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New Learning Cultures: Identities, Media, and Networks

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Introduction: Identity, Community, & Learning

In this chapter we will offer some elements of a re-conceptualization of the relations among identity, community, and culture that we believe are necessary to support lifelong learning in highly diverse online and off-line social networks. We will synthesize arguments supported by research on new learner biographies, the role of popular culture media in youth identity projects, and the marketing of identities and cultures in commercial mass media.

Learning is an aspect of personal (and community) development that is never not happening. Significant learning is that which is sustained over longer timescales by connections with our identities: not just who we say we are, but how we typically respond – our dispositions, habits, preferences, and values. Our life biographies and our learning biographies are increasingly indistinguishable, and both in living and learning we participate in diverse, multiple communities, each with its own culture of resources and models for identity development. For many new learners (Diepstraten, du Bois-Reymond, & Vinken, 2006) and active users of internet-based resources, cultural diversity is increasingly being framed by social identities produced in significant part through participation in online communities and social networks.

For all learners, and particularly for younger ones, popular culture media and personal social networks (including online communities) represent two key sources of identity models and cultural resources for affiliation and identification. Popular culture media for young people today include not only television, film, magazines, music, and books, but also video and computer games, commercial media websites, and media in all these genres distributed online (e.g. through iTunes, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and other sites).

Identity and affiliation today are increasingly sites of contestation between market forces aiming to recruit consumer loyalties through popular culture media and individuals and social networks seeking to re-appropriate popular culture content and forms for our own purposes. As we 'potential customers' live our lives more unpredictably, jumping across sites, activities, media, and communities (our <u>traversals</u>), marketing strategies respond by distributing consumer-identity cultures across multiple media that can span these sites and activities (their <u>transmedia</u>). We will argue that such media-based identities are always already differentiated and hierarchized in ways that try to harmonize the twin goals of recruiting consumers for products and reinforcing dominant beliefs and values. Individuals and our informal communities, however, transform and re-appropriate media to fashion identities and subcultures that may often be subversive of marketing messages and dominant economic interests.

Contemporary culture, accordingly, has become more and more a heteroglot mix of marketed identities and media cultures in uneasy relation with the spontaneous productions of individuals and online communities. All draw on traditional ethnic/national, class/age, gender/sexuality, and other subculture resources and values in the creation of specific identities, preferences, and practices, but the results are far less well-defined and stable than the term "culture" normally implies.

What are the implications of such an analysis for education? Both for traditional schooling and for alternative, at least partly online, learning networks?

If we are to help design better learning support systems for the future, we will need to re-conceptualize both "cultural diversity" and "identity" in less categorical terms and analyze them more fully across multiple timescales. Educational support systems for the most part have stubbornly ignored basic changes to contemporary learning cultures. School curricula disdain the popular culture capital which forms a primary identity resource for students. School-based learning cuts itself off from the social networks, online communities, and peer- and media-based learning practices of students. Non-school learning may be far more effective in connecting with students' identities and therefore in contributing to long-term development than is school-based learning, most of which is forgotten within months.

Online learning networks comprise many kinds of communities and potential learning environments. They do not need to repeat the errors and failure of school-based

education, and if they remain more in the control of their users, then we can imagine how they might form effective bridges between interest-based and identity-based learning on the one hand and whatever new shape traditional education may take on the other.

Individual identities and community cultures today are dynamically responsive to immediate opportunities. They are highly adaptable constellations of identifications and affiliations, with threads of continuity braided into unique life-and-learning biographies. It is the individual and unique differences among participants, resulting from their traversals across and participation in multiple other communities, which matter for the richness of learning opportunities in any particular community.

Our arguments in this chapter lead us to conclude that the structural design of school-based, classroom-centered, standardized-curriculum education is irremediably dysfunctional. We need to envision alternative support systems for lifelong learning across multiple sites, communities, and timescales. We need to imagine online learning networks grounded far more in the cultures and identities of their users.

New Learning Biographies and Social Networks

The culture of online learning will inevitably evolve in the directions being pioneered by young people today, particularly by those who are not satisfied with current educational options and are finding alternative ways to educate themselves.

The European Union and other political entities have been producing volumes of reports

and recommendations over the last decade or so that describe the 'desired' future for

learning and education (e.g. Council of the European Union, 2001; European

Commission, 2001; OECD, 2004). Many of these documents speak of globalization,

knowledge economies, competing with other economic blocs, and preparing our youth to

handle this challenge. They also speak of education support structures that should more

thoroughly involve the learners, and even integrate much better into their lives and

lifestyles, taking into account rapidly changing paradigms of employability, economic

productivity, and personal interests and development. In short, a lot is being said about

what kind of future we think we are approaching, but in reality, not much is known about

how realistic these predictions may be, nor how these today's new generations of learners

may feel about being pressed into a mold that claims not to be one. The goals of

increased freedom, flexibility, adaptation, life-long learning, and rapid traversals among

careers and knowledge domains seem to somehow create a grand buffet of opportunities,

but in this nonetheless rather conservative vision we may still be stuck with learning at

someone else's buffet.

