

Seven Ways to Engage Teens in Civic Problem-Solving Online

Participation Strategies That Work, In Their Own Words

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The burning questions that seem to be on everyone’s mind when it comes to teens’ online civic engagement—or any civic engagement—are: How do we get a lot of participation? How do we sustain it over time? These are the first questions the Citizens League hears from adults as we embark on new Students Speak Out (SSO) initiatives. So with sponsorship from Best Buy, we decided to seek teens’ ideas about how to increase participation.

In August 2010, the Citizens League hosted two Students Speak Out *Design Challenges* in Minneapolis, Minnesota and Orange County, California. We asked teens to review three civic engagement Web spaces and, considering what they experienced, design their own SSO Web site and strategies. While they designed, we listened. Their advice?

Focus less on numbers, and broaden your definition of participation. Create authentic, high-level, inclusive, and adult-facilitated spaces that connect teens to their communities and help them learn civic skills. No civic engagement Web space will ever be their most preferred “go to” space online. But they will regularly visit and use it if the right opportunities are available. These opportunities will humanize the online civic experience, and treat teens respectfully as young adults. They will not rely on digital technologies to provide the experience. Digital technology tools are just that—tools.

According to the teens, there are plenty of simple (and some not-so-simple) strategies and approaches that would boost their interest. Many of these are not, however, adults’ typical offerings. In other words, the ‘right’ approach might require adults to drop their assumptions and shift gears.

This report conveys seven strategies the teens emphasized as most important for any seeking authentic and useful information from them in an online setting.

Strategy 1: Provide sincere, transparent experiences that give teens authentic opportunities to contribute to real discussions and projects. Otherwise, don’t bother.

The teens who participated in the *Design Challenge* are not strangers to contributing their insights. But it’s a rare occasion when it’s clear to them that their voices are meaningful to a process or decision, or

actually influence change. This is particularly true in school. While several participants mentioned Model United Nations, Minnesota’s Catalyst and Scouting as opportunities for learning and practicing civic skills, they said they had limited opportunities to put these skills to use elsewhere. Some teens with social capital¹ are asked to be the “token” teen on committees with adults, they said. But teens perceive that these adults don’t intend to, and often don’t know how to, involve young people. Adults act as though one teen can represent the perspective of *all* teens, for example. Some reported that adults have tried to use them to reinforce their positions in political discussions. These situations make them uncomfortable.

In an online survey of participants given before the *Challenge*, teens’ call for something ‘real’ and ‘sincere’ was also quite clear. Citizens League asked participants to rate 17 possible incentives for them to “join and regularly contribute” to a civic Web site. The teens consistently rated choices having to do with “having real, meaningful involvement”, “interesting topics” and “learning” higher than choices related to socializing or personalizing the Web space.

For teens, a sincere experience means adults genuinely want *their* input and intend to *do something* with it. Transparency is required for teens to stay interested, so adults must make it clear what teens’ work will influence and why their input matters. Adults must also be

¹ See Strategy 6, page 9.



Students Speak Out is a Citizens League project in which we, in keeping with [our guiding principles](#), use a variety of processes and tools to work with teens as they authentically co-define public problems and co-create solutions. It is carried out on our own software platform, CitiZing. Learn more: www.studentsspeakout.org

Design Challenge Details

Who:

- Fifteen total participants
- Grades: 8th (2), 9th (2), 10th (3), 11th (1), 12th (6), College Freshman (1)
- Eight male and seven female
- The groups were comprised of students from all walks of life. Our groups included: residents of a juvenile housing facility; the President of a high school Model United Nations; Boy and Girl Scouts; online, chartered and public school students; students from high-, middle- and low-income families.

Where and When:

- Two, three-hour workshops in August 2010.
 - Orange County, California
 - St. Paul, Minnesota

Format:

- Pre-*Challenge* work included a review of civic Web spaces, blog discussion and a survey of participant Web preferences.
- Each *Design Challenge* started with a large group discussion, following by a breakout into a small group design exercise.
- There were a total of four small group design discussions.

accountable for reporting back to teens about what was learned from them and the effect of their input.

