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## Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Part One)

The following is excerpted from a white paper produced for the Catherine and John MacArthur Foundation as part of their launch of a new initiative on Youth and Digital Learning. The full report can be read at <http://www.projectnml.org>. In this first part, we establish how the opportunities and risks posed by the new participatory culture force us to reassess media education for the 21st century. In the second installment, we will identify a framework of social skills and cultural competencies that we feel should be the foundations for this new media literacy education.

### Introduction

If it were possible to define generally the mission of education, it could be said that its fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, [Creative] and economic life. –

New London Group (2000, p. 9)

According to a 2005 study (Lenhardt & Madden, 2005) conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than half of all American teens – and 57 percent of teens who use the internet – could be considered media creators. For the purpose of the study, a media creator was defined as someone who «created a blog or webpage, posted original artwork, photography, stories or videos online or remixed online content into their own new creations.» Most have done two or more of these activities. 33 percent of teens share what they create online with others. 22 percent have their own home pages. 19 percent blog and 19 percent remix content they found on line.

If anything, the Pew study undercounts the number of American young people who are embracing the new participatory culture. The Pew study did not consider newer forms of expression such as podcasting, game modding or machinima; they also did not count other forms of creative expression and appropriation – for example, music sampling in the hip hop community – which are highly technological but which use other tools and tap other networks for their production and distribution. And the study does not account for even more widespread practices – such as computer or video gaming – which may require a great deal of time and effort focused on constructing and performing fictional personas.

For the moment, let's define participatory culture as one where:

1. there are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. there is strong support for creating and sharing what you create with others
3. there is some kind of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced gets passed along to newbies and novices
4. members feel that their contributions matter
5. members feel some degree of social connection with each other at least to the degree to which they care what other people think about what they have created.

Not every member needs to contribute but all need to feel what they contribute will be appropriately valued if they do. Historically, we have valued creative writing or arts classes because they help to identify and train future writers and artists but also because the creative process is valuable apart from its products: every kid deserves the chance to express themselves through words, sounds and images even if most will never write, perform or draw professionally. Having these experiences, we believe, changes the way kids think about themselves and alters the way they look at work created by others.

Most discussions of the public policy dimensions of new media have centered on technologies – tools and their affordances. The computer is discussed as a magic black box which contains the potential for a learning revolution (in the positive version) or a black hole which consumes resources which might better be devoted to traditional classroom activities (in the more critical version). Yet, media operate in specific cultural and institutional contexts which determine how and why they are used. The computer doesn't operate in a vacuum: the insertion of digital technologies into schools necessarily impacts our relationship with every other communications technology, changing how we feel about what can or should be done with pencils and notebook paper, chalk and blackboard, books and printed matter, films and recordings and so forth.

Rather than dealing with each technology in isolation, we would do better to take an ecological approach, thinking about the interrelationship amongst all of these different communications technologies, the cultural communities that grow up around them, and the activities which they support. Media systems consist of communications technologies

and the social, cultural, legal, political, and economic institutions, practices, and protocols which shape and surround them (Gitelman, 1999). The same task can be performed through a range of different technological options and the same technology can be deployed towards a variety of different ends. Some tasks may be easier with some technologies than with others and thus, the introduction of a new technology may inspire certain uses. Yet, these activities become widespread only if the culture also supports them, if they represent recurring needs at a particular historical juncture. It matters what tools are available to a culture, but it matters more what that culture chooses to do with those tools.

That is why we focus here on the concept of participatory cultures rather than on interactive technologies. Interactivity (Jenkins, 2006) is a property of the technology, while participation is a property of culture. Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies which make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. A focus on expanding access to new technologies carries us only so far if we do not also foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools towards our own ends.

We are using participation as a term which cuts across educational practices, creative processes, community life, and democratic citizenship. Our goals should be to encourage kids to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture. Many young people are already part of this process through:

- Affiliations – memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around and through various forms of media. i.e. Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, MySpace.
- Expressions – involvement in the production of new creative forms. i.e. digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups, etc.
- Collaborative Problem Solving – working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge. i.e. wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling.
- Circulations – Shaping the flow of media. i.e. podcasting, blogging.

Through these various forms of participatory culture, young people are acquiring skills that will serve them well in the future: participatory culture is reworking the rules by which school, cultural expression, civic life, and work operate. Many have argued that these new participatory cultures represent ideal learning environments. Education professor James Paul Gee (2004) calls such informal learning cultures «affinity spaces,» asking why people learn more, participate more actively, engage more deeply with popular

culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks. Affinity spaces offer powerful opportunities for learning, Gee argues, because they are sustained by common endeavors which bridge across differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level, because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer to peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others.