There are few education experts or politicians today who believe our present formal

educational systems are doing a good job. In The Netherlands, a full parliamentary

investigation (the most serious tool the parliament has to critique ministerial policies) has

recently investigated how decades of educational science, policy and reform could get it

so wrong (Tweede Kamer [Netherlands Parliament], 2008). The investigation most

likely, however, bring us little to work with in the end, if only because no mere reform of

an enormous, ponderous formal educational system could possibly serve the needs and desires of today's trendsetting learners, who are looking to smaller-scale, more genuinely relevant and adaptable social networks for their learning (Diepstraten, 2006). There are several reasons why traditional systems are failing. One is that few university Faculties of Education are actually investigating possible new futures for education. All we seem to do is try to keep fixing the broken system we have, or else we 'experiment' with well-intended initiatives that may help small numbers of socially marginalized students here or there. None of our big ideas about schooling reform look to be both scalable and affordable, and certainly none of them seem to offer genuine hope for radically new social approaches to the future of our society and our planet. A second reason is simply the inherent contradiction in any mega-scale, hierarchically organized system trying to teach people swift, creative, tailored adaptation to rapidly changing conditions. Another factor is that education is itself a powerful establishment force with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, in society and for itself, so as to not be rendered obsolete. Most importantly, perhaps, our large-scale mass education systems have only been able to survive for as long as they have because no other institutions in our society were able to take over their market share in the <u>attention economy</u> (Davenport & Beck, 2001). Commercial popular culture, however, integrated with sophisticated marketing machinery and new technological developments, has now successfully conquered a large market share of our students' attention. And where more of the attention is, more of the learning takes place (cf. Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, chapter 5).

The rise of the modern media empires and the success of the social science of marketing have created successful new techniques to capture and develop the interests and attention of consumers. The marketers have realized what we forgot in our classrooms while we were busy handing out 'information' to students: the relationships among interests, learning, and identity. Even when education specialists recognized the role of students' identities, we refused to integrate the key elements that would make most students become passionate about learning: we ignored their own interests beyond our predetermined, one-size-fits-all curricula, their values when they were not our own, their feelings and emotions, and the processes of identification between their worlds (interests, values, feelings and emotions) and what we may call the popular culture social capital that does address what education does not, and is therefore meaningful for students in ways the curriculum is not (e.g. Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Moje & van Helden, 2005). 'Popular culture social capital' here refers to the peer-group value within social networks of being able to talk knowledgeably and often also critically about the content of popular media, old and new (television, film, music, internet media, etc.).

Recent sociological research is showing that most 'trendsetting learners' who are living the globalized, individualized, lifelong-learning biography that policymakers think is ideally adapted for the 21st century, found their formal education to be an obstruction to their development. Not merely unhelpful, or only slightly helpful, but definitely counter-productive, diminishing their chances in the real world, as well as an uncomfortable, boring and (for society) ruinously expensive process (Diepstraten et al., 2006; du Bois-

Reymond & Walther, 1999). Trendsetting learners (who are mostly in their late twenties and early to middle thirties) by and large name two other components of their lives as keys to their career and personal success: popular cultural capital and strategic social networking. Strategic networking is the practice of combining popular culture capital and the social capital of meeting like-minded people online and offline to find those whose knowledge can be shared and can be mobilized towards one's own goals. These concepts are, of course, re-framings of Bourdieu's influential notions of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1979, 1990). Diepstraten's research is particularly disturbing in that it reveals opportunities our educational systems have missed to effectively support learners.

Commercial popular culture is not an innocent resource for anyone, including young people, online or offline. It pushes an agenda of what is now sometimes called by corporations and marketers <u>coordinated lifestyle reinforcement</u> (Bogart, 1994): the synergies (for profit) of linking consumer identities with a wide range of different products and services (see the discussion of 'identity markets' below). Meanwhile, educational systems are not offering young people effective support in dealing with these powerful forces critically. Popular culture and popular media, old and new, and students' pervasive practices in consuming such media offline and online, by computer networking, mobile phones and game devices, are simply invisible, as if by fiat, to the world of schools and 'serious education'. Considering our governments' extreme focus on 'the economy' and strong involvement with business in general it may not be a surprise that formal education does nothing to support critical consumption of marketing media, but it is at least the duty of educators to talk with students about a phenomenon

that engulfs them (and us) '24/7': commercial popular culture. The culture of most online learning, which is that of informal, voluntary learning, is also that of popular media and marketing. Much of informal online learning today consists of what young people make and re-make of popular media culture as they use it and re-appropriate it for their own worlds and purposes (Alvermann, 2002; Black, 2006; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Leander & McKim, 2003).

