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Commentary

With prodigious leaps, children move to technological forefront

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This is the first generation to grow up digital, coming of age in a world where the use of computers, the Internet, cell phones and interactive video games are commonplace.

Where we once worried that computer technology would remain in the hands of the privileged, it is now carried in the backpacks and shirt pockets of those from all walks of life.

Access to technology is simply no longer the central issue. Nearly 90 percent of those from the ages of 12 to 17 are online. High-speed Internet, which enables the richest content, is growing by 40 percent annually. Participation in the virtual world of Second Life has risen from 500,000 to nearly 5 million people in two years.

Today's young people increasingly express themselves and build communities with these powerful tools of technology. The real gap between tomorrow's digital haves and have-nots will be a lag in competence and confidence in the fast-paced and variegated new digital universe that is building and breeding outside schoolhouse walls.

Research, some of it funded by the MacArthur Foundation, is just beginning to fathom how deeply our children have absorbed new technology, the role it plays in their lives, and the impact it makes on their learning, play and socialization. What this research suggests is that today's digital youth are in the process of creating a new kind of literacy, which extends beyond the traditions of reading and writing into an evolving community of expression and problem-solving that is changing not only their world, but ours, as well.

They have created communities the size of nations by channeling personal affiliations through message boards or meta-games or dedicated Web sites like Facebook, Friendster and MySpace. They have mastered digital tools to create new techniques for personal

expression: modding, digital sampling, mash-ups and zines - not to mention new paths of distribution for personal works of video and text. They have redefined the notion of "play" to include complex problem-solving, mentoring, the archiving of knowledge, and real-time conversations on issues of policy and politics of global interest and importance.

Henry Jenkins, director of the media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, calls this a new "participatory culture" - one that features low barriers to artistic expression and social engagement, and one that suggests that a richer environment for learning may lie outside the classroom.

Online and after school, youths in this new participatory culture are assimilating - often behind virtual avatars - new languages and rules, vast troves of research, and perspectives on the nature of order and community that vault across traditional boundaries of race or creed or culture. In meta-games such as Civilization III and SimCity, participants develop and manipulate dynamic models of real life; they teach and legislate, create and share, connect and collaborate, reflecting the value of team-building and consensus over autonomous solutions.

Moreover, through virtual characters and identities - even some of those that disturb parents - teens can experiment through trial and error, make poor moral choices, or learn the downside of risk-taking without jeopardizing careers or lives. They learn to value challenge and appreciate complexity while assimilating facts and assessing developments at breathtaking speed.

The downside may be that we, in the sunset of the old information culture, are not understanding this new media literacy soon enough. Those who have no opportunity or desire to be part of these revolutionary digital communities may be deprived of vital virtual skills that will prepare them for full participation in the real world of tomorrow.

In this new media age, the ability to negotiate and evaluate information online, to recognize manipulation and propaganda, and to assimilate ethical values is becoming as basic to education as reading and writing. Those truly left behind in the evolving digital culture will be those children who fail to bridge this participation gap.

Our challenge is to harness these educational forces, opening our classrooms to the learning in which children now engage largely outside of school. We may find that the best way to institutionalize and encourage this new media literacy is to understand and harness what our young digital culture seems to be doing pretty well on its own.


The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (www.macfound.org) recently launched a \$50 million initiative

to better understand how technology

is changing children and learning.

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