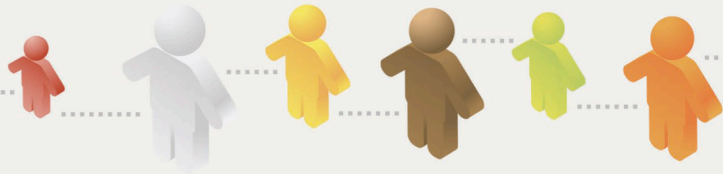


ENGAGED YOUTH

Civic Learning Online



Evaluating Online Tools for Youth Civic Learning

by Deen Freelon

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Center for
Communication
& Civic
Engagement

A Report from the Civic Learning Online Project

Evaluating Online Tools for Youth Civic Learning

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Abstract: This report introduces the work of the Civic Learning Online Project in developing digital media learning tools. The need for identifying specific online learning goals and opportunities is first discussed. This is followed by the introduction of an online curriculum unit, Blogging in Public, which is evaluated in terms of the civic learning opportunities it offers.

Many practitioners, scholars, and educators are excited and hopeful about the potential for digital media to enhance and enliven the youth civic experience. The wealth of free and low-cost online tools that have become available over the past decade may play a significant role not only in helping already-engaged citizens to accomplish their goals, but also in helping youth to get in the game. However, these tools will not perform this educational work on their own. While many of today's "digital natives" are indeed quite technically savvy, we should not expect them to know automatically how to use digital media for civic ends. To address this issue, some youth civic site developers have created web-based curricula to help their users make the best of the opportunities at their disposal. But many more seem to expect eager young citizens simply to flock to online civic destinations of their own accord and begin using the available applications.

The Civic Learning Online project is working to develop a set of modular curricula that can help maximize the civic potential of digital media. Many of these modules will be available both as online training modules and downloadable instruction sets for classroom or

youth organization settings. Further, we have also developed a civic skills checklist that can be used to quickly determine which civic areas a curriculum reinforces particularly well. This will ensure that the curriculum set as a whole offers training in a complete range of technical as well as civic competencies. Our overall goal is thus twofold: 1) to help young people take advantage of the wide range of civic media available to them, and 2) to provide a framework for assessing civic media according to transparent and clearly defined metrics.

Our work emerges from a broader strain of research that is attempting both to define the scope of existing online civic learning opportunities for youth and to develop new ideas for youth civic education. Perhaps the most similar set of pedagogical suggestions for digital civic education comes from Howard Rheingold, whose public voice curriculum (<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/dmal.9780262524827.097>) aims to build critical thinking skills for college students using new media as a staging ground. Our research builds upon Rheingold's, specifically tailoring many of his insights to the tastes and critical capacities of high school age civic learners.

Another reference point in the literature is Henry Jenkins' new media literacies (<http://newmedialiteracies.org/>), which present a collection of digital learning criteria intended to ensure that young people can exploit new media to its fullest, and most civic, extent. We focus Jenkins' general approach by enumerating more specific civic learning opportunities that can be used to compare various online civic curricula. In the words of usability guru Jakob Nielsen, our efforts address the "empowerment divide" in digital media, which prevents those who have access to computer hardware and the required technical aptitudes from using online tools in civic and political ways.

As an example of what we are attempting to do, we have made available our civic blogging curriculum, tentatively titled **Blogging in Public (BIP)**. It is currently structured as a sequence of three workshops, each one building upon the previous, that aim to teach a high-school aged audience how to blog effectively about public issues. BIP begins with the mechanics of using blogging software and ends with peer evaluation of civic content, and since each workshop is modular, instructors can choose only those that fit their institutional goals, learners' needs, and time constraints. In addition to the curriculum itself, we have also included a complementary checklist report, which details which not only civic goals BIP satisfies but how. This second document makes clear the connections between the lessons included in BIP and the higher-order goals included in the civic learning checklist. Every curriculum will have a similar accompanying report, and we will also provide an overview spreadsheet summarizing which curricula satisfy which goals.

This report continues with the core text of the Blogging in Public curriculum (excluding Powerpoint slides, which are available separately), followed by a detailed description of which of our civic learning opportunities the curriculum aims to address. The goal is to share and collaborate on such skills development efforts with other civic learning and engagement projects. Please contact us at admin@engagedyouth.org.