For example, Education researcher Rebecca Black (2005a, 2005b) has explored the kinds of informal pedagogy about writing and language use which emerges in online fan communities around anime: She finds that the «beta-reading» (or editorial feedback) provided by the community to contributors helps them to grow as writers, mastering not only the basic building blocks of sentence construction and narrative structure, but also pushing them to be close readers of the works that inspire them. Participants in the Beta-Reading process learn both by receiving feedback on their own work and by giving feedback to others, creating an ideal peer-to-peer learning community.

While formal education is often highly conservative, the informal learning surrounding popular culture is often experimental; while formal education is static, the informal learning surrounding popular culture is innovative. The structures which sustain informal learning are more provisional, those supporting formal education are more institutional. Informal learning communities can evolve to respond to short term needs and temporary interests, whereas the institutions supporting public education have remained little changed despite decades of school reform. Informal learning communities are ad-hoc and localized; those impacting formal education are bureaucratic and increasingly national in scope. We can move in and out of informal learning communities if they fail to meet our needs; we enjoy no such mobility in our relations to formal education.

These affinity spaces are also highly generative environments out of which new aesthetic experiments and innovations will come. A 2005 report on *The Future of Independent Media*, prepared by Andrew Blau (2005) for the Global Business Network, argued that this kind of grassroots creativity was an important engine of cultural transformation: «A new generation of media-makers and viewers are emerging which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and consumed.» Blau's report celebrates a world where everyone has access to the means of creative expression and the networks supporting artistic distribution. The Pew study (Lenhardt & Madden, 2005) suggests something more – young people who create and circulate their own media are more apt to respect the intellectual property rights of others because they feel a greater stake in the cultural economy. Both reports suggest we are moving away from a world where some produce and many consume media towards one where everyone has more active stakes in the culture that gets produced.

Media Literacy advocate David Buckingham (2000) argues that young people's lack of interest in news and disconnect from politics reflects their perception of disempower-

ment. Politics, as constructed by the news, becomes a spectator sport – something we watch but do not do. Yet, the new participatory culture offers many opportunities for kids to engage in civic debates, to participate in community life, to become political leaders – even if sometimes only through the «second lives» offered by massively multiplayer games or online fan communities. Empowerment comes from making meaningful decisions within a real civic context: we learn the skills of citizenship by becoming political actors and gradually coming to understand the choices we make in political terms.

Participating in these affinity spaces also has economic implications. Our hypothesis is that young people who spend more time playing within these new media environments will feel greater comfort interacting with each other via electronic channels, will have greater fluidity in navigating information landscapes, will be better able to multitask and make rapid decisions about the quality of information they are receiving, and will be able to collaborate better with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade (2004) concluded that gamers were more open to taking risks and engaging in competition but also more open to collaborating with others and more willing to revise earlier assumptions.

This focus on the value of participating within the new media culture stands in striking contrast to recent reports from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) which have bemoaned the amount of time young people spend engaging with «screen media.» The Kaiser reports collapse a range of different media consumption and production activities into the general category of «screen time» without reflecting very deeply on the different degrees of social connectivity, creativity, and learning involved. We do not mean to dismiss the very real concerns they raise– the idea that mediated experience may squeeze out time devoted to other learning activities, the concern that contemporary children often lack access to real world play spaces and that this absence of physical activity has adverse health consequences, the worry that adults may not adequately supervise and interact with children about the media they consume (and produce), or concerns about the moral values and commercialization in much contemporary entertainment. Yet, the focus on negative effects of media consumption offers an incomplete picture. These accounts do not appropriately value the skills and knowledge young people are gaining through their involvement with new media and as a consequence, they may mislead us about the roles teachers and parents need to play in helping these children learn and grow.

### Why We Should Teach Media Literacy: Three Core Problems

Some defenders of the new digital cultures have acted as though kids can simply acquire these skills on their own without adult intervention or supervision. There are three core flaws with the *laissez faire* argument: the first is that it does not address the fundamental inequalities in young people's access to these new media technologies and the opportunities for

participation they represent (what we are calling the participation gap); the second is that it assumes that children are actively reflecting on their media experiences and can thus articulate fully what they learn from their participation (what we are calling the transparency problem); the third is that it assumes children on their own can develop the ethical norms needed to cope with a complex and diverse social environment online (the ethics challenge).

