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Young citizens and civic learning: two paradigms of citizenship in the digital age

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How can civic education keep pace with changing political identifications and practices of new generations of citizens? This paper examines research on school-based civic education in different post-industrial democracies with the aim of deriving a set of core learning categories that offer a starting point for thinking about how to address changing citizen identity styles and learning opportunities in various online and offline environments. The preponderance of school-based civic education programs reflects traditional paradigms of dutiful citizenship (DC) oriented to government through parties and voting, with citizens forming attentive publics who follow events in the news. The authors expand upon these conventional learning categories by identifying additional civic learning opportunities that reflect more self-actualizing (AC) styles of civic participation common among recent generations of youth who have been termed digital natives. Their AC learning styles favor interactive, networked activities often communicated through participatory media such as videos shared across online networks. The result is an expanded set of learning categories that recognize the value of different citizenship styles and emerging online environments that may supplement or supplant school civics.

Keywords: citizenship; citizen identity; civic learning; civic education; civic learning online; civic media

The design of civic education involves making choices about the kind of citizens we hope young people become, and the instruction we think such citizens need (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Citizenship itself is not an unchanging set of activities and attitudes (Schudson 1998), and civic education must evolve to suit the needs of young citizens and the social, political, and communication worlds they inhabit. This essay proposes a view of the current civic education landscape in terms of recent changes in citizen identity, and offers an updated set of civic learning guidelines to enable both schools and online civic learning environments to better reach young citizens.

We begin by looking at recent shifts in citizen identity, which lead us to the conclusion that today's young citizens may approach their civic engagement and learning very differently from their parents and teachers. Using this perspective, we review recent studies of civic learning in schools, and point to findings suggesting that civic identity and learning shifts can help explain civic education successes and failures.

Despite the checkered record of school-based civic learning, this review gives us a solid foundation on which to build a broader framework for civic learning that combines

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traditional learning goals with learning goals more reflective of younger citizens' civic identity and learning styles. We use this framework to assess the potential of different learning environments – schools and online environments – to incorporate more comprehensive and effective civic learning opportunities.

Two paradigms of citizen identity

Based on earlier work by Bennett (1998, 2007, 2008) we propose that there are changes in youth civic orientation evident across the post-industrial democracies resulting from broad structural dislocations associated with globalization. Beginning in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, many observers began to detect important changes in the social and political orientations of younger generations in the post-industrial democracies. For example, in his survey of 43 nations, Inglehart (1997) noted a shift toward a 'post material' politics marked by a diminished sense of the personal relevance of government and growing dissatisfaction with the working of democratic processes. At the same time, younger citizens displayed increased interest in political issues such as environmental quality, human rights, and consumer politics (Inglehart 1997, Zukin *et al.* 2006). Theorists of this late modern social formation argue that global restructuring of economies and production have created profound changes in national institutions from families to political parties, and left individuals with increased personal responsibility and risk (Beck 1999, 2000). Giddens (1991) argued that social identity processes, or the means by which people formulate their outlook on and relationship with the world, have changed. Individuals now take increased responsibility for managing their personal identities as they become detached from modern organizations and institutions that previously provided shared status and social memberships. Schudson (1998) similarly sees the current era of citizenship as oriented toward individual rights, rather than obligations for active public involvement.

Bennett (1998) argues that these changes have produced a shifting politics among younger citizens who are less inclined to feel a sense of duty to participate politically in conventional ways such as voting or following issues in the news, while displaying a greater inclination to embrace issues that connect to lifestyle values, ranging from moral concerns to environmental quality. These lifestyle politics entail greater personally expressive or self-actualizing affiliations that can be fluid and changing. By contrast, the sense of duty to participate through civic organizations, parties and elections is still embraced by many older citizens who continue to identify with the defining institutions (party, church, union, service organization) of fragmenting modern civil societies. In short, ongoing processes of social change have produced two paradigms of citizenship that are distinctively meaningful to different groups in many democracies: the dutiful citizen (DC) and the actualizing citizen (AC). Some of the defining characteristics of these citizen identity types are outlined in Table 1.

