



The Netgeneration: The Internet as Classroom and Community

Jennifer Hendricks
Arizona State University

Classroom practice in the real world has become increasingly incommensurate with the lived experience of students. Policy dictates, packaged curricula, the commodification and commercialization of the classroom, along with high stakes testing have objectified students. Young people, consisting of all age cohorts and class fractions, have never known their world to not include the Internet. They are well versed and completely comfortable with negotiating its space. They have been utilizing this technology since before they started kindergarten, whether it was in games that they played or Internet sites they logged on to.

Much has been made of the Internet's potential to wrest power from the interests that dominate it. The Internet allows ordinary citizens to spread the word and organize resistance as a form of popular culture. In short, to fight power. As a technological artifact and a popular image, the Internet provides a site for exploring and positioning "the world." It is necessary to recognize and critically examine other sites and or institutions as places of knowledge learning. And where do the technology savvy teens go to learn? They utilize the Internet as a major pedagogical site. As John Street (1997) contends, "...culture neither manipulates nor mirrors us; instead we live through and with it" (p. 4). It seems that we are not compelled by culture to imitate it but rather to immerse ourselves in it. In studying the culture of emerging (trans) national cybersocieties, we have arrived at a new moment in history: a moment in which such terms as class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ideology are no longer useful (because they assume singular "identities" for example). We are, according to postmodern theories, now in a culture that is post-national, post-ideological and post-class--a culture shaped not by "production" (labor) but by our social relations of shopping ("consumption").

In an argument related to the idea of virtual communities, Internet scholars often relate the Internet to the idea of the 'public sphere', as developed by Habermas (1989). In an ideal public sphere, citizens would discuss issues of concern and arrive at a consensus for the common good. Habermas did not feel that we have an effective public sphere in Western societies, partly because commercial mass media had turned people into *consumers* of information and entertainment, rather than *participants* in an interactive democratic process. Additionally, Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1988), which borrows from Hegel the idea that particular interests are concretely determined within material culture and undergo a process of universalization that leads to the creation of collective subjects, is an important theory when attempting to understand that participation in various hegemonic sites is a consensual process. For Gramsci, deliberation about matters of social concern and the entire decision-making process in an authentic democracy must be based on a "consensual inter-subjective interaction" (p. 98) and without consensus, websites or communities can become paces of mere reproduction, much like physical classrooms are now.

This puts into question our familiar notions not only of "identity" but also of "subjectivity" and "self-hood"; it argues that there are no "pure" (i.e. "absolute") identities and that all cultural practices such as "growing up" are instances of hybridity: a "difference" that is in all social phenomena. In his groundbreaking book, *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), Jean Francois Lyotard points to this hybridity when he writes, "One listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong...." Perhaps more so than any other contemporary theorist, Baudrillard (1981) provides a provocative concept for "navigating" this hyperreal terrain.

Although he has not addressed worldwide networking and Internet in the specific in his writing, his comments on telematics, along with his more general critiques of modernity, provide an interesting means for exploring the metaphoricity of Internet. Thus the Internet is best thought of as a place, which is far more than a highway. It is a destination, a place where we can create new social designs, where we can dissolve and reconstruct the classroom.

By the mid 1990s, cyberculture was well underway, focusing primarily on virtual communities and online identities. Since Howard Rheingold published *The Virtual Community* in 1993, much has been written about communities on the Internet. Before the Internet, communities were people who lived or worked close to each other. Sometimes the community would be of like-minded people, although it was unlikely that they would be a very compatible group all in the same place. The global Internet transforms this - for those, as always, who have access to it - because it enables like-minded people to form communities regardless of where they are located in the physical world. Before the Internet, teens had little contact with other teenagers outside of their high school, or school district. Meanwhile, fans of obscure bands would have little to do with their counterparts elsewhere, and people interested in certain hobbies, or artists, or skills, could only feed their interest through one-way communication processes such as reading a magazine or newsletter about it.

The Internet changed all that. Now, regardless of where they are in the world, teens with similar interests, or with similar backgrounds, or with similar attitudes, can join communities of like-minded people, and share views, exchange information, and build relationships. In practice, what these communities look like are teenagers sending electronic text to each other. Most of the studies of virtual communities are about groups exchanging messages on newsgroups and e-mail discussion lists, or groups who often meet in the same chat rooms. The studies seem, so far, to have ignored the communities, which develop amongst similarly themed websites and their creators, which in many ways may be stronger, more permanent and more complex. After all, the Internet surpasses the restrictions of fixed locations such as schools and opens up a new world of understanding and knowledge. Participants in cyberspace may come and go, but the websites will remain.