## The Participation Gap

Throughout the 1990s, enormous energy went into combating the Digital Divide, which was defined around questions of technological access. We have seen considerable success in ensuring that most American kids have at least minimal access to networked computers at school or through public libraries. But, as a 2005 report on children's online experience in the United Kingdom (Livingstone & Bobber, 2005) concluded: «No longer are children and young people only or even mainly divided by those with or without access, though 'access' is a moving target in terms of speed, location, quality and support, and inequalities in access do persist. Increasingly, children and young people are divided into those for whom the internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging and stimulating resource of growing importance in their lives and those for whom it remains a narrow, unengaging, if occasionally useful, resource of rather less significance» (p. 12). What you can do with ten minutes of access at a sitting on an out-dated machine in a public library with mandatory filtering software and with no opportunities for storage or transmission pales by comparison with what you can do from a computer in your home which enjoys unfettered access, high bandwidth and continuous connectivity. (Current legislation to block access to social networking software via schools and public libraries will further compound the participation gap.) The school system's inability to close this participation gap has negative consequences for everyone involved. On the one hand, those kids who are most advanced in their mastery over the new media literacies are often deskilled as they enter the classroom: in order to insure a uniform experience, these kids are stripped of their technologies and robbed of their best techniques for learning. On the other hand, many kids who have had no exposure to these new kinds of participatory cultures outside school find themselves struggling to keep up with their peers.

Ellen Wartella, Barbara O'Keefe and Ronda Scantlin (2000) reached a similar conclusion: «Closing the digital divide will depend less on technology and more on providing the skills and content that is most beneficial....Children who have access to home computers demonstrate more positive attitudes towards computers, show more enthusiasm and report more enthusiasm and ease when using computers than those who do not» (p.8). More often than not, those kids who have developed this greatest comfort with the online world are the ones who dominate classroom use of computers, pushing aside less technically skilled classmates. In a 2005 report prepared for the MacArthur Foundation,

Peter Lyman notes, for example, that middle class kids are more likely to rely on resources and assistance from peers and family within their own homes and thus seem more autonomous within the school setting than working class children who have to rely more heavily for scaffolding on teachers and peers to make up for a lack of experience in the home.

Historically, those kids who had access to books or classical recordings in their homes, whose parents took them on outings to concerts or museum exhibits or theatrical performance, who engaged in dinner time discussions of current events, developed, almost without conscious consideration, skills which helped them perform well in school. Those experiences, which were widespread among the middle class and rare among the working class, became a kind of class distinction which shaped how teachers perceived students. These new forms of cultural participation may be playing a similar role. These activities shape what skills and knowledge students bring into the classroom and in this fashion, determine how these students are perceived by teachers and peers.

Writing about the ways that contemporary industry values our «portfolios» as much as our knowledge, James Paul Gee (2004) suggests that what gives elite teens their head start is their capacity to «pick up a variety of experiences (e.g. the ‘right’ sort of summer camps, travel, and special activities), skills (not just school-based skills, but a wide variety of interactional, aesthetic, and technological skills), and achievements (honors, awards, projects) in terms of which they can define themselves as worthy of admission to elite educational institutions and worthy of professional success later in life» (p.105). They become adept at identifying opportunities for leadership and accomplishment; they adjust quickly to new situations, embrace new roles and goals, and interact with people of diverse backgrounds. Even if these opportunities are not formally valued by our educational institutions or listed on one’s resume when applying for a job, the skills and self confidence gathered by moving across all of these online communities surely manifest themselves in other ways, offering yet another leg up to kids on one side and another disadvantage to kids on the opposite side of the participation gap.

## The Transparency Problem

While kids are getting better at using media as resources for doing other things (creative expression, research, social life, etc.), they often show limited ability to examine the media themselves. Psychologist Sherry Turkle (1995) was among the first to call attention to this problem: «Games such as SimLife teach players to think in an active way about complex phenomena (some of them ‘real life,’ some of them not) as dynamic, evolving systems. But they also encourage people to get used to manipulating a system whose core assumptions they do not see and which may or may not be ‘true’» (p. 70).

This issue of transparency crops up regularly in the first wave of field reports from educators experimenting with the pedagogical use of games. Comparative Media Studies

graduate student Karen Shrier (2005) developed a location-specific game for teaching American history which was played in Lexington, Massachusetts; her game was designed to encourage reflection on competing and contradictory accounts of who fired the first shot of the American revolution. The project asked students to experience the ways historians interpret evidence and evaluate competing truth claims. Such debates emerged spontaneously around the game play experience. Yet, Shrier was surprised by another phenomenon: «The participants accepted the game as an authentic representation of historic evidence.... Despite knowing implicitly that this was only a game (and that a designer would have written all of the testimonials and inspections), the participants acted as if the game information was authentic.» Kurt Squire (2004) found similar patterns when he sought to integrate the commercial game, *Civilization III*, into world history classes. Students were adept at formulating «what if» hypotheses which they tested through their game play. Yet, they lack a vocabulary to critique how the game itself constructed history and had difficulty imagining how other games might represent the same historical processes in different terms. In both cases, students were learning how to read information from and through games but they were not yet learning how to read games as texts, constructed with their own aesthetic norms, genre conventions, ideological biases, and codes of representation. These findings suggest the importance of coupling the pedagogical use of new media technologies with a greater focus on media literacy education.

