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Are We Preparing Young People for 21st -Century Citizenship With 20th-Century Thinking? A Case for a Virtual Laboratory of Democracy

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Abstract

“We need a clear citizens’ vision of the way the Net ought to grow, a firm idea of the kind of media environment we would like to see in the future. If we do not develop such a vision for ourselves, the future will be shaped for us by large commercial and political powerholders” (Rheingold, 2000, p. 6). If the online environment is not considered as substantially different from the offline one, social studies educators run the risk of applying preconceived notions not only of citizenship, citizenship education, freedom of expression, and commercial and public space to the online environment, thus, limiting its potential and young people’s preparation for it. To prepare young people for online civic participation, A publicly supported virtual laboratory of democracy should be created that enables young people to become socialized to an online civic society and to learn how to act—in a civic manner—upon issues of importance to them and the larger society.

Finding a Focus

Virtual community...e-governance...online social networking...digital citizenship. Such terms were once the lexicon of science fiction writers, but are a significant part of the lives of a growing segment of the population. The Center for the Digital Future (2007) noted that “we are now witnessing the true emergence of the Internet as the powerful personal and social phenomenon we knew it would become” (p. 1), which is supported by the finding that “43 percent of Internet users who are members of online communities say that they ‘feel as strongly’ about their virtual community as they do about their real-world communities” (p. 1).

As a parent of an adolescent, my attention is turned toward the future. One reason I am fascinated by the emergence of a digital society that operates in real time is that I wonder how best to prepare him for this new reality. Like any other adolescent, though, my son lives largely in the present. I am compelled to question how his schooling is preparing him for life in such a society, particularly in a school environment marked by (often legitimate) limited access to this reality by such means as firewalls and cell phone bans.

In turn, as an aficionado of history I often look to the past for inspiration and am reminded of the words of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis, who wrote that states are laboratories of democracy (Brandeis, 1934). If such is the case for states, is it possible for schools to prepare young people to be digital citizens by creating virtual laboratories of democracies? In O'Brien (in press) I used the metaphor of a journey to illustrate one way to think about the Internet as a place, a metaphor I intend to use again in answering this question.

In this paper I also intend to consider my travels not simply in the offline and online environments, but through time, as well, to explore the application of past and existing conceptions of the online environment. As aptly captured by Thornton (2005), the discussion about the nature of citizenship education has a rich history in social studies education and has moved in new directions as befitting the times. Yet, I have had to explore writings in other fields to engage with ideas about digital citizenship. Legal theorists, for example, are engaged in a vigorous discussion about how to define the Internet and participation in an online environment, while we in social studies have not even stopped to consider, from a holistic sense, the possibility that an online environment is significantly different from an offline one.

I do not suggest that the field is not addressing critical issues such as cyber safety, online access, and the digitization of resources and their effects on student learning. Although these efforts are critical, as a field we should also take a broader view:

We need a clear citizens' vision of the way the Net ought to grow, a firm idea of the kind of media environment we would like to see in the future. If we do not develop such a vision for ourselves, the future will be shaped for us by large commercial and political powerholders. (Rheingold, 2000, p. 6)

By failing to consider the online environment as possibly unique from the offline one and, thus, failing to realize its potential, we risk applying to the online environment preconceived notions of citizenship and citizenship education, freedom of expression, and commercial v. public space. Consequently, we may limit both its potential and young people's preparation for it.

While imagining the preparation of students for online civic participation, I envision the creation of a publicly supported virtual laboratory of democracy that enables young people to become socialized to an online civic society and to learn how to act civically upon issues of importance to them and the larger society. (When considering the civil society, I am referring to that arena where individuals and groups come together for common civic purposes, as opposed to commercial ones.)

Such a secure online site would enable students from throughout the nation to register, create an online avatar, and interact with each other to identify research, discuss, and act upon public policy issues of local, national, and global significance. Akin to virtual communities such as Second Life, such a site might include a campus-like collection of virtual "buildings," each designed to fulfill a specific purpose.

This site would take advantage of the growing social networking capacity of the Internet and allow student to coalesce around civic matters, transferring the civic mission of schools from a brick-and-mortar setting to an online environment. I frame my recommendations for such a virtual lab in the context of a student bill of digital learning rights, which I use as a rhetorical device to emphasize the importance of meeting these expectations for students and as a way to help define such a virtual place.

Before providing a rationale for and outlining possible characteristics of an online laboratory of democracy for students, this paper will first address different conceptions of citizenship and citizenship education and consider how states define each. Next will be considered what these conceptions of citizenship and the state standards suggest about civic participation and students' preparation for it. Then the off- and online environments will be contrasted as a prelude to a discussion about digital democracy both from a governmental and civic sense. Last, civic participation within a digital environment will be addressed to create a foundation for discussing an online laboratory of democracy for students.

Social Studies, Citizenship Education, and Civic Participation

Citizenship Education and Social Studies

In *Cyber Citizen or Cyborg Citizen* Andrew Koch (2005) highlighted the importance of citizenship education, noting that “democratic political practice is premised on the principle of an informed citizenry engaging in a commitment to democracy...” (p. 160). Thomas Jefferson best expressed this sentiment in a 1787 letter to James Madison:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion.

In response to the calls of those like Butts (1988) for “the revitalizing of the historic civic mission of American education” (p. 162), the Carnegie Foundation and CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) in 2003 issued *The Civic Mission of Schools* report, which concluded (a) that “school-based civic education should be seen as an essential approach to increasing young people’s informed engagement with political institutions and issues” (p. 9) and (b) that social studies was the curricular area best able to develop “competent and responsible citizens” (p. 6). The National Council for the Social Studies (1994) confirmed social studies’ unique mission to “help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (p. 3).

According to Thornton (1994), while “most social studies leaders and policymakers justify the subject on the grounds of citizenship...it is here that the consensus ends: What does citizenship mean and what, in turn, does this mean for curriculum and instruction?” (p. 224). In seeking to answer just such a question, Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) culled the literature and found three approaches to social studies—citizenship transmission, reflective inquiry, and social science method, each of which resulted in a different conception of a citizen and a different approach to prepare young people for citizenry.

Barr et al.’s work was critiqued by White (1982) and Shaver (1977), but others such as Martorella (1996) built upon their work. Martorella, for example, identified five

“alternative perspectives on citizenship education.” The intent here is not to review the ongoing discussion of citizenship education, but simply to acknowledge that a variety of approaches have been documented in the literature, which have been informed by a vigorous, ongoing discussion about the purposes for and approaches to citizenship education. What is noteworthy about most of the approaches to citizenship education as identified by those such as Barr et al. and Martorella is that civic participation, be it biennial voting or continuous, active pursuit of the passage of a particular public policy, is to be studied and possibly practiced in a classroom or school setting, but rarely in the community.

In seeking to define, in part, what citizenship means, Menezes (2003) recognized the relationship between different kinds of citizens and how they participate. Does active citizenship, for example, mean a “playing by the rules’ citizen who episodically votes and regularly pays taxes” or a “communitarian perspective that participation in voluntary associations within the civil society assumes a centrality for democratic life” (p. 432)? His emphasis was not on how to prepare young people for citizenship, but on what was expected of them once they fully assumed this role.

In answering Thornton’s question about what citizenship means, in this paper I rely upon three “kinds of citizens” depicted by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), which are based on “prominent theoretical perspectives,” “important differences in the ways that educators conceive of democratic educational aims,” and “ideas and ideals that resonate with practitioners” (p. 240). The first kind of citizen is a “personally responsible citizen,” one that “acts responsibly in his or her community by...picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws...” (p. 241). The second is a “participatory citizen,” one “who actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at the local, state, or national level” (p. 241). Finally, a “justice-oriented citizen” is one with the attributes of a participatory citizen, but who also seeks “to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices” (p. 242). Westheimer and Kahne’s work offers a useful means to link what students are expected to learn (relative to civic engagement) to a particular type of citizen.