Blogging in Public: Civic and Deliberative Blogging for Young People

The following curriculum is intended to introduce young people (aged 13-21) to the practice of blogging on civic and political issues. It consists of a series of modules that can be used individually or in series. The units can either be accessed online youth engagement sites such as www.pugetsoundoff.org, or they can be the focus of group instruction by teachers or youth workers. This curriculum acknowledges that kids may already know a bit about how to communicate over the web, and attempts to channel that existing knowledge and interest in a civic direction.

Here is a list of the modules, in rough ascending order of complexity. A detailed explanation of each follows.

- 1. Blogistics**
 - 2. Taking a Stand**
 - 3. Commenting: What's the Deal?**
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I. Blogistics

Goal(s):

To teach the technical details of blogging. Depending on the population, some users may already know some or all of this material. However, it is likely that even those who think they know it all will learn a few things from this unit.

Instructor notes:

The informational components of this module will probably have to be imparted through a combination of lecture and Q&A. The tech skills should be conducted as a hands-on workshop.

By the end of this unit, students should be able to:

- Define the terms "blog" and "blogging"
- Give examples of blog service providers and major blogs
- Know the strengths and weaknesses of the blog medium
- Create the following:
 - Titles and body text for blog posts
 - Hyperlinks
 - Tags
 - Formatted text (bold, colored, bulleted, etc.)
 - Quoted text

- Images in posts
 - Videos in posts
 - Teaser text for longer posts
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2. Taking a Stand

Goal(s):

- To teach students to identify the "civic" in everyday life.
- To teach students how to effectively ask a discussion-starting question on their blogs.
- To teach students how to express opinions on civic issues effectively.

Instructor notes:

Assemble the students in a discussion circle or similar seating setup. Announce that the purpose of today's exercise is to understand and develop "youth voice" (if an equivalent term works better for your audience, use it) using issues from their daily lives. Ask if anyone knows what youth voice is, and unless someone gives a strong definition, offer one yourself (e.g. "the distinct ideas, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and actions of young people as a collective body." --Wikipedia). Ask if anyone has an important opinion or perspective on an issue they would like to submit to the group to demonstrate youth voice. If no one does, or conversation peters out quickly, ask the kids to mention anything they're interested in—video games, music, movies they've seen recently, sports. Choose several of their examples from which to extract and explain civic elements. One that has worked well in multiple contexts for us is misogyny in mainstream hip-hop, but feel free to choose your own topic.

Now ask the kids to think about and present their own civic framings of personal interests or experiences. You can also ask them to discuss situations they've witnessed or been part of that have clear civic implications (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, disability issues, anti-youth sentiment, neighborhood crime, gangs, etc.) If a discussion ensues, allow it to continue for as long as it remains relevant and on-topic.

Next, ask the students to start a blog post on a civic topic that asserts and briefly (~200 words) defends an opinion and/or asks a question about it. Each student should use his/her own idea if possible (possibly derived from the Identifying Issues unit); if not, you can provide a few prompts. Also, if possible, students should in fact subscribe to the opinions they defend. If students are just learning about the issue they're blogging on, they should use what they already know to preface a question about the issue. Have students search the Internet for two relevant links to additional information so that readers can familiarize themselves with the issue at hand. After the students make their opinion/question posts, instruct them to post two comments to other people's posts.

If the students would like to ask their readers a question after stating their opinion (e.g.

"This is what I think—do you agree or disagree?"), allow them to do so.

By the end of this unit, students should be able to:

- Identify at least one civic issue of personal interest that could serve as the basis for one or more blog posts.
 - Express an opinion on a topic of civic import.
 - Successfully start a discussion via a question on a topic of civic import.
 - Locate and link to sources relevant to their chosen topic.
 - Contribute on-topic replies to their peers' opinion posts.
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3. Commenting: What's the Deal?

Goal(s):

To help students communicate successfully through blogging by identifying key differences between written and spoken language.

Instructor notes:

This module works best when each student has at least ten comments appended to his/her posts by others taking the curriculum.

Have all the students search their posts for comments they don't understand. Each student should come up with at least one if possible. Have the blogger read the comment aloud to the group and then give his/her interpretation of the comment. Ask each commenter to assess the fidelity of the blogger's interpretation to his/her intent by answering the following questions:

Is that more or less what you meant to say? If not, what did you mean to say?