These concerns about the transparency of games seem closely related to concerns about how young people (or indeed, any of us) assesses the quality of information we receive. As Renee Hobbs (1999) has suggested, «Determining the truth value of information has become increasingly difficult in an age of increasing diversity and ease of access to information.» More recent work by the Harvard Good Works Project (Personal interview with Howard Gardner, 2006) has found that issues of format and design are often more important than issues of content in determining how much credibility young people attach to the content of a particular website. This research suggests some tendency to read «professional» sites as more credible than «amateur» produced materials though students lack a well developed set of standards for distinguishing between the two. In her recent book, *The Internet Playground*, media researcher Ellen Seiter (2005) expresses concern that young people were finding it increasingly difficult to separate commercial from noncommercial content in online environments: «The Internet is more like a mall than a library; it resembles a gigantic public relations collection more than it does an archive of scholars» (p. 38).

More and more content comes to us already branded, already shaped through an economics of sponsorship if not overt advertising; we do not know to what degree those commercial interests influence what we see and what has been filtered out. These commercial interests even shape the prioritization of listings on search engines in ways that are often invisible to the people who use them. Increasing, opportunities to participate online are branded as well, so that even when young people produce and share their own media, they

do so under terms set by commercial interests. Children, Seiter found, often had trouble identifying advertising practices in the popular Neopets site, in part because the product references were so integrated into the game play experiences. Seiter (2005) concludes, «The World Wide Web is a more aggressive and stealthy marketer to children than television ever was, and children need as much information about its business practices as teachers and parents can give them» (p. 100). Children need a safe space within which they can master the skills they need as citizens and consumers, as they learn to parse through messages from self-interested parties and separate out fact from falsehood, as they begin to experiment with new forms of creative expression and community participation.

## The Ethics Challenge

In *Making Good: How Young People Cope with Moral Dilemmas at Work*, Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, Deborah Greenspan, and Howard Gardner (2004) discuss how young journalists learn about the ethical norms which will define their future professional practice. They acquired their skills most often by writing for high school newspapers. Their work was supervised – for better or worse – by a range of adult authorities, some interested in promoting the qualities of good journalism, some concerned with protecting the reputation of the school community. The ethical norms and professional practices they were acquiring were well understood by the adults around them.

Now, consider how few of those qualities might be applied to the emerging participatory cultures we are discussing. In a world where the line between consumers and producers is blurring, young people are finding themselves in situations that no one would have anticipated a decade or two ago. Their writing is much more open to the public and can have more far-reaching consequences. The young people are creating new modes of expression which are poorly understood by the adults around them and so they receive little to no guidance or supervision. The ethical implications of these emerging practices are fuzzy and ill-defined. And young people are discovering that information they put online to share with their friends can bring them unwelcomed attention from strangers.

In professional contexts, ethical norms are being watch-dogged by professional organizations. There is not yet a well established set of ethical guidelines shaping the actions of bloggers and podcasters. How should teens decide what they should or should not post about themselves or their friends on Live Journal or MySpace? Different online communities have their own norms about what information should remain within the group and what can be circulated more broadly. Many sites depend on self-disclosure to police whether the participants are children or adults and many young people seem willing to lie in order to access those communities.

*Making Good* (Fischman et al., 2004) found that high school journalists felt constrained by the strong social ties within a local high school, unwilling to publish some

things which they felt would be received negatively by their peers or which might disrupt the social dynamics of their face-to-face society. What constraints, if any, apply to what they do or say within online realms? Do young people feel that same level of investment in their gaming guilds or their fan communities? Or does the ability to mask your identity or move from one community to another easily mean that there are less immediate consequences for anti-social behavior? One important goal of media education should be to encourage young people to become more reflective about the ethical choices they make as participants and communicators and the impact they have upon others.

As we think about meaningful pedagogical intervention, we need to keep in mind these three core concerns:

How do we insure that every child has access to the skills and experiences needed to become a full participant in the social, cultural, economic, and political future of our society?

How do we insure that every child has the ability to articulate their understanding of the way that media shapes our perceptions of the world around us?

How do we insure that every child has been socialized into the emerging ethical standards which should shape their practices as media makers and as participants within online communities.

To address these challenges, we need to rethink the core skills and competencies which we want our children and youth to acquire through their pedagogical experiences. The new participatory culture places new emphasis upon familiar skills which have long been central to American education; it also requires teachers to pay greater attention to the social skills and cultural competencies that are emerging in response to changes in the media landscape.

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