“People do care about *asking* teens, but their actions say they don’t want to learn from us. Most of the time they’re just asking to ask. It’s empty. It’s like getting a ‘signed’ Twins baseball. It sounds great and you work for it and get excited, and then you get it and see it’s been signed by a computer. It’s completely robotic. Nothing sincere or personal. ‘Thank you for your input’ and that’s it. Actually listen!”

“For every project you should make the purpose, objectives, and intended end really clear.”

“When you have one or two teens representing all teens on a panel with 38 adults [“like a teen representative on a school board”, added another participant], that’s not giving teens a voice. The questions matter, too. A lot of times adults ask questions and we answer them, but that doesn’t mean they’ve learned what I think. It’s like, ‘Can’t I be heard without coming to a meeting like this?’” Another participant added, “I don’t represent *all* teens!”

“It really bugs me when efforts are insincere. If you ask us something, then take the time to tell us what you learned and did with it. This will keep us interested, and we’ll know you weren’t asking us just to say you did.”

“Last year, teachers [were furloughed] in my school district and they asked us to wear pink on a particular day to show our support for them so they could point to all the support. I did my own research and I didn’t agree with the district’s choices, but I didn’t fully agree with the teachers’ either. It’s more complicated than what they were saying. So I didn’t wear pink.” Another said, “I wore pink because our teachers said we wouldn’t have homework if we did.”

“Why should I participate in something when it doesn’t matter what I say?”

“If there is not an opportunity for real influence, I’m not going to do it.”

“Student council is held up as an opportunity to get to influence the school. So you work to get onto the council and then you realize right off the bat that you have no power. You go to the first meeting with your ideas and you find out they just wanted students to help plan and set-up the talent show. All our ideas were shot down without any discussion.”

“Once [a candidate for city council] came to our school and he wanted to hear what we had to say. But other than that, no one cares about our opinions.”

Research confirms teens' ideas

Design Challenge participants encouraged adults to broaden their ideas about the scope of participation. One teen said that it's realistic to aim for 30% of all visitors to the site (not necessarily members) to respond or post. Interestingly, Forrester Research found that similar percentages of teens participate as 'creators' and 'critics' online.

Forrester Research analyzes social technology behaviors, lumping consumers/participants into six groups: creators (publish their own content); critics (rate, review, contribute to others' content); collectors (use RSS feeds, tags); joiners (visit social networking Web sites and maintain profiles); spectators (read and listen to content); inactives (none of the above). The groups overlap—most creators are also spectators, for example.

Among teen girls age 12-18*:

- 35% are creators
- 30% are critics
- 11% are collectors
- 48% are joiners
- 55% are spectators
- 34% are inactives

For more information:

http://forrester.typepad.com/groundswell/2007/04/forresters_new_.html

Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff. 2008. *Groundswell*. Forrester Research.

*Exact percentages for all U.S. Youth were not published in this source.

"We can't vote. There's an International Baccalaureate program at my school, and with the budget cuts they're thinking of cutting it. A lot of us are counting on this program for college, but we don't have any real say in [the matter]. We can go to a rally, but we have ideas that deserve more voice. [Such as, where else to cut the budget.]"

"There's satisfaction in knowing I helped shape something. That I had real influence."

Strategy 2: Rethink your definition of participation. Worry less about increasing the number of actual posts on a topic and instead be satisfied with getting teens thinking.

Teens made clear that their definition of "participation" extends beyond posting content on a regular basis. Participation also includes simply browsing a Web site to learn from other people's insights. Doing this, they explain, *is* engagement and learning, even if they don't post a response. Teens suggested that for more passive participants, the value of a civic-oriented site might be simply that it gets them thinking. **The ability to think about issues as better informed people is exactly what many of them seek.**

Teens also explained that no single issue will be of interest to all of them. Individuals will find their niche on the site based on what interests them, so striving to get all of them interested in every discussion topic is likely to be a fruitless endeavor. When asked to recommend ways to increase the number of students who participate, participants suggested creating open/free forum spaces to allow for more discussion topics (posted by either teens or adults) that would appeal to different teens.

