

An occasional paper on digital media and learning

Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century

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Executive Summary

According to a recent study from the Pew Internet & American Life project (Lenhardt & Madden, 2005), more than one-half of all teens have created media content, and roughly one third of teens who use the Internet have shared content they produced. In many cases, these teens are actively involved in what we are calling *participatory cultures*. A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). Forms of participatory culture include:

Affiliations — memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace).

Expressions — producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups).

Collaborative Problem-solving — working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge (such as through *Wikipedia*, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).

Circulations — Shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging).

A growing body of scholarship suggests potential benefits of these forms of participatory culture, including opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, a changed attitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship. Access to this participatory culture functions as a new form of the hidden curriculum, shaping which youth will succeed and which will be left behind as they enter school and the workplace.

Some have argued that children and youth acquire these key skills and competencies on their own by interacting with popular culture. Three concerns, however, suggest the need for policy and pedagogical interventions:

The Participation Gap — the unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow.

The Transparency Problem — The challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways that media shape perceptions of the world.

The Ethics Challenge — The breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants.

Educators must work together to ensure that every American young person has access to the skills and experiences needed to become a full participant, can articulate their understanding of how media shapes perceptions, and has been socialized into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practices as media makers and participants in online communities.

A central goal of this report is to shift the focus of the conversation about the digital divide from questions of technological access to those of opportunities to participate and to develop the cultural competencies and social skills needed for full involvement. Schools as institutions have been slow to react to the emergence of this new participatory culture; the greatest opportunity for

change is currently found in afterschool programs and informal learning communities. Schools and afterschool programs must devote more attention to fostering what we call the new media literacies: a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape. Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom.

The new skills include:

Play — the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving

Performance — the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery

Simulation — the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes

Appropriation — the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content

Multitasking — the ability to scan one’s environment and shift focus as needed to salient details.

Distributed Cognition — the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities

Collective Intelligence — the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal

Judgment — the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources

Transmedia Navigation — the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities

Networking — the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information

Negotiation — the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

Fostering such social skills and cultural competencies requires a more systemic approach to media education in the United States. Everyone involved in preparing young people to go out into the world has contributions to make in helping students acquire the skills they need to become full participants in our society. Schools, afterschool programs, and parents have distinctive roles to play as they do what they can in their own spaces to encourage and nurture these skills.

[UELMA members: You can *access the full paper* at:]

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