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21L.715/CMS.871/MAS.735/SP.493 Media in Cultural Context

Essay #1: Movement City (Lawrence, MA)

October 23, 2008

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I don't believe we can begin to define "civic media" simply by meshing the concepts of new media literacies and civic engagement. Because I value participation, voice, and equitable change, I'd prefer to define it locally *with* by the very constituents and facilitators who both share and act on these values in real life contexts. Movement City in Lawrence, MA strives to be such a space. As revealed in their mission statement, Movement City is "more than a program—it is an environment rich in connectivity, creativity, and support, and one that is shaped, in large part, by the young people themselves."

In this essay, I will describe the development of Movement City's multi-prong approach to youth civic engagement based on their core assumptions and value of network centric organizing. Through this analysis, I form four critical lessons for myself as a youth media facilitator, based not only on their successes, limitations, and everyday actions, but more on the future potential of this organization to adopt more of its collective strategies to new media distribution and networking channels.

## **Background**

### **Lawrence Community Works**

*"In our view, Lawrence had stagnated because civic life in the city had been grossly under populated for decades. It was too hard, too scary, too boring and too unnatural for people to find ways to get to know and learn to trust their neighbors, or to take part in public life. Larger influences such as capital flight, the decline of organized labor and globalization played their parts in this stagnation. But without a healthy civic environment and local leadership, the city had no way to forge a path through these changes. Too few people had taken up the challenge of healing and reinventing the fractured community, and those who did had been isolated and marginalized. Our challenge was to attack this epidemic of disengagement."*

Billy Traynor and Jessica Andors, Lawrence Community Works

While this paper is in essence a case study of Movement City as a youth art and technology program, I found it illuminating to first explore the origins of their parent institution, Lawrence Community Works (LCW). Like any good civic organization rooted in Alinsky's community organizing doctrine, LCW founders, staff, members, and youth alike tell their collective story in the form of a personal and dramatic tale of triumphs and failures. This narrative device is particularly prevalent in Lawrence's urban history. Lawrence was one of this country's first planned industrial cities and a cradle for the American industrial revolution. Now deemed a "forgotten city," Lawrence is characterized by the 19<sup>th</sup> century housing stock, cursed by flooding and foreclosure crises, and the abandoned industrial monoliths physically manifest the slow leaking of large-scale economic activity. Also known as the "immigrant" or "gateway city," Lawrence has been a shore for waves of immigrants who first drawn by work, then solidarity, after the nationally influential labor action of the 1912 Bread & Roses Strike.

Immigrants still gravitate Lawrence, based less on economic factors and more on family connections—almost 60% Latino, mainly from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, Lawrence is now one of the poorest cities in the state and the country, with high poverty and unemployment rates and a staggering high school drop out rate of over 50% (MA Department of Education and 2006 American Community Survey by the United States Census Bureau).

In the face of this historical decline, LCW started in 1999 from the remains of a mostly inactive community development corporation (CDC), sparked by the energy of three MIT graduates and the network organizing visions of a seasoned community development practitioner. The organization's open and fluid network

model was based on flexible plans and provisional groups in an *open architecture*, or “a flexible structure that provides numerous opportunities for community residents to engage in civic life and connect with each other (Plastrik, 2004).” LCW also identifies itself as “mediating institution”, thus implements an overall strategy of partnering with existing organizations and civic infrastructure whenever possible (Gibson, 2006).

This network centric community building strategy has a few particularly interesting imperatives that creates what Gibson’s refers to as an “entrenched ethos of civic engagement (2006, 5)”:

1. form should follow function, avoiding restricting bureaucratic structures or cronyism
2. build issue based affiliation networks that are based in
  - collective benefits,
  - space for authentic voice,
  - resonant interest of the network,
  - and last as only as long as necessary;
3. invest in the process, not outcomes;
4. create sustained, grassroots engagement spaces that are functional, diverse, interactive, and FUN

Their implementation model, now honed and recognized in the community organizing field, aims to create a functioning public sphere, building habits of participation in the predominantly Latino and low-income resident base through organic “neighbor circles,” supported networking forums and workshops. These programs focus on both individual and group advancement, using educational and

skills based learning ("Lawrence Community Works Network Organizing Forum: Autumn/Winter 2008 Workshop Series brochure", 2008). The civic engagement aim, then, is not to "plug" members of the network into existing programs like a consumer, but rather empower them to proactively design deliberately open-ended processes for themselves (Gibson, 2006).