Teens also reminded us that their middle and high school years are a short window of time in which they're learning and trying out a lot of skills. Civic skills are just one piece of

a large puzzle they're putting together. They do wish to develop civic skills, particularly using their authentic voice, including and considering diverse voices, networking, organizing, and community building. While teens hope for adults to provide authentic opportunities for this development, they also warn that even a perfectly designed space will never earn their exclusive attention.

"Your main goal should be getting people thinking, not getting a lot of us to stick around forever and comment on everything."

"There's a critical mass you want to obtain. You need enough people to make it meaningful, but not too many or people will get lost."

"Don't spam us with random invites to participate in everything like we're all interested in everything."

"Offer a variety of topics to reply to."

"The 'Parks and Trails' Web site [CitiZing] didn't do much for me. I think it is because I'm not a person that enjoys nature that much."

"No matter how you design it, this is not something I have time to do every day. I'd check it out two or three times a week, and I wouldn't post every time."

"Strive for a 30% post rate [out of all visits]."

Teens realized that growing and sustaining participation (in numbers of members, posts, and hits) can be important, however, for any organization working with foundations, clients, colleagues, and others who have different ideas about what is "good" online participation. With this in mind, teens suggested strategies for making online civic engagement Web sites meaningful and doable in order to attract teens and broaden reach. Their suggestions are summarized in the Appendix at the end of this report.

Strategy 3: Assume teens can handle and *want* to tackle meaty, complicated topics.

In a pre-*Challenge* online survey of participants, teens said the opposite of what most adults would assume: we want to learn *more than* we want to socialize. The most important factors influencing teens' decision to "join and regularly contribute" to an online civic-oriented site were "interesting topics," "the opportunity to learn something new" and "developing their thinking on issues over time."² The three least important aspects were "my friends are participating," "opportunities to meet up (in person) with people you're working with online" and "personalization features".

² Based on averages.

When asked to create their own online spaces as part of the *Design Challenge*, the teens expressed the same preferences. Teens in four separate breakout groups overwhelmingly selected a Citizens League engagement process called the “commentator series,” in which teens offer their personal blog responses to questions from adult decision-makers. They were attracted to the format because it offers opportunities to “debate,” “influence those actually making decisions,” “communicate new ideas,” and “learn”. They preferred the “commentator series” process over other processes such as surveys and reading-and-responding to articles and papers, which they found to be one-dimensional. They also preferred it over six-month long interactive projects, mainly because they perceived these projects would go on too long and there would not be as much opportunity for debate.

Teens also determined that their ideal Web sites would offer discussion topics that were meaty and atypical for them to be involved in. Citizens League provided teens with a list of potential topics, and encouraged them to add their own ideas. While topics such as bullying, distracted driving, drugs, and gang violence were considered, teens did not rank them highest. Two groups chose to work on broadening the definition of student achievement, one group chose to explore what would happen if our nation reconsidered the notion of adolescence, and a fourth chose to explore the impact of stereotypes on community.

Some participants suggested that teens should have a part in solving problems such as bullying and distracted driving, but challenged the notion that these are teen problems. Teens reported frustration that ‘everyone’ seems to approach them with these topics. The typical attitude, they said, is that these are problems caused by young people when in fact they are universal problems that everyone must work together to solve. Universal problems billed as teen problems are a turn-off.

“Teens know more about politics and current events than we’re given credit for.”

“The way adults approach us all the time with topics like ‘bullying’ or ‘distracted driving’ is presumptuous and condescending. Almost like these are not universal problems! It’s not realistic to say that these problems will be solved by us alone.”

“If there were more student involvement in decision-making at the school district, they would solve a lot [of issues facing schools]. Like, they say they don’t have money. We could help them understand how to save it. For example, we could help them decide which tests are most important.” Another added, “How to solve teacher problems, and how to help us reach our personal goals.” Another added, “How to save money on physical education equipment.”

“I like mastering something hard, and feeling like I have an edge on it. Like a new dance move. I am always seeking to do better.”

“[Providing opportunities for] a lot of communication is important.”

“I would join [any of the civic engagement sites I reviewed] to spark conversations with other active teens. It would be interesting to learn what others were thinking about the needs of our society, and I think it’s *very* important for teenagers to have an output for these thoughts.”

