
Reimagining Civic Education

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Abstract

With the vibrant political landscape today, new civic actions have become more visible and are mobilizing the entire world. This landscape reflects society's need to be heard, for a diversity of voices to be accounted for, and highlights the problem of inequality in institutional politics and representation today. With the need for new modes of participating comes a new type of citizenship that promotes collaboration, participatory politics, and transcends ties to a nation-state. Digital technologies have become integral to how we define community and interact with one another across borders and on a global scale. We found an opportunity in this context to reduce the civic engagement gap in U.S. public high schools as a fundamental aspect of addressing the inequality present in the public sphere. How might we promote new forms of critical engagement in New York public schools that embody a new type of citizenship? A change in definitions follows from a change in how we act. In this project we attempted to do both; to propose a new definition of citizenship, and to offer at the same time a new mode of acting on this model within U.S. public high schools.

Author Keywords

Participatory Design, Cultural Production, Citizenship, Counter-Narratives



Figure 1: Exploring concepts and forms for a new type of citizenship through a participatory design workshop. October, 2017.



Figure 2: Tools that were co-designed with students that became part of the larger civic education redesign.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

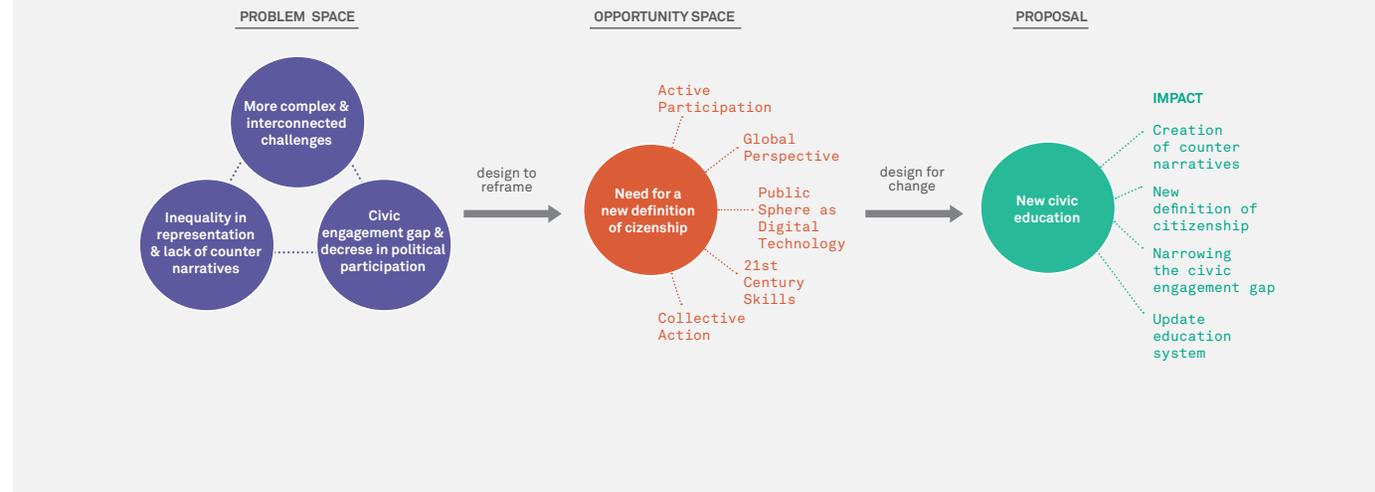
Introduction

The challenges and political questions we face today are more complex, interconnected and interdependent than those in the past. Today's problems span across economic, geopolitical, social, cultural, scientific, and environmental spaces and have greater global implications than in the past. These complex conditions require new approaches to addressing challenges and new ways of participating within society. With the need for new modes of participating comes a new type of citizenship that promotes collaboration, participatory politics, and transcends ties to a nation-state. Digital technologies have become integral to how we define community and interact with one another across borders and on a global scale. These new avenues for the public voice live within digital technology and infrastructure and blur boundaries, borders, and give people access to information and tools to organize in informal and participatory ways.

