

PROJECT CITIZEN ONLINE:
DIGITIZING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The instructional design problem addressed in this paper deals with the task of creating a “digital” venue or portal for student groups participating in the “We the People: Project Citizen” project as part of a Civics class. The task does not involve the creation of a web site about Project Citizen, as these structures currently exist. The idea, instead, is to develop “Project Citizen Online” for facilitating communications between Project Citizen student participants, policy experts, state and local officials, and members of the community. Because the most important function of Project Citizen Online will be its service as a digital portal for direct access to the democratic process, this digital portal must be useful for all aspects of the Project Citizen project – research, communication with policy experts, feedback from instructors, and the presentation of final portfolios.

Project Citizen is a case-based, problem-solving curriculum program developed by the Center for Civic Education in 1995. It was created in response to educational studies conducted in the 1980s by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Council for Social Studies, (NCSS) Center for Civic Education calling for a “reinvigorated” curriculum for students in grades six through nine. The NCSS report stressed using teaching methodologies developmentally appropriate including experiential, interdisciplinary, authentic, and problem-based (Atherton, 2000). The program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, co-sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures, and administered locally by non-profit civic education organizations. In this program, students from elementary, middle and high school grades work in collaborative groups to learn how to “monitor and influence public policy” (Atherton, 2000, p.101). Usually, students participate in Project Citizen as part of their study of Civics but the

program may be offered through youth organizations such as Girls and Boys Clubs, Boy Scouts, etc. Since its inception, more than 500,000 students and 8,300 teachers representing all fifty states and several American territories have participated in Project Citizen (Center for Civic Education, 2006). In Colorado, the program is administered with the help of the Center for Education in Law and Democracy, a non-partisan, non-profit civic education organization (Center for Education in Law and Democracy, 2006).

The program involves an entire class or small groups of students within a class to:

- identify a public policy problem in their community needing a solution
- research and analyze information on the problem
- locate, examine and evaluate alternative solutions to the problem
- propose a solution to the problem
- develop an action plan to get their proposed solution implemented by government
- present findings at a simulated hearing

Throughout this process, students keep a portfolio, serving as written documentation of their work. Guided by the curriculum materials, students are required to gather, analyze, and evaluate information from a variety of media sources. Along with the research conducted using print and broadcast media, students conduct interviews with policy experts, state and local officials, and community members. The program actively encourages interaction among students, their parents, and members of the community. Written and verbal communication skills are emphasized.

The culminating activity of the program is an oral/visual presentation highlighting each step of the process. At this “showcase hearing,” each group is given the opportunity to explain and defend the results of each stage of the project before a panel of judges acting as legislative committee members. To keep the learning experience authentic, organizers work to locate panel members having expertise concerning the issue about which their group is presenting such as

placing a police officer, youth organization leader, and/or mayor on a panel about curfews for teenagers. The panel members and audience follow up the oral presentation with questions and feedback (Center for Civic Education, 2006).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the broad context of democracy and technology, Adalt, Harrison and Zappen (2006) describe a collaborative project bringing social science and computer science researchers affiliated with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute together with representatives of city and county government and youth services agencies to develop a community information system. More specific to the “civics” context of Project Citizen, information democracy is at the heart of the task of digitizing the information technologies used for producing better information for and between participants (Doctor, 1992). Even more specifically, research cited by Mason, Berson, Diem, and Dralle (2000) suggests while technology’s potential to revitalize citizenship education is not presently being well-utilized by teachers, such technology can help students develop the capacity for civic action, both locally and globally. The capacity for civic action requires a motivation for action. Heafner (2004) advocates the use of technology in social studies as a means to provide motivation, by engaging students in the learning process through a familiar medium by improving students’ self-efficacy and self-worth.