Young people are strongly invested in popular culture in many ways, and use popular culture in many ways, including ways which are not 'intended'. Even these processes of subversion or deviation, however, are now often acknowledged and appropriated by the marketers' media, and become part of the more complete media cycle in which we spin. Marketers seek to co-opt even consumers' skeptical stances to marketing media. For example: 'underground' music is imitated and incorporated quickly by major record labels. Popular culture immersion though is only one side of the story. Apart from the individual media consumed and produced, the meanings made, and the products bought as a result of them, the associated popular culture capital also serves to generate and amplify identifications that, for better or worse, draw substantial time and attention away from even well-intended curricula.

Media invite identification by creating interests, emotions and desires in the products they display: the type of pretty girl you like drinks <u>Diet Coke</u>; the kind of sexy, athletic boy you like wears <u>Abercrombie</u> shorts. How can classrooms compete? What is the

probability in today's curriculum and educational accountability climate of a highly

engaging lesson on the chemistry of Diet Coke? Or on the third-world cotton fields and

sweatshops from which come Abercrombie shorts? These are obvious pedagogical tasks

our educational systems should be concerned with, but don't seem to be able or willing to

pursue. It seems a very uneven competition if we compare educational media, even at its

best, with the ads, the TV shows, the clubs and sponsored parties, the music, the

products, and the network of friends who identify with similar media and products: a

transmedia complex in which generations of young people are already integrated, and one

that is saturated with sensuality, feeling and desire, and presented with visual beauty,

exciting sound, and even through live participatory events. There are lessons to be

learned from these competitors for the hearts and minds of today's learners, but they are

not ones which can be implemented in the educational systems we have now. The

systems will have to change in such a way that they can adapt to and implement these

lessons and respond to the new ways in which young people are learning. The alternative,

that commercial interests will successfully market attractive new, more explicitly

educational media to affluent families, leaving other students even more marginalized, is

a very real, and socially dangerous one (Lemke, 2007a).

du Bois-Reymond favors supporting the development of 'valid learning biographies', co-

produced between learner and institution (du Bois-Reymond & Moerch, 2006). A 'valid

learning biography' is a trajectory of actual learning experiences, which represents an

interactive history with education in the broadest sense. It is 'valid' in the sense that

holistically it is both viable for and valuable to the learner, and will help the learner to

build the careers and life(styles) that she or he desires. Only in this way, she claims, can we have a chance of addressing the complexity of a young person's life and future, and have at least a chance of offering real, effective support. As long as traditional educational institutions keep insisting on rigid, linear learning structures rather than flexible, accommodating and innovative support systems, more and more young adults will fail to be successful in leading satisfying and productive lives. These conclusions are based not only on interviews with young adults but also on sociological analyses (see citations below) of the complex trajectories of young people today into and out of the formal educational system, transitions to the world of work, and new highly nonlinear career trajectories. We want to argue that in order to consider even the first steps that educational systems might make to help young people succeed with these new learning biographies, we have to take a much closer look at why and how popular culture capital, identification and social networking play such a crucial part in young people's lives today. We need to study how meanings are made in and between all these sites, networks, and processes, and ultimately abandon the old educational fortresses before they collapse on top of us. It's not the institution of schooling that we primarily need to study and reform, it's the complex dynamic between learning biographies and media complexes that we believe ought to be the focus of future research on new educational alternatives.

Understanding the new translations (Latour, 1987) that are taking place within that dynamic today can potentially tell us how to re-envision and re-engineer social support systems for learning that go beyond both the offline culture of schools and the online culture of media. In re-defining the object of education research away from 'research on

education as we do it now through schools' and towards refining our understanding of how people learn through life: at home, at play, at work, in schools, and especially through social networks, popular culture media, and new online networked communities, it may be useful to apply Bruno Latour's concept of 'actor networks' in which we 'follow the actors' – whether humans, artifacts or concepts – as they are 'translated' from place to place by their interactions with one another, acquiring new properties and meanings from their changing roles in changing networks and spaces (Latour, 1987, 1999). The European Union (European Commission, 2001) and much current youth sociology there (e.g. Chisholm, 2000; Diepstraten et al., 2006; du Bois-Reymond & Chisholm, in press; du Bois-Reymond, Sünker, & Krüger, 2001) has redefined 'lifelong learning' from a cliché that in practice has meant little more than periodic returns to the irrelevancies of school-based learning to a new vision of learning in all settings, where the true educational task is to support people in integrating and synthesizing all that we learn from so many sources and through so many activities (see also OECD, 2004). How can better 'networks' (in Latour's sense, broader than the narrower ICT sense) be built to support such integrational learning? To answer this we at least need to know much more about how current integrational or traversal (Lemke, 2002b, in press) learning is now occurring.

