



An occasional paper on digital media and learning

# Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> 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

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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.

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## Enabling Participation

*“While to adults the Internet primarily means the world wide web, for children it means email, chat, games— and here they are already content producers. Too often neglected, except as a source of risk, these communication and entertainment focused activities, by contrast with the information-focused uses at the centre of public and policy agendas, are driving emerging media literacy. Through such uses, children are most engaged— multi-tasking, becoming proficient at navigation and manoeuvre so as to win, judging their participation and that of others, etc.... In terms of personal development, identity, expression and their social consequences— participation, social capital, civic culture- these are the activities that serve to network today’s younger generation.”*

—Livingstone, 2003, pp.15-16).

### Participatory Culture

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

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued.

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***Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement.***

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In such a world, many will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community. The community itself, however, provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation.

Historically, we have valued creative writing or art classes because they help to identify and train future writers and artists, but also because the creative process is valuable on its own; every child deserves the chance to express him- or herself through words, sounds, and images, even if most will never write, perform, or draw professionally. Having these experiences, we believe, changes the way youth think about themselves and alters the way they look at work created by others.

Most public policy discussion of new media have centered on technologies—tools and their affordances. The computer is discussed as a magic black box with the potential to create a learning revolution (in the positive version) or a black hole that consumes resources that might better be devoted to traditional classroom activities (in the more critical version). Yet, as the quote above suggests, media operate in specific cultural and institutional contexts that determine how and why they are used. We may never know whether a tree makes a sound when it falls in a forest with no one around. But clearly, a computer does nothing in the absence of a

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user. The computer does not operate in a vacuum. Injecting digital technologies into the classroom necessarily affects our relationship with every other communications technology, changing how we feel about what can or should be done with pencils and paper, chalk and blackboard, books, films, and recordings.

Rather than dealing with each technology in isolation, we would do better to take an ecological approach, thinking about the interrelationship among all of these different communication technologies, the cultural communities that grow up around them, and the activities they support. Media systems consist of communication technologies and the social, cultural, legal, political, and economic institutions, practices, and protocols that shape and surround them (Gitelman, 1999). The same task can be performed with a range of different technologies, and the same technology can be deployed toward 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 fill 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 in this paper on the concept of participatory cultures rather than on interactive technologies. Interactivity (H. Jenkins, 2006a) 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 that 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 toward our own ends.

We are using participation as a term that cuts across educational practices, creative processes, community life, and democratic citizenship. Our goals should be to encourage youth 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 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)

The MacArthur Foundation has launched an ambitious effort to document these activities and the roles they play in young people's lives. We do not want to preempt or duplicate that effort here. For the moment, it is sufficient to argue that each of these activities contains opportunities for learning, creative expression, civic engagement, political empowerment, and economic advancement.

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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. A growing body of work has focused on the value of participatory culture and its long-term impact on children's understanding of themselves and the world around them.

### **Affinity Spaces**

Many have argued that these new participatory cultures represent ideal learning environments. 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 that bridge differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level, and 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, Black (2005a,b) finds that the "beta-reading" (or editorial feedback) provided by online fan communities helps contributors 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.

Affinity spaces are distinct from formal educational systems in several ways. While formal education is often conservative, the informal learning within popular culture is often experimental. While formal education is static, the informal learning within popular culture is innovative. The structures that 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; formal educational communities 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.

Affinity spaces are also highly generative environments, from which new aesthetic experiments and innovations emerge. A 2005 report on *The Future of Independent Media* (Blau, 2005) argued that this kind of grassroots creativity was an important engine of cultural transformation:

The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. This bottom up energy will generate enormous creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organize the lives and work of media makers...A new generation of media-makers and viewers are emerging which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and consumed. (p. 3)

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Blau's report celebrates a world in which 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 likely 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 in which some produce and many consume media, toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced.

Buckingham (2000) argues that young people's lack of interest in news and their disconnection from politics reflects their perception of disempowerment. "By and large, young people are not defined by society as political subjects, let alone as political agents. Even in the areas of social life that affect and concern them to a much greater extent than adults—most notably education—political debate is conducted almost entirely 'over their heads'" (pp. 218-219). 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 youth 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. Today's children learn through play the skills they will apply to more serious tasks later. The challenge is how to connect decisions in the context of our everyday lives with the decisions made at local, state, or national levels. The step from watching television news and acting politically seems greater than the transition from being a political actor in a game world to acting politically in the "real world."

