On Screen and Onstage: Interest-Driven Arts for Teens

A new report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation advocates the need to capitalize on the interest of youths in digital media and connect these experiences to more formal arts learning opportunities. Written by KYLIE PEPPLER, assistant professor in the learning sciences program at Indiana University, this report seeks to inspire new pedagogical practices, the design and study of new and existing learning environments, and new tools to support the documentation of interest-driven arts learning.

It goes almost without saying that kids today are absorbed in computers, cellphones, video games, television and other media — spending an average of seven hours and 38 minutes a day with the gadgetry, according to a report by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Additionally, because youths multitask, using more than one medium at a time, they are actually packing 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media consumption into those 7.5 hours.

At the same time, many young people are creating original work and sharing it with others. This is happening in physical spaces through popular events such as comics and costume ("cosplay") conventions, as well as in displays of homemade projects at "Maker Faires" sponsored by Make magazine. It is also happening online. Findings from the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggest that nearly two-thirds of online teens create content at some point — from blogs to webpages to original stories, photos, videos or other artwork they post electronically.

In what other creative activities are young people engaging during their "spare" time? A wide variety of traditional endeavors, to be sure — dancing (often assisted by video games or websites) or poetry (given new life by poetry slams), for example. But they are also busy at work in many wholly new art forms or hybrids of older forms. Among these are designing video games; using animations or cartoons or video game components to produce "machinima" films; and generating "fanfic," stories and creations that feed off popular books, movies, cartoons and other features.

All this, we believe, points to a broader cultural trend that values creative production and the communities that form around it. This trend is driven in part by the proliferation of technologies that put production of arts — music composition, dance, design and visual arts, among them — within reach of anyone interested. A very short sampling of these technologies gives an idea of the breadth of what's available. Scratch, a visual programming environment, allows people to create

and share interactive animations, video games, music and art, while the popular GarageBand software enables novices to compose original music without traditional instruments or access to recording studios. The Brushes app for iPads enables painters to mix paint without paying for new materials or having taken an art class; the Arduino microcontroller helps artists and designers create their own robotic sculptures or interactive environments.

DIGITAL COMMUNITIES FOR ARTS LEARNING

The web, YouTube, social media outlets like Twitter, Facebook and many online communities specifically for artists are giving young people places where they can post digital portfolios, as well as view and comment on one another's work. At the same time, arts mentoring communities are emerging, in some cases taking the role of instructor, especially for arts not usually taught in K-12 schools, such as manga and video game design.

Some communities that form around creative production are virtual: deviantART, for example, is a large online site where artists can share, discuss and market their work, while MacJams serves as an online studio for musicians.

But a number of promising communities focused on young people and artistic production have emerged in physical spaces, too. The YOUmedia network, a program for young people to learn new media skills, is based in libraries, museums and community organizations, for example. The Computer Clubhouse Network, which provides media arts experiences to teens, operates through a network of freely available after-school, open studio spaces.

What we call "grassroots movements" also have the potential to be potent means of arts learning through involvement in communities. Take "krumping," an urban dance form that originated in South Central Los Angeles. Membership in krump communities is dependent on one's inclusion in "families," which are organized around mentorship from a more experienced krump dancer. The form evolves when large groups of dancers engage in "battles" or other exhibitions, after which dancers and their families incorporate or respond to the newest moves from the event. This ensures the perpetual development of the dance form.

In some cases, arts learning communities are both virtual and physical. In addition to concrete meeting spots, YOUmedia offers teens access to Remix Learning, an online space to support mentor-student and student-student collaborations beyond the school day and after-school classes. Remix Learning allows users to post text, graphic designs, games and videos; exchange ideas; critique work; share expertise; and debate.

Online mentors (artists hired as staff by YOUmedia) encourage youths to post their work while also demonstrating model behavior by posting their own creations and moderating online discussions and competitions.

Remix Learning amounts to what we call a "social learning network" (as opposed to a "social network" like Facebook), but because such communities have not been heavily studied, we still have much to learn about how they could boost arts learning. For example, we don't know if youths who have already had experience working with a mentor at a community center do better in social learning networks than the uninitiated. Similarly, grassroots communities have engendered little formal research, although what research there is suggests that most of the eight Studio Thinking habits of mind are taking place within them, from developing craft to reflecting on the process.

ADJUSTING INSTRUCTION TO LEVEL OF INTEREST

To increase youth participation and interest in the arts, adults need to recognize that not all teens are alike — some already have a great interest in the arts, some none at all — and design programming accordingly.

That's what Musical Futures, a British arts education project, has done. The organization has come up with a classification that divides young people into four categories: refusers, those with little or no interest in music; waverers, who have an interest in music but are unsure what they want to do or how to participate; explorers, who have some skills and confidence but have not yet found a good match for their interests; and directors, who are already performing. The project develops fitting activities for the various groups — "taster" workshops for waverers, for example, or professional recording sessions for the directors.

Musical Futures' approach, which seeks to understand young people and meet them where they are, offers insight into how to invite young people into the arts and sustain their participation over time. ■

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