

CURA:Tech, One Year Later

By Kristen Murray and Kaela Dickens



Photo by Andrew Tran

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In 2014–2015, CURA hosted a civic technology incubator, CURA:Tech. The one-year project supported teams to identify issues in their community that could be addressed with an information-based civic technology, and create a prototype of the tool. In 2016, we checked in with award winners and other participants to see how their work was going.

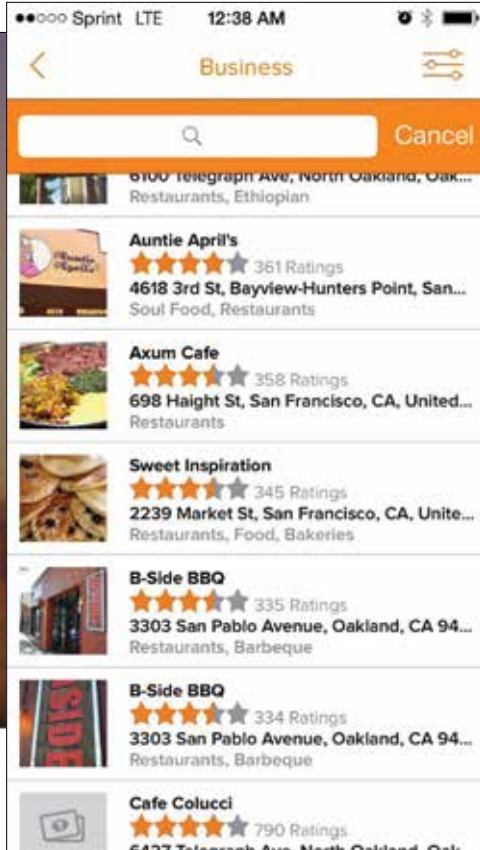
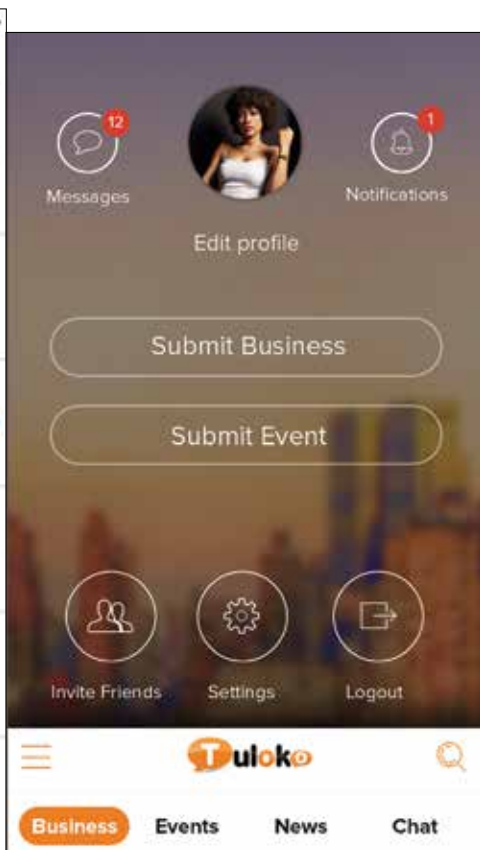
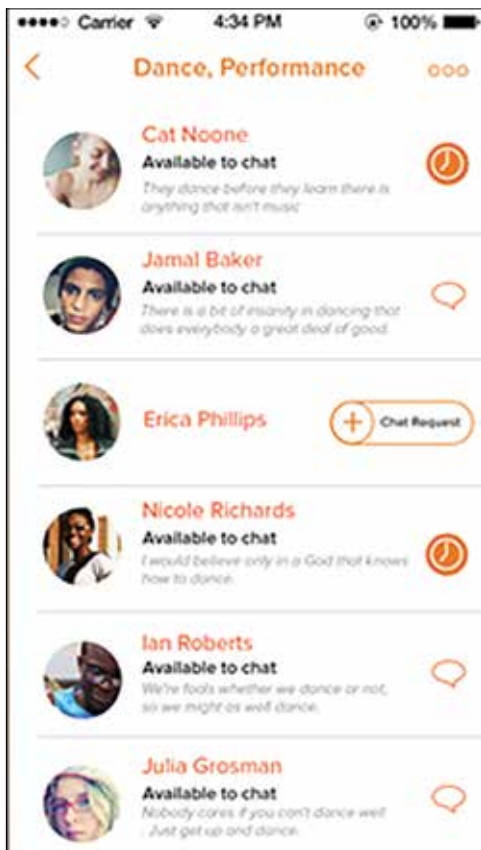
Tuloko

Tuloko, an Internet-based social enterprise that provides products and services focused on the development, growth,

and employment of small, women-, and minority-owned businesses, did a soft launch of its mobile app. In its first 90 days, it had more than 10,000 downloads between iPhone and Android users. The National Newspaper Publishers Association has expressed an interest in partnering with Tuloko to digitally publish news content on the Tuloko app from newspapers across the country.

Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy (CEED)

CEED proposed to create an “Activist Dashboard” where individuals can track a given issue and find useful resources such as public hearings, timelines for citizen input, government officials, and relevant public agencies related to that issue. CEED is currently working on their prototype of the Activist Dashboard, and has narrowed the focus of the tool to energy issues. They hope to launch the tool during spring of 2017.



