Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project

Authors
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Research Summary
Over three years, University of California, Irvine researcher Mizuko Ito and her team interviewed over 800 youth and young adults and conducted over 5000 hours of online observations as part of the most extensive U.S. study of youth media use.

They found that social network and video-sharing sites, online games, and gadgets such as iPods and mobile phones are now fixtures of youth culture. The research shows that today’s youth may be coming of age and struggling for autonomy and identity amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression.

Many adults worry that children are wasting time online, texting, or playing video games. The researchers explain why youth find these activities compelling and important. The digital world is creating new opportunities for youth to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills, and experiment with new forms of self-expression. These activities have captured teens’ attention because they provide avenues for extending social worlds, self-directed learning, and independence.

Major Findings

Youth use online media to extend friendships and interests.
Most youth use online networks to extend the friendships that they navigate in the familiar contexts of school, religious organizations, sports, and other local activities. They can be “always on,” in constant contact with their friends through private communications like instant messaging or mobile phones, as well as in public ways through social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook. With these “friendship-driven” practices, youth are almost always associating with people they already know in their offline lives. The majority of youth use new media to “hang out” and extend existing friendships in these ways.

A smaller number of youth also use the online world to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community. Online groups enable youth to connect to peers who share specialized and niche interests of various kinds, whether that is online gaming, creative writing, video editing, or other artistic endeavors. In these interest-driven networks, youth may find new peers outside the boundaries of their local community. They can also find opportunities to publicize and distribute their work to online audiences, and to gain new forms of visibility and reputation.

Youth engage in peer-based, self-directed learning online.
In both friendship-driven and interest-driven online activity, youth create and navigate new forms of expression...
and rules for social behavior. By exploring new interests, tinkering, and “messing around” with new forms of media, they acquire various forms of technical and media literacy. Through trial and error, youth add new media skills to their repertoire, such as how to create a video or game, or customize their MySpace page. Teens then share their creations and receive feedback from others online. By its immediacy and breadth of information, the digital world lowers barriers to self-directed learning.

Some youth “geek out” and dive into a topic or talent. Contrary to popular images, geeking out is highly social and engaged, although usually not driven primarily by local friendships. Youth turn instead to specialized knowledge groups of both teens and adults from around the country or world, with the goal of improving their craft and gaining reputation among expert peers. While adults participate, they are not automatically the resident experts by virtue of their age. Geeking out in many respects erases the traditional markers of status and authority.

New media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting. Youth respect one another’s authority online, and they are often more motivated to learn from peers than from adults. Their efforts are also largely self-directed, and the outcome emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning that is oriented by set, predefined goals.

**Implications**

New media forms have altered how youth socialize and learn, and raise a new set of issues that educators, parents, and policymakers should consider.

**ADULTS SHOULD FACILITATE YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENGAGEMENT WITH DIGITAL MEDIA.**

Contrary to adult perceptions, while hanging out online, youth are picking up basic social and technical skills they need to fully participate in contemporary society. Erecting barriers to participation deprives teens of access to these forms of learning. Participation in the digital age means more than being able to access serious online information and culture. Youth could benefit from educators being more open to forms of experimentation and social exploration that are generally not characteristic of educational institutions.

**GIVEN THE DIVERSITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA, IT IS PROBLEMATIC TO DEVELOP A STANDARDIZED SET OF BENCHMARKS AGAINST WHICH TO MEASURE YOUNG PEOPLE’S TECHNICAL AND NEW MEDIA LITERACY.**

Friendship-driven and interest-driven online participation have very different kinds of social connotations. For example, whereas friendship-driven activities center upon peer culture, adult participation is more welcomed in the latter more “geeky” forms of learning. In addition, the content, behavior, and skills that youth value are highly variable depending on with which social groups they associate.

**IN INTEREST-DRIVEN PARTICIPATION, ADULTS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY.**

Youth using new media often learn from their peers, not teachers or adults. Yet adults can still have tremendous influence in setting learning goals, particularly on the interest-driven side where adult hobbyists function as role models and more experienced peers.