Strategy 4: Invest in adults who facilitate, coordinate, motivate, and validate.

Teens, working in four small breakout groups to design their own civic engagement Web site, all elected to incorporate a “consistent adult presence” on the online space. Less than half of the participants liked the idea of a moderator in the pre-*Challenge* online survey, but we learned that this was based on how we asked the question. The term “moderator” has some specific subtext in teens’ minds. Most didn’t want an adult making judgments about whose opinion is best and telling them how to behave (although they wanted general rudeness to be challenged and curbed). They did, however, see great value in adult facilitation and coordination.

According to *Design Challenge* participants, adults should model the following civic organizing skills and encourage teens try them out themselves:

- Make the site personal. Adults can help everyone understand who they should connect with (who else is interested in the same issue, for example), quickly helping members understand the online civic space is filled with real people who have good ideas.
- Move the conversation forward. Play devil’s advocate, pose questions for teens to respond to, encourage teens to start their own discussions, and/or introduce teens to new perspectives. For example, in the online dialogue, link to an opinion piece from someone who disagrees with the teens on the site and ask teens what they would say to that person.
- Act as a liaison between teens and decision-makers who have the power to incorporate their ideas. Also, between teens and journalists and others who can help amplify their voice. Just as we sought out to understand how to work with teens, teens said they need help learning how to work with today’s adults. Teens believe that this kind of help from experienced/skilled professionals is necessary for them get serious opportunities to voice their ideas.
- Suggest topics and create projects based on current events, which teens might not already know about but would want to influence if they did. Suggest ways they can get involved in addressing the issue, even beyond what’s happening on the Web site.
- Where appropriate, link teens together – across projects and discussion topics – to help improve ideas. For example, let struggling teens know how other groups of teens overcame a similar problem in their work.
- Respond with opinions or feedback on teens’ ideas, based on your own ideas and experiences.
- Acknowledge learning and progress.
- Make the site a place where all voices are valued. See Strategy 6, below.

“You need to have adult investment from the beginning, even in free [open discussion] spaces”.

“We have a lot of perspectives that can help solve problems, like we know what’s happening in our schools. But we don’t really know how to bring our ideas into [public discussion]. We need help with that.”

“We don’t know how to use the internet to get involved in these things. We need adults to help organize. We might have an issue that’s important, but we don’t have any idea about what to do with it or where to take it.”

“Adults should present scenarios we’re not thinking about. Bring ideas of other people involved [in addressing the issue].”

“Moderators make me feel more empowered.”

“When someone affirms that I’m learning something and doing it well, I’m motivated to keep going.”

“Our ideas have more weight when adults help us carry them [to the right people, discussions, and places].”

“An adult could post something for us to respond to. That’s ‘safer’ in some ways. I don’t have to put myself out there with an initial thought. I can respond to someone else’s.”

Strategy 5: Make it easy for teens to spread the word and participate via Facebook.

Teens’ most frequently used word in the *Design Challenges* was “Facebook.” Teens said they find out about new Web sites mostly via word-of-mouth in social media spaces, including YouTube, Yahoo, and MySpace. However, for most of them, Facebook is their favorite online space. They are on it “all the time.” They would happily “become a fan” or “like” a page for a civic engagement site if it were used as a place to highlight good ideas the teens produce and to engage them with questions that make them think. Teens also want the ability to easily invite Facebook friends to the civic engagement site and to share their personal blog posts in social media spaces. Important to note is that the parents of our youngest participants (age 13) did not allow them to have an account. It might be wise to use language that makes this group feel there are other options for them to include their friends (like email).

“If the site was connected to Facebook, that would make me more likely to look, more often.”

“Make it possible for us to share our blog posts from the site on Facebook. My friends would see what I’m doing, which would be cool. Maybe it could invite them to join the site and post their own blog, too.”

“Feature comments from the site on Facebook, kind of like they do on the Today Show and CNN.”

“Put up a ‘question of the week’ that gets us thinking and link it to the [civic engagement] site, where people should go to respond.”

