Empathy as a Foundation of Civic Engagement: Using Technology and Storytelling to Cultivate Perspective Taking Abilities

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Abstract
Most would agree that developing youth’s capacity for civic engagement is necessary for the continued success of our society. In this poster, we describe a fourteen-week workshop conducted with a diverse group of middle school children to both foster the development of empathy and support civic engagement. We did this by combining Scratch, a media-rich programming environment, and storytelling, into a form of civic media.

Introduction
Strong ties between empathy, defined as cognitive and affective participation in another’s experience, and civic engagement; however, few have explored the use of technology in cultivating perspective taking abilities [2, 11]. In this poster, we present a framework for understanding the connection between empathy and civic engagement, as well as describe one example of a technology-based project geared toward helping youth develop their empathic capacities.

Theoretical Framework
Civic engagement “includes the ability to participate in civic actions such as community service and initiatives to further improve the public sphere, to engage in ‘civic conversations’, and to develop publicly deliberated civic knowledge, attitudes, and decisions” [2]. It is imperative, then, that certain conditions exist in order to create an environment that is conducive to civic engagement. First, community members must understand, care about, and be driven to communicate about injustices, and hopefully take action towards changing them. Second, community members must be able to work with people who are different from them (e.g., age, ethnicity, profession). Both of these conditions hinge on one’s ability to empathize.
In Batson’s Empathy-Attitude-Action Model, adopting the perspective of an individual in a group can lead to an increased valuing of this individual’s welfare. Further, assuming the individual’s group membership is a salient component of his or her plight, this increased valuing, and, therefore, more positive attitude, generalizes to the group as a whole. Thus, working to increase the empathic capacities of community members should directly impact their desire to make change. Colby [5] states:

*A fully developed individual must have the ability to think clearly about...about moral and civic issues; he or she must possess the moral commitment and sense of personal responsibility to act, which may include having moral emotions such as empathy and concern for others...*” (pp. 17-18).

Once community members decide to effectuate change, another issue they may encounter is the ability to successfully work together to accomplish their goal. Working together involves a certain amount of cooperation that is often difficult for diverse groups. Aronson [1] suggests that empathy is fundamental to efficacious cooperation. His jigsaw classrooms, designed in the late 70s to reduce racial tension in Texas schools, involved students in educational settings where the achievement of the group depended on successful cooperation. provide potent examples of the utility of bringing people through the process of understanding one another to accomplish a goal. Similarly, some social justice curricula rely upon intergroup dialogue, which focuses on empathy development in the context of solving society’s most challenging issues [8].

**Related Work**
The use of technology in fostering youth civic engagement usually focuses on the development of political identities as a part of adolescent development, teaching civic content and skills, or providing a space for youth to experiment with participating in civic life through the formation of online communities [2,3]. Bers [2] has focused on the use a 3D virtual environment called in the development of perspective taking; ability she sees as important for civic engagement.

**Research Approach**
We have the dual goal of examining the development of empathy and designing an effective curriculum for Scratch as a form of civic media. Civic media, here, is defined as “any form of communication that strengthens social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement.”[6] Therefore, our approach is that of design-based research which uses natural laboratories to both study and develop effective learning environments [10].
Context. Our context is an fourteen-week apprenticeship, entitled “Say What?!”, conducted in conjunction with Citizen Schools, a network of programs that connects students to adult volunteers in after-school settings [4]. Six male and four female middle school students ranging in age from 11 to 13 are participants in this apprenticeship. Students all come from a middle school in Boston, Massachusetts; however, because of busing programs, their residences are dispersed throughout the city. Because of this mix of students, there are strong histories of racial and ethnic tension within the school, making themes of understanding and working together particularly appropriate.

Data Collection and Analysis. A variety of data sources will be utilized to address the research questions. All students fill out weekly questionnaires that invite feedback on their experiences and understandings of the apprenticeship, and their desires for future experiences. At the end of the apprenticeship, members of the research team will conduct individual semi-structured interviews. Field notes and analysis of artifacts created within the workshop will also be used to develop comprehensive themes of the workshop experiences.

Apprenticeship Design
Although extensively describing the curricular plan for this apprenticeship is beyond the scope of this brief proposal, here we present our framework for each session and then provide a description of the learning objectives that inform the framework over the 11-session experience.

Design-Based Sessions
Each session begins with an opening activity that is designed to have the participants: (1) revisiting the previous week’s themes and experiences, (2) engaging in acts of community (and predominantly physical) construction, and (3) setting the tone and expectations for the day’s lesson by exploring a theme. Next, we work through a series of activities that elaborate on the session’s theme. Each session includes three central activities that build capacities in the areas of journalism (e.g., listening actively, asking questions, understanding representations), emotion (e.g., individual identity, group interaction, shared understanding), and technology (e.g., programming, sensing, remixing).

This capacity building is demonstrated in student-design-driven projects constructed with Scratch, a programming environment designed to cultivate the technological, social, and expressive capacities of young people [7]. Each session concludes with reflections on the day’s activities, which includes opportunities for the students to articulate their learning through teaching-back experiences.
Trajectories of Awareness
We have numerous learning objectives related to the themes of journalism, emotion, and technology, that have been structured across the cognitive, affective, and sensorimotor domains. Participants begin the apprenticeship with experiences that encourage them to explore trajectories of individual, and then community, identity. Simultaneously, participants explore trajectories of understanding their own, and then others’, emotions. These two paths, shown in figure 1, are what we call "trajectories of awareness". Throughout these concurrent processes, students will be utilizing a variety of tools (digital cameras, audio recorders) and techniques (interviewing, mapping) to document their community spaces and to create rich, interactive, multi-threaded narratives.

![Figure 1: Trajectories of awareness](image)

Conclusions
In this poster, we describe a novel approach to teaching perspective taking that is embedded in a curriculum for the Scratch programming environment, designed to support the development of civic engagement. We have just finished our first week of the apprenticeship; however, at the time of this conference, we will have finished all fourteen weeks and will present findings along with our plans for the next iteration of the apprenticeship.

References