Project Citizen could be considered a “beyond the classroom walls” educational experience and, as Menchik (2002) argues, technology not only enables democratic education with its capacity to create an effective learning environment, but also extends education resources beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Barriers hindering technology integration in the classroom exist and have been recognized in scholarly treatments of the subject. Whitworth and Berson (2002) identified lack of teacher training, lack of vision of technology’s power to improve instruction and learning, lack of time to experiment with technology-infused curriculum, and inadequate technical support as the most prevalent obstacles to technology

integration in the social studies classroom (Whitworth & Berson, 2002). More recently, Zhao and Hoge discovered a shift in the type of barriers challenging technology integration centering on restricted access to digital content due to Internet filtering, occurring as a result of the overwhelming amount of information available on the World Wide Web, and the differing levels of technical ability of teachers and students (Zhao & Hoge, 2004).

How will success be defined concerning the integration of technology into social studies? Heafner insists effective technology integration in social studies is dependent on using technology as an instructional tool, not just a means to an end (Heafner 2004). It must “extend the learning beyond what could have been done without technology” and promote communication between teachers, students, and the local/global community (Heafner, 2004, p.48). Given that the emphasis of this project is on the use of technology to establish this community dialogue, the success of Project Citizen Online will be measured by the latter.

Additionally, for any course or curriculum to be successfully recreated in an electronic format, a transformation of curriculum needs to take place. Posting existing print curriculum on a website does not guarantee the creation of a successful online course (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006). Oblinger and Hawkins assert the deliberate instructional design of quality online learning environments and activities will be key. The project will require instructional design collaboration between the instructional designer and classroom instructor. The partnership between teachers, content area experts and instructional designers is built into the organizational structure of Project Citizen.

Historical Perspective

The initial impetus for changing Project Citizen from the paper/pencil format to an electronic one developed through the use of software suites such as Microsoft Office™ to produce the written and graphical products for the Project Citizen portfolio. Student groups began to use PowerPoint presentations at their simulated hearings to display key data and to emphasize important points around their policy issue. Excel™ spreadsheets were created to analyze and display data. Teachers increasingly found the use of electronic media a convenient alternative to the cumbersome process of physically transporting full-size portfolios along with research notebooks. (Miller, 2004).

At teacher training workshops discussions began to emerge, and one question specifically, “How can we integrate the use of technology into the Project Citizen process, not just the product?” (Schatz, 2004). Can integrating emerging communication technologies into Project Citizen help students become more civically engaged?

Technology, communication and engagement

The tools used to communicate are changing and young people are embracing these changes. According to studies conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, “83%” of all American teens own and use at least one personal media device (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005, p.9) such as a computer or cell phone. “Eighty-seven percent” of American youth use the Internet and “45%” own and use cell phones (Lenhart et al., 2005, p.9). Email, while still the staple format being used for exchanging electronic messages, is quickly being eclipsed by instant messaging. Instant messaging, or IM, is a type of real-time communication conducted via the Internet. It allows individuals to create a private chat room where they conduct text-based communication with others. (Jansen, 2002). Teens prefer “IMing” over traditional forms of

electronic communication. The ability to share information with a small group instead of one other person may be the motivation.

The new communication technologies are changing how we say it. The perception is that teens use the Internet and wireless technology primarily to communicate with friends and family, but research indicates the younger generation is also using the Internet to find information about health, political, and social issues (Rainie, Horigan, & Cornfield, 2005). Another study contributes evidence young people communicate differently from their online adult leaders. Where adult leaders in an online forum contribute an abundance of ideas, stick with a particular task, and use powerful language, the style of the younger generation is different. The younger generation is more likely to keep the goals of the group as the focus of discussion. This is achieved by referring to the group rather than themselves and responding to each other's postings as opposed to contributing their own ideas (Caskell, Huffaker, Tversky, Ferriman 2005).

Communication technologies have changed *how* we communicate and will continue to do so but the question remains whether they will transform with *whom* we talk, *what* we have to say, and what type of *citizen* we become.