- Did [blogger's name] leave anything out?
- Did [blogger's name] add anything you didn't intend?
- [To full group] Did anyone else interpret this comment in ways that haven't been mentioned yet? If so, please elaborate.

Iterate this process until every commenter has had at least one comment assessed.

By the end of this unit, students should be able to:

- Recognize some of the characteristics deficiencies in their own writing (the unit may need to be conducted multiple times before this occurs).
- Make more effective blog comments.
- Appreciate how to minimize confusion and unnecessary conflict in written communication exchanges.

Blogging in Public - Civic Standards Assessment

The following learning criteria were developed to ensure that the curricula we create actually fulfill a set of widely acknowledged civic ends. We believe that it is important to state explicitly which civic learning goals are served by each curriculum and which are not, so that multiple curricula can be combined to deliver a well-rounded civic learning experience. As mentioned previously, this sort of evaluation is rarely attempted in online contexts, resulting in a lack of specificity regarding the educational value of online civic tools.

We are not claiming that the civic learning categories we have identified are the final set. To the contrary, these are simply starting points for developing more recognized approaches. This is a starting point for developing and comparing digital tools and civic competencies.

We developed these criteria by distilling the most commonly measured civic learning concepts from the relevant scholarly literature into four broadly applicable categories: information, expression, organization, and action:¹

- **Information** assesses whether civic media contain facts, statistics, guides, or other similar information of a civic nature.
- **Expression** assesses the availability of opportunities for young people to express their views on issues or concerns through civic media--e.g. through blogs, digital video production, or communicating with elites.
- **Organization** evaluates the availability of opportunities to create or join formal or informal groups or networks for civic purposes.
- **Action** evaluates whether civic media offers youth opportunities to undertake some civic activity other than expression or joining a group.

Each of the above criteria can be further assessed in terms of the civic learning styles that they address. Many civic learning opportunities appeal more to a sense of duty or obligation to become involved with government or to follow public affairs in the news. Other opportunities engage more with the expressive or actualizing inclinations of digital natives who share information and experiences across social networks driven by participatory media. Following this distinction, DC (dutiful citizenship) includes traditional civic activities that arise from a sense of duty and are predominantly tied to established societal institutions, such as voting, keeping abreast of current events, and membership in civil society organizations. By contrast, AC (actualizing citizenship) stems from the intersection of the personal and the political, and includes consumer activism, political protest, and expression through digital media and social networking. The two forms of learning can merge, as happened with opportunities in the Obama campaign in 2008 to create personal profiles and networks (AC learning opportunities) within a larger set of DC opportunities such as

¹ For a more detailed discussion of these metrics, see the full CLO report, available at <http://www.engagedyouth.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/youngcitizensciviclearning-july2008.pdf>

learning how to register to vote and receiving one way information about the campaign from various site sources managed by the campaign staff.

Expanding the four core civic learning categories to include both AC and DC opportunities results in eight preliminary criteria for evaluating civic media. What follows is a sample application of our proposed set of civic learning criteria to our youth blogging curriculum. We begin with a question aimed at clarifying our thinking about the main objectives of the digital skill training for blogging.

What is this skills curriculum and what are its primary goals?

"Blogging in Public" is a curriculum that aims to teach young people the necessary skills to write about public issues effectively for the web. Its primary goals are to help youth think critically about issues that matter to them, communicate cogently on these issues, and solicit feedback from their peers. It consists of three modular Powerpoint presentations packaged with instructor notes, and also suitable for online self-instruction.

The following table details which of the eight civic criteria BIP satisfies as a core goal.

	AC	DC
Information	Yes. Participants have the opportunity to draw on peer-produced civic information.	Yes. The guided discussions point to institutional sources of civic information such as news and government statistics.
Expression	Yes. The main goal of this curriculum is to help participants develop participatory media communication skills and share content.	Yes. Participants will learn how to communicate reasoned opinions about public issues as well as how to parse traditional media messages.
Organization	Yes. Through blogging, participants will help build an informal community that will serve as an audience and discussion group.	These beginning blogging communities are not formally organized, nor is this an objective.
Action	Not a direct goal, but it may emerge	Not a direct goal, but it may emerge