Participating in these affinity spaces also has economic implications. We suspect that young people who spend more time playing within these new media environments will feel greater comfort interacting with one another 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. These claims are borne out by research conducted by Beck and Wade (2004) into the ways that early game play experiences affect subsequent work habits

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and professional activities. Beck and Wade conclude 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 (2005a,b) that have bemoaned the amount of time young people spend on “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: that mediated experience may squeeze out time for other learning activities; that contemporary children often lack access to real world play spaces, with adverse health consequences, that adults may inadequately 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 should play in helping children learn and grow.



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## What Should We Teach? Rethinking Literacy

*“Adolescents need to learn how to integrate knowledge from multiple sources, including music, video, online databases, and other media. They need to think critically about information that can be found nearly instantaneously through out the world. They need to participate in the kinds of collaboration that new communication and information technologies enable, but increasingly demand. Considerations of globalization lead us toward the importance of understanding the perspective of others, developing a historical grounding, and seeing the interconnectedness of economic and ecological systems.”*

—Bertram C. Bruce (2002)

A definition of twenty-first century literacy offered by the New Media Consortium (2005) is “the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacy overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms” (p. 8). We would modify this definition in two ways. First, textual literacy remains a central skill in the twenty-first century. Before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new. Second, new media literacies should be considered a social skill.

New media literacies include the traditional literacy that evolved with print culture as well as the newer forms of literacy within mass and digital media. Much writing about twenty-first century literacies seems to assume that communicating through visual, digital, or audiovisual media will displace reading and writing. We fundamentally disagree. Before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. Just as the emergence of written language changed oral traditions and the emergence of printed texts changed our relationship to written language, the emergence of new digital modes of expression changes our relationship to printed texts. In some ways, as researchers such as Black (2005) and Henry Jenkins (2006a) have argued, the new digital cultures provide support systems to help youth improve their core competencies as readers and writers. They may provide opportunities, for example, through blogs or live journals, for young people to receive feedback on their writing and to gain experience in communicating with a larger public, experiences that might once have been restricted to student journalists. Even traditional literacies must change to reflect the media change taking place. Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new.

Beyond core literacy, students need research skills. Among other things, they need to know how to access books and articles through a library; to take notes on and integrate secondary sources; to assess the reliability of data; to read maps and charts; to make sense of scientific visualizations; to grasp what kinds of information are being conveyed by various systems of representation; to distinguish between fact and fiction, fact and opinion; to construct arguments and

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marshal evidence. If anything, these traditional skills assume even greater importance as students venture beyond collections that have been screened by librarians and into the more open space of the web. Some of these skills have traditionally been taught by librarians who, in the modern era, are reconceptualizing their role less as curators of bounded collection and more as information facilitators who can help users find what they need, online or off, and can cultivate good strategies for searching material.

Students also need to develop technical skills. They need to know how to log on, to search, to use various programs, to focus a camera, to edit footage, to do some basic programming and so forth. Yet, to reduce the new media literacies to technical skills would be a mistake on the order of confusing penmanship with composition. Because the technologies are undergoing such rapid change, it is probably impossible to codify which technologies or techniques students must know.

As media literacy advocates have claimed during the past several decades, students also must acquire a basic understanding of the ways media representations structure our perceptions of the world; the economic and cultural contexts within which mass media is produced and circulated; the motives and goals that shape the media they consume; and alternative practices that operate outside the commercial mainstream. Such groups have long called for schools to foster a critical understanding of media as one of the most powerful social, economic, political, and cultural institutions of our era. What we are calling here the new media literacies should be taken as an expansion of, rather than a substitution for, the mass media literacies.