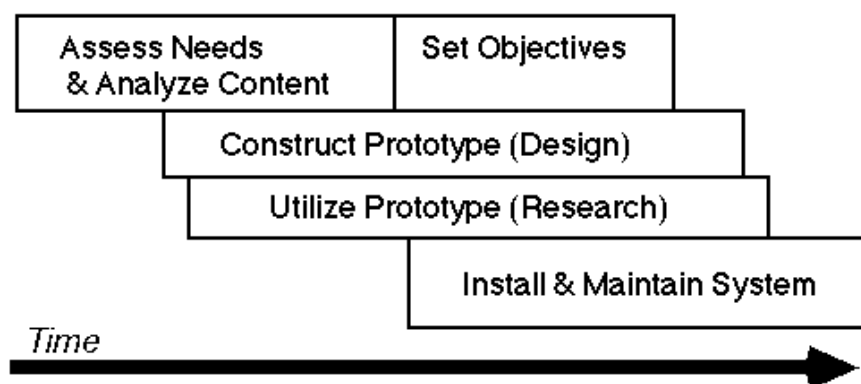
CHAPTER 3

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN METHOD

*What do you do
When you have no time
No time to do “model” ID?
Do you skip....*

(Wedman and Tessmer from Smith & Ragan, 1999, p.375)

Time, limited time was a factor in the design and implementation of Project Citizen Online and for that reason I chose Tripp and Bichelmeyer’s Rapid Prototyping Design Model. The model incorporates all the steps found in ADDIE but the phases of the design process overlap each other. This flexible, iterative approach allows designers and users to interact with each other to develop, analyze and revise the prototype throughout all the phases of the design process (Tripp and Bichelmeyer, 1990). Another reason for using rapid prototyping is its compatibility with a computer-based instructional systems (Smith and Ragan, 1999, p.376).



(Tripp & Bichelmeyer, 1990)

The RPDM was suited to my particular project as it allowed for:

- ◆ Shorter development cycle
- ◆ Testing of user interface during the entire design process
- ◆ Testing and evaluation of different instructional strategies for effectiveness
- ◆ Development of a prototype that can as a basic template for future users
- ◆ Incorporation of client feedback in the development of the prototype

(Wilson, Jonassen, & Cole, 2007)

As described, the purpose of Project Citizen Online is to add a digital component to the established Project Citizen curriculum. Project Citizen Online needed to connect the students with the community, easily and securely. The application used was selected based on instructional philosophy, available features, familiarity, cost, security and scalability.

I reviewed different web applications designed to facilitate discourse via the Internet. These social software applications included weblogs, wikis, e-mail, instant messaging, bulletin boards, peer-to-peer file sharing, and learning/course management systems. Many proved capable of providing an arena for public discourse but by design can influence what, and how, the user says (Farmer, 2004). Relying on the premise that effective online communication is dependent on offering different ways to communicate, I concluded that a course management system or learning management system, as these terms are used interchangeably, would be the best solution.

Many commercial and open-source learning management systems are available. The most popular, commercial systems are Blackboard™ and WebCT™. Combined, and now owned by the same company, they hold the top two slots in the learning management systems market in the United States (Eschoolnews.com, 2005). Although I am familiar with the functionality and features of each of these systems, having used them for work and graduate school, they were not considered for this project due to their cost. Until Project Citizen Online is tested with a broader audience and proven to be a valuable tool for teachers using Project Citizen curriculum, I chose to use a free open-source system.

Moodle™ a free open-source course management system developed by Martin Dougimás in 1990's was chosen. It is based on a constructivist philosophy that individuals construct new knowledge when they interact with their surroundings and social constructivism,

that knowledge originates and is a product of social interaction (Vygotsky in Robb, 2003, p252). Standard collaborative features such as blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, and wikis, offered by Moodle, support the main goals of Project Citizen: the promotion of interaction among students, their parents, and members of the community. (The Center for Education in Law and Democracy, 2006).