These are of course ideal types, and do not imply that all members of demographics born after, say, 1980 are AC citizens or that all born before their societies experienced the impact of globalization display DC qualities. Many young people who grow up today in more conventional modernist families and institutional contexts continue to acquire DC identifications. Likewise, many senior citizens who participated in the protest and liberation politics of the 1960s and 1970s may embrace the more fluid styles of AC politics, tempered by a sense of obligation to follow issues in the news and vote. But the general pattern in survey research is that there are marked generational differences in civic practices and styles of affiliation (for example, Lopez *et al.* 2006). While older generations experience citizenship more in terms of duty to participate in elections, parties, service

Table 1. Citizen identity paradigms in post-industrial democracies.

Actualizing citizen (AC)	Dutiful citizen (DC)
Weak sense of duty to participate in government	Strong sense of duty to participate in government
Focus on lifestyle politics: political consumerism, volunteering, social activism	Voting is the core democratic act
Mistrust of media and politicians – less likely to follow politics in the news	Higher trust in leaders and media – informed about issues and government – follows the news
Joins loose networks for social action – communicates through digital media	Joins social organizations, interest groups, parties – communicates via mass media

organizations, and other government-centered activities (Putnam 2000), younger citizens coming of age in late modern social systems experience many of the core party, election and government elements of politics as distant and inauthentic (Coleman 2008, Coleman and Blumler 2009) and favor more personally expressive or self-actualizing politics, often expressed in peer-to-peer networking environments (Palfry and Gasser 2008).

The point of rethinking civic learning is not to label one citizenship model correct – we see valuable activities and skills in both the Dutiful and Actualizing citizenship types, and today, any civic education program made up wholly of either the DC or AC type would be lacking. Citizen identity is dynamic, and more than a single compelling citizen reality operates in many societies (Lister 1997, Blaug 2002, Faulks 2006). Indeed, the introduction of social networking and participatory media technologies into election campaigns suggests the potential for introducing more expressive elements into conventional politics, merging AC and DC orientations and practices in the process.

The presence of different citizen realities has two implications for civic education in the twenty-first century. First, recognizing different paradigms of citizenship helps explain why many well-meaning civic education efforts fail: they are implicitly or explicitly premised on a particular (dutiful) citizen model that is out of phase with the (actualizing) identity styles and learning preferences of many young people. Second, the problem with civic education is not so much that the focus on government and textbook knowledge of institutions and processes is wrong. Indeed, democracy is importantly based on formal institutions and processes, and civic education must prepare citizens to engage with those institutions. However, if efforts to get younger generations to appreciate the importance of government or to follow politics in the news are to succeed, they must recognize the inclinations of many younger citizens to approach politics from more personal standpoints that permit greater participation in the definition of issues, production and sharing of information and construction of action. A model for bridging the DC and AC citizen models is thus the main project of this paper.

Citizen identity and learning

We can improve our understanding of the challenges posed to civic learning by evolving citizen styles by recognizing that the experience of growing up in an unprecedentedly networked and interactive media world has led many young (AC) citizens to develop *learning* styles that also do not fit with many of the methods used in civic education. In particular, the information culture associated with digital media and social networking in which most young people are immersed leads to a different set of dispositions about

Table 2. Civic learning styles and civic identity.

AC civic learning styles	DC civic learning styles
Interactive, project-based, peer-to-peer networked information sharing	Authoritative, text-based one-way knowledge transmission to individuals
Participatory media creation	Passive media consumption
Preference for democratic environments – learners participate in creating content and assessing credibility	Knowledge and skills and assessed by external standards – little learner content creation or peer assessment

relationships to civic knowledge and its various components such as: authority, credibility, production, consumption, and sharing of information.

Jenkins (2006), for example, suggests that young people immersed in digital culture have a set of learning dispositions that depart significantly from those typically found in many classrooms. They favor loose network affiliations over individual information reception. They favor expression through producing (rather than simply consuming) creative content. They prefer collaborative problem-solving over individual approaches. And they are disposed toward shaping the circulation or flow of the results of these peer-to-peer activities, as opposed to more passive audience relationships to one-way information flows (Jenkins 2006, p. 3). Related preferences for more open or democratic classrooms are associated with gains on various civic learning outcomes (Campbell 2005). These learning styles prevail both in and outside the classroom; Coleman (2008) has observed that the degree of autonomy or peer control over web environments enhances the credibility of political online communities (Coleman 2008). These generational engagement and learning styles map nicely onto the citizen paradigms outlined above, creating very different orientations to information and knowledge acquisition as described in Table 2.