Learning Civic Participation...Or Not

In defining civic engagement, Torney-Purta and Lopez (2006), drawing upon the work of Patrick (2003, 2005/2006), made a distinction between intellectual skills and participatory skills. Patrick had noted that in “combination with cognitive civic skills, participatory civic skills are tools of citizenship whereby individuals, whether acting alone or in groups, can participate effectively to promote personal and common interests in response to public issues” (p. 19). He identified the following as universal participatory skills:

...interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests; monitoring public events and issues; deliberating and making decisions about public policy issues; influencing policy decisions on public issues; implementing policy decision on public issues; and, taking action to improve political and civic life locally, nationally, and globally. (p. 27)

These skills align well with those identified by Torney-Purta and Lopez, who indicated that

schools and other organizations foster civic engagement when they help students to do the following: working with others toward political goal; interpreting

political information; participate in respectful discourse about social and political issues; learn about effective leadership in groups of peers, and how to mitigate the influence of negative experiences such as bullying; join other students and adults to address a community need; assess opportunities to solve community problems; express their views in media forms that are attractive and familiar to them. (p. 7)

They concluded that traditional citizenship education is well suited to developing some of the intellectual skills necessary for civic and political participation. The same, though, was not true for the participatory skills, particularly those addressing either actual participation in the political system or substantive policy issues, since such issues were likely to prove controversial and disquieting to the community (a finding supported by Niemi & Niemi, 2007). As a result, citizenship education rarely heeded the advice of those like Hunt and Metcalf (1968) and Engle and Ochoa (1988) “to recognize values formation as a central concern of social studies instruction” (Parker, 1996, p. 124).

Although Menezes (2003) argued that “citizenship education should...focus on students’ empowerment for assuming an active role in the [democratic] process and defining and expanding citizenship itself” (p. 432), Torney-Purta and Lopez (2006) reported that “there is hesitation about whether and how to incorporate enhanced opportunities for students’ voice and input in their schools and classrooms” (p. 15). Also notable was that “because of the political nature of teaching and learning citizenship, teachers often are unsure of the boundaries around engaging students in political activities” (p. 17), a finding supported by Martin and Chiodo (2007). There even was “ambivalence... about whether and how to incorporate service-learning into citizenship education programs” (p. 17), which potentially will continue the disconnection between serving a community need and addressing the issues that might require the need for the service in the first place.

By and large, K-12 students are engaged in a form of citizenship education that, at best, builds their knowledge base and promotes the acquisition of the intellectual skills necessary for life as a citizen, yet fails to develop the participatory skills, due in part to a reluctance to immerse students in a nonschool, offline environment. However, the way textbooks and state standards portray civic participation raises questions even about that knowledge base.

Portrayal of Civic Participation in Textbooks

Studies such as Anyon (1978), Carroll et al. (1987), Wade and Everett (1994), and Avery and Simmons (2000-2001) led Bennett (2005) to conclude that there were “uniform depictions of passive citizenship and general failure to address the complexities of deliberation” (p. 1). Based on a review of the three most widely used civics textbooks, she concluded that each textbook failed “to connect the role of participatory citizenship to institutions of democracy in a fundamentally compelling way” (p. 2). This “failure reflects an implicit ambivalence to the role of participation in American democracy,” thereby, “offering a limited discussion of the means or reasons for the necessity of citizen participation, the texts explicitly limit the scope and implicitly the necessity or value of citizen participation in American democracy” (pp. 2-3).

Aside from discussion of interest groups and political parties, participation was defined in individualistic ways, such as voting or communicating with a representative. The texts provided little information about ways that citizens can and do participate in a democratic society. In a review of civic life as portrayed in U.S. history and civics textbooks, Avery and Simmons (2001) wrote,

Although most Americans report that they are proud of their country, they tend to view their obligations to the government as limited to paying taxes, obeying the law, and voting. Americans generally think it is a "good thing" if one chooses to become involved in civic groups or actions, but it is certainly not an obligation. (p. 128)

They concluded that textbooks devoted little attention to advocacy groups, a finding supported by Niemi and Junn (1998) who, after analyzing the results of the 1988 National Assessment of Education Progress in Civics, concluded that while high school seniors were knowledgeable about individual rights, they were not as familiar with advocacy groups.

Review of States' Positions on Citizen Education and Preparation for the Digital World

According to Torney-Purta and Lopez (2006), "While knowledge of civic content is the focus of most state standards, some standards also emphasize civic dispositions [though] standards in all three competency strands (knowledge, skills and dispositions) are not uniformly recognized in state assessments" (p. 4).

Recent work undertaken by several colleagues and I support this conclusion. In reviewing the standards of 49 states and Washington, DC, we found that of the 46 states stating a purpose for social studies, 36 specifically identified citizenship. Thirty of those states qualified the type of citizen desired, using terms such as *responsible* and *participating*. Seven states, for example, desired "active," "involved" or "participating" citizens, while 16 states desired "responsible" citizens. The way the states characterized what they desired of a citizen matched Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) definition of either a "personally responsible citizen," which is one who "acts responsibly in his or her community by...picking up litter, giving blood, obeying laws," or a "participatory citizen," which is one "who actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at the local, state, or national level" (p. 241).

Virginia best represents the personally responsible citizen model. According to the Virginia History and Social Science Standards of Learning (SOLs) for 12th grade Government (Virginia Department of Education, 2001),

The student will demonstrate that thoughtful and effective participation in civic life is characterized by: obeying the law and paying taxes; serving as a juror; participating in the political process; performing public service; keeping informed about current issues; and, respecting differing opinions in a diverse society. (p. 579)

In the SOLs, a good citizen is characterized by trustworthiness and honesty, courtesy, respect for the rights of others, responsibility, accountability, self-reliance, respect for the law, and patriotism.

The Vermont Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities (Vermont Department of Education, 2000) typifies the participatory citizen model:

Students act as citizens... establishing rules and/or policies for a group, school, or community, and defending them (e.g., dress code policies, establishing a skate board park); demonstrating positive interaction with group members (e.g.,

working with a group...); and, demonstrating the role of individuals in the election processes (e.g., voting in class or mock elections). (p. 38)

Of those states delineating a clearly identifiable conception of citizen, most aligned with the “personally responsible citizen.”

Since a statewide standardized assessment can assess only some of the intellectual skills necessary for civic participation, some states have retreated from purporting to prepare students to become civically engaged. In 2004, for example, the Kansas Department of Education changed the state’s government standard to the following:

The student uses a working knowledge and understanding of governmental systems of the United States and other nations with an emphasis on the U.S. Constitution, the necessity for the rule of law, the civic values of the American people, and the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of becoming active participants in the democratic process. (p. 1)

One is left with the sense that the standard is incomplete, since the purpose for and the context in which the “student uses a working knowledge” is not provided. While the mission statement indicates that the Kansas History and Government standards will “enable students to actively participate as informed citizens,” this purpose is lacking in the government standard. Overall, the standards lean toward an individualistic orientation toward civic participation and citizenship, that is, voting, communicating with public officials and contributing to political campaigns.

Civic Participation as a Critical Component of Citizenship Education

Given the portrayal of civic engagement in textbooks and state standards and the fact that students do not gain an awareness of, let alone a strong knowledge base about, participating in a democratic society, pundits should not be surprised by low voter turnout. Unquestionably, certain forms of civic participation such as voting are an integral part of the civics curriculum, yet Schwartz (1984) described voting as “an episodic public act” (p. 1121).

Imagine taking a prescription once every 2 years on a particular day and then being fine for the intervening 729 days. How important would the pill seem on the 730th day? From the vantage point of young people, if the government seems to run fine for 729 days, how important can voting be? And if the government does not “run fine” between elections, but all you know to do is vote (take the pill) to try and fix the problem, how would you respond?

As Hess (1979) concluded, “People who argue for their position in a town meeting are acting like citizens. People who simply drop scraps of paper in a box or pull a lever are not acting like citizens; they are acting like consumers” (p. 10). Noveck (2005) raised a similar concern: “Reactive, push-button voting on the ideas of attenuated representatives does less to foster engagement than taking action for oneself about school policy, workplace management or urban planning” (p. 7). These statements lead one to wonder if the U.S. is preparing consumers of, rather than participants in, a democracy.

While not absolving nonvoters of responsibility for their inaction, I question whether social studies educators have provided young people with the knowledge needed to understand civic participation, let alone with the experiences necessary to act upon that knowledge. As noted by Boston, Pearson, and Halperin (2005) “Beyond gathering the

core knowledge they need to understand the meaning of citizenship and to act as citizens, our students must also have opportunities, under adult guidance, to become *civically engaged*" (p. 7, emphasis added).

Given the way civic participation is addressed within the social studies curriculum, teachers are faced with a challenge. Social studies is relatively unique in the K-12 curriculum. Students in music class practice an instrument in a band, those in physical education try different sports in a gym, those in science courses conduct experiments in a lab, while students in social studies read a textbook, one not even true to its purpose. Unquestionably, class discussions, group work and research projects all contribute to intellectual and participatory skills, yet social studies is the only curricular area devoted to preparing young people for life in their community and in "a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." No other curricular area directly places the learner in a setting outside of school. In turn, despite their education in music, physical education, and science, students are not expected upon graduation to become a musician, athlete, or scientist, yet they are expected to assume a role that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis characterized as "the most important political office" in our nation—a citizen.