## **Movement City**

*"I've met a lot of individuals who felt there was no place in our society where young people were supported and motivated to express their creativity, and nowhere they could surround themselves in a positive atmosphere. Lawrence is filled with so many talented artists. We have a young generation who are hungry to be rappers, singers, dancers, designers, and actors. Reaching out to our youth through the arts is an essential part of revitalizing Lawrence."*

Edwige F. Nordelus, Movement City graduate

Although LCW had been incorporating youth in their network organizing structure and programming from their inception, they decided in 2004 to make a more overt effort to not only *incorporate* but also *foster* youth voice. The existing LCW Young Professional cluster entered into a joint planning process with the boards, staff AND youth of the arts based Hope Street Youth Center to form Movement City (MC), "a "virtual city" where young people (ages 10-18 year old) explore their potential through design and performing arts, and choose to participate in a wide range of economic, academic, leadership development and collective action activities (Martinez, 2008)."

This act of combining forces also allowed Movement City to transform classic performance and arts programming into a more media and technology based expressions, mirroring Kellner's tenants of critical media literacy. By linking the existing LCW culture of bottom-up activism to creative individual expression and

production, Movement City strives to create a space for youth based in “sense making,” or the linkage of creation to “larger socio-political issues of culture, gender, class, political economy, nation and power (Kellner & Share, 2005).”

In practice, Movement City (or just “Movement” as the youth call it) is a in-person manifestation of Jenkin’s “participatory culture,” with its low barriers to entry, strong support through both formal adult mentors and informal peer networks, and youth ownership of the space and programs (Jenkins, 2007). Like its parent, Movement City programs concentrate on “knowledge as a process, not a product” and frame literacy as a socially constructed skill.

As I observed both drop-in and more focused class time, I noticed youth demonstrating participatory skills regularly such as play, appropriation, multitasking, and transmedia navigation. In the relaxed environment of the graphic arts class, youth nestled in corners, putting Macbooks on chairs in clusters to work, and calling out to the Residency program instructor for help when needed or conferring with their friend sitting next to them. If “participation is a property of culture,” the in-person environment of Movement City certainly supports the formation of group norms, behaviors, and expectations that could easily transition into a participatory online setting (Jenkins 2007, 8).

### **Core Assumptions**

The stated goals of Movement City reveal their core assumptions and values:

- **OWNERSHIP:** To foster culture that is rich in connectivity, creativity and support that is *shaped by young people themselves*

- **MENTORSHIP & JOB SKILLS:** To bring Lawrence youth together with volunteers and professionals from the fields of design, technology and performing arts to learn the basics of high-skill and creative careers
- **EDUCATION:** To connect youth to institutions of higher education, giving them access to opportunities for educational success
- **CIVIC PARTICIPATION & VOICE:** To engage youth in local projects that encourage them to improve the community and that help them strengthen their leadership skills
- **NETWORKING:** To involve youth in network of young people and families engaged in positive self and community development  
("Lawrence Community Works website")

But when you speak to directly to staff, they say that Movement, at heart, is a youth development program. Its culture is primarily based in relationship building and new media creation as tools to attract and activate disengaged youth.

By nurturing youth voice and creative skills, tapping into LCW's broader civic network structure, and hinging participation on choice and collective benefit, Movement encourages civic commitment when the local schools have proven inadequate. By ascribing to Bennett's ecological approach to civic engagement, "...changing institutions and communication environments in which young people encounter politics rather than fixing attitudes," Movement becomes a critical youth-owned space for them to re-envision their conceptions of democracy and collective action (Bennett, 2007).

Movement City, through these actions, unintentionally takes a clear stand in the media literacy debate. They assume that media literacy isn't just about

informing media consumers, but rather “as a strategy to end violence, to stop sexism or racism, to prevent kids from ruining their futures with drug or alcohol abuse (Hobbs, 1998).” To Movement, media literacy is a “means to an end” (remember, LCW is about process, not product), embedded in both structured and unstructured interactions that appeal to multiple learning styles. In tracks such as fashion illustration, radio advertising, songwriting, and even sneaker design, media literacy is learned in a collaborative environment, almost always “requiring” media creation and embedded in popular culture (Hobbs, 1998). Their focus on design and performance arts enables participants to learn essential teamwork and problem solving skills. This collaborative creative process is especially constructive because the youth control it themselves and it has concrete results. Such assumptions and practices align with Livingstone’s argument that media literacy contributes to more public participation in society through “lifelong learning, cultural expression, and personal fulfillment (Livingstone, 2007).”

As you might have guessed from their roots in LCW, Movement City also has a core assumption that the networked environment addresses the urgency for local youth empowerment in several ways. Here, they’d agree with Kellner that “literacy is thus a necessary condition to equip people to participate in the local, national, and global economy, culture, and polity (Kellner & Share, 2005).” The staff and curriculum designers at Movement City make an implicit connection between media literacy and skills building, especially in terms of teaching both workplace skills and connecting to larger professional networks in the emerging knowledge and creative economies in Massachusetts.