The educational implication of such different styles of citizenship and learning should be clear: if students hold significantly different notions of citizenship and styles of learning from their teachers (and the designers of their curricula), there will be dissonance and resistance in classrooms. Such dissonance is evident in findings from research on school-based civic learning outcomes internationally, as noted in the next section. Those findings bring into sharp relief how failures to address changing citizen identity paradigms and learning preferences account for generally poor results, particularly in lower socioeconomic populations. At the same time, school-based civic learning does offer an important legacy: a well developed (if often unmet) set of civic learning practices and assessments upon which we can build by identifying and adding practices that better capture AC citizen styles, and that better address the learning potential of both schools and online environments.

Evidence from the schools

After Langton and Jennings' (1968) landmark study of high school civics education found few benefits of instructing young Americans in civics, academic interest in civic education waned in many of the social sciences. Toward the end of the century, concerns in many nations about a youth engagement crisis renewed both national and comparative research. In the US, for example, Niemi and Chapman (1998) found that general progress in school was a good predictor of several forms of engagement, including attention to news, a sense of efficacy in communicating with government, a sense of understanding government, and tolerance of others' views. The implication of this finding is that civic knowledge appears

to be acquired much as knowledge of any other subject: as tested academic information. This means, among other things, that the main arena for learning to become citizens favors more academically advantaged populations, perhaps contributing to later life tendencies for higher socioeconomic demographics to be more active participants in politics (Kahne and Middaugh 2008).

What is on those civics tests? A 2006 US Civic and Political Health Survey of the Nation found that civics instruction remained an overwhelmingly DC academic subject, with 41% of high school students reporting the primary focus as 'the Constitution or the US system of government and how it works'. The next leading topics were: 'wars and military battles' (32%), and 'great American heroes and the virtues of the American form of government' (26%). Only 11% of high school students reported a focus on problems facing the country today or racism and other forms of injustice in the American system (CIRCLE 2006). In such an environment, the best case scenario seems to be for an elite stratum of academic achievers to acquire the outward trappings of dutiful citizenship such as knowledge of government, while the majority of students (particularly those in the lower socioeconomic and academic tiers) are not well prepared for successful careers as citizens at all. Indeed, for the US sample of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study at the end of the last century, students from less advantaged homes scored well below international means on knowledge and civic skills measures (Torney-Purta and Barber 2004), and similar patterns appeared in many other nations (Torney-Purta *et al.* 1999, 2000). The focus of schools on a rigidly DC style of citizenship thus seems to jeopardize the capacity of schools to help develop a broad democratic citizenry.

More recently, Niemi and Junn (2005) have demonstrated some important additional effects of schools in fostering civic skills. However, the evidence of school effectiveness remains generally uneven, with highest outcomes persisting in schools of high socioeconomic status and among student demographics where family socialization, academic achievement, and other external factors bode well for civic participation independent of school experience.

In addition to the citizen styles presented to students, there is strong evidence that the style in which information is presented also makes a big difference to student learning. For example, Syvertsen *et al.* (2007) found generally *negative* outcomes in classrooms that limited student input in discussion topics and processes. In such closed environments, some communication-related classroom activities actually diminished students' sense of political voice. Similarly, in more regimented classrooms, exercises aimed at learning to critically analyze information led many students to report less confidence in parsing political messages. And, where classroom democracy was limited, field trips to visit elected officials actually decreased general student interest in politics and political careers (Syvertsen *et al.* 2007).