We will return to this concern later. We want to examine first the kinds of linkages between learning and identity that appear to be making commercial media superior competitors in the attentional economies of lifelong learning.

Media Culture and Identity

Popular culture capital is often an entrée to new social networks as well as a key topical medium for that phatic communion (Jackobson, 1960) which helps maintain and nourish social solidarity in affinity groups. But reliance on popular culture media to help develop our social identities also opens us up to the covert messages and implicit ideologies they carry. Individuals and communities do in fact re-interpret and re-appropriate the beliefs, values, and naturalizations inherent in popular culture worlds, but there is an on-going dialectic of implicit acceptance vs. active re-appropriation.

We are accustomed to thinking in terms of a radical imbalance of power between corporate media producers and distributors vs. individual consumers, but recent research and arguments examining the 'fan communities' around television programs, computer games, movies, and the more complex transmedia franchises (Jenkins, 2006a) which may link all of these media (and more) together suggest the emergence of a different picture (Lemke, 2005a, 2007b). Consider for example the Harry Potter franchise, one of the most popular in the world today, with particular relevance for both young learners and the formation of attitudes to schooling. In addition to the seven principal books, four feature films (as of 2007), six or more computer games, numerous official websites, and endless branded merchandise from toys to candy, which form the 'franchise' proper, there are also, for example, over three hundred thousand fan-authored online stories set in the Potter universe, and substantial numbers of fan-produced art works, music videos, and detailed analyses and commentaries on both the official stories and the fan-produced work (see links to representative websites following the references below). Fan-authored

fiction, in particular, has now begun to receive serious scholarly attention (Black, 2006; Jenkins, 2006a), and a significant phenomenon within this genre will illustrate re-appropriation for us particularly well.

Unselfconsciously, the official Harry Potter world re-inscribes the cultural values of Anglo-Saxon heteronormativity, but a significant genre within its fan fiction community is so-called 'slash fiction', e.g. "Harry/Ron" stories elaborating the romantic involvement of Harry Potter with his 'best friend' Ron Weasley. Such stories are written by young women, almost exclusively. This genre is very similar to some popular culture fiction traditions in Japan (yaoi, doushinji) but appears to be an independent, parallel development. While no doubt re-inscribing some traditional ideologies of romantic love, the subversion of the otherwise powerful taboo on same-sex relationships, particularly among young boys, shows the potential not just of individual writers, but of large mutually supportive online communities to re-appropriate popular culture media and identities in potentially transgressive ways.

Slash fiction occurs for most of the popular transmedia franchises of the day, from Star Wars to Star Trek, Naruto, The Lord of the Rings, etc. It occurs within very large online fan communities (tens to hundreds of thousands of members), where all genres of fan fiction, fan art, fan-made videos, commentaries, discussions, etc. thrive. The meanings and significance, the range of possibilities for identity development, the 'culture' of the transmedia complexes and their fan communities depend not just on the official 'franchised' media, but on an intertextual system which also includes the large-scale fan

production of collateral media. For readers who may imagine that such fan communities are mere by-ways in the general mass consumption of popular culture media, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the combination of passionate fan interest, the daunting complexity of these transmedia worlds, and the potential social capital and desire for social sharing and affinity group acceptance, make the online fan-produced media and discussion websites a customary resource for the even larger numbers of consumers of these media who are not themselves active producers of fan media. In the case of complex computer games such as the <u>Final Fantasy</u> series and many others, it is hard to imagine playing them seriously without seeking some online advice and assistance.

We suspect there will be academic readers who disdain popular culture media especially when it is oriented to youth markets, and who are skeptical of its political significance. We will simply mention that another of the most successful transmedia franchises and online communities is based on the computer game <u>America's Army</u>, produced by the US military as a recruitment tool and a vehicle for teaching about US military doctrine, and proudly or unselfconsciously propagating its questionable geopolitical assumptions (Helles, 2003).

Equally significant, we think, is the general thesis that corporate marketing sells 'lifestyles', or in our terminology, identities, which incline consumers to become their customers. In the case of popular culture media, there is no clear line between what counts as the product and what counts as marketing for the product (look at the official websites for any of the major fictional universe franchises, or of current 'blockbuster'

movies). What marketers call 'synergy' – the linking of their marketing strategies for products, corporate identities, and consumer identities through films, television, music, games, and websites – produces transmedia complexes which, we have argued (Lemke, 2005a, 2007b), are potentially far more effective carriers of ideological messages than are traditional single media, because they are pervasively available across many different sites and activities in daily life, and because they invite or demand an exceptional degree of buy-in by consumers. The latter is occasioned by the degree of consumer effort required to synthesize meanings across these many media in order to obtain the popular culture capital and social-networking benefits of time invested in such transmedia products.