In terms of the local Lawrence network, Movement endeavors to “let

connections flow to value” and provide multiple points of entry through non-media skills building activities such as Men Up and Females Unite, programs for discussion and support within gender lines. Most recently, Movement has recently begun an education support cohort program, to support higher education aspirations with a multi-year, partnered approach with local schools. On a more one-on-one networking level, Movement recently solidified their belief in mentorship by creating a Residency program, where recent college graduates are offered free housing in exchange for committed time teaching and working with youth.

### **Approach to Working with Youth**

*Our network approach recognizes that in the challenging Lawrence climate, youth often become entangled in unproductive and dangerous activities not only because of a lack of other opportunities, but also because such activities feed their real need for connection, meaning, and a sense of power and efficacy in the world.*

[from the Cohort program proposal, 2008]

While Movement City hasn’t yet successfully translated their approach to youth civic engagement to online environments, the staff and youth act out these core values using processes and tools similar to those used in organizing thriving online social networks.

First, Movement offers low and multiple barriers to entry through a balance of structured design and performance courses (split into two age groupings, Stations and Zones), drop-in homework and social time, special interest based offerings and also provides space for self organized activities as well. I define these programs as processes, because the staff deliberately works in six week iterative cycles, to allow for customization based on staff and participant feedback. The staff also uses network organizing techniques for curriculum design, filtering ideas

through a central node of the Curriculum Developer to collectively coordinate a cohesive overall strategy and document institutional knowledge over time.

In addition to youth centered processes, Movement also sustains the network relationships and asset building through processes such as parent meetings, home visits, and most creatively through matched individual development accounts (IDAs) to teach money management skills and save for higher education pursuits.

Movement City employs two constantly evolving strategies to create program tools for youth civic engagement: events based activism and organizing leadership development. Events based actions have included open mic's, youth forums, and ad-hoc events such as well known walk coordinated with a neighboring community youth to ease intercommunity tension or a traveling photography exhibit (entitled "Struggles") to collect and present youth concerns about conflict in their own community. Although these events are just an expansion of the discussions happening organically within the walls of Movement itself, such events are key interaction portals to the larger public sphere, filled with opportunities for the youth to gain awareness of their own opinion, test their individual beliefs with outside networks, and build power.

But most critically, these events are a unique and successful tool because they are rooted in LCW assumption that civic engagement can be FUN. At first, MIT Media Lab student Leo Burd was drawn to do his PhD work with Movement City because of their success in "personally meaningful community events" organized and led by youth themselves (Burd, 2007).

Adult staff initiated early events based actions, but soon this tool was commandeered by a totally spontaneous leadership group of 14-18 year olds that

formed the "Movement Squad." But as these youth aged out of the program, Movement tried to connect more structurally with the LCW network and to outside youth organizations by creating a mediating staff position of Youth Network Organizer. While this staff organizer had some short-term success, both the local staff and Leo Burd noticed that the expectations of this staff position became overwhelming and moved away from a youth owned approach. As Plastrik and Taylor noted: "These people [mediators] will tend to be quickly saturated by the demands of processing multiple requests for information and guidance. The challenge is to keep important information flowing without overwhelming individual nodes (P & T 2006, 84)."

Most recently, Movement has seeded its new academic support cohort program with mechanisms to build leadership and civic skills of young members, with the implicit goal of distributing organizing capacity back to the youth themselves. This program grew out of growing concern that youth couldn't continue to participate in creative activities if they were caught in cycles of poverty, because early school drop would lead to entrance into low-wage jobs without opportunities for growth or expression. The youth in the cohort program, starting at 7<sup>th</sup> grade and extending to high school graduation, make a long-term commitment to participate in educational and leadership programming. They are mentored by the Residency program participants and connected to MC graduates through a newly forming alumni network. Movement aims to empower youth with "public service" skills building in areas such as leadership in non-profits, community activism & organizing, and social enterprise. Their hope is that these new leaders

will takeover events like the youth forum and conceive of other future civic actions within the network.

## **Successes**

When I take into account the dynamic fluidity and iterative design of Movement City programs, it almost seems unfair to list successes and failures, because they are interdependent joints of the evolving narrative of the organization itself. On the surface, Movement City is obviously successful at its primary goals, because the youth return every day in growing, engaged numbers and the newly renovated physical space is as open and bursting with creativity as the youth themselves.

So other than depending on quantitative measurements of attendance or test scores, I'll identify success in more qualitative ways such as partnerships, staff development and dedication, and the ability of a youth to clearly articulate the organizations values both in words and creative acts. For instance, I see success in the Cohort programs explicit effort to reach out to local schools to not only achieve individual academic goals and support MC's internal goals but also to build the capacity of a fellow struggling civic institutions. I also recognize success in the organizational efforts to train and support staff and volunteers to become "weavers" in the network and not top-down controllers.