The tremendous increase in the number and size of Moodle sites worldwide, 0 in 2003 to over 24,000, is only one indication Moodle has proven itself a powerful, scalable, learning management system (Moodle, 2007). It can be adapted for large groups of users from universities with multiple users down to the home schooling parent who needs one course for one child. As technologies change and needs of users change, software applications must also change. Moodle, being an open-source, is constantly evolving. Users and developers, usually the same individuals, are constantly creating and improving what Moodle can do. At this writing there are over 150, user created, add-on modules available for download and support is always available through the user forums at Moodle.org (Moodle, 2007)

Finally, the ability to share and edit research documents, and track and grade class activities aids both teacher and student when organizing information for traditional Project Citizen portfolios. Given that Project Citizen curriculum is usually delivered as part of a civics class, the ability to monitor and grade assignments is a desirable feature.

Three teachers from Aurora Central High School were invited to try Project Citizen Online. After initial meeting with these instructors it was decided that the best course of action would be to integrate Project Citizen Online in one class, Law and Government. Lack of resources, specifically computer lab time, and the fact that the participating teacher would receive technical support from a student teacher assigned to this class influenced this decision.

The participating teacher, Monique Taylor, and her student teacher, Leah Evans, and I met once a week, for a month deciding what content to include. With the help of another Project Citizen teacher, Terry Bramhall, we were able to transfer all research forms and documents from the Project Citizen Student Workbook. Additionally we compiled specific lessons and documents Ms. Taylor has collected in her six years of teaching Project Citizen for inclusion on the Project Citizen Online. This is important to note as I wanted teachers who might try Project Citizen Online to know that a course can be customized to fit their instructional context and students learning styles.

I established a domain, www.digdemocracy.org, through a low cost Internet hosting company and installed Moodle version 1.7. Many hosting companies make an installation of popular open-source software packages available via the website, I chose to do this even if a small cost was involved because I wanted to focus more time on the development of content and communication features and less on technical issues I would incur if I downloaded and installed Moodle on my own server. I then created a course, PCCHS, Project Citizen Central High School.

Administrator logins were created for all the teachers, generic user names and logins were created, and Project Citizen documents uploaded. Because this was a trial, all student users were given similar, generic logins – chsstudent1, chsstudent2 and so on. After an introductory session in the computer lab students began using the site.

Evaluation data was collected by the teachers and myself through classroom observations, review of course documents, transcripts from online activities, questionnaires and interviews. The information gathered focused on the design and implementation of the interface, the value of different features to enhance the traditional Project Citizen experience, and the potential of future installations of Project Citizen Online.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

While the focus of Project Citizen Online was the usefulness of web based communication tools in facilitating communication with the community, other findings emerged. Overall, the students and teachers liked using the Project Citizen Online. Students were eager to try out something new and the high motivation associated with the use of technology was evident. I am sure this influenced individuals' attitudes and levels of participation. Students were diligent in making sure I received their feedback about the project and over half of them were willing to give extra time to complete interviews.

The data collected thus far reveals that the students and teachers find the Project Citizen Online interface easy to use even when they had no prior experience using a course management system (Appendix B). Only a handful of students found the login, the first login, tricky, and all of the students found the interface "easy" to use. The features most liked by students:

- Downloading and uploading class documents
- Participating in chat sessions

In response to the question about how Project Citizen Online could help them complete the Project Citizen curriculum, most responses included comments about twenty-four hour access, research resources in one location, ease of organizing project materials, and the ability to share and edit documents through the course interface. Comments included:

"I can still upload work if I am not at school."

"I like all the information sources available through it."

One unforeseen comment that showed up in several student surveys reveals the students' attitudes about class participation, teacher feedback and wastefulness.

“I like that the teacher can monitor a students time online and that lets her know who is really working.”

“I don't waste paper for assignments.”

“We don't have to write on paper and she (the teacher) can check our work faster.”

