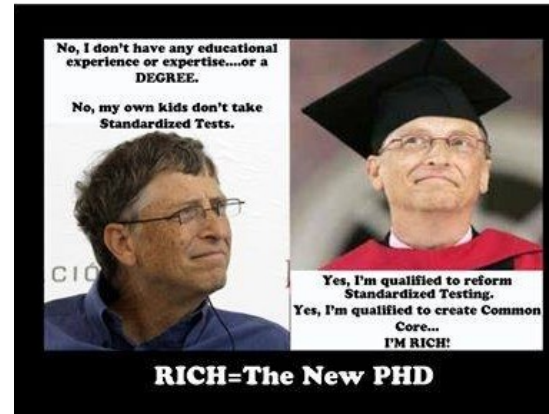
3



4



5



6



7

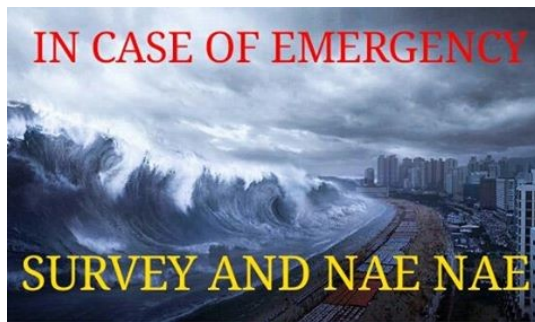
### Union Support and Issues - USI



1



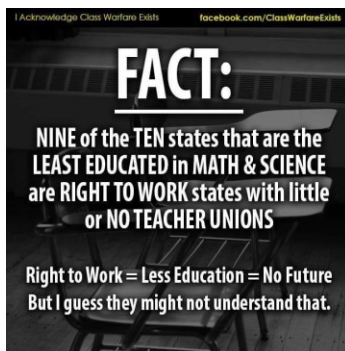
2



3



4



5



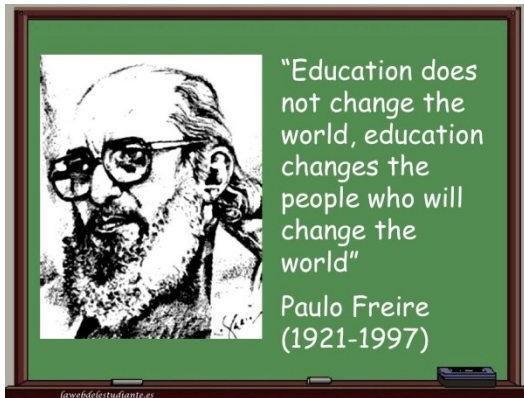
6



7



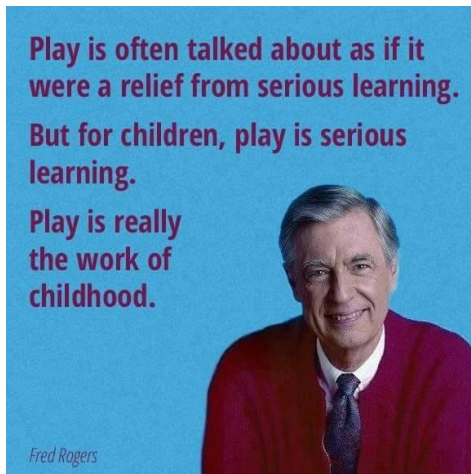
Child Development, Education & Teaching - CET



