

The Dill Pickle Club: Online and Off

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Chatting, instant messaging, blogging, commenting, gaming, social networking, liking, following, posting, studying, cataloguing, communicating. We are a more networked society than ever before. New technologies and media developments have us hooked on digital culture, where we can be creators, curators, facilitators, administrators, publishers, and acquaintances with people all over the world. I would wager to say that the influence of the participatory and collaborative nature of our online actions is influencing how organizations approach audience engagement and programming both online and off, and that as we learn through our online behaviors to be participants, we value the opportunities to continue to be a participant and collaborator offline as well. To this end, I conducted a case study on the new Dill Pickle Club located in Portland, OR. The organization utilizes the many tools that technology has to offer to generate collaborative place-based programming in the form of themed tours in the city of Portland. Each tour is a unique, one-time event that draws on the expertise of professionals throughout the city. I was fortunate to be able to spend an hour in a one-on-one interview with the club's co-founder and only full time staff member Marc Moscato and garner some insight as to how the club works, how it came to be, and what lies in it's future.

The Beginning

Years ago, an aspiring young video maker by the name of Marc Moscato entered the University of Buffalo. The influence of his professors there revealed to Marc the possibility of video and film as a vehicle for social action. Upon graduating, Marc found himself employed in commercial enterprise, and found this to be a draining endeavor that failed to fill his video making soul with joy. Seeking the type of satisfaction and stimulation he discovered as an undergraduate, he became a volunteer for Squeaky Wheel. Squeaky Wheel is a "grassroots, artist-run, nonprofit media arts center" that works to "promote and support film, video, computer, digital, and audio art by media artists and community members". These events led Marc to pursue graduate work as an

arts administrator at the University of Oregon. Following graduation, Marc went to work at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, OR. Eventually, he was laid off.

With newly found time on his hands, Marc set about work on some ideas that had been lingering in his mind. He also became connected to a couple with an interest in creating a special sort of place in Portland, OR. Special in that it would draw upon themes of soap boxing and cultural salons, not unlike the Dill Pickle Club of Chicago, a bohemian club that functioned between 1917 and 1935. It served as a speakeasy, cabaret, and theatre where free thinkers gathered. Inspired, Marc and his colleagues reincarnated the organization in Portland, OR as “an experimental forum for critiquing contemporary culture, politics, and humanities”. The original establishment invited the multiplicity of voices and ideas that the Internet has made widely accessible, but it did this without the use of media. In it’s second iteration, based in Portland, OR, media is an extension of the same values of community gathering, education, and collaboration. It is also an outreach tool, and an archival repository.

Nontraditional and Interactive Learning

The world wide web has had major influences on information sharing, making it possible for world wide movements to grow at rapid rates. In a most recent example, it has within one day, allowed for the creation of a Facebook page, several twitter feeds, an online petition, and statewide sharing and response to the firing of UO President Lariviere. People are engaged in the conversation online, and critical of the fact that the decision to let Lariviere go was not made with input from faculty or staff. In essence, the people who will be affected did not have the opportunity to participate in the decision making process. We have come to expect participation as a natural course of action (and when that doesn’t happen, we have the web on our side for generating mass public awareness and support!).

The Dill Pickle Club enables participation from the beginning, in a democratized and collaborative model that includes on and off line sharing. For example, its website and social media feeds are used to advertise calls for ideas and artists. Marc describes the tours as coordinated rather than led, and the organization is committed to making all forms of knowledge accessible, as evidenced by their publication series and new Know

Your Place phone app (in the development stages). Here's the mission statement of the Dill Pickle Club:

The Dill Pickle Club is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that organizes educational projects that help us understand the place in which we live. Through tours, public programs and publications, we create nontraditional and interactive learning environments where all forms of knowledge are valued and made readily accessible. Founded in 2009, we are a volunteer-driven organization, with a shared belief in the vitality of community education and democracy.

Pickle Lovers

Rather than a list of partners, DPC's website lists letters of support from people in places like:

- The Portland Art Museum: "Dill Pickle Club is an example of another organization that is making a significant contribution to the cultural discourse of Portland and the larger region." – Stephanie Parrish, Manager of Docent Programs & Gallery Teaching
- Portland State University: All community members benefit when we have a broader understanding of who we are as Portlanders and the DPC plays a vital role in promoting cross-cultural awareness, a role that does not seem to be satisfied by government agencies or other organizations." **-Julie Perini**
Assistant Professor, Portland State University
- Seattle University: Regarding an experience speaking at a Dill Pickle Club tour of Chinatown: It was a notable experience and I was amazed at the high number of people who attended and delighted at the opportunity to participate in a community discussion and a presentation that included the audience.

Letters of support from the Portland community are also on the page.

The Cost of Pickling

With a lack of resources to open a club that occupies a physical space, the DPC opened with a mobile structure, incorporating various organizations throughout the city

on each unique tour. This is a clever workaround that helped the founders avoid the overhead costs of maintaining a facility. Funding comes from donations and memberships (many levels available) and crowd-sourced fundraising for projects on websites like Kickstarter. Additionally, the club hosts an annual event called the “The Perfect Pickle”, inviting area chefs to a pickle-off. The uniquely created ultimate pickles are then auctioned. The event is a pickle connoisseur’s dream come true.