Recent studies have attempted to determine exactly what characteristics of school curricula and learning environments explain more and less successful outcomes (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Not surprisingly, one factor that has emerged as very important in a wide range of studies is the openness of a school or classroom's climate (Torney-Purta 2002, Gibson and Levine 2003, Campbell 2005, McIntosh *et al.* 2007, Pasek *et al.* 2008). An important correlate to a generally open classroom environment is the presence of classroom discussion, of current events or other issues (Gibson and Levine 2003, McDevitt *et al.* 2003, Parker 2003, Syvertsen *et al.* 2007). Discussing hotly contested topics may particularly increase student interest in politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996, Hess and Posselt 2002, Niemi and Junn 2005, Syvertsen *et al.* 2007). Another common finding has been the importance of offering civic information in a context

relevant to students' experiences (Gibson and Levine 2003, Niemi and Junn 2005, Pasek *et al.* 2008).

As the above studies indicate, civic education that remains locked in a DC framework fails to teach critical skills and even reduces the likelihood of political participation. All of this lends support to formally acknowledging and addressing different styles of citizenship (AC and DC) within the same pedagogy, and to permitting more open school environments and more realistic experiences of politics to help students develop standpoints that make sense to them. However, instead of acknowledging different paradigms of citizenship and trying to bridge them, many educational policy makers, parents, and teachers continue to fight unproductively over singular definitions of the 'good citizen' (Hess 2004, Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

We point out the failures of school-based DC curriculum not to deride or dismiss the goals of the curricula themselves. Rather, by noting the outcomes of clashing civic styles, we seek to develop approaches to civic learning that bridge different conceptions of politics and citizenship. And given the challenges of reforming school-based civic learning – elaborated below – we also seek to identify approaches that can be implemented and observed in online youth engagement environments that may be more attractive. Those environments present their own challenges, and would also benefit from clear civic learning guidelines. *The overall goal is to work toward a well-defined and accepted set of civic learning practices that help schools better address changing youth identities, and that offer concrete guidelines and assessment tools to emerging online environments.*

Toward a more general set of civic learning practices

Despite generally uneven performance, school-based civic education has created a legacy of often thoughtful and well-defined standards and practices. Even as many academic observers document the frustrations of school performance, they also find pockets of success that enable theorizing about how civic education might work in a more perfect world (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). Many of these practices range far beyond the conventional goals of learning how government works, to include other kinds of learning that occur when students help generate discussion agendas, participate in deliberations, and experience various sorts of community involvement. Indeed, our exploration of civic education literature and various national civic renewal initiatives resulted in more than 30 measurable civic learning opportunities and related outcomes, ranging over: forms of knowledge, communication and media literacy skills, to understanding how people join groups and form community ties, and how to conduct and assess various forms of participation (Niemi and Chapman 1998, Torney-Purta *et al.* 1999, Torney-Purta *et al.* 2001, Gibson and Levine 2003, Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools 2008a). In addition to these direct measures of civic learning, a variety of secondary (civic orientation) outcomes have been associated with positive performance on the direct indicators. These orientations include: political efficacy, trust in government and others, and confidence in leaders and public institutions. These numerous measures of civic competencies can be sorted into five general categories that offer a useful starting point for rethinking civic learning goals:

- Knowledge/information (conventionally understood as knowing highlights of national history, basic grasp of how government works, following contemporary issues, and so on)
- Communication/expression (most often defined as understanding media and information sources, parsing political messages, learning effective ways to present

views through petitioning, writing letters, and learning how to contact representatives)

- Organization/membership (conventionally defined as knowing the roles of parties, interest organizations, and civic groups and the reasons and bases for joining them)
- Action/participation (typically measured in terms of abilities to understand legitimate ways of addressing issues through participation alternatives such as voting, petitioning, and, perhaps, when other approaches fail, through protesting)
- Orientations/attitudes (efficacy, trust, attitudes toward government, justice values)

