

Nurturing democratic character in teens:

The potential of IT

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In 1974 the leaders of 25% of the world's independent nations were democratically elected. By 1996, that figure had risen to 66%. During the same period there was a decline in political participation among the younger generations of North America and Europe. In a sense, it is not only underserved youth but the majority of young people whose civic engagement is at issue.

In this paper we draw from Michael Walzer's (1989) definition of a citizen and emphasize that, if we want young people to be engaged in democracy, three things are needed: That they a) feel included as *members* of communities whose b) *rights* are respected and *voice valued* and who in turn c) feel *responsible* for the common good.

What promise might IT hold for developing feelings of membership and inclusion of marginalized youth? What possibilities does it offer for nurturing democratic dispositions, tolerance, and perspective taking skills? And why, in particular, should special attention be paid to including the voices of underserved youth?

Democracy, inclusion, and an informed public

Democracy is a system in which the people govern themselves. As simple as that sounds, maintaining that system means that each new generation needs practice in the skills that make democracies work. For example, if the public is to make informed decisions, it needs information about the issues and an appreciation of different perspectives on those issues.

Compared to other media, IT provides more information at increased speed and disperses it through multiple paths without a centralized authority determining the content. The WEB in particular allows the user to transcend the confines of geography, time, and social identity. Such broad access to information and the decentralized power to disperse it point to the democratic potential of the NET.

Knowledge is power, as the saying goes, and control of information is a main mechanism whereby authoritarian regimes maintain power. But the spread of IT makes it more difficult to withhold information from the public. Some scholars have even argued that the spread of global communication has played a key role in the diffusion of democratic governance across nations (Huntington) and the capacity for alternative political parties and views to compete in political discourse (Norris).

In western democracies, social class and political participation are stubbornly linked. The better educated, better paid, and better connected are more likely to participate (a disparity that is particularly marked in the United States) (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). If the use of IT mirrors these patterns, it will do nothing to augment the voice of disenfranchised youth. In this regard access to IT for underserved youth is a fundamental issue for democracies. If some segments of the public have information and others do not, power is inequitably distributed and the rule 'of the people' an empty promise.

But equal access to IT is not only a question of justice. It is also essential to democratic stability. For democratic polities to remain stable, a belief in 'the system' and trust in its promise has to be widely shared. However, in the context of a global marketplace, the social contracts that once secured the futures of working class youth in North America and Europe are eroding. Unlike the generations that preceded them, young people can no longer expect to find low skilled (but well paid) jobs. Nor can they be sure that the social safety nets and entitlement programs that states once guaranteed to citizens will be there for them. In a climate of insecurity, the ties that bind younger generations to the broader polity are weakened. In this context, access to IT for youth who are otherwise marginalized may send a particular message of inclusion, of membership in the polity. It says 'you count, your voice matters'. That sense of mattering to people in the broader community can be a basis for civic attachment of otherwise disaffected youth and a means whereby they develop a stake in public affairs.

The Internet as a free space

Self determination and tolerance are basic principles of democracies, the latter sometimes referred to as the litmus test of a democracy (Elshtain, 1990). Dissent is both expected and respected. For democracies to flourish, citizens must have 'free spaces' where dissent can be voiced and alternatives to the status quo explored (Evans & Boyte). Faith based organizations provided such safe spaces for the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and environmental organizations and unions served similar roles in the 1980's as citizens challenged the state in Central and Eastern Europe. A case could be made that the WEB also serves as a free space. It is a safe place where young people can explore identities, test out and debate ideas and find common ground that stretches the boundaries of their geographical or social backgrounds.

The anonymity of a chat room or newsgroup allows youth who feel marginalized or isolated in their local communities to find a niche. For those who may be stigmatized, left out of mainstream culture, these can be spaces to test out identities, find a voice, and a sense of solidarity with others who are similarly excluded from the mainstream. At least one study found that virtual communities provide a safe space for people whose identities are stigmatized (but concealable) in mainstream culture (e.g., gay people). Besides the freedom they provided, newsgroups also held members accountable, provided a reality check, and exerted some measure of social control. Ultimately, as a result of their experiences in these virtual communities, people felt more confident about revealing their concealed identities to family and friends (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Egalitarian relationships and heterogeneous opinion

Vertical relationships between patrons and clients are the structure underlying an authoritarian social order. But horizontal networks that build trust between equals are the basis for a democratic social order (Putnam, 2000). By virtue of its non-hierarchical structure, the WEB affords unique opportunities for forming egalitarian relationships. In contrast to the other major institutions of socialization (e.g., families and schools, less so of community based youth organizations) where relationships of authority are asymmetrical and where youth are typically not in a position of power, the status of members in a chat room or newsgroup is the same. This even playing field means that members can gain experience in admitting and resolving differences of opinion in an atmosphere where the consequences of disagreeing are the same for everyone in the group.

But there are potential downsides of IT to democracy as well. First, what can be horizontal and distributive can also be centralized and made more hierarchical. Centralized servers, control of access, and surveillance of Internet use curb democratic utilization. Recent trends point to an increase in the recentralization of information technology. Second, PCs are precisely that -- personal computers. Once it is accessible, participation in chat rooms or list serves is a choice -- and therein lies the contradiction. Not only can we personalize the cultural content to which we're exposed, we can also filter the news we choose to hear (Sunstein, 2001). Of course, individual preferences are not unique to the Internet. How teens are using the technology determines whether it will open their minds or narrow their views.

Decisions in democracies should be informed choices that consider multiple sides of an issue. As Elshtain (1990) observes, democracies depend on persons with "democratic dispositions", i.e. "a preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward shared ends; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can't always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or one small group alone".