Although a host of reasons prevent situating student learning directly in a community and beyond, engaging students in an online environment, such as a virtual lab of democracy, might address these difficulties. The hesitancy to address controversial issues, the continuing disconnect between the classroom and community, and the reluctance to involve students in the political process, though, present potential barriers to such an effort.

Aside from textbooks and state standards, two other potential barriers to implementing a virtual lab are (a) social studies' ambivalent relationship with technology and (b) schools' reluctance to prepare youth for online civic participation given the Internet's growing social networking capacity and the nature of schools as public spaces in a digital age. As with textbooks and standards, these two potential barriers to providing students with online civic experiences arise out of existing conceptions of citizenship, since they inhibit discussion about how best to prepare young people for civic participation in an online environment.

Social Studies and a Changing Environment: Technology as the X Factor

When conceiving of the relationship between technology and K-12 education primarily through the lens of instructional technology, technology is often considered as "a collection of tools" (Berson, Lee, & Stuckart, 2001, p. 210). By concentrating on providing schools with tools such as Internet access, the "ends have frequently been forgotten" (Thornton, 2005, p. 47). Even when considering technology within a social context, the field still tends to apply a tools approach. The digital divide is represented by the disparity between districts in amounts of hardware and types of software, Internet access, and cyber safety, rather by the effect of the relationship between technology and society on the online community in which students will come to live, the directions electronic democracy might take, and the academic preparation future citizens might need.

Rheingold (2000) captured this distinction well when writing about the title to his book, *The Virtual Community*: "You have to be careful to not mistake the tool for the task and think that just writing words on a screen is the same thing as real community." No doubt, having access to the tools and learning how to use them are critical, but so is the context in which you learn about them and how you are asked to apply them.

Vincenti (1990) noted that technological design “is a social activity directed at a practical set of goals intended to serve human beings in some direct way” (p. 11). The online environment represents such a technological design, which involves a host of designers with complementary and competing interests at work. Since the online environment is a work in progress, there are questions as to which interests, commercial or public, will come to shape the design and, therefore, the online environment. By not even acknowledging the distinctive nature of the online environment nor realizing the perils and potential of its future, social studies educators run the risk of continuing discussions about effective use of instructional technology while the online world develops around us, causing us to lose sight of what is in the best interests of young people in such a world.

Given the emergence and growing popularity of online social networking, for example, I wonder if a tools approach has led us to overlook the Internet’s potential as a democratic commons and, therefore, if we have failed to consider the implications of the online environment for citizenship education, in general, and digital citizenship, in particular. The Internet offers a means for individuals and groups to address matters of social concern and, thus, contribute to an online democratic commons. The emergence of commercial and nonprofit social networking sites specifically geared toward youth for social and civic purposes illustrates a response to this phenomenon but begs the question as to why such space is not set aside specifically to address the public’s interest in preparing tomorrow’s online citizens.

Martin (2006) considered “one of the fundamental characteristics of systems design to be that of enabling the system to be used in schools in order to facilitate the practical teaching of citizen participation” (p. 7). Frey (2002) called for the development of school-based electronic participatory programs. Sears and Hughes (2006) argued that the “ability to rethink and reframe civic principles and structures is fundamental to democratic citizenship” (p. 7). Van Hover, Berson, Bolick, and Swan (2006) recognized a need “to articulate constructive visions for ubiquitous computing” (p. 276) and apply their advice to our conception of civic education in an online environment.

Redefining Schools as Public Spaces in a Digital Age

Alexis de Tocqueville (1848), in *Democracy in America*, marveled at Americans’ associational nature:

Americans make associations...to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes.... Wherever at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association. (1848, Chapter V, Vol. II, para. 2.)

As Parker (1996) noted, the associational nature of U.S. democracy created the potential for “a broadening of the commonwealth, as shared interests became more varied and diversity among groups more pronounced” (p. 8). In making an argument for schools as laboratories of democracy, Parker stated, “Public schools are the only public spaces encountered by virtually all children” (p. 10). I suggest that the online environment represents another public space where young people come together, one that might serve as a forum for cultivating among young people this associational nature of U.S. democracy; however, public education would be required to reconcile its traditional mission of preparing young people for citizenship with the emerging digital world.

A counterargument is that the online environment is more like the community at large with a host of public, personal, and commercial spaces. Yet, I suggest that one reason to engage in a discussion about digital citizenship is to consider how to create a public space in an online environment akin to that of the public schools in the offline environment. In turn, just as providing such spaces does not ensure that “within and among these settings problems of common living are identified and mutual deliberation and problem-solving activity is undertaken as a routine practice of school life” (p. 12), simply providing such public spaces in an online environment will not ensure that young people are able to work out “the practices of democratic living” (p. 12). Young people need to learn how to act democratically in an online environment.

There is a certain irony in proposing the creation of online public spaces that serve as laboratories of democracy, given the analogy I drew earlier about such spaces in an online and offline environment. For example, in a time when, for a host of social reasons, young people are discouraged from wandering too far away from their home and neighborhood (thus, limiting the boundaries of their offline play and later their social or associational environment), they are but a click away from anywhere in the world. Although the growing emphasis on matters such as cyber safety illustrate that one of the same concerns limiting young people’s physical movements in the offline environment is influencing their movement in virtual space, movement in virtual space is more difficult to monitor. Are we able to put electronic measures in place to regulate and monitor such movement? Unquestionably. As young people grow older, do they become adept at circumventing such measures? What do you think? Here is where we encounter the space and time distinctions between the off and online environments.

In the offline environment there is a direct relationship between space and time where, depending upon the means of travel, one can assume that getting from one point to the next will take a certain amount of time. Also, where a person is able to travel determines those who can be associated with and, therefore, what a person can undertake as a member of a group. As a young person I was mindful of this relation when I decided to travel somewhere, whether to a friend’s house or to the store. As more and more people move to broadband access, though, the relationship between moving within virtual space and time becomes increasingly irrelevant.

Why am I addressing what seems obvious? First, part of growing up is gaining increasing independence and assuming greater responsibility for one’s actions. In turn, adults grant autonomy to youth to make more and more decisions and trust in their judgment when doing so, which lies at the heart of citizenship education.

Second, when I was growing up I remember these times as an ever-expanding circle to my personal, social, and physical space, one influenced to a degree by my means of travel. When I was younger and traveled mostly by foot, I remember when the woods about two blocks away replaced the cul-de-sac where I lived as my playground. I then made new friends, ones that lived several blocks away, and used my bike to get to their homes. When I reached early adolescence, with stronger legs and a bigger bike, my world reached out several miles or more, and then I got my driver’s license.

I am not suggesting that the online environment is replacing the offline one in this regard. When my 15-year-old son came to me holding a handheld player excited that he just made an online trade for a game piece with someone in Japan, however, I realized that his playground is quite different from the one my generation experienced. Therefore, rather than simply seeking to monitor and regulate young people’s online actions, public education should assume the responsibility of preparing them for democratic life in an online environment. They must possess the skills and dispositions necessary to make

informed decisions about their life and that of others in this venue and, thus, deserve the trust that our parents and guardians once gave us. One way to accomplish this end is to carve out online public spaces as laboratories of democracy, supported by the government and designed especially for students.

The Nature of Virtual Environment and the Need for a Public Discussion About Its Future

Prior to exploring the idea of a virtual laboratory of democracy, I will address several characteristics of the online environment and, in doing so, raise questions about the growing commercialization of the Internet and its implications for the use of the Internet to serve the public interest. This discussion raises the larger questions of whether the online environment is truly distinct from the offline one and whether applying conceptions derived from the offline environment to the online one is appropriate.

Finding Space for the Public Interest in a Rapidly Emerging Commercial Place

According to Chester (2007), “We are on the eve of the emergence of the most powerful communications and media system ever developed” (p. xv), yet “we run the risk of merely serving as observers while special interests determine America’s ‘digital destiny’” (p. xvi). He argued for an “intense and well publicized debate about where our digital society is headed,” a debate that addresses “how our media can foster civic participation [and] make our government more accountable to the public” (p. xv). He stated that our society is at a crossroads, one where decisions are being made as to whether the Internet will be “our public information highway” and, thus, serve as a “public resource and treasure” or whether it will become “a digital tollbooth that will send us gaming, gambling, more movies on demand, and interactive advertising” (p. xvii).

