

The Needed Skills in the New Media Culture

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.¹

Ashley Richardson was a middle-schooler when she ran for president of Alphaville. She wanted to control a government of more than 100 volunteer workers to make policies affecting thousands of people. She debated her opponent on National Public Radio and found herself in the center of a debate about the nature of citizenship, how to ensure honest elections, and the future of democracy in a digital age. Alphaville is the largest city in a popular multiplayer game, *The Sims Online*.²

Heather Lawver was 14 years old. She wanted to help other young people improve their reading and writing skills, so she established an online publication with a staff of more than 100 people across the world. As her project was embraced by teachers and integrated into their curriculum, she emerged as an important spokesperson in a national debate about intellectual property. The Web site Lawver created was a school newspaper

for the fictional school Hogwarts, the setting for the popular Harry Potter books.³

Blake Ross was 14 years old when he was hired for a summer internship at Netscape. By that point, he had already developed computer programming skills and published his own Web site. Frustrated by many of the corporate decisions made at Netscape, Ross decided to design his own Web browser. Through the joint participation of thousands of other volunteer youths and adults working on his project worldwide, the Firefox Web browser was born. Today, Firefox enjoys more than 60 times as many users as Netscape Navigator. By age 19, Ross had the venture capital needed to launch his own start-up company. His interest in computing originally was sparked by playing the popular video game *Sim City*.⁴

Josh Meeter was about to graduate from high school when he completed the Claymation animation for Awards Showdown. He had negotiated with composer John Williams for the rights to use excerpts from his film scores. The film became widely circulated on the Web. By networking, Meeter was able to convince Stephen Spielberg to watch the film, and it was later featured on Spielberg's Dreamworks Web site. Meeter is now starting work on his first feature film.⁵

Richardson, Lawver, Ross, and Meeter are future politicians, activists, educators, writers, entrepreneurs, and media makers. The skills they acquired—learning how to campaign and govern; how to read, write, edit, and defend civil liberties; how to program computers and run a business; how to make a movie and find distribution—are the kinds of skills we might hope our best schools would teach. Yet none of these learning activities took

place in schools. Indeed, many of these youths were frustrated with school; some dropped out and others chose to graduate early. They developed much of their skill and knowledge through their participation in the informal learning communities of fans and gamers.

Richardson, Lawver, Ross, and Meeter are exceptional individuals. In any given period, exceptional individuals will break rules and enjoy off-the-charts success—even at surprisingly young ages. But, Richardson, Lawver, Ross, and Meeter are not so exceptional.

According to a 2005 study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life project,⁶ 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 is someone who has created a blog or Web page; 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. One-third of teens share what they create online with others, 22 percent have their own Web sites, 19 percent blog, and 19 percent remix online content.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, these activities are not restricted to white, suburban males. In fact, urban youths (40 percent) are somewhat more likely than their suburban (28 percent) or rural (38 percent) counterparts to be media creators. Girls aged 15–17 (27 percent) are more likely than boys their age (17 percent) to be involved with blogging or other social activities online. The Pew researchers found no significant differences in participation by race or ethnicity.

According to a 2005 study 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.

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. Nor did it count other forms of creative expression and appropriation, such as music sampling in the hip-hop community. These activities are highly technological, but they use tools and tap production and distribution networks neglected in the Pew study. The study also does not include even more widespread practices, such as computer or video gaming, that can require an extensive focus on constructing and performing as fictional personas. Our focus here is not on individual accomplishment but rather the emergence of a cultural context that supports widespread participation in the production and distribution of media.