Civic Engagement through Digital Citizenship

Engaging youth in active, participatory citizenship through digital media

Participatory digital media — broadly defined as media such as the Internet, social network sites and cell phones that allow users to interact — are ubiquitous among today’s youth. Among teens ages 12–17, 95% have access to the Internet; 70% go online daily; 80% use social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; and 77% have cell phones.1

Many schools, however, have been reluctant to allow students to use digital participatory media for learning during the school day. Because digital media are so pervasive among youth and offer new avenues for civic participation, schools must rethink how they prepare students for active, participatory citizenship. In short, the civic mission of schools has broadened to include the mission of preparing “digital citizens” — those who use digital media to fulfill their civic duty.

This issue of The Progress of Education Reform includes a closer look at the characteristics of digital natives and provides a summary of research about digital natives’ civic engagement habits and the implications of this research for education policy aimed at promoting digital citizenship for today’s youth.
Who are “digital natives” and how do they perceive civic action?

Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture


This study provides a description of how digital natives’ conceptions of civic action and communication differ from those of previous generations. For the majority of the 20th century, “Dutiful Citizenship” reflected the dominant belief that civic engagement is a “matter of duty or obligation.” For digital natives, however, citizenship is not a duty. Their civic actions originate from their “personally expressive politics” and “peer-to-peer relationships that promote engagement.” This search for self-actualization is often referred to as “Actualizing Citizenship.” Table 1 compares differences between previous generations’ ideal of “dutiful citizenship and digital natives’ ideal of “actualizing citizenship.”

Table 1: Dutiful and Actualizing Styles of Civic Action and Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic Style</th>
<th>Dutiful Citizenship of Previous Generations</th>
<th>Actualizing Citizenship of Digital Natives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rooted in responsibility and duty</td>
<td>Open to many forms of creative civic expression, from government to consumer politics to global activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channeled through membership in defined social groups</td>
<td>Rooted in self-actualization through social expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from W. Lance Bennett, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture, p. 398.

Because digital natives’ conception of civic action is rooted in self-actualization, the types of learning experiences they need to become active, engaged citizens are fundamentally different from the civic learning experiences historically provided by schools. Table 2 describes how four types of civic learning opportunities — knowledge, expression, joining publics and taking action — differ for those who hold dutiful and actualizing conceptions of citizenship.

Table 2: Dutiful and Actualizing Forms of Four Civic Learning Opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic Learning Opportunity</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Dutiful Form (appropriate for previous generations)</th>
<th>Actualizing Form (necessary for digital natives)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Information that citizens should know</td>
<td>Information provided by authorities (e.g., teachers, news reports)</td>
<td>Information created and shared by peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>Training in effective public communication skills</td>
<td>Training for traditional forms of public address (e.g., letters to editors, government officials)</td>
<td>Training for self-produced digital media (e.g., blogs, wikis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining Publics</td>
<td>Learning how to connect to others through networks and groups</td>
<td>Membership in site-defined, structured organizations</td>
<td>Membership in self-defined networks and groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Action</td>
<td>Actions that engaged citizens can take</td>
<td>Activities defined and offered by authority figures</td>
<td>Activities generated or reported by peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: W. Lance Bennett, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, Changing Citizen Identity and the Rise of a Participatory Media Culture, p. 409.
Skillful Digital Participation Requires Training — For Natives, Too

While digital natives use participatory media extensively, they need formal training to help them use it most effectively. Unfortunately, those who do receive such training are in the minority, leaving this “elite” class of skillful digital citizens to make the majority of contributions to participatory media, and to dominate digital dialogues.

Failing to Reach Digital Natives

While they target digital natives, most civic engagement Web sites do not attend to the actualizing civic ideals of digital natives. The authors reviewed 61 youth engagement Web sites to determine whether or not the Web sites were attempting to engage and educate youth through the older, more traditional “dutiful” or newer “actualizing” conceptions of civic action. Over two-thirds of the Web sites attempted to engage youth through the old lens of dutiful civic action; they didn’t speak through digital natives’ language actualizing citizenship. Of those that were based in actualizing conceptions of civic action, most were from online-only organizations (i.e., the organization produced only online forms of media and held no in-person meetings). The authors conclude that the civic engagement world has not caught up with the realities of digital natives: “an apparently powerful inertia prevent[s] many sponsoring civic organizations from productively deploying social networking and participatory media affordances for youth.”

How has digital media provided and shaped opportunities for the civic engagement of digital natives?

