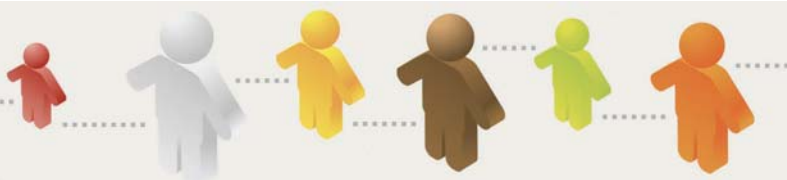ENGAGED YOUTH
Civic Learning Online

Evaluations of the Civic Learning Online Project: Year 1 (2008)

by Kate Goddard, Eszter Hargittai, Joseph Kahne, Peter Levine, Howard Rheingold, and Sarah McCaffrey

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Introduction

The Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (CCCE) hosted a two-day workshop and site visit focused on youth civic engagement through digital media at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA on October 3 and 4, 2008. The workshop specifically invited comments on findings reported by the CCCE-affiliated Civic Learning Online research team and on Puget Sound Off (PSO) (http://pugetsoundoff.org/), our local online civic youth portal. To capture some of the ideas and reactions generated during the conference, five advisers to the CLO project have produced short memos detailing their reactions to these two projects. The advisers were:

- **Kate Goddard**, Program Coordinator, Youthlearn (kgoddard@edc.org)
- **Eszter Hargittai**, Assistant Professor, School of Communication, Northwestern University (eszter@northwestern.edu)
- **Joseph Kahne**, Professor and Dean, School of Education, Mills College (jkahne@mills.edu)
- **Peter Levine**, Director, CIRCLE, Tufts University (peter.levine@tufts.edu)
- **Howard Rheingold**, Author and Lecturer (howard@rheingold.com)

The next section contains a topic-based executive summary of the contents of the adviser memos followed by the full text of the memos themselves.

Executive Summary of *Civic Learning Online* Advisor Response Memos

Research Framework

Both Joe and Eszter carry the AC/DC conversation further by questioning how to look at the categories in a less dichotomized way. Both respondents suggest looking more closely at the relationship between actualized and dutiful citizenship and examining how websites and organizations incorporate both categories.

Puget Sound Off

Most of the suggestions for PSO relate to promoting skill building, to finding ways to increase and maintain the number of website users, and to engaging users in a discussion of PSO's core values and ideal practices.

<u>Skill Building:</u>

Multiple respondents remind that base skill level correlates with gender, race, economic class, and other social influences. PSO needs to help all youth build the skills necessary to take part in civic engagement and avoid reinforcing structures of privilege. Respondents focus on the need to develop a variety of skills including: basic civic knowledge, an understanding of how to use digital media, basic writing / literacy skills, and the ability to effectively and persuasively express ideas.

Specific Suggestions for PSO:
- Create a guide for the curriculum page; the guide would convey the importance of the curriculum and instruct teens how to find what they are looking for.
- Make curriculum presentations more specific and tailor them to different skill levels (i.e. a "Beginner's Guide To Blogging" and an "Advanced Guide.")
- Add a "Help Forum" to the PSO; the Help Forum would be a place where users can provide assistance one another and brainstorm through specific problems as users experience them.
- Continue developing the integral relationships between PSO and classrooms, schools, and teachers.
- Showcase quality models of successful youth-centered media projects on PSO; the models will set a high standard for PSO user-generated content and teach through example.

<u>Buildling / Maintaining PSO's User Base</u>

Specific Suggestions for PSO:

- Greet new members right away, bringing them into the community.
- Post user-generated work and polls in prominent places on the site.
- Make a PSO toolbar participants can add to their browsers; the toolbar would contain the PSO logo as well as some PSO features and typical toolbar features
- Send emails to users anytime someone comments on one of their blog entries or anytime someone responds to one of their comments; the email would contain link, taking the user directly to the page with the new comment or response.
- Continue pursuing partnerships with other like-minded local organizations or youth mentors.
- Pursue different avenues to receiving funding.

<u>Core Values and Ethics</u>

Specific Suggestions for PSO:

1. Get the youth who use PSO involved in defining the site's core values; doing so will facilitate community-building as well as promoting users to take ownership and responsibility.
2. Post polls and forums on PSO to obtain feedback from teens who are actually using the site.

Potpourri

- How does PSO deal with tensions between focusing on issues that affect the local, Puget Sound area and focusing on global issues / opening the website to users all over the world?
- As a website that promotes social networking amongst youth in the Puget Sound area, the issue of users meeting face-to-face will likely arise; website creators should consider the implications of that possibility early before problems or issues arise.