Thus, the opportunity for counter education exists on the Internet. As Giroux (1995) contends students, as well as teachers, and their empowerment as radical intellectuals change the concept of school as a part of a general struggle over essential social change (p. 30). In Giroux's concept, education is a political arena with a major role in producing discourse, meaning and subjects, as well as control and distribution. In comparison, the Internet as classroom and community does much the same thing. It is a place that has the capacity to open up an infinite number of opportunities to connect with individuals, knowledge and experiences. The Internet offers students boundless possibilities for

exploration and exchange of ideas (Westera and Sloep 2001). On the Internet, students are free to 'log on' at any time and place of their choosing. They are ultimately free to explore in a new construction of the 'classroom.'

Technology makes possible a reconfiguring of school; a refocusing of everyday life, and the use of the tools and techniques of computer and image technologies expands the field of politics and culture. To a meaningful extent, technology is revolutionary. The battles of the future may well be fought not only in the streets, factories, or other sites of past struggle, but on the Internet as well. And as the members of the "NetGeneration," teenagers today are more adaptable than other sectors of society and in general are quicker to adapt to the new technologies. To some extent they are the innovators, the forces of change in a new community landscape.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (1981). *Simulacra and simulation: The body in theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Giroux, H. (1995). "Radical pedagogy as cultural politics: Beyond the discourse of critique and anti-utopianism." In Peter McLaren (Ed.), *Critical pedagogy and predatory culture: Oppositional politics in a postmodern era*. London: Routledge.
- Gramsci, A. (1988). *A Gramsci reader: selected writings, 1916-1935*. Edited by David Forgacs. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into bourgeois society*. Translated by T. Burger & F. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published 1962).
- . (1992). Further reflections on the public sphere. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 421-461). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Liotard, J. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McLaren, Peter. (1991). Critical pedagogy: Constructing an arch of social dreaming and a doorway to hope. *The sociology of education in Canada* 173: 137-60.
- Rheingold, H. (1993). *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
- Street, J. (1997). *Politics and popular culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Westera, W. and Sloep, P. (2001). The future of education in cyberspace. In L. Vandervert & L. Shavinina (Eds), *Cybereducation: The future of long distance learning*. New York: Liebert Publishers.

2004 Article Citation

Hendricks, J. A. (2004, January 20). The Netgeneration: The Internet as classroom and community. *Current Issues in Education* [On-line], 7(1). Available: <http://cie.ed.asu.edu/volume7/number1/>

Author Notes

Jennifer Hendricks
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287
Jennifer.Hendricks@asu.edu

Jennifer A. Hendricks, is a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. program with a focus on Curriculum and Cultural Studies in the College of Education at Arizona State University. Jennifer has a B.A. in Art History and Archaeology with a minor in Studio Art. She also holds an M.A. in Art Education from the University of Maryland at College Park. Her research interests include the use of narrative methodology to empower students' life stories of school and alternative arts-based forms of research and research representation. Her current research focuses on how teens create a political curriculum outside of the increasingly anarcharistic classroom, specifically concentrating on the Internet as a site of empowerment. She may be contacted via e-mail at Jennifer.Hendricks@asu.edu.

Note from the 2011 Executive Editor, Lori Ellingford

October 2, 2011. This article was first published at the original *Current Issues in Education* website, located at <http://cie.asu.edu/articles/index.html>. In 2009, *CIE* changed online platforms to deliver the journal at <http://cie.asu.edu>. The original *CIE* website is now only used as an archival repository for published articles prior to Volume 12. Efforts to make the current *CIE* website inclusive of past publications have necessitated the repurposing of this article into the published format you are viewing now.

All content from the original publication has been preserved. No content edits occurred. Spelling, grammar, and mechanical errors that may be found were present in the original publication. The *CIE* logo and publisher information in use at the time of the article's original publication is unaltered.

Please direct questions about this article's repurposing to lori.ellingford@asu.edu. Questions related to all other aspects of the journal may be addressed to cie@asu.edu.

2011 Article Citation

Hendricks, J. A. (2011). The netgeneration: The internet as classroom and community. *Current Issues in Education*, 7(1). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/820>



Current Issues in Education

Mary Lou Fulton College of Education
Arizona State University