Hunter (2003) used similarly strong language to depict what he argued was occurring with the Internet:

Historians will look back to these early years of the twenty-first century as the moment when the tipping point became apparent. It is not too portentous to say that we stand at the fork between two possible futures of intellectual endeavor. Down one road lies a future of completely propertized and privatized ownership of intellectual activity. Down the other road is a future where the interests of society at large are fostered, which at times leads to private ownership of intellectual activity, and at other times demands that some public intellectual space be kept as commons for all. (p. 442)

Hunter went on to argue “that we are enclosing cyberspace and imposing private property conceptions upon it,” resulting in the creation of “a digital anticommons where suboptimal use of Internet resources will be the norm” (p. 444). According to Hunter a digital anticommons will lead to an online environment “where no one will be allowed to access competitors’ cyberspace ‘assets’ without a license or other transactionally expensive or impossible permission mechanism” (p. 442). Hunter characterized what is happening as “the gradual whittling away of the public domain within intellectual property” (p. 446), a view shared by Boyle (2003), who called this trend the “second enclosure movement.”

Lemley (2003) criticized “the idea that the Internet is literally a place in which people travel” as “not only wrong but faintly ludicrous” (p. 523). I realize, however, that the metaphor is useful for two reasons. First, the familiar provides a comfortable starting

point for attempting to conceive of the Internet. Second, in seeking to distinguish the virtual nature of the Internet from a physical place, Lemley provided useful guidelines in setting parameters around the Internet: Unlike with a physical place, a person “can be everywhere at once”; since “bandwidth is effectively infinite” there are no “spatial constraints”; and while “physical places exist in proximity to one another...there is no ‘next door’ on the Internet” (p. 526). The key is to start with the idea of the Internet as a place, knowing that this starting reference point is the physical world, but then to take the idea of place and to rethink it within the context of a virtual environment. To do so, it is helpful to delve further into what Chester (2007), Hunter (2003), Balkin (2004), and Lessig (2004), considered a big question concerning the Internet: whether public or commercial interests will come to dominate and, thus, define how virtual space is used. In addition, the implications of the growing commercialization of the Internet on preparing young people for an online life should also be considered.

Google – the Internet’s Future?

On the one hand, this characterization of the Internet seems far removed from citizenship education and the lives of young people. On the other hand, it illustrates how we are trying to define the Internet as a place and, in so defining it, to characterize life within it. If we come to define the Internet as commercial space, then are we largely defining our role as consumers in this place? If we take Chester’s idea of the Internet as a “public resource” or Hunter’s implicit notion of the Internet as a public commons, then would we not define our role as more of a citizen? Consider this view in light of Noveck’s (2005) claim that relative to the Internet “what was an ‘information revolution’ is becoming a social revolution” (p. 4). The online environment has become a commercial battlefield, as illustrated by Google, and the way the traditional methods of considering such matters no longer apply. Consider what developments by Google (as representative of online businesses) might mean for digital citizens and consumers. This helps to highlight the importance of dedicating a portion of the Internet for public interest.

Since Google represents a possible direction of the Internet’s evolution, what is Google?

1. Google both typifies the emerging digital economy and is a classic Horatio Alger story, two young, ambitious, and bright people become multimillionaires.
2. Google was one of the first companies to dramatically simplify what was best about the “old” Internet, that is, a rich repository of information and readily accessible to even the technologically illiterate.
3. Google continually diversifies its services, carving out niches, such as Scholars and Images, as well as capturing the multimedia capability of the Internet.
4. Despite the concerns expressed by some pundits, the purchase of YouTube not only stands as a shrewd business deal but represents Google’s entry into social networking and even fuller use of the Internet’s capacity.
5. Google typifies the “new media,” that is, 24/7 instant-access, interactive, personalized online service providers. In turn, YouTube users challenge the “old media,” that is, the content providers producing intellectual property such as copyrighted movies and music.
6. Google is a growing monopoly, one that has caught the attention of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) with the pending purchase of DoubleClick, a major online advertising company. The FTC and the U.S. Senate are reviewing the purchase for antitrust reasons.
7. Google is seeking a patent for profiling software that would enable the company to create psychological profiles of online gamers, which advertisers might use to personalize ads for specific users in the online game. Google potentially could collect information on anyone using a game console with Internet access.

8. Using the Street View feature of Google maps, individuals are posting videos on YouTube, such as the one of a person entering a porn shop, giving a new meaning to being in the public eye.
9. Given the Chinese government's concern over what the Chinese people might access online, Google agreed to create a Chinese version that censored itself. According to a BBC article (BBC News, 2006), "a search on Google.cn for the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement directs users to a string of condemnatory articles"(para. 5).

So what is Google? Highly effective online service provider? Harbinger of the future? Facilitator of the democratic commons? Emerging digital monopoly, the likes of which would make John D. Rockefeller proud? Digital commercial version of "big brother"? As you contemplate these questions, consider how much of this activity has occurred within the past 18 months, illustrating the importance of Chester's call for a public discussion about the future of the "digital society." This activity represents healthy competition between multibillion dollar content and online service providers that benefits us as consumers, but two items are noteworthy.

First, information is the new commodity, and one of the most valuable types of information is personal information. Although the Internet is perceived as "free," one price is information about ourselves, which businesses use to market and sell their products online. As Chester (2007) noted, "Our online 'behavior' is closely followed and then shared... without our real consent" as "marketers...connect our cyberspace travels with information readily for sale by data-mining warehouses" (p. 128). Just as media companies realized they could make money by selling old newspapers in a digital format, so too businesses have realized the value of personal information that we freely give away as a condition of using their sites.

Second, we not only are witnessing the growing commercialization of the Internet, but possibly a dramatic and radical blurring of the lines between the commercial and private spheres of life. Several years ago Safeway came under great criticism for seeking to sell the buying habits of its customers, which it gathered from its computerized cash registers. Telemarketers called one too many families at home during dinner time, which resulted in the creation of the "no call" list. In the first instance, I can decide not to frequent Safeway any longer. In the second instance, with caller ID I can screen calls during the evening and not permit the marketing representative into my home.

With the case of Google's profiling software, though, the only way to keep Google or other such service providers from tracking what my son does online in our living room is to forbid him to connect to the Internet. Again, let me resort to the place metaphor. The computer or game console can be imagined as a door out of one's home into a public or commercial realm. Thus, if my son chooses to exit our home via the Internet, he is doing so knowingly and needs to realize the terms under which he is agreeing to do so. On the other hand, few people would invite marketers into their homes and permit them to leave a means (known in the online world as "cookies") to track their behavior in the physical public or commercial realm.

The Google example, then, not only raises a host of public policy issues worthy of discussion, but also a need to find ways to socialize young people for life in an emerging digital society. As Chester concluded, the public interest gets lost amidst this battle of media titans. His concern leads me to wonder again if a tools approach has caused us to overlook the Internet's potential as a democratic commons, one where users not only are made aware of the implications of such matters on their online lives, but are able to

engage in public discussion about them and are informed of ways to act upon such public policy matters.

Placing Borders on the “Indefinite and Infinite”?

As Lemley (2003) articulated, the risk of using metaphors is that their application proves more limiting than illuminating. Such is possible with characterizing cyberspace as a place. One application of this metaphor can serve as the basis for arguing that the online environment is distinct from the offline one and requires a different set of standards when making decisions about it. A second application is to treat virtual space akin to real space and to apply the same regulations to both spaces.

Goldsmith (1998), who argued against cyberspace as a distinct place relative to international transaction stated,

Transactions in cyberspace involve real people in one territorial jurisdiction either (i) transacting with real people in other territorial jurisdictions or (ii) engaging in activity in one jurisdiction that causes real-world effects in another territorial jurisdiction. To this extent, activity in cyberspace is functionally identical to transnational activity mediated by other means, such as mail or telephone or smoke signal. (p. 1239-1240)

Goldsmith also contended that extraterritorial regulation is “commonplace in the modern world” (p. 1239) and, therefore, the same rules applied to a physical place would apply to a virtual place. Again within the context of transactions between people, David Post (2002) countered that cyberspace was distinct from the real world in that

I can communicate an offer to sell some product or service: instantaneously (or nearly so); at zero marginal cost (or nearly so); to several million people; with near-zero probability of error in the reproduction or distribution of that offer; which can be stored, retrieved, and translated into another language by each of the recipients (instantaneously, and at zero marginal cost); and, to recipients who have the capability to respond to my offer (instantaneously, and at zero marginal cost). (p. 1374)

The distinctions between the offline and online environments pointed out by Post extend beyond such communication. Goldsmith made the argument that by the end of the 20th century legal “concepts of territorial sovereignty permit a nation to regulate the local effects of extraterritorial conduct even if this regulation produces spillover effects in other jurisdictions...” (p. 1212). Such conceptions were applicable in a time and place when such “local effects” typically could only be caused by large, cohesive groups, such as nations or businesses, entities that possessed a degree of “self-awareness” and the ability to make conscious choices. What happens when such local effects are the result of aggregated actions of thousands of discrete users?