Memo 1

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The Civic Learning Online Workshop was a great opportunity to explore issues critical to the work of youth and online learning, such as achieving sustainability and reaching target audiences. It was also interesting in hear about the research recently conducted looking at strategies for assessing civic learning in online spaces. However, the conversations centered on youth engagement spoke to me most as a youth developer, and the key questions that came up include:

- How do we engage young people in exploring real issues?
- How can we engage young people that say they are not interested in social issues and activism?
- How can digital media tools help young people explore issues and learn from that process?
- What are good strategies and models for working with partners who are creating meaningful content with young people?

Here at YouthLearn we believe, as well as a growing amount of research shows, that motivation and engagement are prerequisites for learning. One effective way to achieve youth engagement is to make real connections to the lives and everyday experiences of young people and draw them into the learning process and compel them to take ownership of their learning experiences. To effectively facilitate this process, one must consider the core principles of positive youth development and constructivist techniques and allow young people to determine and drive their own learning. This youth centered approach is ideally suited for engaging young people in explorations of personal and community issues, which can also have an impact on their understanding of civics and their role as active citizens. By focusing on the young people and their interests, those who are not inclined to think of themselves as civically engaged can also participate in this learning experience.

Digital media has two characteristics that make it an effective tool for engaging young people in learning. First, young people are enthusiastic users of digital media and technology, so why not engage them by proving learning experiences that use these tools. Additionally, digital media is useful for fueling youth centered projects, specifically those that are project

and inquiry-based. Inquiry-based projects guide young people through the process of learning about an issue or topic by having them ask questions that they care about, explore answers to those questions, synthesize what is learned and what is already known, and then share this new knowledge and perspective. Digital media tools can be used to not only represent the learning, but to facilitate this learning process.

Take for instance the process one goes through to create media, a young person begins with questions and is then able to use digital media tools to uncover answers and understand the issues. Often in this process he/she will find that there are multiple answers or perspectives on an issue that need to be analyzed and debated. Ultimately, this analysis leads to a conclusion that can be shared with others, perhaps to effect change. This can become an even more interesting learning experience when the young people reflect on their own learning and how they came to understand the issue when considering what in their community, school, and personal life have shaped their perspectives all along. With this model, creating media looks very similar to community and civic engagement.

Good media making is also contextual, rooted in the lives and community of the young people. In making media, they often gain new awareness of community issues, learn to collaborate with institutions and individuals in their community, and use their new knowledge to transform their surroundings. For more than 30 years, educators have been engaging youth with these media activities and have integrated constructivist techniques that are ideally suited for engaging youth in explorations of personal and community issues while at the same time cultivating technical and cognitive skills. Youth media organizations have been highly effective at supporting the creation of unique, independent media that speaks for youth interests and issues. The work is exciting and innovative, and reflects the diversity, creativity, and determination of young people who are eager to tell their own stories and make a difference.

One project that we are currently involved in that illustrates the power digital media can have when young people are able to use the tools to explore issues and learn about their communities is Adobe Youth Voices (AYV). Adobe Youth Voices is a global philanthropic initiative designed to empower youth in underserved communities by providing educators, both in school and out of school, with the tools and training necessary to support youth centered media projects at their sites. The practices at the heart of Adobe Youth Voices provide opportunities for young people to explore and comment on their world, take positive action where they live, and develop the ability to think creatively, communicate effectively and work collaboratively, critical 21st century skills needed for school, career and life as global citizens.

Adobe Youth Voices' mission is to empower young people to *Create with Purpose*. This challenge to young people is intended to foster a more intentional strategy for media making, one that is purposeful, designed to have impact and effect change. AYV has defined this set of criteria to assist young people in determining whether the media they create is with purpose: relevancy (to the makers and the audience), intentionality (an intended audience and impact), youth voice (clear point of view or specific perspective), youth generated

methods (but also educator facilitated), creativity & innovation (evident in style and content), inquiry-based (derived and led by youth questions), quality (effective use of tools and techniques). I believe this is a good representation of what makes a high quality media project and hope that this criteria can be re-framed and developed upon to continue the creation of meaningful youth media.

By supporting and fostering inquiry-based projects, young people are able work together to solve problems, meet challenges, and create products. It also enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills and fosters academic achievement. More and more we are recognizing that today's education and employment landscape requires a new skill set for full participation: young people need to blend technical skill, critical thinking, collaboration, and academic accomplishment to truly excel, and employers seek workers who are innovative, adept at multitasking, and able to analyze and integrate diverse sources of information. We at YouthLearn believe that digital media programs employ a distinct and vital set of practices that can expand young peoples' opportunities for creative self-expression and bolster their ability to respond to 21st century realities.

It has been my intention to support your efforts of engaging more youth by providing an argument for a youth centered approach to learning. I would recommend for the Puget Sound Off project that you continue to work with partner agencies and begin showcasing their models of successful youth-centered media projects. I also encourage you to look at how you can model inquiry on the site through the projects that are showcased and the curriculum you are developing. To engage young people and spark their interests in the community, it will require letting them determine their course of exploration, and I believe that by having strong examples of this process others will follow.