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Kitty Andersen Youth Science Center (KAYSC)

Teen Tech Crew (TTC), a group of teens employed in the Science Museum of Minnesota's Kitty Andersen Youth Science Center, received an award to create What'sWerk: a web series designed and produced by and for young people to teach important information about getting a job. In the winter of 2016, TTC created their first series about how to get an interview, and screened the episodes at Right Track's job fair for St. Paul teens last spring. TTC is currently making a second series of five episodes, focused on what to do during an interview, which will be screened at teen job fairs this spring. The videos are available from Teen Tech Crew's YouTube channel.

KAYSC youth also recently released a mobile app about healthy eating in the Frogtown neighborhood, in partnership with Frogtown Farm. It is available for Android phones through Google Play.

The Bridge for Youth

The Bridge for Youth launched their text-based crisis line, 24/7 Txt4Help, in the fall of 2015. Now, in addition

to calling the Bridge's phone hotline, youth can send a text to 612-400-SAFE to communicate with trained volunteers and staff at the Bridge about a range of sensitive topics, including homelessness, bullying, family conflict, sexual exploitation, depression, and other issues. The textline is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

CURA:Tech also included an in-depth workshop on human-centered design techniques, to help teams develop and prototype civic tech tools. This intensive experience, hosted by CURA and led by design firm Azul Seven, brought together people diverse in expertise, skills, background, and lived experience. Over the course of the two-day workshop, participants practiced a way of identifying issues and solving problems by asking questions, listening and observing, making low-tech prototypes, and trying them out with real people. We heard from some participants that learning this process benefited their work in a variety of ways. We reconnected with a few CURA:Tech participants to hear what they are up to now.

Dr. Lanise Block

Dr. Lanise Block is the Strategic Projects Administrator at Minneapolis Public Schools and founder and Executive Director of the Digital Empowerment Academy, which offers workshops in social activism via digital creation and youth-focused programs (www.digitalempowermentacademy.org). Block had incorporated some aspects of human-centered design into her work before CURA:Tech, but she felt the experience gave her a firmer foundation and justification for its practices. "It took small elements that were natural to me and gave me a language and framework for them."

Block's favorite aspect of design thinking is the empathy building that requires creators to put themselves in the shoes of the users. She had done empathy work with participants before, but this was the first time she put vocabulary to that concept. Block also said that the prototyping stage of the human-centered design process has made her more action-oriented. "People tend to talk about ideas ad nauseam; [it is much more effective to] make something, see if it works, and change it if it doesn't."

Block now uses design thinking in every aspect of her work, from program design to teaching students to utilizing technology. "Leadership looks different for me now. It's more constructivist. For youth, I just frame the idea and then say, 'Alright, you all can do the rest.' That process allows them to grow in leadership....It's not about me, it's not about the agenda. It's about what's coming from them."

David Kang

David Kang, an independent producer and director from the Twin Cities, had been using elements of human-centered design for years in his career in film and digital media, but the CURA:Tech experience gave him new tools to augment his practices.

One of his first implementations of design thinking following the CURA:Tech experience focused on increasing Hepatitis B education for older Hmong males, who experience higher rates of the infection than other groups in the Twin Cities. Previous efforts to educate them using fliers and written communication were proving ineffective, so Kang and a group of local Hmong artists partnered with Hennepin County to consult on the project. They grounded the work in the practice of oral communication and cultural values of strength and stoicism. Together, they developed a public service announcement for a Hmong radio station that serves as a main information point for many Hmong adults. "By focusing on their needs and communication patterns, we were able to innovate and design a solution that reached people in a way that worked for them."

Kang is continuing the work he started in CURA:Tech through his company The DIAL (www.thedialgroup.org), which builds partnerships between the creative community and public institutions and initiatives to create culturally relevant tools and approaches to engagement. According to Kang, "Too many approaches are created in a top-down way, without thinking about what the community values and will respond to. ... [It is critical] to be very intentional to always keep the community member at the center of the design and approach."

Sandy Wolfe Wood

Sandy Wolfe Wood is an independent designer with roots in graphic design. She ran Design for Good, a program of the American Institute of Graphic Artists Minnesota, following years of work for design firms and other large organizations. After participating in CURA:Tech, Wood took the step to launch her own venture, Designing Change (www.designing-change.com), a firm that uses the principles of design to address social problems. She uses an iterative process of listening and observing, defining the problem, generating ideas to address the problem, prototyping solutions, and testing and refining them.

Wood says that it can be hard to start with a question and move towards a solution that may be different from one that's already in your mind: "[The design process is] iterative. ... It's important, though sometimes hard, to keep that in mind when designing."

Wood also highlighted the importance of "jettisoning your assumptions" and listening to and observing the

potential users of the tool or approach you are designing. Building relationships and trust can be critical to getting to a place where you can both have honest conversations about the issues and try out possible solutions to find the ones that will work best.

Kristen Murray is a Program Developer at CURA. She ran CURA:Tech, and currently manages CURA's Community Visualization program, which offers design and visualization assistance to community partners, with the goal of democratizing complex information about the Twin Cities, such as data, policies, and other processes. She received her master's degree from University of Minnesota in Landscape Architecture, with a graduate minor in Public Policy.

Kaela Dickens was a graduate assistant working on community visualization and communications for CURA. She received her master's degree in Public Policy, with a concentration in Administration and Leadership.

Open Twin Cities, a partner on CURA:Tech, continues to host monthly civic technology meetups and other civic tech events for the Twin Cities region. Get more info at www.opentwincities.org.

If you participated in CURA:Tech and want to share an update, we'd love to hear from you. Contact Kristen Murray at kmurray@umn.edu.