

Cognitive Surplus and Appreciation in Civic Life

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I have no idea how I ended up watching a [Ted Talk](#) entitled “How Cognitive Surplus Will Change the World”. I did not know what cognitive surplus was, and generally, “save the world” hyperbole is not my thing. Regardless of what prompted me to click the link, Clay Shirky’s 2010 talk spurred me to some interesting thoughts about one of my passions, civic engagement, and how we can bolster community connection and civic participation.

The gist of the talk is that our free time and talent (cognitive surplus) is a significant resource that should be harnessed to make change. In the past, media was built around consuming, and we proved to be very good consumers indeed. Media has evolved to be more than just something we consume – we can now use it to create and share. Shirky references both [LOLcats](#) and [Ushahidi](#) mapping as examples of creative acts that are possible because of our new use of media. He distinguishes them, though, by who they benefit. LOLcats provide communal good – benefit for those that make them and those that see them. Something like Ushahidi provides civic good – benefits for those that make them as well as society in general.

He then draws in intrinsic and external motivation and what encourages us to act in certain ways. He uses a great study about late pick-ups from a daycare centre to illustrate the finding that intrinsic motivation/social constraints are more effective than external motivation/contractual constraints. Organizations that are designed around a culture of generosity can therefore be able to achieve results without a lot of what he calls ‘contractual overhead’ and I take to mean rules, regulations and policies.

He goes on to bring up a quote from Dean Kamen – and this is the part that really got to me – “In a free society, you get what you celebrate.” By celebrating, supporting and rewarding those that are trying to use cognitive surplus to create civic value, we can change society for the better. This makes so much sense to me. I do, however go past that to think about the *how*. How do we celebrate, support and reward people that are using their time and talent towards our communities? Part of the challenge, from my perspective, is that civic engagement processes often culminate in decision-making. For someone who has used their cognitive surplus to contribute to a process that ultimately ends in a decision that does not reflect what they were working towards, how do we ensure that they are motivated to do so again? I think about recent Edmonton City Council decisions that have not gone the community’s ‘way’, particularly the **Molson’s/Crosstown rezoning**, and the **volume of citizen volunteer hours that go into communities’ responses to developer proposals**. Regardless of the decision, which can often be disappointing for the community, an even worse outcome is the disillusionment of community members that keeps them from investing their ‘cognitive surpluses’ in future civic events and processes. To create civil society, we need to find ways of making sure people that are involved in civic life feel supported, celebrated and rewarded, without crossing the line into extrinsic motivators (i.e. fines for not voting).

While I was thinking about this, I was looking around the Internet and stumbled across **Samara Canada** and their project **Everyday Political Citizen**. While their lens is little more focused on organized politics, I was pleased to find an organization in Canada that was doing some active recognition of citizens who were investing their time and talent into the political (civic and otherwise) sphere. It is worth browsing through their blog to get a sense of the depth and breadth of citizen political participation across the country.

The more I think about it, the more I appreciate Clay Shirky’s comment about designing for generosity and, my own addition, appreciation. If discussions about city- and community-building can come from a place of generosity and appreciation, generosity of and appreciation for time, ideas, creativity, etc. on all

sides of a discussion, I think we could make significant changes in how people feel about being involved in civic life and perhaps increase both the quantity and quality of participation.

Is this overly simplistic? Probably. But maybe making it overly complicated slows down the changes we need to make. You are already reading this post so you probably have some interest in civic affairs. What would it take for you to feel celebrated, supported and rewarded for your participation, regardless of the outcome? How can you ensure other people at the table feel appreciated, even if you disagree with them?