When various measures are sorted into this simple scheme, it is clear that the failings of conventional approaches to civic education lie not so much with the categories, themselves, as with the specific learning goals and pedagogies that typically populate them. Those learning modes, even in approaches that emphasize greater classroom participation, overwhelmingly tend to represent the dutiful citizen paradigm. Thus, it is hard to argue against knowledge or information as things that good citizens should possess, at least to some degree. However, we might want to think more critically about what kinds of knowledge should count and what sources are deemed credible. For example, the common civic learning goal of *'knowledge about government and politics'* seems perfectly reasonable as a DC learning goal. However, in order to accommodate the AC citizen experience and related learning preferences, we may wish to go beyond knowledge of how government works to address the workings of citizen-organized political processes, from how civic networks are organized in popular online social networking forums such as facebook, to the workings of direct consumer campaigns to change the labor, environmental, or trading practices of corporations. We may also wish to broaden the sources of credible political information beyond textbooks and other conventional authoritative sources to include direct citizen accounts of their political activities, information produced by peer knowledge networks such as the user-created, web-based encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, and critical uses of online search tools. Similarly, in learning how people become involved with various forms of political action, it seems prudent to move beyond the usual government-centered repertoires of voting, campaigning, or lobbying, to include opportunities to study or participate in more fluid political networks such as campaigns against misogyny in hip hop music or to promote greater environmental awareness. When we have developed a more comprehensive set of approaches, we can begin to think creatively about bridging the civic paradigms with examples such as ways in which grassroots media networks can enliven election campaigns, as happened in the US 2008 presidential election when millions of young voters (primarily Obama supporters) were involved in creating and sharing videos through websites such as YouTube, where users can post their own creations and view videos posted by others.

A preliminary framework that adds complementary AC outcomes to typical DC elements in the four main categories of civic learning is shown in Table 3. (For the present discussion, this scheme leaves aside civic orientations such as trust and efficacy, which tend to be secondary outcomes based on effective engagement with learning opportunities in the first four categories.)

Expanding the range of opportunities and practices that define the basic categories of civic learning serves two main purposes. First, there are practical applications for enabling educators, policymakers, and developers of online environments to better recognize and respond to the lived political experiences of youth. Second, there are theoretical and conceptual benefits for civic learning scholars to formalize guidelines and points of comparison in keeping with changing democratic realities.

Table 3. Expanded civic learning framework including AC goals.

Civic learning dimension	Sample DC goals	Sample AC goals
Knowledge/information	National history emphasizing common experiences and myths; how government works; following contemporary issues in the news	Generational histories emphasizing different life experiences and legitimate frustrations with government; how direct action networks operate; finding and assessing credible sources of information outside of the news (for example, participatory information sources such as wikipedia)
Communication/expression	Understanding conventional media and information sources; parsing political messages; learning effective ways to present views through petitioning, writing letters, and learning how to contact representatives	Understanding digital media and peer information sources; learning participatory media skills (blogging, video production); learning how to use digital media to reach various audiences
Organization/membership	Knowing the roles of parties, interest organizations, and civic groups and the reasons and bases for joining them	Knowing the roles of social networking and online communities (for example, moveon, Taking IT Global) and the reasons and bases for joining them
Action/participation	Identification of participation paths to government, such as voting, campaigning, courts	Identification of paths to join or organize effective peer advocacy networks for direct action
Orientations/attitudes	Efficacy, trust in others, confidence in institutions and government	Empowerment, trust in networks, confidence in participatory skills

At the practical level, classrooms and online environments that offer an expanded notion of civic behavior possibilities may draw out the interests of many students for whom purely DC citizenship holds little appeal. In this way, DC skills may be learned in conjunction with AC opportunities that, at least initially, make more sense to young people. For example, learning how to organize a consumer boycott of a coffee company (an AC skill) might be a starting point for many students to see the relevance of more DC skills such as understanding formal international trade relations, and citizens' opportunities for influencing them through government. We should also not lose sight of the fact that in a globalized corporate world in which national governments may have taken some policy options off the election agenda, AC knowledge, expression, organization and action skills may have value in their own right (Zukin *et al.* 2006).

At the conceptual level, broadening the civic learning framework enables us to address diverse sites of civic learning, from schools to online environments. Especially, as new potential sites of learning emerge – particularly online – our broadened framework offers an opportunity to compare within and across different types of civic learning venues, so that the learning taking place through a website might be compared with that taking place in classrooms and on other websites.

Here the important questions should be: what kinds of civic learning take place in schools, extracurricular locations, and online environments? How adaptable is each setting to newer notions of civic learning? And how might different environments be coordinated to offer students more complete civic education? In the last two sections of the paper, we begin answering those questions by assessing the potentials of school and online environments to accommodate broadened notions of civic learning.