I look forward to watching the Puget Sound Off project grow and for finding ways to continue our collaboration. As you begin to explore sustainability options, we hope we can provide support by examining the ways you work with partner agencies and how to keep them engaged for an extended period of time. For instance, we know that for most of the young people the point on entry into civic engagement is through a mentor, so looking at ways that the PSO can provide something to these mentors, such as professional development opportunities, to continue their support of the site is something we would be interested in exploring with you.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you all and learn about this project, good luck with the PSO contest and I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Memo 2

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The Civic Learning Online project has led to several valuable outcomes concerning how developments in online communication can be used to enhance youth civic engagement. The reports have been informative about the conceptual and practical approaches to this topic. The CLO workshop offered a helpful opportunity to discuss related challenges among researchers and practitioners. The mix of perspectives represented was a welcomed unique aspect of the gathering and an excellent way to tackle the many questions involved. Including representatives of the target group – teens – also added an often excluded yet important point of view to the discussions. The Puget Sound Off Web site seems to be off to a good start with intriguing content generated by youth. In this report, I present some reactions to both conceptual and practical outputs of the project including some recommendations on how to address some of the main challenges.

Theoretical model

Several of the project reports have suggested that a useful framework for thinking about digital media in the realm of youth civic engagement concerns the recognition of two different models of citizen identity: the traditional dutiful citizen (DC) model and the actualizing citizen (AC) model. Identifying the characteristics of the two types is helpful in recognizing the change in how people approach civic engagement.

While reading the reports, I was struck, however, by the strict dichotomous manner in which the two are presented and discussed. While I recognize the utility to outlining ideal types in order to best convey the main differences among the models, it seems important to recognize explicitly in such writing that many Web sites include a mix of the two models. In fact, it would be an interesting empirical project to take stock of where on the spectrum of the two types sites seem to be positioned.

The papers generated by the project could be published in various venues, preferably across disciplines and also beyond strictly academic audiences to ensure wide dissemination. For a methodological piece on coding sites, I recommend the *Social Science Computer Review*. For substantive pieces, various established new media journals could work well (e.g., *Journal*

of *Computer-Mediated Communication*, *New Media and Society*) as would the new MacArthur-sponsored *International Journal of Learning and Media*. To reach a wider audience in the realm of civic learning, I recommend publishing in the Working Paper Series of CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement).

Skill building

An important issue concerning widespread participation by diverse voices on the Puget Sound Off site has to do with youth having the necessary skills to take part in the conversations and the sharing of content. How do we ensure that youth from varying backgrounds have the necessary skills to participate in online conversations about civic engagement? This question came up during the workshop and is addressed in some reports and CLO blog posts, but the challenge of achieving a knowledgeable user base representing individuals from diverse backgrounds remains. Skills relevant to this undertaking involve two components: digital literacy as well as know-how about civic engagement.

The idea that young users exhibit different Internet user savvy is supported by existing research. Digital media user skills are not uniformly distributed among youth and these discrepancies are not random (Hargittai 2008). Rather, young people's background predicts their level of online know-how with gender, race, ethnicity and parental education all contributing to who understands the Internet better and who uses it for more diverse types of activities (Hargittai and Hinnant 2008). Of particular interest to PSO is the finding that content creation and sharing itself is not randomly distributed (Hargittai & Walejko 2008) with those from higher socio-economic backgrounds more likely to create content and male users more likely to share this on the Web. However, this work also finds that once controlling for online skills, there is no statistically significant difference between the extent to which male and female content creators share their creative content online. These latter findings highlight the need for offering guidance to potential PSO members regarding use of digital media and recent Web developments that allow for active participation in the community.

The CLO project is currently tackling related issues by creating and posting a series of short multi-media tutorials. These look promising, as long as young users find them and recognize their value. Fortunately, they are integrated into the Puget Sound Off Web site prominently for easy access. The youth-friendly design of the tutorials is hopefully appealing to the intended audience. Additionally, by focusing on skills in fairly small segments, the guides should hold people's attention. As more materials become available, I recommend the creation of an overall guide to the tutorials on the site. This listing would present the available materials in a way that would allow more advanced users to skip over instructions about basic skills easily to find what is of most relevance to their immediate needs. For example, as more tutorials are added, the current material entitled "Blogging" may be renamed to be more specific about which aspect of blogging it addresses with more nuanced titles given to tutorials addressing other aspects of blogging.

What may be other approaches to spreading know-how? Oftentimes skills of this sort are learned on a need-to-know basis, that is, a PSO user is most likely to be inspired to learn a

function when he or she needs it to achieve an intended outcome such as posting a video on the site. What is a good approach to having guidance available just when a user needs it? One possibility is to create a network within the Puget Sound Off site that links more and less knowledgeable users. This could be as simple as offering a link on the How To page to a discussion within the site dedicated to this topic. If it looks like other PSO users are not meeting the demand of responding to queries on the thread, a PSO staff member could be assigned to monitoring the group and responding to inquiries.