We define political engagement as any action that challenges current systems of authority, and we can find different examples of this engagement in forms such as protests, community gardens, activist projects, and social groups. We align with Jacques Ranciere when he defined politics for our project. He states that "Politics are the dynamic events and exchanges in which those without a voice in the dominant culture express and make heard, or 'sensible' what has been repressed, precluded or censored within political regimes." (1)(2). However, there is increasing inequality and lack of diversity represented in

governance, in institutions, and in news outlets. We note this inequality in power in the recent election with Trump's majority white male cabinet, in the rise of influence of fake news, and in the decrease of local news. This shows that the privileged few have the power to influence public opinion. Rebecca Solnit summarizes it well when she states, "Making an injury visible and public is often the first step in remedying it, and political change often follows culture, as what was long tolerated is seen to be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious. Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard." (3) An inclusive liberal democratic society depends on everybody's participation and voice. This analysis of an inclusive society and the need for a reframing of citizenship and the public sphere open an opportunity to broaden the notion of citizenship and challenge traditional notions of the public sphere as achieved through formal methods of voting, deliberation, and consensus-building (4,2).

To begin to frame an opportunity space for our design intervention, and guide our ongoing research we used a hypothesis: We believe that empowering youth toward civic participation is central to building a more inclusive democratic society. Youth voices and needs are not represented, and those from underserved communities are especially not heard. The traditional notion of citizenship contains meanings of membership, rights, and belonging framed by nation-states and have attached to it many historical connotations of marginalization towards low-income and immigrant populations. For example, the right to vote was once only granted to only those of certain races, classes, genders, or those who own property. To us, citizenship is not about being tied to a nation-state, holding a



passport, or about the act of voting; rather it is more about having the skills and experiences for effective and productive participation to not just sustain, and more importantly to improve society and to take ownership over cultural production. This improvement involves solidarity, collaboration, celebration of difference, critical engagement, and sharing of voice. The education system has had a historic responsibility in the development of preparing youth to become critical and active participants in society. Today, these new realities are not reflected in U.S. public schools. The framework to assess civic learning in public schools has centered on knowledge of principles, ideas such as patriotism, the formation of laws, and processes of institutions rather than about preparing youth to engage in today's complex political landscape critically (5).

We found an opportunity in this context to reduce the civic engagement gap in U.S. public schools as a fundamental aspect of addressing the inequality present in the public sphere. How might we promote new forms of critical engagement in New York public schools that embody a new type of citizenship?

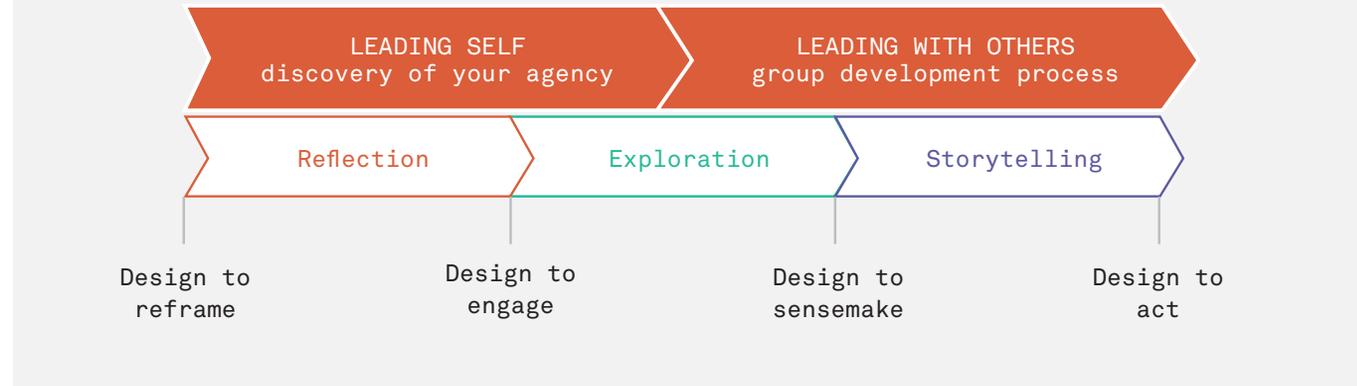
Project

Our proposal is a civic engagement program for New York youth in public schools that promotes students reflection around their personal position on political questions, exploration of civic topics in relation to their life, and the creation of counter-narratives using various media to promote cultural production. Our thesis project aims to demonstrate how the creation of self-made artifacts can be transformative, both individually and collectively. The program provides frameworks and creates an environment for individual voices to surface, to investigate diverse perspectives, and create media artifacts that question the status quo of ownership in narratives and generates a shared sense of purpose. Through this thesis, we speak for new forms of political participation and new tools to bridge learning between the classroom and the student's life outside the classroom.