Consider the Chinese government’s recent deal with Google in which, as the service provider for Chinese users, Google agreed to limit access to certain content. Although this action supports Goldsmith’s thesis in that the Chinese government sought out Google as the agent most responsible for the “local effects” (i.e., Chinese users engaging in transactions undesired by the government), it also proves the limitations of this late 20th-century model. Google is the biggest such service provider, but the number of smaller service providers, as well as the growth of diverse forms of social networking, suggests that such action by China is but a finger in the dike.

This example points out some of the other distinguishing features noted by Post: the scale of activities, which addresses not only the frequency of activities but also the number of users. Given the scale of online activities, assessing the effects of them with any precision is difficult. Since by its very nature all online activity is international, how do we determine where the government derives its authority to regulate such action?

Such features complement the associational nature of U.S. democratic society. As noted by Greenhill and Fletcher (2003),

electronic spaces can be, though not necessarily, participatory and interactive. The action of entering electronic social spaces makes any available electronic experience an immediate possibility without any definite confirmation of these possibilities, or even their existence. The user is, in effect, spatially located everywhere at once while being nowhere in particular. (A Map to Electronic Social Space section, para. 2)

Greenhill and Fletcher's (2003) characterization of electronic space as "indefinite and infinite while all the places within it remain instantaneously accessible" (2nd para.) leads me to consider the online environment as distinct from the offline one. The key here is the notion of the Internet as a social space, though one lacking in definition or borders except for those imposed upon it by those assembling there. Just as businesses are carving out online commercial places, so should citizens create public spaces.

Perils, Promise, and Potential of Democracy in a Digital Community

Just as language designed to define physical space does not necessarily capture the essence of virtual space, the same holds true for consideration of democracy within an online environment. Citizenship entails one's relation with the formal political system and with the larger civic society, particularly an online one. My attention is mostly focused on the larger online civic society, rather than the more specific online government. In doing so I potentially fail to address Martin and Chiodo's (2007) finding that students typically do not make the "connection between civic and political engagement" (p. 123), a finding supported by Flanagan and Faison (2001) and Galston (2001). Yet, Martin and Chiodo recognized that "civic engagement provides a foundation for political engagement" (p. 127). I am also sensitive to teachers' reluctance to engage students in the political system. In describing the potential of the Internet as a place for students to experience democracy, I will first address why a focus on e-government fails to make full use of the Internet's democratic features. I will next consider the idea of "e-democracy" within the online civic society and then address some of the democratic features of the online environment.

E-Government as a Form of E-Democracy – Why It Is Not Enough

The emergence of "e-government," typically presented in a stage model, has generated much discussion. Kampen and Snijkers (2003), for example, contend that e-government usually emerges in several steps. First, there is the establishment of a presence of government or governmental institutions on the Web, which is followed by the possibility of online transactions with government by citizens and businesses. A further step involves greater and greater interaction between citizens and government that extends beyond merely providing services. "Accelerated communication of citizens and politicians through the means of ICT [information and communication technology] will lead to increased participation of citizens in the making of policy in democratic nations" since such technologies offer "open unprecedented opportunities for interactions between

citizens and politicians” (p. 492). Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2003) identified four different approaches to e-government: electronic bureaucracy model, information model, populist model, and the civic society model. Moon (2002) acknowledged similar stages, but concluded that many governments as they proceed through the stage models of e-government typically “focus on Web-based public services (information provision and public service delivery) and do not include Web-based political participation and virtual democracy (online voting and public forums)” (p. 432). In describing the U.S. government’s progress in fulfilling the promise of e-government, Fountain (2001) stated,

The American government appears to be in the early phase of significant transformation as public managers begin to use the Internet and related information technologies in ways that affect coordination, control, and communication. Many of these developments hold the potential for substantial efficiency in producing and delivering information and services. (p. 241)

Thomas and Streib (2003) stated that the Internet is “an increasingly important vehicle for citizen-initiated contacts with government” (p. 97), which suggests the public’s growing realization of e-government’s interactive potential. VanFossen (2006) said, “Evidence has suggested that the Internet has begun to function as a communication network for grassroots organizations and activist networks” (p. 36), raising the prospect of the gradual emergence of Kakabadse et al.’s (2003) populist approach and Kampen and Snijkers’ (2003) interactive government approach.

For three reasons I am focusing on the larger civic setting, which is “neither the state nor the marketplace” (Center for Digital Democracy, Making the Internet Safe for Democracy section, para. 1). First, despite the glimmers of a more interactive e-government approach, e-government in the U.S. is still an unmet promise and is several steps behind the democratic potential represented by the Internet.

Second, the nature of online democracy tends to be a direct, as opposed to a representative, democracy model. Gaining experience in the former setting will not only aid students in acquiring knowledge and skills necessary to influence public policy in online and offline settings, but will also provide them with richer, broader and deeper democratic experiences.

Third, as in the example of Google, commercial interests are increasingly defining the nature of the Internet. If, as Habermas (Fraser, 1992) noted, the public sphere is a place for discursive rather than market relations, then students need to learn how to engage in this public or civic sphere in an online environment, particularly if they are to participate in a “debate about the future of the digital society” (Chester 2007, xv).

Coded for Democracy, or Not

Longford (2005) captured well both the relationship between the code and design of the Internet and the prospect of failing to clearly define the relationship and distinctions between online commercial and public space:

...the ways in which citizenship norms, rights, obligations and practices are *encoded* in the design and structure of our increasingly digital surroundings. To be more specific...at the level of technical design, the Internet and the World Wide Web regulate and *govern* users, enabling and cultivating certain conduct,

activities, and forms of life while simultaneously constraining and neutralizing others. (Introduction section, para. 1)

The code forming online commercial space on the most transparent level is intended to enable users to engage in business transactions, defining the users' role as that of a consumer. On the less transparent level, such as with the use of services like email or social networking sites, the user's association with the service providers is still as a consumer. A colleague learned this fact to his dismay when, after advising friends of his family's imminent move to New Hampshire, ads related to New Hampshire began popping up on his account. Although sites such as YouTube, (a grand example of a collective contribution to an online culture), and Amazon (which relies in part upon a user-driven rating system), contain many democratic features associated with an open-source environment, the code for such sites is written to serve a commercial not a public interest. Yet, as Winner (2005) noted,

From the founding of the republic to the present day the rhetoric of American politicians, businessmen, educators, and journalists has always praised the coming of new tools and systems, predicting that they would contribute not only substantial benefits in the power, efficiency and profit, but also revitalize democratic society, enabling citizens to command the political and economic resources to become more effectively self-governing. (p. 124)

Despite the concerns about the commercialization of the Web, Chester (2007) recognized the Internet as one such system: "The Internet is more than a marketing machine. It has revolutionized access to information, greatly enhanced free speech and communication, and given us tools for creative expression" (p. 147). Levine (2002) argued that certain features of the Internet, such as its convenience, would lead to more civic participation (p. 122) and that the Internet acts as a "massive town hall meeting" (p. 126). However, such features have resulted in misconceptions about the ability of the online environment to promote democracy. He suggested that the creation of an online commons (i.e., a space not subject to "competition and private ownership," p. 130) would represent "one of the most promising strategies for democratic renewal" and would serve as a means "to keep the Internet a publicly accessible space in which citizens create and share free public goods" (p. 137).

A Dynamic Coalition of the Internet Governance Forum, which is working on an Internet Bill of Rights, supports this idea:

The Internet is the widest public space that mankind ever has known. A space where everybody can have their say, acquire knowledge, create ideas and not just information, exercise their right to criticize, to discuss, to take part in the broader political life, and thus to build a different world of which everybody can claim to be an equal citizen. (p. 1)

If, as Parker (1996) wrote, democracy needs "cultivation," then we must realize that the Internet requires similar attention. Simply because the Internet's design is characterized by many democratic features does not ensure that it is democratic:

The Internet is also causing a new, big redistribution of power; that's why it is continuously under threat. In the name of security, liberties are restricted. In the name of a short-sighted market approach, chances of a fair access to knowledge are limited. Alliances between corporations and authoritarian States try to impose new forms of censorship. The Internet must not become an instrument to

better control the millions of people who use it, to grab personal information from people against their will, to seal the new forms of knowledge behind proprietary fences. (Parker, 1996, p. 1)

The Coalition further recommended,

To avert these dangers we cannot just be confident that the Internet will show its natural resiliency. It is due time to state some principles as part of the new planetary citizenship: freedom of access; freedom of use; right to knowledge; respect of privacy; recognition of new common goods. (p. 1)

Preparing young people as caretakers of the Internet would help “avert the dangers” but requires recognizing the unique nature of online democracy.