Ensuring equal access to relevant skills will remain a challenge of such initiatives. We need to continue brainstorming about possible avenues including a careful look at how current efforts resonate with youth.

Building PSO's user base

An important aspect of achieving a successful site concerns its marketing. The site needs to be able to attract as well as retain participants. Some innovative methods are already being used taking advantage of various offline and online events. The contest seems like a promising way to spread the word and get people involved.

Once youth hear about and sign up on the site, the next challenge is to keep them coming back. One possibility is to feature polls where students can cast their vote on issues. This would ensure ever-changing content on the site as well as direct involvement with site-relevant content. Additionally, users could be encouraged to submit their own poll ideas. These would be featured prominently on the sidebar of the site. An alternative approach to this idea is to allow anyone to start a poll and then choose one to feature each week.

Another way to build brand loyalty and be a constant reminder to users is making a toolbar available that participants can add to their browsers. The toolbar would have the PSO logo plus some PSO features in addition to more traditional toolbar features such as a search box. Every time a user launched the browser, PSO would be visible to them on the toolbar hopefully encouraging visits to the site.

Another approach to encouraging both new and returning users is partnering with local organizations that have related missions. One possibility is Reel Grrls, which was featured at the CLO workshop. Hands-on tutorials and sessions could be offered in partnership with Reel Girls for people who are interested in learning more, but are not sure where they can get access to the relevant devices and skills. The advantage of working with a group like Reel Grrls is that youth would be learning from their peers. What does the partnering organization get out of the joint project? It has the opportunity to recruit new members. Such partnerships could be publicized on Puget Sound Off and the resulting videos from such sessions could be featured on PSO thereby encouraging future participation by additional members.

An issue that I have not seen raised and one that may or may not need to be addressed concerns the local versus global nature of the PSO community. Browsing the users of the site, I noticed that several participants are from a high school in Russia. Is the participation of such distant youth going to be encouraged? Will they be integrated into the site? Additional youth in those communities may join the site due to network effects. Will this be a problem for PSO

if its main goal is to achieve a coherent community around geographically local affairs? One could make an argument for the benefits of having people from other communities present on the site (e.g., sharing of perspectives across borders), on the other hand, it may detract from the geographical focus of PSO. It is worth thinking about whether such participation from beyond Seattle's borders should or should not be encouraged.

What is the project doing currently to get feedback from PSO's target audience? PSO itself could be used to generate conversation around this topic. This could be done in the form of a discussion thread or some polls. If the thread is not generating sufficient feedback, one could try introducing incentives. Alternatively, the feedback could be sought off-site by asking participants to join in focus groups. Harder would be to get input from those who have seen the site, but decided not to get involved since it could be tricky to identify such people. One possibility would be to ask PSO participants to point to people in their networks who fit that criterion. Whatever the manner by which feedback is collected, communicating regularly with users about their experiences should help in sustaining what works and modifying what does not seem to gain traction.

Summary

Overall, the project has made impressive strides from both the research and the practical perspective by articulating a helpful conceptual framework for understanding how digital media can best be used to encourage youth civic engagement and using this to develop a site that implements the ideas in a real-world setting. Continued monitoring and expansion of the site should allow for new lessons learned about what strategies work best to achieve a committed youth concerning civic engagement.

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Memo 3

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In this brief and informal memo, I'm going to highlight and discuss three topics that surfaced for me as I reflected during and after the meeting.

3. **Puget Sound Off: A New Form of Civic Infrastructure**
Puget Sound off strikes me as a very valuable undertaking. The site can be thought of as providing a new form of social capital – one with the potential to facilitate coordinated supports for civic engagement among schools, civic organizations, youth groups, the private sector, and city agencies. These efforts can lead to civic and political learning, expression, and action among youth. Indeed, a site like Puget Sound Off may well become a valued piece of civic infrastructure – a place where individual young people, as well as those who are part of religious groups, youth organizations, and schools, for example, can find out about issues, share perspectives, and learn about ways to get involved.

Will it work? There are, of course, a number of challenges.
- Will youth go to the site?
- How should Puget Sound Off engage youth in guiding the development of Puget Sound Off?
- Will the site deepen youths' understandings of issues?
- Will the site foster engagement with institutions in ways that lead to change?
- Will the site foster productive dialogs among those with differing perspectives?
- What is a productive dialog among those with differing perspectives in an online context?

Thinking through these issues will take time. There's no doubt, for example, that deepening teens' (as well as adults) understanding of issues is important. But simply providing information via the web would likely prove unused or ineffective. Moreover, part of the promise of Puget Sound Off lies in finding new ways to engage young people as creators of civic knowledge and of strategies to address civic concerns. There are many options. How exactly to pursue this goal, however, is not clear.

Civic Learning Online promises to teach us a great deal about how this new form of civic infrastructure can support for youth civic engagement.