Marketers, and, if you wish, corporate-globalist propagandists, have felt somewhat thwarted in recent times by the advent first of cable-television viewing habits (channel-surfing, advertisement muting) and then of the diversion of 'eye-balls' (time and attention) from earlier marketing media like television to websites, video and computer games, mobile phone subcultures, internet chat, online blogs, etc. In seeking to more effectively colonize these more diverse and, from their point of view, message-diluting media, marketers have turned to transmedia strategies which enable them to keep their messages (and ideological naturalizations) in view in ways that are more integrated with the media content themselves (e.g. Bogart, 1994). Corporate advertising has never just sold products (Williamson, 1978), and its methods are now also the primary communicative strategy of political interest groups as well. Who can doubt that

transmedia analysis methods would apply just as well to The Iraq War franchise as to any fictional complex? Today wars are marketed just like the games that simulate them.

When we consumers attention-surf across hundreds of channels and millions of websites, or even go out and leave our houses and televisions behind, we enact traversals (Lemke, 2005b, 2007b) that marketers seek to encompass in their wide-ranging transmedia webs. A transmedia franchise, whether fictional or merely political, ramifies through our televisions, computers, mobile phones, and friendship groups. The systematically differentiated and hierarchized collections of standardized consumer identities defined and proffered by transmedia corporate marketers – what we are calling here identity markets – can still become merely resources for individual and group identity construction along our traversals. In a very post-modern spirit, young fans edit together moments from commercial films to make their own, sometimes very transgressive, versions of the Harry Potter or Star Wars mythos. They post these to hosting sites such as YouTube.com as well as to fan sites like The Leaky Cauldron. Corporate identity cauldrons are leaky indeed in the hands of these consumer-producers.

Online Cultures and Learning

What are we to make then of the notion of 'online culture' in relation to the learning potential of such fan communities? There is a curious notion inherited from the nationalist 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, by way of the early cultural anthropology of those times, that 'cultures' are, if not homogeneous, at least significant primarily insofar as they are shared. But a more recent view in cultural anthropology (since Wallace, 1970)

is that social systems are ordered heterogeneities held together not so much by shared

values as by our mutual interdependence on one another's diverse skills and knowledges.

Post-modern cultures cohere because we need each other, not because we resemble one

another, or indeed even very much like one another. Our modern communities, whether

great metropolitan cities or even smaller towns, are filled with a broad diversity of often

conflicting religions and cultures, yet for all that we are still bound together by our

economic and practical dependence on one another's existence and efforts. Historically,

men's cultures and women's cultures in the same community were often quite different

(for all that men pretended otherwise), yet remained bound together by mutual

interdependence.

Online communities are no different. It is the diversity and divisions of labor within such

communities that produce the added-value for each member (Levy, 1997). Yes, we flock

together around our shared passions for this or that, but we benefit most not from

communities of our own clones, but from the different points of view, distinct

experiences, and diverse contributions of other members. We have learned in recent years

a great deal more about the role of online culture and new media in the lives of school-

age students and something of how they are and are not being integrated into classroom

education (e.g. Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Leander, 2003).

Lankshear and Knobel in particular have criticized approaches to co-opting 'the digital'

into national curricula rather than thinking through how digital literacies might change

the relationship between students and the wider society. They imagine, following Chris

Bigum, that schools might evolve, as universities have, into knowledge generating

institutions for their communities, as well as being sites of knowledge transmission. Such an approach might well represent one new educational option that we could endorse, insofar as making such contributions also represents a rich learning opportunity for students. But the experience of universities may indicate that the agendas of knowledge-generation inevitably sit very uneasily alongside any canons of what knowledge must be taught. The former are responsive to and emergent from local contexts, while the latter remain relatively static and comparatively uninspiring for more present-oriented learners.

How different all this is from the 'culture' of schools and their one-size-fits-all curricula. Natural human communities, whether in village or neighborhood societies or online, promote learning across difference: we learn from elders and by teaching juniors, we learn from peers who have a different view of things from our own (Lemke, 2002a). We discover online that our interests, but not our attitudes, are shared by Japanese, Korean, and Finnish gamers, readers, and fellow producers of fan-made media. There are canonical texts, but not authoritative readings (not even those of authors or producers). There are familiar genres, but fan-made works are valued for their unique 'twists' (and often for their transgressions). The fan communities are created, maintained, run, and managed by fans themselves, not by paternalistic elders. The communities appropriate and transform what the commercial media offer; they do not simply reproduce it. Along the way, members learn from one another, often by the route of apprenticeship to more experienced peers (Lave & Wenger, 1992), and often far more effectively than in schools (Alvermann, 2002; Alvermann et al., 1999; Black, 2006; Steinkuehler, Black, & Clinton, 2005), how to improve their writing, their visual design, their web skills, their video

editing, and in similar contexts in other online peer communities their computer programming, their research skills, their music, etc. etc.