Strategy 6: Create a space that challenges people to consider a variety of perspectives and backgrounds. Teens report that their schools are often not such a space.

Teens reported that a site like StudentsSpeakOut.org really adds value because the topic choices, language, and diversity of selected student leaders for various projects make clear that all voices are useful and important in addressing public problems. Such a site could help cut-through the culture they find in many of their schools and activities, where only certain students’ insights are publicly valued by peers and adults.

It’s important that all kinds of teens, from all kinds of schools and backgrounds, are welcome for this space to be able to really help solve public problems. Teens urged that adults give thought to the way they offer incentives such as academic credit, badges and point systems. They cautioned against structures that might enhance ‘elitism’. Several suggested not involving teachers for two reasons: (1) many students would seek to please teachers instead of offering their own authentic insights; (2) teachers

Teens find ‘achievement’ on Facebook. Adults find it on Twitter.

In a discussion about teens’ perceptions of adults, Julie Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow* reported that young people have no interest in the lack of balance they observe among their parents. Instead, teens seek to be happy, to have time for peace and reflection, and to have time for their own interests. The definitions of “achievement” are different.

Part of Evans’ evidence for this is that teens and kids don’t use Twitter. Twitter is an adult response to Facebook, she said. On Twitter adults can focus on what makes them feel they are achieving: “How many followers do I have?” Adults also feel comfortable with Twitter because it is easier to put out their content without needing to respond to others.

Teens prefer Facebook because they seek to connect with people. But adults have trouble understanding this based on their own worldview, which they project onto teens. Everywhere Evans goes she is asked why Project Tomorrow’s national Speak Up survey doesn’t ask teens about their Twitter use. Her response? They’d see Project Tomorrow’s survey as irrelevant.

When seeking to understand teens’ online and civic behavior, adults ought to pay attention to teens’ worldview and associated preferences.

*Project Tomorrow’s vision is to ensure that today’s students are well prepared to be tomorrow’s innovators, leaders and engaged citizens of the world. It is a national education nonprofit group that, among other things, conducts national research on students, educators, and parents via its Speak Up project. www.tomorrow.org

Source: Private conversation between Kim Farris-Berg and Julie Evans October 1, 2009.

involved in these activities tend to assign things like “write three posts on this Web site,” which they sensed would also be detrimental to authenticity. One participant felt differently, however, saying that there are a lot of classes where teachers introduce topics similar to those on Students Speak Out and invite diverse perspectives through debate. She suggested, “It could be useful to these teachers and students if teachers were aware of the site and could pull discussion topics from SSO to use in class. Students could then post their ideas on the site after class discussion if they wanted.”

“My teachers, even early on, had no belief in me. It was that way from that start [of my going to school], just the way I look. I was trying, but they would just talk *at* me. They didn’t want to get to know me, or see me as equal to everyone else.”

“There are some people who have a voice and some who don’t. You have to be someone and be involved at a high level to have a voice.”

“Everyone has a ‘rank.’ If a lot of people know and respect you, you have a rank. This is with teachers and peers; moreso peers.”

“Peers only think ideas are good if you’re liked; if you’re [popular]. And teachers have their favorites.”

“A lot of times we’ll offer our perspectives and adults will cut us off. For example, with topics like gang violence or homosexuality adults will say, ‘No. You should believe [x, y, or z].’”

“One of my main goals is to stay afloat in a huge school. I want to branch out and meet people.”

“Things like badges for participation could have an elitist effect. Students will think, ‘I’ll never get my voice in here, just like I don’t at school.’”

“If you offer academic credit, then teachers will get involved and authenticity will decrease. Students ‘play the game’ in school. For example, if a teacher is known to be a Christian and we’re addressing a topic like abortion on the site and I know that my teacher is participating then I will hold back.”

Strategy 7: Make the Web site a resource for teens to connect with the community, learn more and feel a part of something both on- and offline.

In a pre-*Challenge* online survey of participants teens ranked “meet ups with people you’re working with online” and “my friends are participating” least among reasons they would “join and regularly contribute” to a civic engagement Web site, they asserted in-person that the ability to connect with others *for learning* would get and keep their attention. They want to feel a part of something and learn

while doing it. They also want to network for volunteer opportunities, internships, resources for their school work, and just to meet other teens and adults who care about the same issues.