Civic Engagement, Pedagogy, and Information Technology on Web Sites for Youth


The authors of this study reviewed 73 civic youth Web sites in an effort to determine if the sites:

1. Employ active pedagogical techniques that research suggests are effective in civic education
2. Include features that permit interaction
3. Introduce youth to policy issues related to information and communication technology (ICT), such as Internet privacy, the digital divide, intellectual property and censorship
4. Differ in their inclusion of active pedagogy and ICT policy issues based on ownership, age of those responsible for editorial content, or type of civic engagement emphasized.

The authors found that sites using active pedagogy tended to rely more on youth contributors than other sites; tended to belong to nonprofit, rather than governmental and for-profit, organizations; and tended to prioritize mobilizing youth for civic action. Approximately two-thirds of sites offered opportunities for youth interaction, primarily through message boards and listservs. Few sites addressed ICT policy issues or helped prepare youth to engage in civic action around ICT issues.

The authors argue that civic youth Web sites should be a place to link civic action, active pedagogy and examination of ICT policy issues that connect youth with “larger forums for civic discussion and action, allowing ample opportunities for youth to contribute to editorial content, and promoting both individual and collective means to participate in society.”
Digital Media Literacy Education and Online Civic and Political Participation
Joseph Kahne, Jessica Timpany Feezel and Namjin Lee (Youth and Participatory Politics and DML Central, November, 2010),

Youth Online Activities and Exposure to Diverse Perspectives
Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, Nam-Jin Lee and Jessica Timpany Feezell (Youth & Participatory Politics and DML Central, December, 2010),
http://dmlcentral.net/sites/dmlcentral/files/resource_files/YouthOnlineActivityDiverseExposure.WORKINGPAPERS.pdf.

The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood
Joseph Kahne, Nam-Jin Lee and Jessica Timpany Feezell, The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood (Youth & Participatory Politics and DML Central, February, 2011),
http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/OnlineParticipatoryCultures.WORKINGPAPERS.pdf.

The authors of these three studies used a common dataset to examine the online civic participation habits of more than 900 high school students in California. They found:

- While many youth receive digital media literacy education, not all do. A little less than 20% reported never receiving educational opportunities associated with consumption of online civic and political information; fewer than half reported receiving such opportunities “often” or “very often.” Students who received digital media literacy education were more likely to participate in politically driven online activities than those who did not receive such opportunities. This finding suggests that when youth have opportunities to learn how to engage in online political activities, they are more likely to do so.

- The Internet is not an echo chamber for politically active youth. Rather, those who engage in politically driven online activities tend to interact with those whose views both align with and diverge from their own.

- Youth who engage in either politically driven and/or nonpolitical interest forms of online activity are more likely to be exposed to diverse perspectives. The authors argue that because most online activity — political or not — seems to provide youth with exposure to diverse perspectives, online contexts can be important tools to reach youth “who lack strong civic and political interests…” Friendship-driven and interest-driven online participation may be a gateway to various forms of online civic and political participation.

"The Internet is not an echo chamber for politically active youth."
How can policy better address the civic learning of digital natives?

Collectively, these studies suggest that the civic mission of schools has indeed broadened to include preparation for digital citizenship and that such participation holds promise for increasing the active civic participation of digital natives. Consequently, these studies’ findings should inform the development of policy aimed at promoting digital citizenship:

1. Digital natives learn and think about citizenship in fundamentally different ways than previous generations. If schools are to meet their civic mission, education policies and practices need to take digital natives’ conceptions of citizenship into account.

2. Broadband availability, accessibility and affordability are the determining factors separating youth who are digital natives and youth who are not. If policymakers do not address these factors, non-digital native youth, who are largely poor and largely minority, will continue to be less likely to be civically engaged than their digital native peers.

3. Policymakers should carefully consider how technology usage policies impact civic learning, as well as potential civic engagement, for digital natives. While well-intended, policies that forbid student use of Facebook, Twitter, message boards, blogs and texting during the school day effectively close off many suitable and worthwhile opportunities for civic learning, participation and activism for digital natives.

4. Young citizens, digital natives included, need educational opportunities to prepare them for participation in digital media. Students do not possess inborn skills for technology and civic participation. These skills must be taught and therefore should be addressed in school standards and curricula.

Conclusion

Digital natives possess fundamentally different conceptions of citizenship and civic action than their predecessors. While digital participatory media provide numerous avenues for digital natives to engage in active citizenship, many schools have not yet implemented policies and practices that capitalize on these opportunities.
Endnotes