The potential of schools

Unfortunately, rather than moving in the broadening directions recommended here, recent national efforts to reinvigorate school-based approaches to civic education aim mainly to re-connect young people to the very political institutions that they seem most skeptical about. In 2002, the United Kingdom made civic education a required foundation subject (Kerr *et al.* 2003), a move spurred in part by the high profile Advisory Group on Citizenship. The white paper issued by that panel (often termed the Crick report after its chair, Bernard Crick) made this its first recommendation:

We unanimously advise ... that citizenship and the teaching of democracy ... is so important both for schools and the life of the nation that there must be a statutory requirement on schools to ensure that it is part of the entitlement of all pupils. It can no longer sensibly be left as uncoordinated local initiatives which vary greatly in number, content and method. This is an inadequate basis for animating the idea of a common citizenship with democratic values. (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998)

The report then proceeded to define what good citizenship is and what the outcomes of civic education should be. The definitions of these things acknowledged the possibility for greater empowerment of young citizens but framed the notion of citizenship itself in terms of references to the Greeks and to a classic text on the subject from 1950. There was little notion that democratic citizenship may be mutable or contestable (Lister 1997, Faulks 2006), or that innovative educational approaches might be needed to connect with the identities, learning preferences, or social circumstances of young citizens (Biesta and Lawy 2006). The report was thus in line with the recent British emphasis on 'creating *future responsible citizens*' (Weller 2007, p. 166) and the notion of 'active citizenship'

(Faulks 1998), which devalue and restrict students' access to the terms and practice of their own citizenship.

In the United States, more than 40 education experts, government officials and education policy organizations have launched a Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CCMC). The American campaign similarly makes little reference to how young people see their citizen roles differently from their elders. However, the CCMC campaign does take a progressive turn in suggesting that methods of civic education may extend beyond textbooks to critical engagement with issues and community involvement:

Civic learning teaches the fundamental ideas of American democracy and prepares young people to take on the rights and responsibilities of self-government. Yes, it instructs students in the facts, perspectives, and procedures of government, history, and law, but civic learning extends far beyond 'how a bill becomes a law'. Civic learning encourages students to practice democratic processes; it invites critical thinking and discussion of complex issues; it offers opportunities for students to get involved in the life of their communities. (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools 2008b)

A far more ambitious initiative in Australia was launched in response to poor performance on the IEA's international civic assessment study of 90,000 14-year-olds in 28 countries and 50,000 17–19-year-olds in 16 countries during 1999–2000 (Torney-Purta *et al.* 2001). The Australian Council of Education Research (ACER)'s recommendations for education reform included a mix of conventional learning outcomes, such as knowledge of national political institutions, augmented with goals that seem more in tune with changing civic orientations of young people, such as understanding the everyday lived experiences of young people and their apparent alienation from conventional political life. Among other recommendations was the idea of democratizing the civics classroom. While this approach seems more in tune with social identity shifts and learning styles among many adolescents in late modern societies, it met considerable resistance in Australian schools and related education institutions. Few schools implemented the recommendations for addressing the changing participation and learning preferences of young Australians (Mellor *et al.* 2001).

Adding to these cross-national patterns is an insightful study by Davies and Issitt (2005) of prominent civics texts and related teaching materials in Canada, Australia and England. They found that, despite the contested nature of both citizenship and civic education: 'all three countries tend, in the textbooks we have examined, to emphasize forms of citizenship education that may submerge citizen empowerment under essentially orthodox agendas' (Davies and Issitt 2005, p. 389).

These cases suggest at least three important points about citizenship and civic education in the current era. First, there is a continuing tendency for education authorities in many nations to impose conventional definitions of citizenship and standards for measuring it, even in the face of resistance from young citizens who typically fail to perform well on those measures. Second, even in nations such as Australia, where changing youth civic identity and learning styles have been recognized, educational institutions often prove resistant to change. Third, despite mounting evidence that schools and related civic education curricula generally show poor results in helping young people learn to become motivated and effective citizens, there is a persistent belief among adult authorities that civic education still must occur in schools. As a prominent participant in one of the above national initiatives told one of the authors, when queried about why schools remain the dominant focus of civic learning: 'because that's where the kids are'.

