

1. Could you describe the eDemocracy project that Wayne State University is hosting?

Wayne State University is working together with the American Democracy Project of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC) to coordinate a long-term initiative on eCitizenship. The initiative will bring together more than 30 AASCU universities to study the relationship between new technologies and civic agency. We will work together to understand how new social networks help to foster (and sometimes inhibit) political engagement. Our goal is to develop strategies for students, faculty and university administrators to make the best possible use of our new technological tools to encourage engagement and civic participation.

Representatives from all of our university partners will meet in Detroit in November 2009 to discuss and plan. While we do not have room for any more formal participants, we are eager to work with any universities or organizations that share our goals. Those who are interested should contact the project organizers can be contacted at adp.ecitizenship@gmail.com and look for more details at our website (to be launched formally in late September), <http://www.ecitizenship.org>.

As part of this initiative, each participating university will engage in its own specific projects. One part of Wayne State's participation in the initiative is development of the Detroit Network for Engaged Service Learning (DĒSL), a free social network that can build active, ongoing connections between students, faculty members and community organizations for the purpose of serving the Detroit community, and learning from the experience of service. Beginning with a pilot program in Wayne State's Honors College, we envision DĒSL as a way to connect students wishing to engage in service learning with organizations that need volunteers and other forms of assistance and faculty members who wish to offer service learning options and seek better mechanisms for tracking service hours and facilitate student learning and keeps students engaged from enrollment until graduation.

2. How does the project build on previous work that you and your students have done on civic engagement?

I myself am a relative newcomer in the field of civic engagement, but my home institution - Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan - has a long and distinguished history in this area. The university has long maintained a close connection with the labor movement in the United States, and innovative programs such as its Weekend College - an early effort to reach out to nontraditional students - and the Urban Agenda and Youth agenda - programs to help young people develop political awareness and advocacy skills - have received national attention. (The civic engagement efforts of my late colleague Otto Feinstein features prominently in *Educating for Democracy* by Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich and Josh Corngold).

In the last several years, our efforts at civic engagement have gained considerable support from Wayne State's Center for the Study of Citizenship and the Irvin D. Reid Honors College. The Honors College emphasizes "service" as one of its core values and begins immediately to get

incoming first-year students engaged with the surrounding community with a variety of assignments and cultural opportunities that culminate in group projects designed by the students themselves in cooperation with local organizations. The Center for the Study of Citizenship has been active in promoting our exploration of the technology side of the equation with a 2007 conference on “Virtual Citizenship” at which presenters and participants explored the ways that technology has positively and negatively affected our civic interactions and how technological change may shape our political future. In 2010 the center’s annual conference will focus on the topic of “Networks” and feature dozens of scholarly presentations including a keynote speech by Yochai Benkler author of *The Wealth of Networks*.

3. Are there simple things that faculty, staff, and community partners can do to take advantage of technology in their civic engagement work?

I think that the most important step may be simply to stay aware of the technology in which our students are immersed. That means watching what they do in class and listening to how they talk about the ways in which they live their lives. It is useful and productive to take some the time out in classroom discussion and one-on-one conversations to ask students about how they use technology, what it is they do “online,” keeping in mind that many of them do not see obvious distinctions between on- and off-line life because the two are so intertwined.

Since students are not necessarily self-aware about their own use of technology, it is also useful to talk to technology-savvy colleagues, who may be able to separate the important tools from those that are here today and gone tomorrow. The field of library science has made particularly good use of the new tools, and so it is often possible to get good advice about new technology from librarians with recent (or ongoing) training. And where there are no faculty colleagues available in person, the nature of the new technology means that we can look online for additional support. There is a small but growing number of academics who make good use of new tools to talk about the tools themselves, and I try to stay current by following the blogs and social bookmark links of a few of those (among others I follow Peter Levine, danah boyd, Fred Stutzman, Mills Kelly and Tibor Scholz. As above, there are also quite a few good blogs on technology in education maintained by librarians).

Armed with a basic understanding of what tools to try, the next step is to try them. It is not necessary for us to remake our lives around the technology (as some have done), but it is useful to spend a bit of time participating in social networks (at the moment this means Facebook), social bookmarking, writing a few basic blog entries and making some additions or deletions to wikipedia entries in an area of expertise, posting a video (at the moment this means YouTube). The good news here is unlike most academic work, the philosophy of “no pain, no gain” does not apply. Only easy-to-use tools will become widespread, so if you find something hard to use, you should move on to something easier (because everybody else probably will probably do the same).

The other good news in my personal experience is that those who use technology in their educational efforts tend to be extremely generous in sharing their expertise. In my experience, most will respond quickly to requests for advice, and many have already anticipated the requests

with helpful blog entries and other online tools. In short, ask for help, borrow what works and adapt it to your own needs.

4. What are the key mistakes to avoid?

I think we need to be careful about our expectations in two ways:

First, we need to avoid expecting too much of our participants. Anything that requires participants to make fundamental change to their habits probably won't work. This is a difficult dance - we have to lead without dragging - but for most teachers this is nothing new. The challenge is particularly acute - and particularly difficult - in the realm of new technology. Even transformative technologies will have little impact if they require participants to do too much. We need instead to build on what our would-be participants are already doing rather than asking them to do something *wholly* new. With regard to introducing technological tools, this can take at least two forms: one is to take an existing responsibility and give it a technological component (writing a paper as usual but then submitting it as a blog entry); another is to take an existing technological tool and using it in a way that enhances civic engagement (creating a common knowledge base by using social bookmarks instead of individual ones, requiring students to enhance wikipedia entries in key areas rather than simply reading them). It is for this reason that we need to be aware of what it is that students are already doing, so that we can make sure that we are nudging them only a few steps beyond their comfort zone.

Second, we need to avoid expecting too much of the tools. Any expectation that a particular tool (or a combination of tools) will transform our civic engagement efforts will probably be counterproductive. The technological tools simply do not address most of the things about civic engagement that are really hard: finding the time, finding the energy, finding the courage to confront poverty or injustice. I cannot imagine any technological solution that will work at that level. Indeed, if technology becomes the focus of our efforts then it makes the hard part of civic engagement even harder by keeping us at our keyboards and among those with like minds rather than pushing us into the world. But if we keep our expectations moderate - if we understand them as a new and slightly better way to find others with whom we can work, learn from their experiences and stay connected with them - then we will find ourselves slightly better equipped to overcome the things that make engagement so hard.

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In addition to his work in comparative politics he teaches courses on Citizenship, New Technology and Politics, and the Politics of Science Fiction. He helped to coordinate Wayne State University's 2007 "Virtual Citizenship" symposium and will work with the Center for the Study of Citizenship and the American Democracy Project to coordinate the eCitizenship Initiative beginning in fall 2009.