Democracy of Groups in an Open-Source Environment

Noveck (2005) asserted that in “groups we can do together what we cannot achieve alone” and that new technologies enable people to “become a group even without the benefit of a corporation or organization” so that they “can make decisions, own and sell assets...exercise meaningful power about national, state and local – indeed global – issues [and even] self-organize a political protest or campaign...” (p. 3). The result is that “groups will increasingly be able to go beyond social capital building to lawmaking” (p. 4). I concur with Noveck’s assessment and am placing the emphasis on promoting the enhancement of students’ ability to participate in a larger democratic online environment and not simply in relation to the government:

It is important to mention at the outset that this argument about groups re-centers a misguided debate we have had about so-called “e-democracy.” Electronic democracy theorists tend to focus either on the binary relationship between the individual and the state, ignoring the collaborative nature of public life, or they remain wedded to conceptions of deliberative democracy mired in an outdated technological reality that ignores the way groups work today. (p. 5)

She argued that the “power and limitations [of groups] depend on the tools at their disposal” but “we have consistently under-theorized the role of technology – and in turn the way technology creates the spatial, temporal and material conditions for interaction,” thus, changing “the calculus of group self-governance” (p. 7).

She is not alone in recognizing the Internet’s potential for collective empowerment. In describing freedom of expression within the context of the Internet, Balkin (2004) stated,

The idea of a democratic culture captures the inherent duality of freedom of speech. Although freedom of speech is deeply individual, it is at the same time deeply collective because it is deeply cultural....It is a network of people interacting with each other, agreeing and disagreeing, gossiping and shaming, criticizing and parodying, imitating and innovating, supporting and praising. People exercise their freedom by participating in the system. They participate by interacting with others and by making new meanings and new ideas out of old ones. ...As people express themselves, make music, create works of art, sing, gossip, converse, accuse, deny, complain, celebrate, enthuse, boast, and parody, they continually add something to the cultural mixture in which they believe. ...Through communicative interaction, through expression, through exchange, individual people become the architects of their culture. Building on what others

did before them and shaping the world that will shape them and those who follow them. And through this practice of interaction and appropriation, they exercise their freedom. (pp. 4-5)

Martin (2006) noted, "One of the most revolutionary characteristics of the Internet stems from its capacity to use the limited resources of an infinite number of interconnected subjects to generate networks with an unlimited aggregate capacity" (p. 5). This capacity harks back to the Internet's architecture and highlights a reason behind the struggle over its future. Benkler (2002), for example, stated, "The President's Information Technology Advisory Committee recommended that the federal government support open source software as a strategic national choice to sustain the U.S. lead in critical software development" (p. 371). Open source software fosters "commons-based production," where "very large aggregations of individuals independently scouring their information environment in search of opportunities to be creative in small or large increments" (pp. 375-376). Such software raises questions about use of intellectual property, thus, highlighting the distinction between property in the online public and commercial spheres. Such software also complements Noveck's democracy of groups since

Peer production provides a framework within which individuals who have the best information available about their own fit for a task can self-identify for the task...but only if the system develops some mechanism to filter out mistaken judgments that agents make about themselves. (p. 376)

Not surprisingly, "successful peer production systems," such as Wikipedia, "have a robust mechanism for peer review or statistical weeding out of contributions from agents who misjudge themselves" (p. 376).

Do we as citizenship educators have a duty to provide both for our students and for society? As educators we focus on the learner. Are we obligated to consider the collective impact of these individuals on the future society, an impact that arises out of their preparation for citizenship? If so, then by ignoring the associational nature of online life, the very nature of the American character that de Tocqueville considered essential to our democratic society, and failing to prepare young people for it, we may fail to prepare them for a collective or community-oriented online democratic life.

Why Create an Online Place That Serves the Public Interest in Citizenship Education?

Given the civic mission of schools, in general, and the importance of citizenship education to social studies, in particular, we may accept the premise that the Internet is a distinct place. If so, then our society is obligated to dedicate Internet space to serve the public interest to prepare the next generation for citizenship in an online environment.

Although such space already is provided to a degree (e.g., the electronic educational services and resources provided by a host of public agencies), no such publicly maintained democratic commons is specifically geared toward learners. If we have dedicated "brick and mortar" space for citizenship education in the offline environment to prepare learners for civic life in that environment, why not dedicate virtual space for a similar endeavor, specifically geared toward civic action in an online environment?

I propose the creation of a national town commons open to K-12 students established as an .edu site or a series of .edu sites. The site would serve as a democratic commons where young people might engage in discussion of school or local, national, or global concerns. Such a commons also might serve as a means for young people to post calls for action and

reports on actions taken, provide information about themselves or the community in which they live, and the list goes on.

I realize the perils of such a site, though I hope the questions and concerns do not diminish discussion about the idea itself. Concerns over cyber safety have not resulted in calls to eliminate young people's access to the Internet, nor have incidents of school violence resulted in calls to close schools. I would hope that concerns over cyber safety in a democratic commons for young people do not prevent consideration of the commons in itself.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) indicated that only 46% of schools permit student access to the school intranet. The schools' growing hesitancy to permit students to go online reveals both a failure to recognize the importance of creating such a place and a sign of a growing digital disconnect between young people's online out-of-school lives and their offline in-school lives. This situation highlights the need for an online democratic commons dedicated solely to students, a place where students learn both how to protect themselves and how to prosper and be proactive online.

Why What Exists Is Not Sufficient – Commercial v. Public Interest Space

Certain aspects of the Internet's architecture are innately democratic. What is YouTube but a grand, global expression of free speech? What are sites like Facebook and MySpace but avenues for individuals to act upon the associational nature of our democratic culture? As Rheingold (2006) noted, simply because those qualities are inherent in the Internet's nature does not mean that users will exercise them in this manner. Students need opportunities to learn about online democratic practices and experiences in online democracy. Numerous sites serve the public interest, but resources and economy of scale prevent them from providing either the range of services offered by a typical public school or from ensuring the adequacy or longevity of such services. The National Archives is a great example of the former, representing the gold standard of digitized primary sources and supporting educational resources, yet its services are (rightfully) tightly focused. The latter is best illustrated by those sites that provide a rich array of services one month, but are gone the next.

If sites now serving a limited public interest in citizenship education are insufficient, then why not use commercial sites? Why reinvent the wheel? The simple answer is that such sites primarily are intended to earn the providers a profit, not serve the public interest. Chester (2007) argued that, though such providers have promised to devote resources to serve the public interest, their record is less than exemplary. This question is akin to asking why hold school in a publicly owned building as opposed to a Wal-Mart or Toys 'R Us. Why should we expect service providers to meet a need that the public in the form of the government should address?

Socialization in an Online Democratic Community

Here is where conceiving of the Internet as a place is critical, but also where I become limited by my past experiences, which impedes my ability to imagine the Internet as a distinct place and my ability to characterize it. On the one hand, Greenhill and Fletcher's (2003) characterized the Internet as "indefinite and infinite while all the places within it remain instantaneously accessible." On the other hand, Coleman (2004) characterized the Internet as a community: The "traditional idea of community was characterised by parochial belongings and shared ethical and emotional commitments" where "community was conceived as a bounded enclave, with narrow filters of entry and badly-marked exit

signs,” while in the online environment, “interpersonal networks are increasingly a matter of choice rather than a consequence of geography.”

In this characterization, first, there is the removal of the physical nature of community, which raises the question of whether preparing young people for life in virtual communities solely in a physical environment (i.e., a classroom) is sufficient. Second, Coleman characterized online communities as social entities, harking back to Noveck’s idea about the democracy of groups. In offline communities we can choose to live physically in a place located in a community, but this choice does not necessarily reflect a desire to become a participating member of that community. We become part of the online community for social reasons and, therefore, out of a desire to interact with others.

Coleman also included the element of choice, which is at the heart of a democratic culture. As Lessig (2004) noted, “Democratic culture is about individual liberty as well as collective self-governance; ...each individual’s ability to participate in the production & distribution of culture.” What is more democratic than acting upon our associational nature by choosing to participate in social networks and exercise freedom of expression? Here, though, I now butt up against the “indefinite,” “infinite,” and “instantaneous” nature of the Internet. These aspects highlight not only the Internet’s potential, but also why we find a certain comfort in a “bounded enclave, with narrow filters of entry and badly-marked exit signs” (Lessig, 2004).