This project responds to the civic engagement gap that is fundamental in addressing the inequality in cultural production and representation. It is designed for students aged 14 - 20, to be implemented in middle and high school advisory class (also known as homeroom), and also to integrate moments outside of



Figures 3-6: Students using the various tools to create counter narratives on civic questions.



school in afterschool programs, at home, and in the student's extracurricular activities. The program promotes self-directed exploration of civic topics through the creation of media artifacts. It works on three stages - reflection where students position themselves and form an opinion on civic questions and current events, exploration to gain an outside perspective and situate the topic in their daily life, and storytelling to reframe their opinion through the process of crafting a narrative from their research and share youth's voice. This program mirrors frameworks from both youth development models and leadership development which emphasizes the need to move from leading oneself before leading others. We are presenting a continuous program, but the designed methods tools we created have the ability to support and contribute to other initiatives.

The goals of our program are to develop students confidence and self-efficacy to build their learning path, to promote their exploration of interests and passions about civic themes, to produce counter-narratives, share their perspective, and to connect individual voice to a collective sense of purpose. We want to move youth away from dependency and lack of agency towards independence and self-determination through engagement with civic topics.

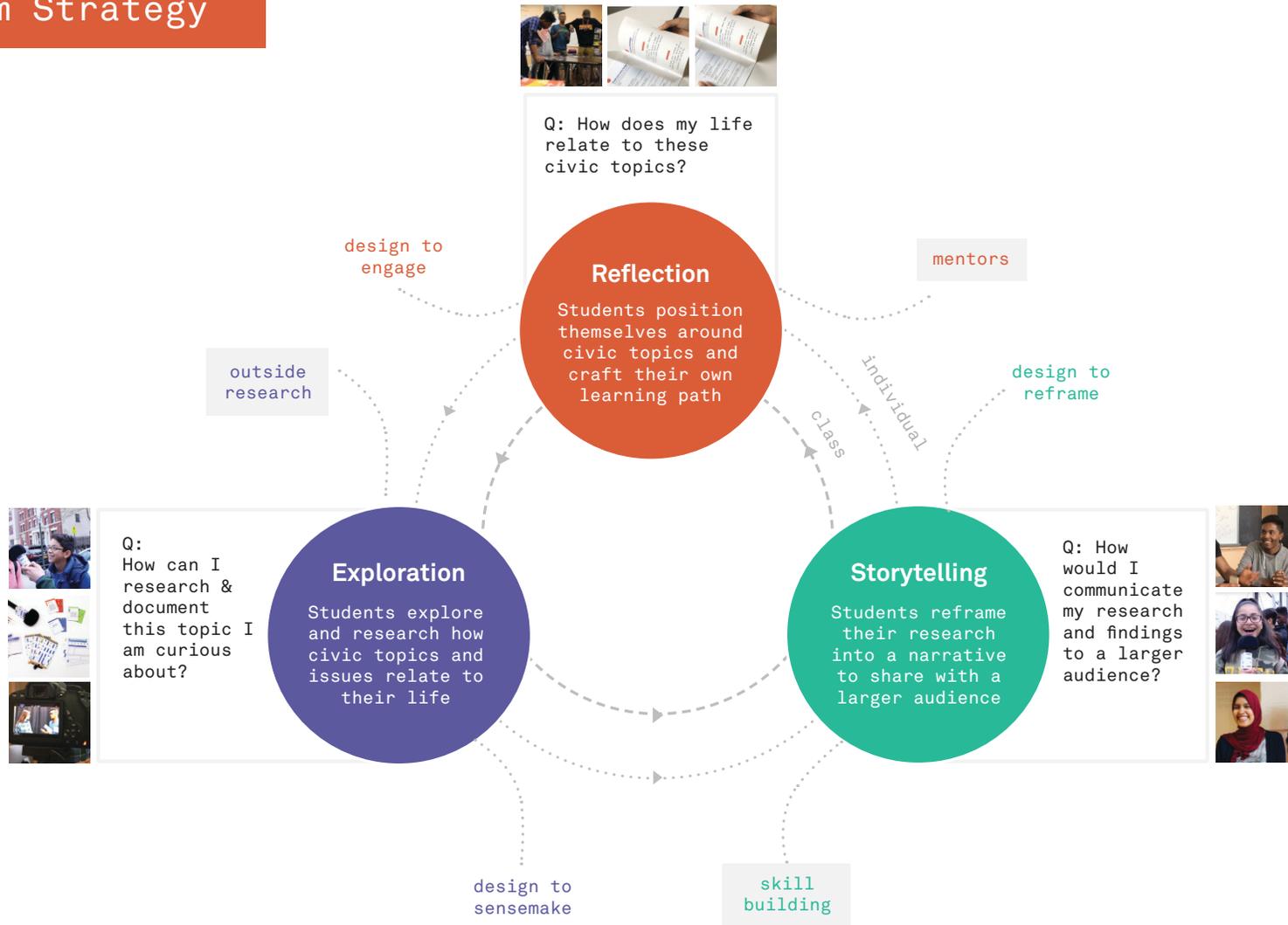
The first direct output of the program is youth-made media artifacts documenting their reflection and