The official culture of schools, by contrast, is authoritarian and morally offensive. Rather than an educational support system that makes available, as resources for new production, the valued art, literature, music, and knowledge of the world's cultural traditions, we have allowed ourselves to settle for an institution that attempts to force the next generation to simply emulate the last, that imposes an arbitrary canon of 'content' on mostly unwilling students, that propagates a single, still mostly upper-middle class, nationalistic or euro-cultural, masculinist and heteronormative curriculum of very little demonstrable value to most people's real daily lives. We are not speaking here of basic primary education, some of which is enlightened and playful in its activities, and much of which is actually of use (though many primary schools are still culturally diverse only in their students and not in their teachers or curriculum). We are talking about all that follows those first years, up to the point where students are finally allowed to choose what they wish to learn. Is it a surprise that students are alienated from our current educational systems? That they do not wait until after their formal schooling to begin the real work of their identity development or learning about what really interests them and how to discuss it? That they turn to peers, to online communities, to social networks, to mass media and popular culture? Or that this is happening even while educators, curricula, and indeed most adults steadfastly ignore everything that matters to our students in their worlds outside of the school?

When students genuinely seek to learn, to what kinds of communities, with what sorts of norms and practices do they turn? They turn to more-knowledgeable peers, because they cannot trust 'adults' to treat them democratically rather than paternalistically (much as women often prefer learning communities that exclude men). They turn to communities that are engaged in projects over fairly long periods of time, where there are opportunities to do something, make something, share something that really matters to the members. They turn to communities where there is a passion for what is being done and learned. None of these are features of our ruinously expensive formal learning institutions. Schools do not draw on the diverse experiences of students, but impose a single voice on all. They do not encourage and support students to develop unique learnings and experiences, unique voices or viewpoints. They are famously intolerant of creativity and transgressive attitudes. They prefer readers to writers, learners to peer-teachers, answers to questions, and consumers to producers. They imagine that pencil-and-paper tests, done in an hour or less, can give valid indications of intellectual and social-emotional development or the ability to conduct long-term, self-guided or group projects. Or, worse, that what such tests can indicate is more important, or more fundamental, than what students, parents, employers, and educational leaders generally agree are the ultimate goals of learning (e.g. critical judgment, learning autonomy, skilled collaboration, etc.).

Long ago, the alternative to the free public school was the free public library, but solitary study appeals to only a few, even if it brings the freedom to pursue your own interests, in your own way, at your own pace. The great benefit of the school is the opportunity to ask your questions of a knowledgeable teacher, and to get some guidance as to what

knowledge might really be useful to your quest. But how often in classrooms do students get the opportunity to ask the questions they really want to ask? Without their being refused as 'off the topic'? What guidance do teachers typically give students to the world of knowledge that is relevant to the students' interests and concerns? What teachers could give to students, the curriculum and the structure of the institution (short classes, large classes, overloaded content demands) typically prevent.

The web is, among its other functions, a library online. Online communities and their portal sites give guidance for learning on topics of interest to participants, and opportunities to join in projects. Mentors in online communities are unpaid volunteers, eager to help those who share their interests and passions. They are not well-trained as teachers, they may provide misinformation (though this is less common in specialized communities where others readily correct them). Online communities are not just information resources, they are social networks, and often communities in the true sense. Degree of participation is voluntary; you can be a core member of the community, intellectually and socially, or you can drop in and out for what you need. The core community is usually a small fraction of all those who may participate over the course of a day or a week, yet it maintains its cohesion and direction. Online learning communities are hybrids of strong communities with tight binding and loose communities with weak binding (Müller-Prothmann, 2006; Wellman et al., 1996). Correspondingly, their cultures consist of a certain core culture with a periphery that is more tolerant of diverse perspectives. It is possible to enter these communities and move from peripheral to core participant, and it is equally possible to come and go and to be left alone. Unlike schools,

online communities have a culture of weak recruitment. They may entice, but they do not pressure, much less compel. Schools, even after the abhorrent age of corporal punishments, still do discipline bodies and enforce their demands on students through physical imprisonment. Online communities have had to evolve a different culture of learning because they have virtually no leverage over participants' bodies, and only a little over their sensibilities.

Affectivity and Learning

Several times already we have referred to the passionate commitment to their projects in online communities. Learning the complexities of many of these fictional franchise worlds, or successfully completing the challenges of computer games, takes a great deal of effort and commitment. So does regular participation in, much less formal responsibility for online fan sites, communities, and forums. For all this time and labor, the activity itself is its own and only reward. These are labors of love, fueled by passionate interests and desires. Students who would not spend more than ten minutes on homework or textbook reading will spend six or eight hours a day on their passions. Students who can hardly be coaxed to write two sentences or a half a page, will write dozens and hundreds of pages about their passions. Students who cannot recall facts of history or science a day after the examination can recount minute details of computer and video games they have played, or stories they have read, months and years later. If very few students find any convergence between their passions and what is offered in school, whose fault is that? And whose loss is it?