4. **The AC and DC framework**

The AC/DC frame highlights two important visions of civic goals– and two differing ways to connect with youth. It feels like the central argument is that approaches for connecting with youth that emphasize duty (or traditional forms of civic engagement – voting, following the news, joining political parties) will be less attractive than approaches that emphasize such things as lifestyle politics, skepticism of the media, and loose networks for social action. This seems quite possible and is worth continued investigation to better understand. For example, trends indicate that youth interest in elections is on the rise for the past few elections. This may mean that young people are recognizing the importance of elected officials (or, at least, presidents) and may also be due to mobilization efforts that tap an interest in actualization. In other words, focusing on elections and traditional politics not be in conflict with attention to actualization – at least not in all cases.

It also feels important to deepen our understanding of these two perspectives (AC/DC) as goals. In other words, how should we assess the desirability of duty oriented citizens and actualizing citizens in terms of supporting a healthy democracy? At times during the meeting, it felt like some were arguing that DC were bad and AC were good. This seems problematic. If DC means following rules and acting out of duty rather than thought – then it's clearly anti democratic and problematic. If DC means feeling like one should do things like follow politics, join political parties, be involved with institutions, and vote then it's not bad – though it's not necessarily good either. Similarly, if AC means favoring more personally expressive and self-actualizing politics, it's neither good nor bad. An emphasis on personal expression may reflect a desire to be engaged and contribute, but it can also reflect a form of narcissism or excessive ego involvement.

This highlights a need for a normative democratic framework through which we can better understand ways that appealing to youth and engaging them can foster normatively desirable democratic commitments, capacities, and forms of engagement. What really matters isn't whether one thinks political parties are more or less important than lifestyle politics, but things like whether one is concerned for the well being of others, respects others and their perspectives, takes advantage of opportunities to engage with a diverse array of viewpoints, and engages with evidence critically when thinking through policy alternatives. I'm wondering about ways to connect the AC/DC framework more explicitly to these kinds of outcomes.

5. **How schools and the web can be good for each other**.

One thing I particularly liked about the time we devoted to thinking about the relationship between school based and web based supports for civic development was that it highlighted for me the ways these two institutions can support each other. Clearly, digital media can be a

platform for strengthening what happens in classrooms. For example, computer games can make civic learning more engaging and can deepen students' understandings of the dynamic nature of politics, economics, and other social sciences through varied forms of simulations. Similarly, I suspect that teachers can use a web site like Puget Sound Off to provide an audience for student thinking and a platform for wide ranging discussions with more diverse publics than exist in a given classroom.

Schools may also play a valuable role in supporting civic uses of digital media. For example, at the meeting, we discussed the importance of incorporating information and analysis into policy arguments and broader social perspectives. Schools are well positioned to provide background understandings of politics, economics, and government, for example, and are also well positioned to teach research skills, etc. This kind of work can be very valuable as a means of informing thinking about many of the civic issues one might engage on web platforms.

In our research, we've also found that high school students report having a variety of digital media learning opportunities as part of their classroom activities including learning to assess the trustworthiness of information on the web, using the web to get different points of view on political and social issues, and using the web to get information on political and social issues. Indeed, 80% of youth report having each of these experiences at least sometimes. Moreover, youth whose teachers provide these digital media learning opportunities, begin using digital media outside of school in more productive ways. They are more likely to learn how to get involved in politics through the internet, are more likely to have had on-line leadership opportunities, and are more likely to be experience a sense of democratic community online. These relationships hold even controlling for students' prior levels of these forms of digital involvement. Moreover, we found that providing these digital media learning opportunities was associated with higher levels of commitments to civic participation even when controlling for each students' prior commitment to civic participation from the year before - prior to taking the course where the media literacy assignments occurred.

Thus, a synergy may well exist between digital media and schools – best practice in one domain can foster best practice in the other.

Memo 4

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Thank you very much for including me in the meeting in Seattle. I am excited about the concept of actualizing citizenship (AC) as a complement to dutiful citizenship (DC). I agree that AC is more motivating and can allow more people to define and address public issues and shape their cultures than DC can alone. I also agree that Web 2.0 holds great promise for AC.

In an effort to be useful, I'll try to discuss some concerns or worries about the early stages of Puget Sound Off. My three main issues are learning, equality, and institutionalization.

1. Learning

AC requires different skills, knowledge, values, and habits from DC. Making a video mashup is different from voting (for instance). But AC also requires learning; in fact, the intellectual and social challenges are formidable. AC can't mean only sounding off—it must involve some degree of competence or even mastery. Those of us who are experimenting in this domain need to figure out what we want kids to learn and whether they are learning it. Part of this process can involve a dialog with the young people themselves about the best learning goals. I have the feeling they will set fairly high standards.