“Have an ‘opportunity bank’ where we can [indicate] our interests and then get connected to things to do in the local community based on those interests. Like if we want to get involved in the medical profession, maybe we’d get notices about volunteer opportunities or internships related to that. Or people interested in the environment might hear about a beach clean-up.”

“Make it a resource for us. For school we always need primary sources, but they are hard to get. If you had a lot of resources—like people could say they’re willing to be interviewed—and you organized them by topic, that would be something that draws us to the site. Citizens League and others could post their reports, too.” Another added, “And we could say, ‘I’m working on this topic at school’ and it would connect us to other people who are also working on that topic at school or work. And we could share stuff.”

“[Don’t avoid] projects at the state and national level, but you should definitely keep teens working together locally. That way we can meet at events for the topic or find local opportunities. Maybe as you build up the site people can connect across local areas and regions based on the topic they’re working on, to help each other.”

“I have gotten involved [in civic initiatives] before because I wanted to be known. I wanted to be a part of something.”

“When the skate park I use was going to be closed, we sold coupon books to raise the money to keep it open. It was cool. I got involved because it was personal to me and I was working with other people who cared about [the same thing].”

“I was involved in a recycling program called Planet Pal. We just did these little things to contribute, but I remember learning how much energy it takes to run a school. That was really interesting, and I stayed involved because I understood my impact and kept learning new things.”

“People need something to bond over. On the site, this could be things like knowing fun facts about a person or where they live.”

Appendix

Additional strategies for increasing participation

To **initially interest** teens in visiting and joining an online civic engagement site as a member...

...make it do-able.

Content and process design suggestions

- Focus on how to make the the benefit greater than the commitment.
- Teens are hesitant to commit to long-duration projects right off the bat. Offer things to do that take just a few minutes and opportunities that wrap up in just a few days.
- Feature photos of teens. Let teens contribute their own using Photobucket.
- Create funny videos explaining what SSO is and post them on YouTube. “Seeing” the site before they go to it, in a space they already frequent, would remove some of the mystery about what it is.
- Don’t emphasize projects that incorporate video creation and uploading. Contrary to popular belief, teens don’t necessarily have the time nor the skills required. Teens also worry about viruses when it comes to watching video.

Technical design suggestions

- Make sure the online space is accessible at school and libraries. Ironically, the *Design Challenge* space in Orange County, California blocked StudentsSpeakOut.org because it is a social networking space. In general, teens reported that engaging in civic issues in these spaces tends to get them “kicked off.” One student mentioned that word counts like “kill” and “murder” resulted in him getting his death penalty research blocked. Discussing civic issues online might conflict with the ways in which firewalls are currently set-up.
- For site design, keep things bright and colorful, but avoid anything cartoony and childish, including animation. Do not use a lot of text. Make the purpose and things-to-do clear. Keep things simple and easy-to-use. Perhaps have one simple, shiny feature. Simple navigation.

...make it meaningful.

Content and process design suggestions

- Get their attention using:
 - Language that makes the opportunity sound prestigious.

- Advertisements in school newspapers and on signs in the schools or other places teens frequent.
 - “Students Speak Out Club” in schools, launched with on-campus seminars. These clubs would be the heart of SSO at each school. They would be responsible for bringing ideas from each site into school-level discussions and vice versa. They would also spread the word about opportunities for discussions and events. Cool t-shirts are always a plus.
 - U.S. Mail. Some reported that they never get letters, so they tend to pay attention when people contact them this way.
- Convey to teens that they will be good at it (civic participation on x issue). Also convey that they already have everything they need to do it well.
 - Use familiar language. While terms like “solve policy problems” and “learn civic skills” will attract the teens already interested in that sort of challenge, it could easily scare away others. To attract more teens, use familiar language such as “public” and “community”. Many of the *Design Challenge* participants had no idea what “policy” meant. Additional ideas include:
 - From the start, be funny. It doesn’t have to be serious, but take care not to pander either. One teen recommended taking a note from: <http://thatguywiththeglasses.com/>
 - Use phrases such as the following:
 - Get active. Use your voice.
 - Be heard! You can say it here!
 - Would you like to help?
 - There are public issues in all of our communities that you can become involved in solving. Answers can be found if we all work together.
 - The words “young people” come off as awkward to some, but they didn’t have other suggestions when pressed. Some said the name and url “StudentsSpeakOut.org” should be kept as is.
 - Take care not to say “you’re going to solve the problem.” Instead say, “you’re going to contribute to solving the problem.” Teens sense the former is insincere. It’s not likely they will solve community problems entirely on their own.

