The Netgeneration: The Internet as Classroom and Community

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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 bet 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


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