I would propose that some of the most important learning goals include:

Persuasiveness: the ability to influence other people who have different opinions and backgrounds. I used the phrase "a public voice" in my chapter for Lance's edited volume, and several other chapters also emphasized that theme. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace tend to link people who already know one another. A classic use is to take pictures in a face-to-face setting and then post them for the people who appear in them to see. Our question is how to use social networking sites to address people who are different.

A more specific issue is what to do about writing proficiency. I just looked at the leading blog post on PSO right now. It is headed, "Enviornment?" (sic) and it includes sentences like this: "Inglewood California, gas prices are expensive in California, some gang members really cant afford 3 45 a gallon, so they kill, and kill, and hunt."

I appreciate that the author needs a space to express himself; asking him to spell-check and write coherently would make PSO feel like school; and teaching literacy cannot be PSO's role. But this kind of post is not going to persuade anyone who is skeptical about the substance or about the young author's value as a commenter. I am not sure what to do about this.

Political effectiveness: Once kids decide on a social or cultural goal, they have to know how to get it. There are lots of ways to have an impact, and we should be open to ways that have nothing to do with formal politics. But not all activism is effective; some is even counter-productive.

By the way, it can be useful to understand the regular political system, although that's certainly not the only important knowledge domain. One young person writes on PSO that the "next president should make a difference like take out the WASL." He would be better off understanding that a Washington State test is not likely to be affected by the President of the United States.

Ethics: PSO has a Code of Conduct, presented both in video and text. It is mostly a set of negatives, e.g., no bigotry, racism, profanity. There are also a few very general positive norms, such as "honest debate." I presume that the organizers and student activists have implicit values or aspirations that go beyond these lists. These values should be open to discussion and critique, but PSO will always have a normative purpose and core. That implies the need to learn and practice these norms.

We would appreciate an opportunity to collaborate on learning measures. CIRCLE recently won a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to build and evaluate a social network for college students in the Boston area. CNCS also made five other social networking grants and asked us to coordinate discussions among the grantees and maximize shared learning. Our main strategy is to help them with their evaluation plans and try to glean general lessons from all the evaluation data. Meanwhile, we are evaluating online projects for TakingITGlobal (which has its own social network) and the Bonner Foundation.

Thus we are very interested in developing measures of online learning. We have identified lists of strong survey questions, mostly concerning efficacy, political knowledge, social capital, values such as tolerance and appreciation of diversity, and self-reported civic skills (which may actually measure confidence). It seems important to add measures of real persuasiveness, effectiveness, and ethics—among other outcomes. These measures probably can't be based on surveys. To measure AC competence may require observation, coding of youth writing, or portfolios. In any case, it would seem useful to share ideas about how to measure learning and, where appropriate, use common measures.

1. Equality

There is serious inequality in youth civic engagement by social class. Young adults with no college experience (half of the 18-29 population) lag substantially behind young people who

have attended college in: voting, volunteering, religious attendance, group membership, meeting attendance, newspaper reading, working on community projects, social trust, contact by political parties, and even union membership. (In the 1970s, at least unions represented more non-college youth than college youth). These are mostly DC forms of citizenship, although people who do AC citizenship could probably cite community projects and meeting attendance.

There are many reasons for this inequality, but Joe Kahne and others have shown that we make matters worse by reserving the best forms of school-based civic education—classroom discussions of issues, service-learning, and extracurricular group-participation—for high school students who are on a college track. Youth who are most likely to participate, thanks to their better resources and networks, receive public investments in their civic skills. The investment then continues once they get to their publicly subsidized colleges. Their peers who are less advantaged get little.

Web 2.0 offers some opportunities for narrowing these gaps, because connectivity is nearing universality and there are rarely admissions criteria or other insuperable barriers to online participation. According to the 2008 survey for the National Conference on Citizenship (which CIRCLE designed and analyzed), gaps in Web 2.0 social activism by social class were not very large for under-30s. We asked: "I am going to list some Internet technologies. Please tell me whether you have used each of these to express your opinions about political or social or community issues within the past twelve months." This question yielded the following results.