Participatory Pickle

Early in the term, our Participatory Media course focused on some work that would create a frame for exploring a variety of projects that deal with media and social action. As a graduate student studying community arts, I likened this frame to that of community development. Participatory media is an avenue for community development through collaborative work that brings people together to learn, share, and dialogue and then collectively tell a story, or respond/curate/ or take other roles in co-creation. Scribe’s Precious Places work in Philadelphia is perhaps the clearest example of the social-building capacity of media projects, and it is described in an aptly titled paper: “Toward a Collaborative Ethos”. The work of the Dill Pickle club can also be explored through this framework. The ideas for the tours that the organization coordinates are member generated and then voted on by a board. Not one person leads the tour, rather the tour visits a variety of locations and at each is a professional who guides information sharing about that specific stop along the journey. Another person documents the story. The tours are the culmination of the ideas of members, the facilitation of the Dill Pickle Club, the knowledge sharing of professional Portlanders who agree to provide some time for the tour, the artists who submit poster entries to advertise the events, and the culminating documentation that can be witnessed online through a large variety of social media outlets.

A Pickle’s Place in a Giant Jar

A major attribute of the Dill Pickle Club is that it tells the stories about Portland that are lesser heard, generating cross cultural dialogue and inclusive place-based learning.

For example, a tour called “Walls of Pride” traveled through the city and examined African American public art in Portland. Julie Perini, quoted above as a supporter, upon being inspired by this tour added some related content to courses that she teaches at PSU. Another tour considered the contemporary development of Chinatown in the city, while still others depart from cultural themes and look at how the city functions with events like “How the River Works”. Dill Pickle Club leader Marc Moscato also felt they would be remiss not to address the current issues brought on by the Occupy movement, and recently hosted a well attended teach-in. Videos of the event are embedded on the DPC web page and earned them some mention in a recent publication of Willamette Week.

Here’s a bulleted break down of the specific attributes that make the Dill Pickle Club special in the landscape of participatory media projects:

- Highly flexible in terms of programming
- Responsive to current important social trends, like the Occupy movement
- Media is the connector between the members as co-collaborators and the Dill Pickle Club itself
- Media is used as a tool for documentation and public distribution of information
- Media does not replace face to face interaction and physical involvement in activity, but rather facilitates such occurrences

Plight of the Pickle

Starting a business with heavy overhead can’t be recommended in these rather terrible economic times. So, while the vision of the new Dill Pickle Club was inspired by an actual club in Chicago, it was the freethinking cultural salon activity that the new Dill Pickle Club would really seek to invigorate in Portland. Though the DPC offers place-based thematic programming, physically it exists as a small office on the fourth floor of the Dekum building in downtown Portland. It is a small space that appears to be used as office, storage, and as a gallery of posters from previous events. While the DPC has established a strong presence through many social media sites online, physically it does not exist beyond its small administrative space four floors above the ground level of Portland. The lack of a street front presence is something the club is looking to address in

its 3-5 year planning. Marc envisions this space as a small area possibly housing a collection of the club's publications, office space in the back, and room for 10 or so people to gather. The location would serve as a meeting place and point of departure for event participants, and may have the potential to host small workshops.

The Networked Pickle

As I write this, the Dill Pickle Club has 1201 "likes" on Facebook, 759 Twitter followers, a Wikipedia page of its own, a Vimeo account with videos embedded on the Club's website, and a tumblr feed. There is probably more to that list, these are the accounts I came across. Additionally, it utilizes Kickstarter, a web based crowd-sourced fundraising website, to draw support from both members and non-members for upcoming projects. I've checked, and the feeds are active – indicating some level of commitment to the use of social media. Marc noted in our interview that he sees social media as a way to connect with his audience and members, rather than as the center of the project.

Building the Pickle Community

The DPC and its work are probably best aligned within the cultural sector. However, its place based and open-ended programming creates the space in which dialogue includes multiple sectors. For example, the recent tour, "How the River Works" joins the DPC and civic facilities/infrastructure. Visiting the Port of Portland, tour participants learned about the economic implications of the port, and its role within the Pacific Northwest region as a major import/export location. Another tour examined where Portland's food waste goes, while another explored African art throughout the city. The flexible programming structure of the DPC is a critical asset to the club in that it allows for a variety of events that can appeal to members with a diverse set of interests and thematic content from various sectors within the city which impact Portland's residents and visitors.