exploration of civic themes and current events. These media artifacts can take a variety of forms: writing, video, audio, drawing, photography, or new mixed-media that the students explore while researching the current event. The second output of the program is a collective media piece created by the class. While in the classroom together, the group of students bring the research documentation together to create a class narrative of their research and process. Through the act of reframing the materials created by each student, the group creates something that represents their collective voice.

Transdisciplinary Design

This thesis project is an example of how a Transdisciplinary Design approach can be fundamental in addressing complex problems that span across disciplinary spaces. When we say Transdisciplinary Design, we mean an approach to tackling a problem that designs for values, axioms, and principles, rather than objectives. In another way, Transdisciplinary Design to us is the design of processes and approach to a challenge. How this translates into our project is seen within the methodologies and strategies we used to define the problem, to narrow to our opportunity space, and to imagine possible ways that design interventions could play a role in testing our hypothesis. Today's complex problems require new approaches outside of traditional disciplinary structures. Having a systemic perspective that recognizes not just the concrete

Program Strategy



problem of curricula in education, but the factors that influence youth, culture, and the foundation of our education system allowed us to connect insights from different spaces and understand the living ecosystem influencing today's institutions. We learned of the lived experience, frustrations, dreams and passions of the different people involved in our problem space. Our

design research and participatory approach helped challenge our assumptions and take the work in new directions. Analyzing the problem from different perspectives helped us frame our social question in a new light and opened up new possibilities and connections. The systemic lens allowed us to see multiple scales. Being able to move from the design



Figure 7: Student contributing to interactive survey regarding media, technology, and how it relates to civic topics.

intervention to the larger social question helped us fill gaps in the logic, and see how a nudge in the system can transform the root issues that generate inequalities.

Through the thesis process, we have strengthened and developed the values and ethics of our practice – such as openness, transparency, equity – which is of particular importance when dealing with sensitive social questions. Our design practice involves having an awareness that relies on the context and insights to guide our way forward. It is the participation, ownership, values, and worldviews of everyone who has a stake in the outcome that helps us guide what design interventions are relevant for the problem-space. This approach helped us gain trust with a group of students and organizations, engage collaborations differently, make beneficiaries part of the process, and work on something that addresses the characteristics of the environment and existing needs. We believe that this

new design approach - that calls on designers to take new roles and engage in strategic questions - provides the perspective to narrow and frame a proposal that is meaningful to the people that will be most impacted by this work.

Design provides a strong foundation in which to explore, speculate, and question the world around us through materiality. We believe that design and materiality act as a vehicle for thinking and imagining because we can see how it concretely and tangibly fits into our reality. By introducing something new through design and materiality, we can interact and make decisions around the new interventions in a way that creates new modalities of thinking, new concepts, new terms, and new worlds. One way we used design to spark a new type of thinking was by creating the conditions for making. With the students, we used design tools to create the conditions for playful making to occur. Through making, we imagined different futures and crafted new narratives. We were able to expand the boundaries of the problem to a more exciting and innovative space because the students were able to share complex insights around motivations and thoughts of the future through the playful conditions of cultural production. By creating these new circumstances for creative capacities through design, a new type of critical thinking was used within the classroom. This thesis demonstrates design's full potential to provoke and ignite critical thinking within new settings.

Conclusion

A change in definitions follows from a change in how we act. In this project we attempted to do both; to propose a new definition of citizenship, and to propose

at the same time a new mode of acting on this model within U.S. public high schools. We upheld the Transdisciplinary process in our ongoing research and adaptations, exposing new forms and futures as we progressed on our project. As we followed an open-ended process - letting the discoveries guide us without a predefined outcome in mind - we found a unique opportunity space that questioned citizenship and how we act on it through a new approach to the civic engagement gap. We see our thesis and the future projects making three main contributions: how design can be used to address education by bridging learning spaces, how design is used to translate individual voice into larger collective movement, and how design can be used to create the conditions for new types of thinking and cultural production. We came to the program to find new ways to apply design and to seek new perspectives to construct more equitable and inclusive realities. We cannot build upon the same foundations but introduce new ones. We found a space to use design to provoke, empower and bring people together in creative ways, putting forward a more conscious design practice.

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