

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

THE INTERNET AND CIVIC OUTCOMES: NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Many CIRCLE documents have cited the gap in civic engagement between those youth who have college experience and those who do not.¹ Recent research shows that schools may be contributing to this gap.² However, a report, the *2008 Civic Health Index*, found that new media, such as email, social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook), Youtube, and text messaging, represent possible avenues for youth with no college experience to participate in civic life. The 2008 survey showed a much smaller gap in civic engagement levels between young people with and without college experience when it came to indicators such as “using a social networking site for civic purposes” and “commenting on blogs.”³

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND HOW YOUNG PEOPLE WITHOUT COLLEGE EXPERIENCE ARE USING THE INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY, WE INTERVIEWED STAFF FROM YOUTHBUILD USA, AN ADULT LEARNING CENTER IN VERMONT, A COUNTY CORRECTIONAL FACILITY IN PENNSYLVANIA, AND A COMMUNITY-BASED ARTS AND EDUCATION CENTER IN KENTUCKY.

To better understand how young people without college experience are using the internet and technology, we interviewed staff from YouthBuild USA, an adult learning center in Vermont, a county correctional facility in Pennsylvania, and a community-based arts and education center in Kentucky. While all four organizations used the internet or technology for educational purposes, they used them in various degrees and in different ways with different outcomes. Following are excerpts from the interviews with the four groups. All of the practitioners who contributed to this article work with young people who do not have college experience.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE?

YouthBuild USA: Maanav Thakore is the National Mentoring Manager at YouthBuild USA. “In YouthBuild programs, low-income young people ages 16-24 work toward their GEDs

or high school diplomas, learn job skills and serve their communities by building affordable housing.”⁴ The education and construction components of YouthBuild programs are embedded in a leadership development model that encourages young people to take responsibility for improving their lives and their communities.

In May, the Graduate Leadership Development Department at YouthBuild USA began producing “YouthBuild TV,” a live, interactive web-based television show for the network of 226 local YouthBuild programs, with 20 to 40 youth per site. Maanav sees YBTV as a “popular education tool” that will engage current students and graduates on the issues that are relevant to their lives. Programming includes: discussions of world issues, portraits of successful graduates, mini-documentaries profiling neighborhoods across the country in a segment called “MyBlock,” reports of organizing efforts by graduates and other organizations, as well as announcements of scholarships, internships, and leadership opportunities for YouthBuild graduates.

YouthBuild TV is a partnership between YouthBuild graduates and YouthBuild USA staff. Each quarterly webcast will be “as participatory as possible” with interactive features such as live chatting, surveying and user-generated content featured in each episode.

The strategy for utilizing live internet video as a tool to promote civic engagement emerged from dialogue between YouthBuild USA staff and graduates from various YouthBuild programs, Maanav says. The Graduate Leadership Department at YouthBuild USA believes user-generated media is crucial to engaging young people.

Vermont Adult Learning/Learning Works (VAL): In Vermont, Wendy Hayward has a different experience of using the internet and technology. Wendy is a staff member at Vermont Adult Learning/Learning Works (VAL). VAL “provides adults with essential skills and education to further their educational, employment and personal goals in order to expand their options and capabilities in the family, community and workplace.”⁵ Wendy reports that for youth in VAL’s programs the technol-





ogy most often used is the internet. She notes, “the internet is probably the most often used and required by instructors here hoping that students will find their way around learning to choose appropriate sites, how to cite the material, and how to use it in a presentation.” Taking a step back, Wendy’s overall experience suggests that, “technology inhibits the students from sharing and participating. I also find that their interpersonal communication skills, oratory skills, spelling and writing skills are not as sharp as students who are not vested in technology.”

County Correctional Facility, Pennsylvania: From another perspective, Dawn Rafter teaches youth under 21-years-old in a county correctional facility in Pennsylvania who are working on completing a high school diploma. While no internet access is available during class time, Dawn says that she does “take various re-printable materials from the Internet, discuss[es] social media and [tries] to incorporate technology to the best of my ability inside the prison.” Dawn says that “students have a somewhat limited understanding of technology, and only some are eager to learn more.” She “believe[s] this stems from their environment - one in which education was not a priority.” Upon reflection, Dawn says that “the response to learning is generally increased by how I present the information, as well as the multiple ways I can instruct them in using various technologies.”

Appalachian Media Institute (AMI): Rebecca O’Doherty is the Director of the Appalachian Media Institute (AMI).⁶ AMI is “a program of Appalshop, a community-based arts and media education center in the coalfields of Kentucky.”⁷ AMI works with 14- to 22-year-olds. They are “youth who are on parole or who may be valedictorians,” as Rebecca says. The youth primarily contribute to the creation of documentaries about issues in their region. Often these documentaries represent “the first time there’s media about the issue.”

Rebecca talks about the fact that young people in the area of Kentucky where AMI is based grow up with images of themselves and their communities that imply that “to be successful you have to leave the region.” For her the “central question” of AMI’s work is “how can we help young people develop capacities and knowledge to effect the change they want to see...and stay in [the] region.” As a result, there’s an intertwined focus of AMI on the “idea that just to get to a point that young people can be effective civic actors, be healthy and happy citizens, there needs to be a re-envisioning.”

The youth are paid a stipend, which Rebecca cites as critical because “most kids [are] contributing to family incomes and couldn’t do work if [they] weren’t being paid.” As a part of the program, participants conduct interviews in the community. She

notes these interviews “connect young people to community members who they have never had the opportunity to associate with” and “hear diverse view points.” Through these interviews “they [the youth] are bringing people to the table whose voices are never heard and that’s a powerful act for them to be able to participate in.”

Much research remains to be done on how social media/new technology is used in youth programs. We do not yet know much about the effects on participants or the civic outcomes. Moreover, it’s important to note the accessibility gap that still exists – in December 2008 95% of the U.S. population with a college degree reported being internet users “at least occasionally,” compared to 67% who have a high school diploma and 35% who have less than a high school diploma.⁸ However, our interviews do suggest that social media is being used by a variety of different youth programs in many creative ways.

CIRCLE would like to thank *The Right Question Project* for assistance with this article. *The Right Question Project* is an “educational organization developing new methods and ideas for tapping the potential of tens of millions of people in low and moderate-income communities to become more self-sufficient in their own lives and active citizens participating on all levels of our democratic society.”⁹ ★

ENDNOTES

- 1 For more information see “College Attendance and Civic Engagement Among
- 2 18 to 25 Year Olds” and “Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood.”
- 3 CIRCLE Working Paper 59: “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in
- 4 High School” by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh.
- 5 More information about NCOC and the CHI can be found at www.ncoc.net.
- 6 www.youthbuild.org
- 7 www.vtadulthoodlearning.org
- 8 www.appalshop.org/ami/
- 9 www.appalshop.org
- 10 www.pewinternet.org. Accessed on May 5, 2009.
- 11 www.rightquestion.org