Pornographic sites, misuse of copyrighted material, cyber-stalkers, and mistaken divulgence of personal information are but a few of the concerns raised by this indefinite and infinite place. If such problems exist, why not create a publicly supported, protected online place in which the Internet’s democratic features are embedded in the site’s architecture—the equivalent of an online laboratory of democracy for students? In turn, the site’s purposes and the democratic principles embedded in the design may serve to define this online community. At the very least, by defining this space as an online democratic community of learners, we would take the first step in recognizing the importance of socializing young people in both an offline and an online democratic society.

Virtual Citizenship Education

Such a virtual space would provide learners with an academic setting to learn about and act upon democratic practices that address not only the participatory approach to citizenship, but the justice-oriented one as well. As Bers and Chau (2006) concluded, “There is a lack of research on how technology-based interventions particularly aimed at fostering civic engagement can promote participation not only in the virtual world, but also in the face-to-face world” (p. 2).

During work on a pilot project, Bers and Chau explored whether “the Internet can provide a safe space for youth to experiment with civic life by forming on-line communities” (p. 2). They created a virtual community inhabited solely by youth, where the “focus goes beyond procedural aspects of democracy to the many facets of deliberative democracy, such as the ability to participate in civic actions like community service” (p. 5). Their construct embodied the participatory model of citizenship, but by building the design primarily around a virtual community disconnected from the real world, the learners were asked only to act upon matters that arose within the context of their community and did not include the social and political matters that arise in the real world.

Although this is an appropriate beginning point for younger students, older students need to connect their virtual experiences to real-life social issues. As they recognized, their pilot program represented a “stepping stone for civic engagement and civic development in the face-to-face world” (p. 14). They envisioned their program as a means to an end, that is, use of the virtual environment to foster engagement in the “face-to-face world,” rather than as an end in itself. They might agree with Coleman (2006) that, in order for “democratic citizenship to really benefit from online interaction, however, a more democratically expansive strategy is required than what now is practiced” (p. 258).

Giving Shape to a Virtual Laboratory of Democracy

A virtual laboratory of democracy would allow learners to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for civic engagement as they engage with justice-oriented matters. I will address some of the barriers raised earlier, suggest what might characterize such a place, offer an example that fits with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) participatory and justice-oriented citizen models, and close with a discussion of a student bill of digital learning rights as part of the site’s architecture.

Overcoming Barriers and Establishing Principles

First, given our tools approach, we need to move beyond considering the Internet “as a form of broadcasting, in which youth ‘audiences’ can be trained to interact with [adults]” (Coleman, 2006, p. 258). We must consider the Internet as a network where “people are communicating in fluid and uncontested ways” (p. 258). Failing to recognize the Internet’s social networking capacity causes us to overlook why so many young people are attracted to it. Ironically, the very features of the Internet that youth find so attractive (i.e., to communicate and socialize) are defining elements of our democratic society—freedom of expression and the right to associate. We must help them learn how to act upon these features in a manner that serves not merely social functions, but the public interest.

Second, given our concern over addressing controversial issues in the classroom, “we need to help young people realize that being a democratic citizen is about disagreement as well as consensus...and [that]the best way to do this is to encourage online interactions that go beyond cozy simulations of managed e-citizenship” (Coleman, p. 258). Here is where grounding one’s self in a particular approach to citizenship and sound instructional pedagogy is critical.

Avoiding controversial issues seems possible with a personally responsible citizen approach, but such seems oxymoronic with a participatory and particularly with a justice-oriented approach. The challenge is designing the site so educators and students can select controversial issues that better align with the desires and interests of the community, drawing upon the work of Evans and Saxe (1996) and Parker and Zumeta (1999). Ultimately, it should be “up to young people to set the terms of their own political debate, without external censorship,” though this “does not mean that there should be an absence of agreed upon rules of participation or moderation of debate, but that such controls should be consensual, transparent and accountable” (Coleman, 2006, p. 260).

Third, “digital citizenship entails a more multi-layered, open-ended notion of political interaction that more often than not strays some distance from the traditional preoccupations of instrumental politics” (Coleman, 2006, p. 259). Realizing the concerns over student involvement in the political realm, creating “online democratic spaces for young people” where they are “encouraged to develop horizontal channels of interaction

through which networks and collective associations can be formed, as well as vertical channels, providing dialogical links to various institutions that have power over young people's lives" (Coleman, 2006, p. 260) would serve as a means for students to gain limited political experience.

The site could relay

a broad conception of politics that embraces traditional questions of power, inequality, organization and ideology, but does not exclude everyday political experience, such as the negotiation of feelings and sensitivities, the governance of spaces and relationships, the nature of and political status of children, adults and youth, and the many intersections between popular culture and power. (Coleman, 2006, p. 261)

If not addressing and acting upon social issues congruent with a justice-oriented approach to citizenship, students should, at least, have opportunities to become civically engaged in a manner aligned with the participatory approach.

Finally, given that virtually all schools now have access to the Internet, the notion of creating a virtual lab or community for students begins to address the disconnect between the classroom and the community. Such a site not only should be founded on democratic principles, but also provide opportunities to act upon such principles. Just as importantly, such a site should serve an online socialization purpose.

If such is the case, what if participation in the site required agreement to a social contract? In turn, what if users assumed partial responsibility for ensuring that the terms of the contract were honored? I am neither idealistic nor naïve enough to ignore the dramatic limitations of such a proposal, yet do users not routinely enter into such agreements?

I am reminded of a recent class session during a graduate course where during a presentation on Socratic seminar two students presented the rest of the class with a copy of the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA." Though everyone had listened to the song numerous times, few knew the lyrics and, thus, did not "know" the song. My point here is that if such a site is to serve the ultimate purpose of familiarizing learners with digital citizenship in an online and offline environment, then we must place value in knowing about the social contract that forms the foundation of our democratic society, as well as about the idea of agreeing to a set of ideals and individual responsibility both to act upon them and to change them when necessary.

Froomkin (2003) stated that "the Internet is an orderly anarchy" (p. 756), but he also asserted "that the Internet is a complex, predominantly self-regulating system" (p. 755). If such is the case, then we need to prepare the next generation for assuming responsibility for regulating that system.

Digital Learning Rights

Given the principles outlined in this paper, I suggest framing the idea of a virtual laboratory within the context of what students should expect when participating in such a lab—a bill of digital learning rights for students (see Figure 1). Ultimately, the "bill" is more a rhetorical device to emphasize the importance of meeting these expectations for students than a proposal for legally enforceable rights for K-12 students. The bill also serves as a way to begin considering the borders of this electronic space.

Bill of Digital Learning Rights

- Freedom of expression in an online environment
- Right to assemble in online environment for educational and civic purposes
- Freedom of access to appropriate and relevant online information
- Equitable access to the Internet and to the digital tools needed for learning
- Equitable opportunities to engage in global learning in an online environment
- Right to digital privacy
- Right to a digitally safe environment
- Equitable opportunities to contribute to an online democratic commons
- Equitable opportunities to engage in digital civic action

Figure 1. *Bill of Digital Learning Rights.*

These expectations capture some of the Internet's essential democratic features (freedom of expression, right of association, freedom of access to information, and equitable opportunity to contribute to the online democratic commons), while ensuring users' protection by acknowledging concerns about their privacy and safety while online. Finally, given the Internet's global nature and its capacity to promote civic participation and social change, we ought to guarantee opportunities for young people to act upon both.

Imagining a Laboratory of Democracy

Knowing that direct democracy does not scale well, I envision some possible features of such a site and leave for a later discussion questions about scale and technical specifications. Imagine going to a site where students first encounter the site's version of Ellis Island and are given a tutorial about the site by a U.S. historical figure of their choice. Upon the conclusion of the tutorial students create a digital avatar and then review and electronically sign the social contract. Upon completing the entry requirements, students enter a community commons where they encounter "buildings" that serve the purposes and functions described. The purposes and functions of several buildings are described as follows within the context of acting upon Ken Burns' oral history project (which aligns with the participatory citizen approach) and an effort to help former child soldiers become acclimated to their new lives (which aligns with the justice-oriented approach). These ideas provide a rough, initial sketch of such a site and are designed to begin a discussion about how to provide students with invaluable learning experiences in online democracy.