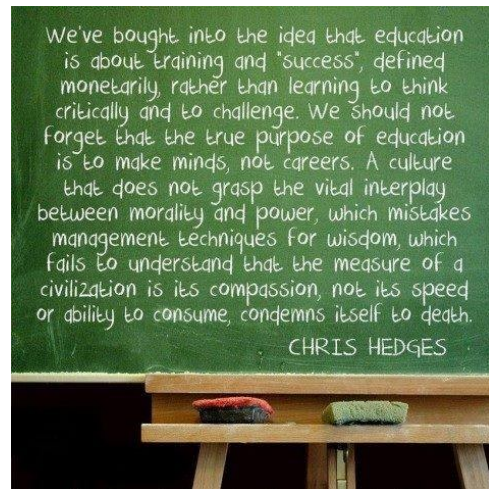
1



2



3



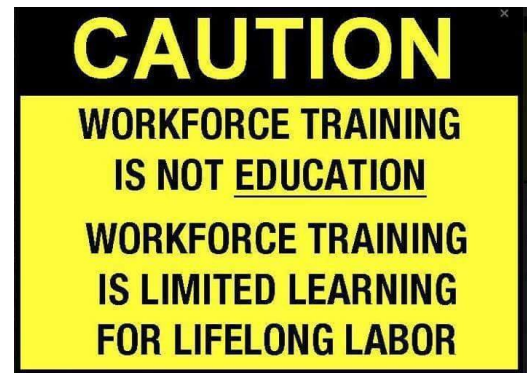
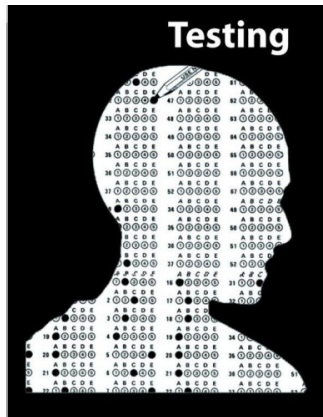
4

Learning

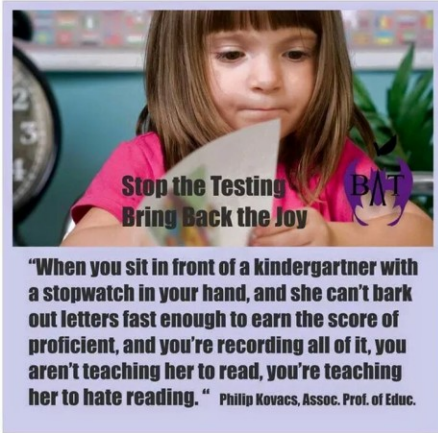


5

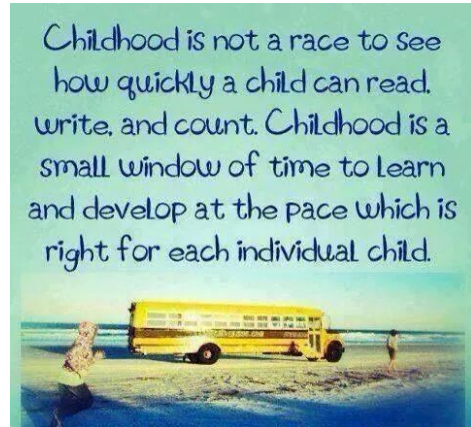
Testing



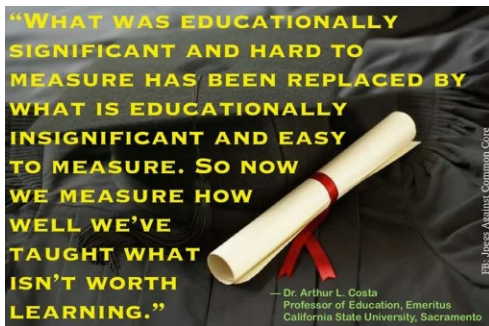
6



7



8



9

Activism/Call to Action Memes – CtA

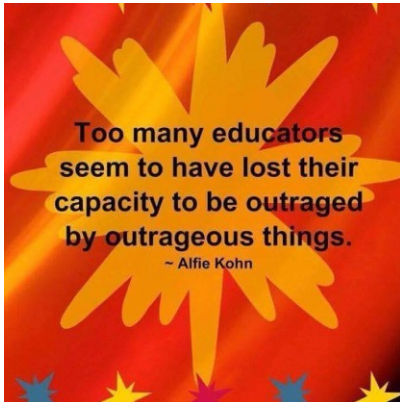


1

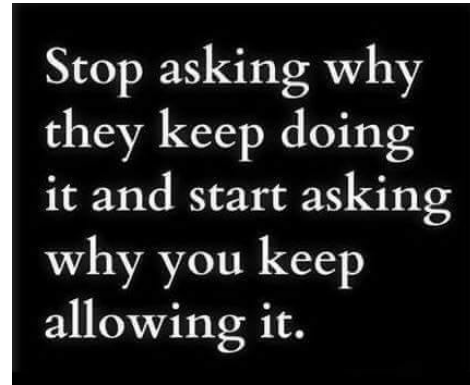


2





3



4



5



6



7