Using a learning management system was a new experience for both teachers in the project. Most of their feedback was positive. Specific strengths mentioned paralleled the students' comments:

- ◆ Students could communicate easily with each other and community members through chat room and threaded discussions.
- ◆ Assignments could all be uploaded, commented on, and graded in an organized manner (versus having to print everything out, waste paper, file papers, etc)
- ◆ Quick and easy student feedback
- ◆ Quick and easy teacher feedback

Managing students in a computer lab while trying to respond to students in Project Citizen Online was one of the difficulties the teachers encountered. Other frustrations were related to technical glitches, the inability to see a community member's response in a chat session.

Although frustrated, both teachers were not discouraged and are positive about the possibilities of Project Citizen Online. They continue to test it and are in the process of contacting community members to invite them to participate.

Table 4.1: Student Technology Survey Results

Have you ever used an online course using a courseware system?		Yes 1		No 13
Was it difficult to learn to use PConline?		Yes 2	Neutral	No 12
What was the easiest part or tasks to learn when using PConline?	Uploading assignments -8, Using chat room – 4, Login difficulties - 2			
What was the most difficult part or tasks to learn when using PConline?	Uploading assignments -1, Uploading a graphic – 2, Login difficulties (forgot password) – 4, Browsing for documents – 1, Navigation the site – 1			
	*meet deadlines -1			
Do you think PConline helps you complete Project Citizen?		Yes 14	Neutral	No
Please explain your answer.	Makes me want to learn – 2			
	Organizes information – 1			
	I can use it at home/anytime – 4			
	I can talk to community members - 3			
Do you like using PConline as an addition to your regular class?		Yes 10	Neutral	No 4
What features of PConline do you like best?		Like	Neutral	Dislike
	Chat	x		
	Discussion forum			
	File upload	x		
	Web resources	x		
	Wikis	**		
	Quizzes			
	Surveys			
What, if anything, would you change about PConline?	Nothing – 8			
	Interface design/layout – 2			
	Improve chat capabilities -1			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> my password 			

- Unrelated to Moodle interface **Testing in progress.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I think the project is a success in that it provides Project Citizen participants alternate ways to exchange information. This applies to students and teachers. I think the project has only provided a starting point for what is possible. Many of the communication tools I wanted to use are only now being tested but the lack of time and lack of training, the two common challenges to technology integration, impacted what was accomplished. Mandatory state testing interrupted our schedule of implementation and since specific testing schedules are set by individual schools it was difficult to coordinate dates to work with Project Citizen Online participants. Although discouraged I can definitely envision the potential power of Project Citizen Online as an avenue to transform community interaction and promote civic engagement.

I will continue to develop Project Citizen Online and will have an opportunity to share what I have done at the Colorado Project Citizen Summer Teacher Institute in June 2007. I will give teachers the opportunity to use the digdemocracy website to create their own Project Citizen Online and provide technical support when needed.

The success of Project Citizen Online will be dependent on its continued development, testing, and teacher training. As more Project Citizen teachers incorporate Project Citizen Online as part of the face-to-face curriculum, the dialogue between teachers, students, and the community will increase and we will continue to discover new ways this technology can be an effective tool for individual growth and social change.

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Appendix A: Student Technology Survey

Have you ever used an online course using a courseware system? Examples: Blackboard or WebCt		Yes 1		No – 13
Was it difficult to learn to use PConline?		Yes 2	Neutral	No 12
What was the easiest part or tasks to learn when using PConline?	Turning in/uploading assignments – 8 Chat – 4 Logging in - 2			
What was the most difficult part or tasks to learn when using PConline?				
Do you think PConline helps you complete Project Citizen?		yes	neutral	no
Please explain your answer.				
Do you like using PConline as an addition to your regular class?		Yes	neutral	No
What features of PConline do you like best?		like	Neutral	dislike
	Chat			
	Discussion forum			
	File upload			
	Web resources			
	Wikis			
	Quizzes			
	Surveys			
	Journal			
What, if anything, would you change about PConline?				