Pickle as a Platform

While many organizations have a space that allows them to hold events, the Dill Pickle Club uses the city as its space. This approach is surprisingly logical, given the community place-based nature of the events that the club hosts. The online representation of the DPC is sort of a combination of its utilitarian organizational structure, with information about membership and its mission statement, and a place to garner some of the information that is revealed on the tours. It is also a place to put out calls for ideas and arts entries. While topics within the realm of our class work identify digital culture largely with participatory culture, the DPC finds a comfortable intersection between the two, more in the fashion of the collaborative ethos embodied in Scribe's Precious Places. Another project we looked at, mapping Memories, makes for an interesting comparison to the work of the Dill Pickle Club. Mapping Memories deals with people's specific identities in relationship to their own personal background and how it relates to their physical environment within a place. The DPC tours similarly deal with identity, but in such a way that it deepens a person's understanding of the identity of the place, which can be reflected on individually.

Pickle Potential

Well situated within a region known for its sustainable and DIY values, the DPC is a model for DIY place-based learning. The list of subjects that can be explored within the city of Portland is nearly limitless. From engineering to waterways, art history, and social movements, food growth and food waste, and the stories of the people that you won't find in a history book, the DPC is one small example of the richness of place as a multidisciplinary learning tool for all ages. On a smaller scale, the DPC is an incubator for place-based dialogue, a way to educate local residents about the unique stories and workings of their environment whether it is socially, economically, or pertaining to infrastructure.

Staying on the Pickle Path

Naturally, if an organization has the word "pickle" in its title, there might be a pickle in the logo. And that's true of the DPC. At least I think it is. What appears to have

a pickle shaped body also appears to have the head and feet of a duck. The DPC has branded itself with this image and a logo font that looks like it might have been created by initially cutting letters out of construction paper. Under the logo in some places is the tagline “creative cultural club”, a rather appropriate definition of the organization. The website banner is a faded map on which I can make out the Willamette river, and the homepage has graphics that swap in slideshow fashion highlighting recent events, upcoming activities, and on-going projects. The website also includes a shop, where you can purchase your membership as well as any of the publications the organization has compiled, and then there’s your normal swag, like t-shirts and tote bags. Obtaining a street-front space will allow the DPC to make these items available for purchase more easily offline. The new space would also help brand the Dill Pickle Club within the physical space in which it functions.

Pickle Planning

The Dill Pickle Club in Portland Oregon was founded in 2009. While it has grown within the community and has a solid following, the organization has not grown administratively beyond its one and a half staff members. When I asked Marc about the future of the DPC, he both mentioned goals he sees for the club over the next 3-5 years (he is currently working on some strategic planning) and also that eventually he sees that there may be a natural progression to move on. Specifically, Marc said that he doesn’t want to fall victim to Founder’s Syndrome. This is very fitting, since Founder’s Syndrome can result in an organizational leader being reluctant to welcome newcomers, and s/he may have disproportionate control over decision-making and fail to seek input from members. Since The Dill Pickle club “believes in the vitality of community education and democracy” such a situation would be highly counter-intuitive to its mission. At the moment the club is still poised for growth. The DPC’s future goals include:

- Acquisition of street level storefront space that will give the DPC a stronger physical presence
- Increased funding
- Increased staffing

- Development of the “Know Your Place” phone app that will allow anyone access to unique information about Portland, OR

Counting Pickles

The DPC is currently functioning with the following assets:

- Office space
- Dedicated members and volunteers
- Strong community network
- Great location for the type of work it’s doing
- Collection of items and publications that document its work
- Knowledge and use of media tools to connect with audience

Pickle Punch

The impact of the DPC may not yet be measured numerically, but can be gauged by its ability to draw upon its growing network to put on innovative programming, and in its flexibility to theme programming around a variety of topics. An example of this is the recent teach-in that the DPC hosted. It was an impromptu event that included presentations by Dr. Randall Bluffstone, a Professor of Economics at Portland State University, John Coghlan, a filmmaker for the Occupy Portland Video Collective, Dr. Veronica Dujon, Professor of Sociology at Portland State University, and Michael Moore, to name a few.

The Participant Pickle

Outreach permeates the DPC’s creative approach to all of its activities. For example, each year the DPC hosts the “Perfect Pickle” challenge, a fundraising event that challenges area chefs to create an item of pickle perfection. This event is fun and different, and certain to be a new experience for many attendees. Each tour the club coordinates has its own theme, like “How is news made?” or “How does the river work?” The DPC is uniquely designed to address a variety of subjects, and this alone is a major asset in being able to reach a variety of community members with a variety of interests.

Now the DPC has launched efforts on its phone app, which will broaden its capacity to share tour information and allow people to become intimately familiar with aspects of the city they may not have considered exploring. Each of these components assists in outreach while maintaining the mission of establishing nontraditional and interactive learning environments to foster community education.

Pickle Wrap-up

The Dill Pickle Club is no doubt an asset to Portland, OR. Through the use of the Internet the club functions without it's own space to share and collect info and generate interest in events. The events themselves often reveal other cultural assets within the city to the tour-goers. With a comfortable balance between the use of media and the use of the physical environment, the DPC promotes participation as a member, a volunteer, an artist contributor, an idea submitter, or a tour-goer. In terms of our many readings and web immersions, I believe this balance stands out. While there are many implications for the virtual world and social projects, what we can learn from the Dill Pickle Club is that human contact in our physical environments is still an essential element of our lived experience.

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