To develop such dispositions, young people need to be exposed to various 'sides' of an issue, to alternative possibilities, to the conditions of life and the opinions of 'others' unlike themselves who will be affected by their decisions. That exposure does not happen by default insofar as the everyday experiences of most adolescents are rather homogeneous. As a result of decreasing family size, age grading practices, social homogenization of neighborhoods, and school tracking, adolescents have relatively few natural opportunities to interact with people who are different from them in cultural background, social class, or even age. The current climate of mandated testing in schools may further homogenize the curricular content to which they are exposed in schools. To some extent public transportation, media and programs such as service learning introduce young people to settings, persons, and issues that they would not typically encounter. But the Internet with its possibilities for overcoming geographical and social homogeneity may expose youth to perspectives that cause them to reexamine and accommodate their views. Indeed, most discussion groups are organized around hobbies or shared interests but participants are likely to hold a broad range of political views. Thus, when social or ideological issues surface, there may be unanticipated consequences as diverse opinions are aired (Jenkins, 2001).

Exposure to alternative perspectives also is a necessary catalyst for social change. If the familiar is all we know, it is hard to imagine alternatives to the status quo. Interviews we conducted with young black leaders in South Africa this summer illustrate our point. When asked to reflect on their personal biographies -- what factors in the apartheid era had played a role in their paths to leadership -- a consistent theme for those from rural villages was that they had had some exposure to a world OTHER than that in the village. Whether through boarding school, attending an agricultural college, or simply having parents who were teachers and had access to information beyond the local village, they were aware, as one man put it, "that life didn't have to be this way".

Why focus on teens?

In 1990 the deliberations of the newly elected Hungarian Parliament were televised and in those early days of democracy many citizens were glued to their TV sets. FIDESZ, the youth party (membership was limited to those 35 and under), had only a few MPs but each of them brought their lap top to the sessions. While their elders fumbled and as the Hungarian people watched, these young MPs had information on any topic of discussion literally at their finger tips. The reaction of the public was swift. Not only were many over 35 year olds impressed with the intelligence of these relative youngsters, they pressed FIDESZ to accept 'older' citizens into membership in the party. Today FIDESZ (albeit a more conservative version than the original) is a major partner in the governing coalition and IT played a key role in their political success.

Adoption of IT reverses the typical direction of socialization. Kids teach their parents how to use computers or surf the WEB rather than the reverse. In fact, the digital divide on television commercials is framed as an issue of age rather than one of social class. Those under 30 are savvy, smooth, users of IT. Those over 30 are at best timid and at worst, clueless.

There is some truth to these age stereotypes. Compared to adults, the mental schema of children and teens is not so firmly structured. New knowledge does not compete with the old. Thus, young people are typically better than their elders at adopting new ideas. In the middle of the 19th century, the 4-H program was started so that young people could be a medium whereby parents would adopt new farming techniques. Today, when prevention programs convince children that smoking is bad for health, the kids get on their parents' back to give up the habit. And youth have always been at the forefront of movements for social change.

From a human development point of view, adolescence is a time for exploring novel ideas and identities. Not yet saddled with the responsibilities of adulthood, teens are free to imagine -- who they are and could become, what they stand for, and what kind of world they want to live in. The adolescent and young adult years also are a period when political views are explored and eventually crystallize. And, given the protracted period that adolescence has become in Europe and North America (where it is now normative to delay marriage, parenthood, and permanent jobs and pursue education for more years), it is an ideal time to take advantage of the democratizing possibilities of the Internet. In fact, although we are unaware of relevant research on age differences, we suspect that young people would be more likely than their

elders to explore the democratic potential of IT and less likely to focus on efficiency and customization. In sum, if promoting the democratic potential of IT is a goal, there are good developmental arguments for a focus on teens.

Global citizens?

The civic role of schools has long been recognized. But in the past decade, as evidenced by their own mission statements, that role has increasingly been interpreted as one that prepares 'global citizens'. Whether that phrase means maximizing the competitive edge of their students in the global marketplace or broadening the community to which their students are responsible we do not know.

It is clear, however, that for current and future generations of teens, loyalty and citizenship is less defined by the borders of nation states as members of the EU know better than those of us in North America. Malcolm Cross who has directed the European Migration and Ethnic Studies program in the UK, recently summarized some of their data gathered from teens across Europe. He described two kinds of what he calls 'stateless citizens' -- one that enjoys the freedom to travel, learn, and work unencumbered by national borders and another that left a homeland for work in another country but lives in limbo with little sense of membership or belonging in either state.

Such reports raise questions of values in our view. How do 'global citizens' develop a sense of place? To what entitie(s) do they feel a sense of responsibility? What do they mean by the 'common good' or does it ever even cross their mind?

Information technology is a content neutral medium. The Internet can be used to spread hate as easily as tolerance. It can be another place to shop or a new forum for airing public issues. But the WEB has unique potential for democracy because it is difficult to dominate and allows information and opinion to criss cross communities that would otherwise not encounter one another.

The teen years are a time when young people both want to be unique and want to fit in. They want to have a voice but also want to find groups and values with which they identify. If these young citizens are to develop a sense of obligation to their communities, whether local or global, they need to feel that they matter, that their voice counts in community affairs. The most consistent result in youth development and prevention studies is that feeling connected to adults and community institutions protects kids from a host of risky choices.

IT offers young people new ways to 'get connected' and to have a voice. For adolescents who are figuring out what they want to do with their lives and what kind of world they want to live in, the Internet provides a free space where the younger generation can explore who a 'global citizen' might be.