Online Engagement for Under-30s, by Educational Background
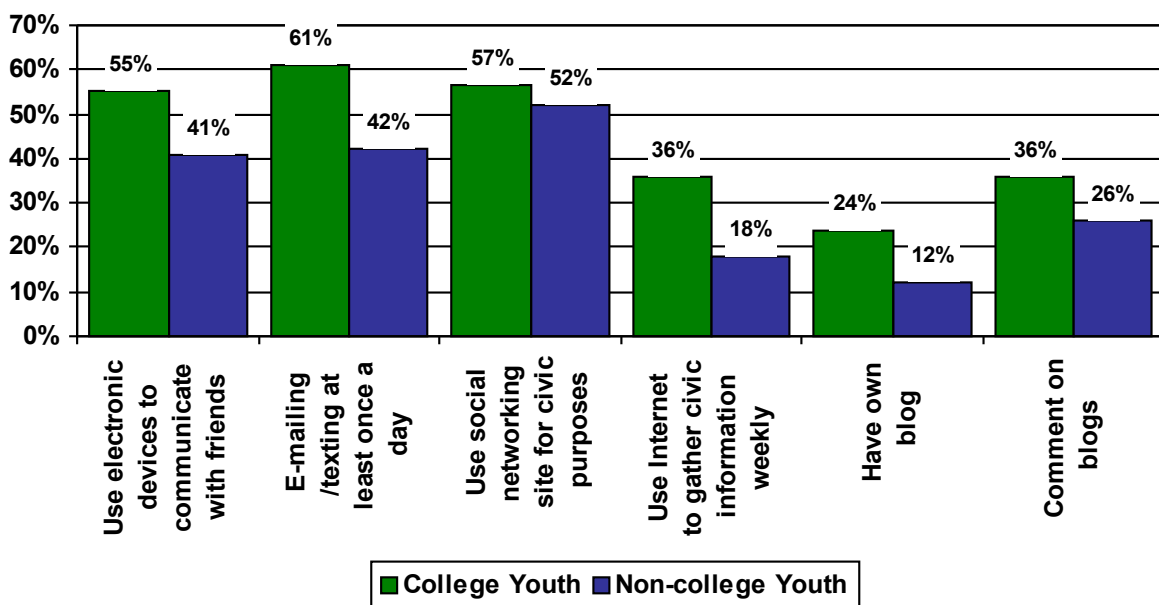
There was only a 5-point gap in the measure most relevant to PSO—using "A social networking site like MySpace or Facebook."

This is good news, but I worry that, because the Internet is a medium of choice, using Web 2.0 for effective political or social purposes will strongly correlate with social class and education. It's also possible that any given social network will draw a particular stratum of SES or educational performance and thus heighten inequalities.

Again, I am not sure what to do about this, but I am heartened by the prominent use of PSO by classroom teachers.

Institutionalization

When we create a space for young people to contribute public material, I think we undertake an obligation to sustain that space after the end of our current grant. Soon after we received our new Boston-area CNCS grant, we met with potential community partners. Their most pressing concern was whether we would be able to afford to sustain the site over time. I had neglected this issue because I was so interested in learning from the project. But that was my rather selfish researcher's perspective. For them, the site was a potential waste of effort unless it lasted.

There is a tradition of creating online democratic spaces and then watching them die. For instance, the community web portals of the late 1990s mostly vanished because of sustainability problems: a lack of money, institutional partnerships, and stable audiences. In 2001, the Ford Foundation convened some of the key stakeholders (including the public broadcasters, libraries, the ACLU, and digital media experts) to envision a new federal program that would support community media in the electronic era. Their plan was called a Public Telecommunications Service, and a summary is still online: http://peterlevine.ws/pts.pdf. This plan is obsolete now and should not be implemented as such, but it is time to think about new policies for civic and community media—with a strong youth component.

Options for sustainability:

6. Youth media production could be considered a valuable form of community service and thus eligible for federal support through the CNCS.
7. Youth media could become a more pervasive function of the public broadcasting system.
8. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration could support freestanding community media platforms that trained and supported youth (and others) as media producers.
9. The nation's Land-Grant colleges and universities could take this job on, either with new federal funds or on their own. (This report

(http://www.si.umich.edu/~presnick/papers/civicextension/whitepaper.pdf) on the role of the Land-Grants also came out of the meetings in 2001.)

10. Municipalities could be the leading force, using new federal funds or perhaps drawing resources from cable-franchise agreements or other local sources.

11. Libraries, newspapers, and schools are some other potential partners.

If we came together to discuss policies for youth media production, we could also think collectively about fundamental issues that have arisen in Seattle elsewhere: How should projects like this be governed? What counts as "learning"? What defines a high-quality product?

Memo 5

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The following suggestions are meant to stimulate thinking about how to bring general experience in online community-building to the specific task of growing Puget sound-off:

Acknowledge new contributors as soon as possible, and by name.

Sticking your head up above the anonymity of the Internet to publish a comment or a blog post or a video is, even for the most experienced, a moment of at least a little trepidation. Everyone has the same fears: "What will people say? They all seem to know each other. Will I be welcomed...or mocked?" If a newcomer makes a comment and nobody responds fairly soon (within a few hours for asynchronous media like blog comments or forums) -- or worse, an old-time community member makes a subsequent comment, which does receive a response -- that newcomer is less likely to come back. If a new contributor is greeted almost immediately by name -- or better, greeted with a thought-out response to the contribution -- that new contributor is far more likely to stay and to contribute again. At the beginning, one person can do this. But as the population grows, two things will happen: the original greeter will not be able to keep up with all the places contributions are made by a growing population, and to the degree that newcomers grow an authentic community they will seem like an old boy's crowd who have to accept newcomers into their freemasonry. So grow the number of greeters. Ultimately, the best way to work this proven method for retaining new participants is by infusing it into the entire culture of the online community -- welcoming newcomers becomes a norm because those who come to value the community know that a regular stream of newcomers is necessary to prevent stagnation. Even someone who joined this morning can greet someone who arrives this afternoon.