It is not news that we learn more readily what matters to us emotionally and in relation to our identities and our participation in affinity groups. Or that we then recall it longer and are better able to marshal it when occasion arises to make some use of it. But the only emotion to be found in most educational materials is that of dry disinterestedness, our legacy from the turbulent politics of the days of Boyle and Hobbes (Shapin & Schaffer, 1989) that defined the official scientific stance of academic learning as dispassionateness. That mistrust of feeling and subjectivity has also deprived us of needed research and even a theoretical vocabulary with which to discuss the role of passion in learning, and in the culture of learning communities.

What are the passions that support learning, retention, and future use of knowledge and skills? What are the affective dimensions of social-emotional and intellectual development? What do we really mean by excitement, curiosity, playfulness, or the joy of discovery? What are the actual emotional trajectories of learners over longer periods of time? What are the roles of other emotional processes that we term frustration, drive, conflict, anxiety, or pride? What of the social emotions of solidarity, friendship, enmity, jealousy, guilt, and gratitude? Do we doubt that all these and more play key roles in our learning processes over multiple timescales from minutes to years? Or that they are fundamental to social processes of learning?

Roland Barthes, speaking of the pleasures of the text in literature, used the French term jouissance, with its connotations of erotic pleasure, very deliberately (Barthes, 1979).

Feelings are strongly embodied, and in the realm of bodily feelings and sensations there are no clear demarcations between erotic and other somatic desires, pleasures, and pains. If Anglo-Saxon academic traditions viscerally reject such matters as peripheral to intellectual inquiry, if some of us may breathe a sigh of relief at no longer having to engage with Freudian theory, there are many colleagues in other cultural traditions who are not so skittish. You cannot read Harry/Ron slash fiction without awareness of its erotic pleasures, or experience the ilinx (a pleasure of vertigo; Caillois, 1961) of diving through aerial space in a virtual game of quidditch with Harry Potter, and not realize that no analysis of the semiotics of fiction, film, or videogames can be intellectually defensible if it does not also consider reader, viewer, and player feelings. This is especially obvious for computer games, where interactivity is fundamental, and player moves which advance the game depend on player emotional reactions, fears, and desires. It's no less true in more traditional media. Popular culture media, including marketing media, have always played on the edges of the erotic, and have always appealed to emotional responses, yet we have relatively little well-developed theoretical language to give accounts of these basic phenomena.

One reason is academic psychology's historic rejection of subjective accounts as valid data. Perhaps this was justified in a particular moment of the discipline's development, but it seems very clear today that we need to combine first-person phenomenological accounts of experience and feeling with third-person semiotic analyses of meanings and affordances, if we are to give adequate accounts of how people learn with media and

social networks or provide useful guidance for the design of effective learning media, environments, and communities.

New Educational Options

'New educational options' does not mean new and better schools. The technology of the school, its fundamental structural design for learning is today obsolete and dysfunctional (Lemke, 2007a). Most of our new learning theories hold this obvious implication, but we prefer to look the other way because we are afraid of the consequences. The dangers must be faced, but so must the necessity for new kinds of learning and new ways to support learning. It may not be customary in academic writing to go beyond recitation of facts and their conceptual explication, but it seems morally necessary here to draw out what we see as the significant social policy implications of our argument.

Schools isolate students from the rest of society, but we know that they learn best by combining immersion in realistic, meaningful social activities with periods of critical reflection. Schools provide teachers, but not sufficient time for individual contact with students, nor the extended timescales of persistent relationships between one teacher and one student for the years needed to understand and guide individual learning. Schools divide life into artificial 'subjects' and teach about them in abstract terms which are meaningless to students who have never experienced what those abstractions stand for. Students are taught to do well on tests that bear no resemblance to the activities of life, and whose results have no correlation with later success in those activities. Students learn to do tasks limited to timescales of minutes or hours, and do not learn to manage their

own learning or complete tasks that take planning, revision, and execution over weeks and months. Students are expected, indeed forced, to learn what does not interest them, at the same time and place as everyone else, and it is not surprising that they promptly forget most of what they learned within days or weeks. This is the situation most of the time, in most schools, in most classes, because these problems are structural features of the school-curriculum-classroom model of education. Dedicated teachers and willing students sometimes achieve significant learning despite these structural obstacles, but that is no recommendation for the system itself, nor does it really happen often enough to produce what we would want to call a truly educated citizenry.

Critical studies in the field of literacy education (e.g. Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1995), with which we generally agree, have called for educational paradigms that focus more on the authentic empowerment of students, particularly with respect to their abilities to create and critique old and new media and to use these for their own purposes and in their own interests. Although clearly highlighting the political and power/interest dimensions of educational practices, they have at most proposed that new media and online learning offer additional educational opportunities, but have not, as we have sought to do here, directly challenged the institutional structures and educational assumptions of schooling itself as a social technology.