Technical design suggestions

- Create opportunities to “friend” other members. Offer notifications when people you might know join (e.g. from same school or activity).
- Give members the ability to send personal invitations to join the site, attached to a published blog post. For example, let students put their posts up on Facebook with a teaser and link to the site that says “I shared my ideas on Students Speak Out. Brett invites you to share yours, too.”

To sustain their interest and increase their participation in terms of posting...

...*make it do-able*.

Content and process design suggestions

- Consider connecting with schools to arrange academic credit. In an online survey of participants given prior to the *Design Challenge*, one of teens' highest-rated choices for participation incentives was "academic credit." But when teens discussed this option further in the *Design Challenge*, they weren't sure it was a great idea. It could affect authenticity of the outcomes if students were "made" to go on the site to, for example, communicate in x number of forums in y amount of time. They also worried about whether students would be authentic if their teachers were involved (see Strategy 6, above). Some teens suggested that extra credit might be a good idea in larger high schools, while smaller, less traditional high schools might be able to figure out how to give credit for civics or writing.
- Offer crib notes of what's happening and what they can do now. Also, prioritize topics and explain why. If teens have to spend a lot of time to get up-to-speed on an ongoing discussion in order to offer their opinions, it's not likely they will.
- Offer incentives to participate in new ways.

Technical design suggestions

- When members arrive, offer:
 - An abbreviated news feed for members to follow their projects or topics of interest as well as what their friends are doing. Teens don't want to sift through content that is not in their area of interest.
 - A summary of discussion posts. Combing through weeks or months of discussion posts to get updated on a topic is time-consuming, yet synopses would build their confidence to enter conversations.
 - Topic suggestions, encouraging them to start new discussions.
- Provide members the ability to subscribe to discussions they want to follow in their site-based news feed, email, or RSS feed.
- Provide members the ability to set email preferences. For example, they might not want to know about all SSO projects (only specific projects).
- Keep content organized and searchable. Consider making this a member responsibility (as on Wikipedia). Encourage members to tag items with keywords. Also, assemble and organize links to the Web, how-to documents, and lists of community experts.

...make it meaningful.

Content and process design suggestions

- Have consistent, active people participating on the site. “This is important. You need a ‘critical mass’ to make it worthwhile. Eight would be enough. You need enough people to make it meaningful, but not too many such that people get lost.”
- Consider distributing “points” for contributions to the site such as starting and furthering discussions, connecting with adults, bringing changemakers to the site, publishing a letter to the editor, or building other civic skills. Continuously offer new points-earning activities so there is always something new to do. Determine a reward for points, which might be as simple as affirmations and validations (see next bullet). Best Buy @15’s “use your points to tell us where to make donations” model was tied for teens’ highest-ranked participation incentive.

Some teens worried that a points or badge system could have an elitist effect, impacting the variety of perspectives we could get on the site. If some students came to a site and saw badges they might think they wouldn’t be able to have a voice on the site until they work their way in.

- Offer validation of the learning and growing taking place. Personal accolades are good, but also consider offering a college or job recommendation letter, or a U.S.-mailed certificate, that acknowledges students’ achievements on the site, perhaps based on points earned for accomplishing various tasks.
- Use teen-created artwork in the Web design and on any incentives.
- Feature a “request box” so teens can submit ideas for improvement.

Technology and site design suggestions

- Offer subtle customization opportunities on individual pages. These should allow you to express who you are, but not affect the loading speed for the page. Autoplay music features are generally not desirable.
- Offer space to do personal blogs on individual pages.