Norms formed by initial users will have a far reaching effect on the culture.

A group of people who share an interest only grows into something they would call "community" after a period of time (I think roughly three-four months is a minimum) in which regular communication took place among members, and when those members build up a

minimum store of shared experiences (which can take years). When early users celebrate such events, they develop a history and mythology and shared language. That's a sign that people are bonding. But it also can look insular to newcomers. Besides being greeted, they need multiple ways to learn about local customs without embarassment. A FAQ or collaboratively composed document on "how we talk to each other here -- and why" or other detailed explanations can be pointed out politely in online comments. A forum and/or regular chats should be dedicated to asking questions, getting tips, practicing in a sandbox. Creating a document for newcomers is in itself a community-building activity, since it can and should be discussed actively by the community. One person or a small committee can draft it, put it online for comment, and revise according to the comments -- this has proven to be far less likely to get bogged down in meta-discussion than a document that is collaboratively drafted by the entire population of the community. Individual and small group drafts that the entire community comments on is `Because of the importance of early norms, it's important for those who are facilitating the growth of PSO to encourage their emergence -- a task that requires authentic discourse over a period of time, a process that is more complex and messier than laying down a set of rules. A minimum of rules is necessary at the very beginning, and should be clearly articulated by the community founders and agreed to by all who join. But norms, by their nature, must emerge from prolonged interaction and widespread discussion.

"Repeat offenders turn into staff members."

The leaders, managers, evangelists, and redesigners of the initial PSO will be those who emerge online. It won't take long to spot those who influence others, who contribute often, who seem to be taking a sense of ownership and responsibility. Empower them, mentor them, encourage those who are so inclined to evangelize, and teach them to teach to others the subtle arts of facilitating online discussion (See http://www.rheingold.com/texts/artonlinehost.html). Some people are greeters. Others are great at sparking discussion, cooling disputes, finding resources, providing summaries, making introductions. More often than not, these are all different people -- don't expect a greeter or sparker to be good at cooling disputes or summarizing. Let people select what they want to do according to their own inclinations, and if their inclination is to grow the community, give them the resources to do it better and more often. If the community is to feel and to be empowered, that means that the community founders will have to give up some of that power as trusted community leaders are recognized.

Face to face meetings cement relationships

I understand that there are real constraints to ftf organizing when minors are involved, and certainly anything that is organized should include parents and other appropriate adult

mentors/chaperones. But when an online community also involves a common geographic region, the opportunity arises for get-togethers -- and people will arrange them peer-to-peer. Better to think out how this might work early in the growth of PSO, because it will inevitably arise as a natural consequence of the development of online groups and relationships. Having spent the first three sentences on cautions, I want to add that of course face to face meetings and relationships are immensely helpful in building real community among people whose primary mode of communication is online.

Forums?

I definitely agree that blogs are the place to start. But when you have a hundred active participants in PSO, consider adding forums for asynchronous multimedia discussions. This is my argument for forums: http://blip.tv/file/1123048 We created a Drupal module as part of the Social Media Classroom project, specifically because I didn't think existing Drupal forum modules provided the necessary affordances. You'll see this module in action at http://socialmediaclassroom.com/community after it launches (scheduled for October 15 as of this writing). Again, forums need skilled facilitators in place at the beginning, and as it grows, emergent leadership should be trained in online facilitation skills. The kinds of forums and topics within forums should be carefully thought-out in advance -- and the community can help in this process. But until the community figures out the best balance between number of topics and navigability, the official facilitator should be the one to create new forums and topics according to participant suggestions. And the number of forums and topics should not grow too rapidly, or it will overwhelm people who join weeks or months later.

Levels of participation

You definitely want to welcome newcomers and not in any way make newbies feel like they are low status. But there should be roles and responsibilities, if not also titles, for people who put in time and effort -- escalating levels of responsibility and authority.

Email notifications

This technical affordance can help bring people back: A check-box that triggers an email to a user whenever a subsequent post or comment is made in response to the user's blog post or comment. The email contains a URL that brings the user directly to the appropriate thread. Drupal already affords this subscription capability.

Video Discussions

http://www.seesmic.com and http://www.phreadz.com are only two of what will become many services that enable participants to create and participate in threaded video

discussions. Seesmic widgets can be posted in blogs, so a user can start a video conversation in Seesmic and embed the widget in their PSO blog. A Seesmic users can click on the widget, directly in the PSO blog, and record a response, which shows up on the widget in a horizontal line of small clickable thumbnails. At the same time, PSO participants can respond in the comment thread on the PSO blog. For an example of this, see: http://www.hastac.org/scholars/forum/8-25-08Rheingold-participatory-learning Video is definitely emerging as not just a vernacular presentation medium but as a discussion medium, as well.