CIVIC LEARNING ONLINE: RESPONDING TO THE GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN CITIZEN IDENTITY

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Perhaps the greatest challenge facing civic education today is for educators, youth workers, policy makers and scholars to recognize the profound generational shift in citizenship styles that is occurring to varying degrees in most of the post-industrial democracies. The core of the shift is that young people are far less willing to subscribe to the notion held by earlier generations that citizenship is a matter of duty and obligation. This earlier sense of common commitment to participate at some level in public affairs was supported, indeed forged, within a group and class based civil society. The underlying sense of citizenship has shifted in societies in which individuals are more responsible for defining their own identities, using the various tools offered by social networks and communication media.
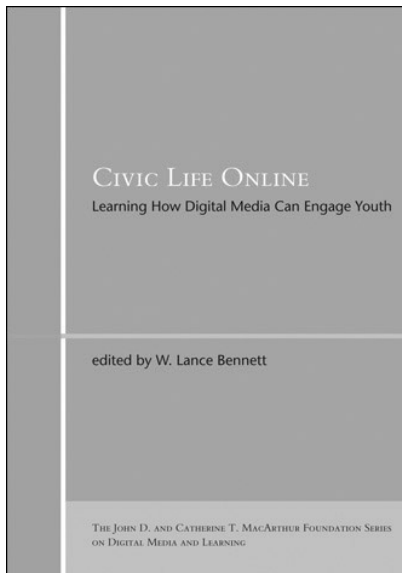
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This broad generational change in the post industrial democracies involves a shift from a dutiful citizen (DC) model (still adhered to by older generations and many young people who are positioned in more traditional social settings) to an actualizing citizen (AC) model favoring loosely networked activism to address issues that reflect personal values. Dutiful Citizens have the following characteristics:

- Obligation to participate in government-centered activities
- Voting is the core democratic act, supported by surrounding knowledge and contact with government
- Becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media news
- Joins civil society organizations and/or expresses interests through parties or interest groups that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilize supporters

Contrast this with the orientation of Actualizing Citizens:

- Diminished sense of government obligation –higher sense of individual purpose

CIVIC LIFE ONLINE
Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth

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- Voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism
- Mistrust of media and politicians—rise of a participatory media culture
- Favors loose networks of community action – often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies

These stark, clearly visible differences lead me to ask why public schools continue to teach civics to young people as if they are their grandparents, with regular news habits, and a developed sense that government and voting were of self evident importance? They do this, in part, because it is both politically safe and easily testable. But perhaps the persistence of ineffective approaches to civics in public schools is simply a reflection that most school policy officers, curriculum developers, education researchers, and many older teachers are, themselves, DC citizens.

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Schools should help students develop their own public voices using various digital media, allowing students to find their own means of engaging with and learning about issues and forming peer-learning communities. However, despite some glimmerings of a national school civics reform movement, there is little immediate promise of school reform that will introduce a better balance between DC and AC learning goals. The ideal learning environment would find ways to combine the two styles. It would include identifying the individual preferences for personal expression and peer-to-peer discovery of issues within relatively open digital media spaces. It would also offer learning paths for issue resolution and public problem-solving that included, among other options, contact with community organizations and appropriate government officials and processes.

Rather than wait for the slow possibility of such change in schools, we may want to consider the potential for civic learning to occur in online communities that offer the advantage of adapting familiar social technologies to more flexible learning designs. The engagement of new civic styles in online environments is not without challenges. Many of the online communities developed by governments and youth experts also fail to utilize the power of social networking involving participatory media in relatively open, democratic contexts. Too often when adult-run institutions such as schools, governments, NGOs, or community organizations build digital media projects, they impose limits on what young people can and "should" do. As a result, the more sustainable projects often strike young people as inauthentic and lacking credibility. The result is that online environments aimed at engaging young people civically often fail. At the same time, when young people are left to their own devices, they may lack models for effective communication, organizing, and democratic practice.

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We need to create or identify existing, informal learning environments within which young people can learn civic skills and practice citizenship. We should consider creative ways to link those informal environments back to formal organizations such as schools, libraries, and youth organizations so that they indirectly aid the civic missions of those formal organizations. Recognition of the potential for civic learning online has been advanced through encouragement from the MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning initiative (http://digitallearning.macfound .org/site/c.enJLKQNlFiG/b.2029199/k.BFC9/Home.htm) which supported a collaborative effort among an interdisciplinary group of scholars to chart an initial research and policy agenda for civic learning online. This group included Mike Xenos, Kirsten Foot, Kathryn Montgomery, Jennifer Earl, Alan Schussman, Merina Bers, Howard Rheingold, Peter Levine, and Stephen Coleman, along with myself. A book based on this collaboration, *Civic Life Online*, is available from M.I.T. Press both as a conventional volume, and as free PDF files from the press site (http:// www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/dmal/-/1). Continuing research and discussions can be found on our project site Civic Learning Online (http://www.engagedyouth.org).

The CIRCLE community is welcome to participate in our blog, share research, and help us define the future of this exciting field. Inquiries can be addressed to me at lbennett@u.washington.edu.   ✦