

CivicEvolution Technology Presentation

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CivicEvolution helps citizens develop solutions to community problems. More specifically, CivicEvolution helps teams of citizens influence their communities by developing detailed proposals through structured dialogue.

Before we can explore the ideas of structured dialogue, proposals, and community influence, we need to look at forms of expression, tools and motivation. A can of spray paint is a tool. You can do many things with it. Let's consider it as a means of expression. On one hand spray paint can be used to express yourself through tagging and graffiti vandalism. This is a destructive form of expression; a cry to be heard and acknowledged. Now consider another spray paint based form of expression, the community mural. It is constructive, communal, perhaps even inspiring,

In each case there is a promise of reward that motivates its performance, and a corresponding bargain or implicit agreement that determines the costs associated with performance and achieving the reward. If you do so-and-so, you will be rewarded (Shirky 2008).

The promise of tagging vandalism is public self-expression, an acknowledgment "I exist!" The bargain is that if you get caught you might be punished. The promise of working on a community mural is self-expression, respect from others and pride in a community contribution. The bargain is that you have to cooperate and collaborate with others and follow rules about content and location. Community artwork projects are considered an effective response to graffiti vandalism because they can channel energy from destructive vandalism to constructive communal artwork.

Online tools such as forums, blogs and wikis are also means for self-expression. They can be constructive and powerful, but they can also be destructive, divisive, and diminish the power of our communities. We know that people spend tremendous amounts of energy online. I will focus on online activity that involves civic and political expression. Of course there are many well meaning writers, bloggers, and other participants creating civic and political expressions. But a brief survey of popular online sites shows an alarming amount of angry and divisive commentary by bloggers and commenters alike. What we very rarely see is constructive civic engagement.

CivicEvolution is an attempt to change this situation by encouraging people to believe and invest in the promise of constructive civic engagement and improvement. To make it work, we need to determine a bargain at which people will be motivated to claim the promise. With this understanding, CivicEvolution can provide the tools, structures, and resources that help people realize the promise at a good bargain.

What is a promise? It is an expected reward. It provides motivation to engage in an activity. What promise can motivate citizens to engage in constructive community dialogue and problem solving? What will people find rewarding? They want to connect with their community, find allies and make new friends. They like to earn respect for their ideas and contributions. They will benefit from tapping into the energy of hope and teamwork while reducing their feelings of despair and powerlessness. They can improve their communication, organization and problem solving skills. Most importantly, they can get the satisfaction and benefit of helping to solve a community problem.

What is a bargain? It is an agreement among participants and perhaps with organizers. It details the rules, costs, and expectations. Mutual respect will be rewarded. You are expected to work honestly with others to find common ground and the best solution for the community. If you engage respectfully with others and commit to an engagement over several weeks, you will learn more about yourself and your community and develop a solution to a problem.

The largest prize of the promise comes from successfully compelling constructive action from community decision makers. This means you need to create a proposal that can engender broad community support. In order to gain broad community support, teams need to couch their arguments in terms that are conducive to reflective acceptance by other community members (Dryzek 2000). They also need to strategically promote their proposal in the community to create confluence among different interests (Kadlec 2007). This confluence of interests in the community can provide the necessary force to influence community decision makers and/or compel them to respond constructively.

This structured and reflective dialogue provides voice and efficacious, reciprocal engagement to all participants as it generates common ground, authenticity, trust, wise ideas, and eventual buy-in—all critical elements for the development of creative and effective solutions.

Now that we have considered the promise and the bargain, we can finally define a tool and process to help citizen teams change their communities. The tool needs to provide an explicit process as a series of dialogues. It must provide efficient ways to capture and refine team ideas. It needs to make participation inviting, effective and efficient. It needs to provide automatic notification of dialogue activity. It must accommodate a continuum of levels of participation. It also needs to support self-organizing and self-managed teams. It needs to provide support for skills such as public relations, promotion, and reflective dialogue. Finally, it needs to collect case studies and best practices so each team has the chance to benefit from those that came before.

In the demo we will see how CivicEvolution satisfies these requirements and delivers on the promises of constructive civic engagement. We will also take a brief look at two applications of CivicEvolution.

Sustainability within a generation (SWAG) is an initiative to involve the citizens of Western Australia in the search for and implementation of policies and actions that will help WA address climate change and oil dependency. This project is being conducted in partnership with the WA Dept. of Planning and Infrastructure and The Hon. Alannah MacTiernan, MLA Minister for Planning & Infrastructure. We are currently in a pilot phase with government agency personnel. Twenty-three proposals have been suggested and eight have been completed. You can learn more at <http://home.getinvolvedwa.org/home.html>.

Citizens' Parliament is an initiative with newDemocracy in Australia to provide realistic and innovative alternative models of federal government determined by the people. We will achieve this by engaging ordinary Australians to discuss and propose political reform and by empowering people to have a say in the process. CivicEvolution was recently selected by the Australian Research Council to work with the Australian National University, University of Sydney, and Curtin University on this important project. You can learn more at <http://newdemocracy.com.au/>

Our mission is to promote constructive civic engagement in our communities by developing and providing strategies, tools, structures and resources to help teams of citizens successfully influence their communities by developing and promoting detailed proposals. We host CivicEvolution as a free public

utility for citizen initiated proposals. We also offer hosting and services to government agencies that want to conduct engagements using CivicEvolution.

This presentation and demo has tried to show you the importance of encouraging constructive forms of expression and the delicate balance that must be struck between the promise, the bargain, and the tools. We considered the requirements for a tool to satisfy this promise and bargain and saw how CivicEvolution can help deliver the promise. So what's in it for you? You and your community will benefit from engaged, informed and empowered citizen teams developing solutions to community problems. I hope you are moved by the potential of CivicEvolution. We need you to use, promote, support and help us improve CivicEvolution. Please contact me at brian@civicevolution.org if you have any questions, suggestions, or applications

References

Dryzek, John S. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Kadlec, Alison. *Dewey's Critical Pragmatism*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007.

Shirky, Clay. *Here Comes Everybody*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2008.

Links to more information about CivicEvolution

<http://civicevolution.org/intro-movie>, a 4 minute video about CE in flash format and an FAQ

<http://civicevolution.org/intro-movie-qt>, a 4 minute video about CE in QuickTime format

<http://civicevolution.org/intro-movie-wmv>, a 4 minute video about CE in windows media format

<http://home.getinvolvedwa.org/home.html>, Sustainability Within a Generation

<http://newdemocracy.com.au/>, Citizens' Parliament

<http://civicevolution.org/create>, Create your own proposal development team