In the end, I'll argue that Movement City's greatest successes are the physical space and program structure built on ethical factors that James and other's ascribe to "good play," including as technology and media literacy, peer cultures, and ethical supports (James, 2008). To be more specific, I had some initial

problems getting information about their views on technology and media literacy. I eventually realized that these values were so latent that the staff and youth don't explicitly identify themselves as "media literacy" program despite all the outcomes evidence that they are one. Also, Movement exhibits a genuine peer mentoring culture both in the classes and in public events. Finally, the youth are ethically supported in honest, youth initiated discussion by (1) individual mentors and staff and (2) shared and sustained norms within the organization.

## **Challenges**

Rather than dwell on the obvious limitations of a small scale staff and relationship intensive model like Movement City's for expansion and evaluation, I'd rather focus on the challenges they've faced in attempting to expand their successful network model to online spaces. I think it's too simple to blame it all on barriers to mobile civic space identified by the Aspen Institute in 2008, including funding or price, access or availability of appropriate technology, and the technology literacy of the adults or youth themselves (Lasica, 2008). Leo Burd's attempt to create a customized, mobile phone based organizing communication system, What's Up, wasn't hindered primarily by these constraints. Despite the fact that he used existing tools (members cell phones) and open-source technologies like the Drupal content management system to build a voicemail based system based on several collaborative design cycles with MC staff and youth, they still do not actively use the system.

The most latent limitation of the Movement City model may be that it hasn't found an answer to the age-old question of the right recipe for intervention and

seeding participation balanced with member ownership and control of the organization itself. The secret ingredient isn't just creating critical hubs in the network or depending too heavily on outside technical experts either. Burd concluded that both a lack of realistic expectations on staff and organizational capacity were the main barriers to full adoption of the What's Up tool in Movement City's programs (Burd, 2007).

However, I also see two particular aspects of the LCW open architecture organizing model that may be hindering a move toward online tools: demand driven action and "let it go" (defined on their website as when "a network activity no longer serves a function or passes a test of resonance, network members have to be willing to let it go.") At this moment, much of the strength of the network is based in frequent face-to-face interactions, so online social networking may not be in demand because it seems redundant. Also, even though there was excitement and interest in the What's Up tool during its development, it was eventually "let go" because it (and arguably other new media tools) never gained enough immediate resonance with the youth and staff. The organization built a MySpace page for the organization instead, although it seems mostly stagnant at this point other than a place to post photos of in-person events. I suspect that youth and staff are using new media tools and literacies to do the work of the organization, but they aren't explicitly attributing it to tools or processes in their organizational network strategy. The first step to expansion to more online endeavors may then merely be more explicitly describing and coordinating these existing new media use behaviors.

## Critical Lessons

Although I may be personally biased by my love of creative (and alternative) youth development endeavors, I believe I can glean four lessons by tempering my analysis of Movement City as a civic organization through the realization that it is deliberately configured to be living and evolving network. Thus, my first critical lesson comes from LCW and Movement City model to base programs on their constituents values and choices to participate and not just in response to imperatives of funders or academics. However, as proven by the educational expansion into the Cohort program, this foundation in value and choice can support expansion into new actions when deemed necessary. Given this, I'm not particularly concerned about the potential of Movement City moving more into the online realm in the future. It seem like it could easily happen if and only when the members find value in using it as a tool for the voice and activism.

If we then consider that the Movement network is really the sum of its human parts and the linkages between them, my second lesson emerges from the fact that the organization is healthier when there are both strong and useful links among its members. Movement City has been particularly creative in fostering new forms of mentorship, between peers, adults in the LCW network, and college graduate role models in the Residency program. Again, I am heartened to think that it won't be a large step to move this creative mentorship model online, with the possibilities of connecting to larger networks within Lawrence and beyond.

By focusing on Movement City as an youth membership organization, I also found a third lesson tied to Pettingill's *Engagement 2.0* argument that the "roots of political engagement lie in organizational membership (Pettingill, 2008)."

Montgomery also noted in the *Youth as E-Citizens* report that over half of the civic actions online they observed grew out of existing youth organizations (Montgomery, 2004). From talking with both staff and youth themselves at Movement, I think youth are buying into the democratic values of the programs and performing both expressive and instrumental actions, through the “engagement 1.0” of the daily in-person programs and special events (Pettingill, 2008). Perhaps all MC needs to move to “engagement 2.0” is a grassroots re-framing of their current activities, harnessing the existing behaviors of new media creation and the value of performance to take advantage of new (and probably low barrier) opportunities online for the collective action.

Therefore, I end with one last lesson, straight out of LCW organizing doctrine, that we should never forget: civic participation, whether it is based in activism, media production, or social networking, can and *should* be FUN. As nicely said by Edwige Nordelus, MC participant youth, staff, and college graduate:

“Plus, art is entertainment however you want to put it. There are those who love to entertain and those who love to be entertained. Satisfying both worlds brings the community together (Nordelus, 2006).”

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