It turns out that kids are in lots of other places too. For example, many young people participate in after school youth programs, which represent large-scale opportunities for

civic learning. Increasing numbers of young people also spend time in online environments, many of which offer civic engagement opportunities that are more in tune with the appeal of social networking and participatory media creation among peers (Jenkins 2006, Palfrey and Gasser 2008).

Thus, while we hope our expanded civic learning framework might inform school-based civic education, this review leaves us less than optimistic. Instead, we here turn our attention to online learning environments which, while far from perfect, hold significant potential.

Realizing the civic potential of online environments

It seems clear that many opportunities for meaningful civic learning exist in online environments using technologies that are familiar and appealing to digital natives, a term that Prensky (2001) coined to refer to people born after 1980 and coming of age with interactive, convergent digital media. Web 2.0 – the style of internet programming that enables user-to-user contact, user expression, and user influence of website content – has understandable appeal for a young person with the sort of AC citizenship and learning inclinations we have depicted. At the same time, rigorous theory concerning the civic learning potential of the web has been overshadowed by a tendency to overgeneralize about the web's possibilities. We believe that the set of expanded and specific civic learning goals developed above can add clarity to this discussion. To begin, we should address three sorts of sweeping generalizations that are often made about so-called digital natives and the richness of civic life online.

First, it is easy to overgeneralize about the breadth and depth of various media skills presumably possessed by anyone under 25. Some critics caution that exaggerating the capacities of this population beyond their actual access and skill levels has become something akin to a moral panic (Bennett *et al.* 2008). Even blogs, online journals where individuals post their views on issues ranging from politics to race cars, are not understood by many digital natives. Populations as sophisticated as undergraduates at Stanford or Berkeley do not automatically understand what a blog is, why one might want to blog, or how to do it effectively (Rheingold 2008). The knowledge, motivation, and skills deficits are surely even greater in more typical youth populations. Even if the access gap can be closed, the second digital divide – what people can and want to do with their access – remains an even deeper mystery. Thus we wish to avoid assumptions about access, motives, or skills that potential users of various youth sites will automatically bring with them. Instead, we hope a framework like the one we propose might be used to assess initial abilities and resulting learning. We also want to think seriously about how skills training can be added to online environments (and, of course to schools) so that important segments of the youth population are not inadvertently excluded from participation.

Second, with respect to what kinds of engagement experiences are available online, it is clear that digital media and web networks offer great potential for reinvigorating youth participation (Delli Carpini 2000, Iyengar and Jackman 2003, Montgomery *et al.* 2004). However, a large volume of intuitive and under-investigated generalizations stand in the way of clearly understanding how and when such potential may be realized, ranging from claims that experiences in video war games and popular culture fan sites are somehow civic, to the equally fervent convictions of designers and managers of youth engagement sites that their environments offer the kinds of civic experiences young people should have (Bennett 2008).

Our view is that there may well be important civic learning going on in online games such as *World of Warcraft* where multiple users interact with each other in a fictional world, or among users of a political party youth site, but we would like to ask and investigate such questions as: what kind of learning is it; what different youth populations may be engaged by it; what civic skills can they take away to use in other settings; and how can we compare those environments, populations and skills? Preliminary investigations suggest that there are few clear standards for developing or assessing the civic potential of online environments (Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2008). And Coleman's (2008) studies of online youth engagement sites in the UK suggests that those high resource sites built by governments, foundations, and NGOs may reflect the same kinds of restrictive DC learning goals within heavily managed environments that hamper schools, while more open AC oriented sites are poorly resourced, often sparsely attended, and widely scattered in terms of their engagement values.

Finally, while the Internet has certainly offered a rich space for individual users to create and engage, online communities often fall prey to commercial values that may inhibit more open expression of other social possibilities. Indeed, the things that may make commercial sites cool in consumer terms, from free entertainment to dense social networks, may make civic sites seem less desirable by comparison. Thus, we also want to think critically about how online spaces capture young people's attention, and how to make public values at once attractive and credible. Our learning guidelines may be of help in assessing the benefits of various kinds of sites.