**TO STAY RELEVANT IN THE 21ST CENTURY, EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS NEED TO KEEP PACE WITH THE RAPID CHANGES INTRODUCED BY DIGITAL MEDIA.**

Youths’ participation in this networked world suggests new ways of thinking about the role of education. What, the authors ask, would it mean to really exploit the potential of the learning opportunities available through online resources and networks? What would it mean to reach beyond traditional education and civic institutions and enlist the help of others in young people’s learning? Rather than assuming that education is primarily about preparing for jobs and careers, they question what it would mean to think of it as a process guiding youths’ participation in public life more generally.

**More Information**

More information about the study and the MacArthur Foundation’s digital media and learning initiative can be found online at www.digitallearning.macfound.org/ethnography.
**Graphic Organizer**

*Directions:* Read the four questions below. As you address each question, re-read the paragraphs in “Living and Learning with New Media” that the question is addressing. Using the text, write your responses in the "My Thoughts" and "Evidence From the Text" sections. You will then be given time to talk to a classmate, share ideas, and take notes. Based on your conversations, you will complete the "My Thoughts Now" section.

1. Why do the authors start out by stating that the team of researchers “interviewed over 800 youth and young adults and conducted over 5000 hours of online observations as part of the most extensive U.S. study of youth media use”? How does this statement impact the reader’s perception of the authors and the article?

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<th>My Thoughts</th>
<th>Evidence From the Text</th>
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My Thoughts Now (Confirmations, new ideas, or differences after talking with a partner)

| My Thoughts Now | |
|-----------------| |
2. In the third paragraph, the authors state, “Many adults worry that children are wasting time online, texting, or playing video games.” How does the information in the Research Summary (paragraphs 1-3) support and/or contradict this concern? Cite specific evidence from the text to support your response.

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**My Thoughts Now (Confirmations, new ideas, or differences after talking with a partner)**

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3. In the third paragraph it states, “The researchers explain why youth find [online activities] compelling and important.” Explain the use of the word “compelling” in relation to the benefits of online activity. Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

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My Thoughts Now (Confirmations, new ideas, or differences after talking with a partner)
4. The first major finding of the article is that “Youth use online media to extend friendships and interests.” What are some examples of “friendship driven” online activity? What skills or competencies are teens gaining from this type of online interaction? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

What are some examples of “interest driven” online activity? What skills or competencies are teens gaining from this type of online interaction? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

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<th>My Response</th>
<th>Evidence From the Text</th>
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My Thoughts Now (Confirmations, new ideas, or differences after talking with a partner)
ELA Grade 9 Writing Assessment
Evidence-Based Questions

Directions:
Answer the questions below on a separate sheet of lined paper. You may use this sheet to make any notes or draft your response. You may refer to the reading passage and your graphic organizer to help you answer the questions.

1. What is the authors’ perspective on the worry of adults “…that children are wasting time online, texting, or playing video games”? How does the research support the authors’ perspective? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

2. Why is it important for teens to have both “friendship driven” and “interest driven” engagement with online media and learning? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

3. According to the authors, “New media forms have altered how youth socialize and learn, and raise a new set of issues that educators, parents, and policymakers should consider.” What is different about the way youth socialize and learn through online interactions? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

4. Why it is important for adults to understand how youth engage with digital and online media? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.

5. How do the language and structure of the text support the authors in providing factual information and expressing their point of view on that information? Cite evidence from the text to support your response.
ELA Grade 9 Writing Assessment
Writing Task

Directions:

You will have 50 minutes to respond to the prompt below in writing. Use your graphic organizer, constructed response questions, and/or any other notes to inform your writing. You may take notes on this paper but you should write your entire response on lined paper.

Writing Prompt

In the 21st century, technology is changing the way that we interact with each other. How do today’s youth interact with digital and online media?

After reading the summary of findings from the Digital Youth Project, write an essay in which you determine the authors’ point of view on a central idea of the text, and analyze how this point of view is advanced through the language and structure of the text. Be sure to use evidence from the text to support your response.

Be Sure To:

- Include relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotes or other information
- Use appropriate transitions
- Use precise language and vocabulary to inform or explain your topic
- Establish and maintain a formal style
- Provide a concluding section that follows from and supports your analysis