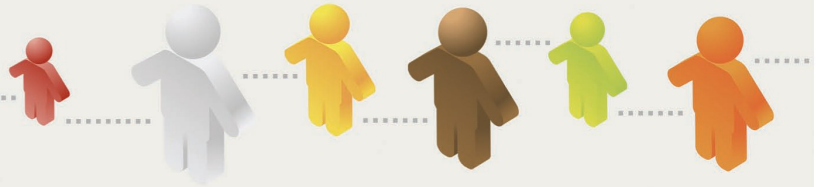


ENGAGED YOUTH

Civic Learning Online



The Generational Shift in Citizen Identity: Implications for Civic Learning Online

by W. Lance Bennett

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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. This generational shift reflects the profound changes associated with the transition away from a modernist society defined by membership organizations, social hierarchies (guided by leaders), and one-way mass communication. Replacing these social

conditions in late modern society are social organizations increasingly based on personal social networks that flatten hierarchies with loose-tied (opt in-opt out) affiliations. Social technologies both facilitate such organizational forms and transform information exchange into multi-channel participatory communication.

The resulting generational change in civic identity 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
- 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.

It is not surprising that new generation citizens that have grown up as digital natives display different learning styles than their parents and grandparents. In contrast to earlier models of education that emphasized authoritative one way transmission of knowledge to individuals who were assessed by external standards, digital natives prefer interactive, project based, peer learning in more democratic environments in which they help create and share content. Yet 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.

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.

We need to develop online environments in which young people can learn civic skills and engage in politics in ways that better reflect their identities and learning preferences. 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 initiative¹ 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.²

The next steps in thinking about civic learning online involve identifying standards for learning outcomes that young citizens can use effectively and that site developers can build into their sites. In addition, we need to identify agreed upon information, expression, organization and participation skills that reflect those standards. At present most online environments are based on intuitive notions of good civic outcomes and seldom offer training in communication and participation skills that users can take away and apply in other settings. As a result, many online

¹ <<http://digitallearning.macfound.org/site/c.enJLKQNiFiG/b.2029199/k.BFC9/Home.htm>>

² <<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/dmal/-/1?cookieSet=1>>

civic spaces end up selecting for young people who already come equipped with advanced digital media skills. As in the schools, those online communities inadvertently tune out the teens already at risk for becoming engaged. Online environments can offer youth potential for high quality skill-based participation in public life so they may become effective advocates for their own causes. Scholars, developers and practitioners can join young citizens in thinking about civic learning standards that work both on and off line. Teens can become active in developing and sharing digital technologies that reflect those standards. New research, discussion, and examples of youth-driven projects that embody these principles can be found on our site Civic Learning Online www.engagedyouth.org. The civic learning and engagement community is welcome to participate in this project through our blog (located in the CLO site) and by sharing research and practice to help define the future of this exciting field.

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