Our framework thus opens the way for constructing measures that can be used to compare the learning opportunities available in different online environments. The goal here is to make modest predictions that help build theory. For example, it seems reasonable to expect that youth sites managed by relatively hierarchical organizations such as political parties will focus on DC models of citizenship with very top down information provision and highly structured participation opportunities (centered on campaigning and voting for party candidates). By contrast, online-only youth engagement sites that offer more expressive Web 2.0 experiences may implicitly favor AC citizen skills. Indeed, a preliminary study by Wells (2007) of online-only youth sites found that the predominant engagement features fell largely within AC categories, and that the ratio of AC to DC features varied significantly according to Coleman's (2008) distinction of whether the site heavily managed user behavior or offered greater autonomy for users to express themselves.

Research currently in progress using our framework involves coding a sample of some 90 primarily US youth engagement sites ranging from those sponsored by predominantly offline organizations (for example, party, campaign, service and interest organizations) that maintain an online youth site, to organizations in which young people can only participate online. We have developed a coding scheme to screen every site for both DC and AC learning opportunities in all four categories of Table 3.¹

Our preliminary analyses of the data already show that websites' civic approaches differ substantially based on what kind of site they are. Among the four categories of sites we investigated (online-only websites, candidates' and government sites, community organization sites, and interest group sites), the online-only websites offer many more AC learning opportunities than sites from the other categories. This suggests that the emphasis on DC citizenship extends beyond classrooms to include the nation's more institutional civic organizations with online presences. Even the online-only sites tend to favor DC learning when it comes to joining publics and taking action. Few sites empower youth to form their own political networks or propose their own action plans.

Subsequent reports and publications will elaborate this coding scheme and the results of mapping a broad spectrum of youth sites according to their various civic learning features. From such maps we can compare different types of sites, as well as compare populations of youth sites in different nations. In addition, we imagine studies that will enable us to understand how and what young people (perhaps pre-tested for their positioning along an AC–DC continuum) learn from their engagement with various types of sites. Since our framework is an extension of the baseline learning frameworks developed in earlier school-based research, this research may eventually enable us to draw comparisons between the civic learning potential of schools and online environments, both as they affect young citizens separately, and when used together to facilitate civic learning.

Conclusion

Even if our proposed expansion of conventional civic learning practices proves too politically sensitive for schools to implement – or for various authorities rooted in the DC civic paradigm to recognize – important reasons to broaden our framework for thinking about civic learning remain:

- First, this expanded framework makes explicit what is now more often left implicit: that the very conceptions of appropriate citizenship and politics are contested in many societies, and the voices of young people are often underdeveloped and undervalued in the process.
- Second, even if many of these contested practices do not make it immediately into schools, simply recognizing their existence may broaden the policy debates that gradually shape civic education practices.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this framework offers a set of guidelines for thinking about emerging online environments, where important civic learning may occur. Our expanded framework may help us think about the design properties and assessment approaches appropriate for those potentially important sites of learning.

We offer the above framework as a first step toward a comparative model that enables us to assess and compare approaches to civic learning in different settings from schools to online communities. From these comparisons we may move toward more ambitious understandings of civic properties of games, popular culture sites, and other places where young people gather in large numbers. Indeed, the ultimate goal may be to break down arbitrary distinctions between private and public, commercial and civic so that the best features of different on and offline environments enhance the potential of learning to participate effectively in politics.

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Note

1. For example, here are the coding instructions for DC and AC versions of communication/expression learning opportunities, with the first instruction referring coders to a DC learning opportunity and the second instruction screening for presence or absence of an AC learning opportunity:

Many sites want to help users express their views about public issues or concerns. Sites may encourage users to express themselves in a variety of ways. Looking at the pages selected from this site:

(for DC expression) Do any of the pages present users with training on how to communicate using traditional forms of public communication?

For example, the site may offer templates or toolkits on writing letters to the editor or to a political representative, calling or contacting a legislator, running a canvass, or bringing a speaker to campus.

They may also offer guidelines – like do's and don't's – for communicating effectively in those ways.

(for AC expression) Do any of the pages present users with training on how to communicate effectively with digital media they can produce themselves?

For example the page may offer templates or toolkits on how to create a blog or webpage, or tips on creating videos or podcasts. How to create media in general or how to post content on the site are included.

They may also offer guidelines – like do's and don't's – for communicating effectively in those ways.

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