

## CIRCLE'S SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERIMENTS

CIRCLE is involved with two experiments that combine social media and civic engagement. One project, called BLink, is designed to “link organizations, issues, and people in the Greater Boston Area for social change.” BLink is an open network, usable by college students and anyone else in the community to support their volunteering and activism. The other project, called Legislative Aide, involves high school classes in Tampa, Florida. There, students use custom-designed software as part of a high school curriculum.

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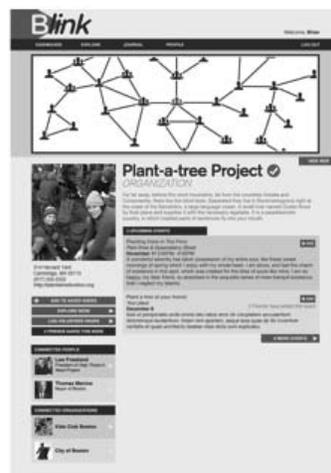
These two experiments share an emphasis on learning to analyze and use networks, both online and in the community. Both projects use specialized network-mapping software designed by CIRCLE’s partner, Community Knowledgebase, LLC of Wisconsin. University of Wisconsin professor Lewis A. Friedland and his colleagues have been working closely with CIRCLE throughout. A Learn & Serve grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service is funding BLink. A Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) contract from the United States Department of Education has funded the development phase of Legislative Aide.

BLink is an open social network, comparable to Facebook or Twitter (see [myblink.org](http://myblink.org)). In fact, users of BLink can elect to receive notifications through a network like Facebook and do not have to return often to BLink if they prefer not to. But BLink differs from other social networks in two important ways. First, the main nodes of the network are not people, but organizations and issues. Any member can set up a page for a local nonprofit, a government agency, an informal group, or an issue such as homelessness or global warming. Any member can then edit and augment those pages and link them together.

Second, the BLink network is transparent. The nodes and links are displayed visually on the site, whereas the network structure of Facebook is private. Being able to see and edit a public diagram of Boston’s civil society is useful for anyone involved in community organizing. A visitor can see which groups have many links

and are therefore important to contact about an issue, which groups seem marginal and need to be linked better, how clusters are segregated by geography, demographics, or ideology, who serves as important bridges between communities, and much other information that is useful for civic work.

**Figure 1: Mockup of a BLink page, showing an imaginary organization with the network map at the top of the page. Clicking on a different node re-centers the map and opens a new node.**



### STUDENTS USE NETWORK MAPS TO UNDERSTAND COMPLEX COMMUNITY ISSUES

The Tampa project, Legislative Aide, is an example of what Wisconsin Professor David Williamson Shaffer, who was a principal on the design team, has called an “epistemic game.” High school students role-play adult jobs—in this case, aides in a fictional U.S. Congresswoman’s field office. The class meets in a computer lab or a school library. Students log onto a password-protected Web site that simulates the office network of their Congresswoman. Fictional employees send them assignments and feedback in the form of emails, and the students are able to email one another and share documents.

The fictional characters are ultimately controlled by the teacher, who makes judgments about students’ performance and the appropriate pace to set for the group as a whole. The fictional Congresswoman represents a real district in the Tampa Bay and seeks real information and guidance about a problem in that community. Students leave the fictional, online environment when they are assigned community-research tasks, such as interviews

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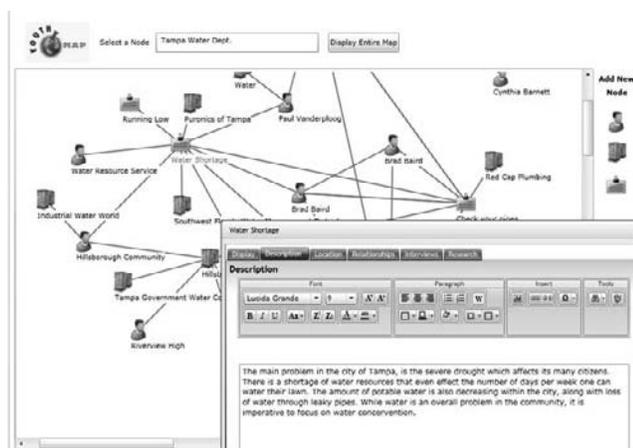


with adults. The class develops a plan for addressing that issue, and they may implement part of their plan through a service-learning project once the game is over.

The common element shared by BLink and Legislative Aide is the network map. Students in Tampa use proprietary software from Community Knowledgebase to build a shared diagram of issues, people, and organizations relevant to their project. Although real aides to a U.S. Representative would not use such software, political professionals do develop implicit models of issues, people, organizations, and their relationships. A class of students can quickly produce a sophisticated map if they work together online, and this becomes a representation of the mental model of an adult professional.

Before its public launch, BLink has been used by college students at Tufts University, University of Massachusetts-Boston, and Suffolk University, who have built an initial network map of the Boston area that will be expanded when the network becomes publicly accessible. Our colleagues at UMass Boston (including faculty and students) have been closely involved in designing BLink. Massachusetts Campus Compact is CIRCLE's other major partner, responsible for recruiting additional users.

**Figure 2: Example of student work from Legislative Aide in Tampa. The emerging network map is shown in the background. The node entitled “water shortage” is open to show a student’s overall description of that problem.**



## INITIAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

BLink is a research opportunity, and we have fielded pre-test and post-test surveys in the participating classes. Though the survey samples have been small so far, the findings indicate substantial

increases in the proportion of students who spend time volunteering, work with other people in the community to fix problems or improve conditions, interact with people of other racial backgrounds, and interact with students from other colleges.

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Like BLink, Legislative Aide is a research project. We have collected data in the form of student work, pre-and post-test surveys, and classroom observations and interviews. The most striking finding from the pilot phase was a significant increase in the quality of students' writing about social issues. We hypothesize that the combination of service-learning (academic work tied to community service) plus an epistemic game may prove especially valuable. The epistemic game gives students a challenging, immersive environment in which they are able to achieve successes. The service-learning experiences allow them to work in the real world and make an actual difference.

Future steps for CIRCLE and its partners include refining and re-testing Legislative Aide in Tampa, publicly launching and continuously improving BLink in Boston, making Legislative Aide portable to other communities, and developing new epistemic games (such as possibly a classroom simulation of running an environmental organization). ★