### **What New Skills Matter? New Social Skills and Cultural Competencies**

All of these skills are necessary, even essential, but they are not sufficient, which brings us to our second point about the notion of twenty-first century literacy: the new media literacies should be seen as social skills, as ways of interacting within a larger community, and not simply an individualized skill to be used for personal expression. The social dimensions of literacy are acknowledged in the New Media Consortium's (2005) report only in terms of the distribution of media content. We must push further by talking about how meaning emerges collectively and collaboratively in the new media environment and how creativity operates differently in an open-source culture based on sampling, appropriation, transformation, and repurposing.

The social production of meaning is more than individual interpretation multiplied; it represents a qualitative difference in the ways we make sense of cultural experience, and in that sense, it represents a profound change in how we understand literacy. In such a world, youth need skills for working within social networks, for pooling knowledge within a collective intelligence, for negotiating across cultural differences that shape the governing assumptions in different communities, and for reconciling conflicting bits of data to form a coherent picture of the world around them.

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We must integrate these new knowledge cultures into our schools, not only through group work but also through long-distance collaborations across different learning communities. Students should discover what it is like to contribute their own expertise to a process that involves many intelligences, a process they encounter readily in their participation in fan discussion lists or blogging. Indeed, this disparate collaboration may be the most radical element of new literacies: they enable collaboration and knowledge-sharing with large-scale communities that may never personally interact. Schools are currently still training autonomous problem-solvers, whereas as students enter the workplace, they are increasingly being asked to work in teams, drawing on different sets of expertise, and collaborating to solve problems.

Changes in the media environment are altering our understanding of literacy and requiring new habits of mind, new ways of processing culture and interacting with the world around us. We are just beginning to identify and assess these emerging sets of social skills and cultural competencies. We have only a broad sense of which competencies are most likely to matter as

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young people move from the realms of play and education and into the adult world of work and society. What follows, then, is a provisional list of eleven core skills needed to participate within the new media landscape. These skills have been identified both by reviewing the existing body of scholarship on new media literacies and by surveying the forms of informal learning taking place in the participatory culture. As suggested above, mastering these skills remains a key step in preparing young people “to participate fully in public, community, [Creative] and economic life” (New London Group, 2000, p. 9). In short, these are skills some youth are learning through participatory culture, but they are also skills that all youth need to learn if they are going to be equal participants in the world of tomorrow. We identify a range of activities that might be deployed in schools or afterschool programs, across a range of disciplines and subject matter, to foster these social skills and cultural competencies. These activities are by no means an exhaustive list but rather are simply illustrations of the kind of work already being done in each area. One goal of this report is to challenge those who have responsibility for teaching our young people to think more systematically and creatively about the many different ways they might build these skills into their day-to-day activities in ways that are appropriate to the content they are teaching.

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## The Challenge Ahead: Ensuring that All Benefit from the Expanding Media Landscape

Writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 19, 2006), Bill Ivey, the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, and Steven J. Tepper, a professor of Sociology at Vanderbilt University, described what they see as the long term consequences of this participation gap:

Increasingly, those who have the education, skills, financial resources, and time required to navigate the sea of cultural choice will gain access to new cultural opportunities....They will be the pro-ams who network with other serious amateurs and find audiences for their work. They will discover new forms of cultural expression that engage their passions and help them forge their own identities, and will be the curators of their own expressive lives and the mavens who enrich the lives of others....At the same time, those citizens who have fewer resources—less time, less money, and less knowledge about how to navigate the cultural system—will increasingly rely on the cultural fare offered to them by consolidated media and entertainment conglomerates...Finding it increasingly difficult to take advantage of the pro-am revolution, such citizens will be trapped on the wrong side of the cultural divide. So technology and economic change are conspiring to create a new cultural elite—and a new cultural underclass. It is not yet clear what such a cultural divide portends: what its consequences will be for democracy, civility, community, and quality of life. But the emerging picture is deeply troubling. Can America prosper if its citizens experience such different and unequal cultural lives?

Ivey and Tepper bring us back to the core concerns that have framed this essay: how can we “ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, [Creative] and economic life?” How do we guarantee that the rich opportunities afforded by the expanding media landscape are available to all? What can we do through schools, afterschool programs, and the home to give our youngest children a head start and allow our more mature youth the chance to develop and grow as effective participants and ethical communicators? This is the challenge that faces education at all levels at the dawn of a new era of participatory culture.