1. ***Town Hall Meeting Place.*** This forum called Town Hall Meeting Place might serve multiple purposes, such as an orientation center, a beginning point for online socialization, a source of information about what is occurring within the site as a whole, a map of the site, and an opportunity to engage in informal discussions about current events and the contemporary issues embedded in them. Here is where participants might first learn about the oral history and child soldiers' projects.

2. **Research Center.** The Research Center is the easiest part to imagine as a place for users to begin their research on either an issue assigned in an offline class or an issue that caught their attention in the Town Hall. This site also might provide for more learner-friendly research material than is typically found online. Many government sites that focus on providing information to the public also provide sites for K-12 students, but often the information provided at such sites is geared more to teachers than youth. The online Research Center should provide content-rich materials that address the age appropriateness of the site's users. In turn, if one of the values of the online democratic commons is the ability for users to generate material and contribute to the online democratic culture, ala Wikipedia and YouTube, why not initiate such efforts in this research center?

Here is where an oral history project might serve the site well. What if there was a review process where the best student-developed material was posted on the site for those interested in researching World War II? To help place this in context, consider the quality of many entries at the state and national level in History Day. Such projects rarely reach an audience beyond those immediately involved. What if such students were allowed to contribute their projects to the Research Center? In addition, consider the importance of the child soldier issue and the difficulty educators would have in finding age appropriate research material for high school (let alone middle school) students. Even a site such as the United Nations' Cyber School Bus site, which hosts a child soldier project, has online materials designed more for teachers than for learners.

3. **Public Issues Information Center.** The Information Center is intended to complement the Research Center. Whereas the Research Center has more of the trappings of the traditional library, this site could make fuller use of the Internet's social capacity, such as through the use of blogs, podcasts, and virtual conferences. As national or global issues emerged during a school year, experts in the public and private sectors could be asked to maintain a blog, give a podcast, or even participate in a virtual conference. In turn, a learner-generated media center could combine these elements.

As Froomkin (2003) noted, "blogs represent one of the latest examples of the Internet's democratization of publishing," which "illustrate how ease of publishing can stimulate debate" (p. 856), a depiction shared by Griffiths (2004). Since "bloggers often read and react to each other's work," the result may be "a new commons of public, if not necessarily always deeply deliberate, debate" (pp. 857-858). *Slashdot* is a leading example of a community-based (and community-creating) discussion forum with collaborative filtering. Given the diminishing number of WWII veterans, several could possibly maintain blogs or participate in an online video interview on a periodic basis.

At this center, imagine learning about child soldiers not only from experts in the field, but from former child soldiers, themselves. Such youth might discuss not only their experiences as soldiers, but what they are encountering as they seek to reintegrate into their former or new community. In turn, the students participating in the online discussion with such youth might seek to learn how they might assist either those youth, in particular, or child soldiers in general.

4. **Editorial and Student-Centered Discourse Center.** As users become more informed about an issue, they might move to this Center and go to a part of the site where other users are engaged in a deeper discussion about an issue and are willing to go on record with reasoned opinions about that issue. Although such editorials might start out as representative of one person's thinking, they may

take on more of the character of a group of people with shared thinking. Use of a Wiki, which is authoring software that permits collaborative documents, offers a means for those with common interests and thinking to engage in a discourse, one informed by reference to other Wikis that are representative of different thinking on the same issue. As Froomkin (2003) noted, "The process of creating these documents is a form of discourse, and the finished, or continually evolving, products are themselves contributions to larger discourses" (p. 856).

The Center might have an electronic voting feature that permits opinion polls regarding the issues of most importance or straw votes on how to frame such issues. Here, participants might discuss the role played by veterans of World War II and the reasons for capturing their contributions in an oral history project, which might address questions about why learning history is important. Participants might discuss the use of children as soldiers and whether those in the U.S. should assume any responsibility for such youth or use the issue of child soldiers as a springboard for a larger discussion about what is justified to do in war. To ensure the users a safe, comfortable environment in which to engage in a free flowing discussion, places such as this require a greater degree of security and monitoring than many other places on the site.

5. **Civic Engagement Project Center.** In the Civic Engagement Project Center students would congregate to work on specific projects. Such projects might be as small as conducting online interviews with World War II veterans or as large as creating an oral history exhibit of World War II veterans from across the globe. Such a center might provide exit points if participants need to stay online but exit this particular site to continue work on the project. With the child soldier project, for example, students might choose to work with the Invisible Children project (<http://www.invisiblechildren.com/home.php>), which is an ongoing project dedicated to helping former child soldiers acclimate to a new life.

The intent of the site is to complement, not replace, ongoing online efforts seeking to address such social issues or offering youth invaluable ways to become civically engaged. In turn, the site could spawn new such efforts that are either addressed solely within the context of the site or, where appropriate, are better addressed as an independent site outside of, but possibly still linked to, the lab. As with the Editorial and Discourse Center, this part of the site would require a greater degree of security and oversight. Access to projects might require a password and as projects reach a certain size or duration might require an application. This Center harks back to an earlier piece where I proposed learners working together as an ongoing research group, one characterized by the Internet's indefinite and instantaneous nature, rather than that of time limits and class periods of the school day.

6. **Public Notice Board.** The Public Notice Board either might stand as a separate center or as part of the Town Hall or Public Issues Information Center. Here, an interactive part of the lab could permit users to post their proposed plans for a project or information about finished projects. Although access to students' projects in progress should be in a more secure portion of the lab to lessen the likelihood of cyber vandalism, a YouTube-type Public Notice Board would prove invaluable. A group might make a video about its plan for a project and use the Board as an invitation for other users to review and comment on their plan. Similarly, a group might post a video invitation to attend the unveiling of a completed project. Although not necessarily attracting a global audience, at the very least the group might use the Board to advise family and friends of their "showing."

7. **Service Center.** In the Service Center organizations dedicated to a public service might present information and seek volunteers. The Schools for Schools project (<http://s4s.invisiblechildren.com/>), for example, might offer information about its efforts to assist child soldiers. Obviously, a screening process is necessary for the privilege of promoting one's organization. This center might work from a user rater system, where those who have volunteered with each organization in the past are able to complete an evaluation form and post their responses on the site.
8. **Public Hearing Meeting Hall.** One result of users' work on an issue could be a call for action. Such a call might be, for example, either to initiate an electronic petition in response to a national or global concern or to address a localized matter, such as a failing of the site's electronic social contract. The Hall would be the place where engagement moves from the larger civic sphere to a more focused state or political sphere, which is why it should be separated from the Public Issues Information Center.

At times participants will need to address governance concerns, concerns that might require not simply discussion but action. Such action though might require "decisionmaking concerning fundamental issues of Internet [or site] management (including both technical matters and issues of social propriety)" (Froomkin, p. 754). Rundle (2005) argued that "there is no guarantee – legal or technological – that free and democratic principles will reign in the networked world" (p. 19). Therefore, this latter feature, where students assume some responsibility for governing themselves, might serve as one of the most critical ones.

9. **Community Center Building.** The Community Center Building could serve as a social networking place where participants go primarily for social purposes. As with a regular school, this venue might serve as for a variety of social functions.

Conclusion

I fully realize that, at first blush, the scope of what I propose is overwhelming. I hark back to an earlier time, a time when young people such as my sister were unable to secure a public education. She contracted polio when she was seven and has needed the aid of a wheelchair ever since. Initially, the school system was unable to accommodate her. Fortunately for her, technology eventually came to her rescue via a two-way intercom system between her bedroom and each of her classrooms.

In hindsight, maybe some of my thinking arises from her experience, since she engaged in a "virtual school" of her time. Back then, though, the prospect of accommodating her and so many other young people with needs outside the social norm seemed a daunting task, one which too many people were all too willing to dismiss as impossible to achieve. All she wanted was an education, and she has since obtained a master's degree, adopted four young girls from India, and now writes federal regulations regarding how to accommodate those with special needs. I shudder to think what her life, and others like hers, would have been like if educators at the time had listened only to those who said meeting her needs was an impossible task.

In posing the creation of a virtual laboratory of democracy from the vantage point of what young people today need to prepare for citizenship in a digital society of tomorrow, I am reminded of Coleman's (2006) call for "an open debate about what young people want from the democratic process and how they would like to use the technologies of

communication with which they are familiar” (p. 261). Although he was speaking of the debate itself, I take Coleman’s thinking one step further and suggest that a virtual lab is “a risky, exciting, and highly creative exercise in planning for the next generation of democratic citizens” (p. 261). Such a proposal represents a leap into the future, into a place yet unknown, but I believe the leap is necessary and well worth taking.

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