Online informal learning and classroom learning are built on competing paradigms which do not live well together. Online learning builds on the library paradigm: find what you want to know when you want to know it because you have a reason to want to know it

then. A real reason, your own reason. More generally, online learning is conducted as a member of a community, a natural community that has come together because of a shared interest, not a group put together artificially by a teacher for a project students did not initiate themselves. Classroom learning is learning what someone else wants you to know, in their way, at their pace, in their time and their place. It is imposed, not free by choice. There is a strong moral obligation placed on those who would impose their choice of learning on others to demonstrate, first, the real value of their curriculum for the lives of students and, second, that no system grounded in greater student autonomy produces equal or superior value for time spent. When have these moral obligations to students ever been met?

Education is not simply learning, neither the online learning of voluntary communities, nor the imposed learning of schools. Education is the development over time of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will support us in pursuing our own and our community's goals for better lives and a better world. Schools are not doing that. Students are not becoming better able to envision a better world, they are not learning better political and moral judgment, they are not learning to understand the complexity and interdependence of a global network of social and ecological systems, they are not learning to more effectively critique an empty consumer capitalism, they are not learning to create their own media to intervene in the commercially-dominated transmedia complexes that are shaping our collective visions of possible realities. They are not even learning very much to make them useful as exploitable knowledge workers. They might at best be learning to perform on tests in ways that make them eligible for a higher

education in which they might learn something that they could be underpaid to do at work. They are also learning, through popular media and not through schools, to be more avid consumers of more varied products and services, and to identify with lifestyles that support consumer economies.

But some of them, as work such as that of DuBois-Reymond and Diepstraten is showing, are learning a lot more on their own, or as members of the social networks they join and help create, offline and online. They are learning to use their popular culture and social capital, and to make new connections and bridges, new translations, connecting their own projects to those of others. They are connecting work and play, they are learning to shift rapidly among simultaneous and sequential projects, with different combinations of partners, on many timescales. Schools, even higher education, continue to 'educate' students for predictable careers in stable fields, which we all know are not likely to continue to provide livelihoods for the lifetimes of those now in school. The next generation of students will as often create their own jobs as take jobs in existing enterprises. They will have multiple careers in unpredictable occupations, projects, and social groups. They will learn to work effectively by contributing to and leveraging the 'collective intelligence' (Levy, 1997) of different online-and-offline social networks of people, information resources, and very likely of computational intelligences.

New educational options should be just that: options. There should be means of social support for many different mixes of the key components of the new, alternative learning biographies: online interest- and affinity-based communities, real-world meaningful

activities in existing institutions, service-oriented volunteer learning, commercial enterprise and public- and independent- sector internships, paid and unpaid; intelligent tutoring software and simulations, mentoring and guidance by trained educators and by diverse people of many occupations. And also, time spent in reflective seminars, face-to-face discussions, and practice rooms, in buildings that might still be called schools, but which should house only one component among the many ways societies support lifelong learning and human development.

Of course there will remain a place for systematic instruction, for close work with teachers, and for exposure to elements of knowledge and of the global human tradition that might otherwise be missed. But not on a uniform schedule, not with deadline dates or at specific fixed ages of life. Not by requirements, but by capitalizing on connections to other interests and on an ancient motivator: genuine respect for the advice of a good teacher. That respect may be easier to come by when it is not undermined by making teachers mere delivery agents for an imposed and alienating curriculum.

We are not unmindful that the changes we are talking about are already beginning among the more privileged sectors of society, or that they will likely be taken up initially and preferentially by those sectors. The needs of those who have been marginalized, economically and in terms of social and cultural capital of all kinds, may remain different for some time to come. More traditional approaches to education, for such students, have the advantage of providing a roadmap to what is valued by the politically dominant castes of society. Much of what is on that roadmap may be empty of real use-value, but retains

some of its arbitrary exchange-value as a ticket of entry to further opportunities. It is unfortunate that these are the facts of our unjust society, but they too need to be faced. Perhaps it is at least more just that we have many educational alternatives, and not just one for the privileged and another for the marginalized. It should be easier for the marginalized to find avenues of mobility where there are more fluid criteria of success and multiple communities and social networks offering new opportunities.

The future of education is not about schools, and it is not about online learning. It is about new ways of <u>connecting all the ways that people learn</u>. It is not about a single ideal culture of learning in schools, or about one culture of online learning. It is about supporting critical learning and creative production across times and places, work and play, academic knowledge and popular culture capital, and across many different but interconnected social networks with many diverse learning cultures.

These new educational options will need to be supported by new research agendas. We need to know how young people are successfully learning outside the model of the school and curriculum, no matter what it is that they are learning. We need to know how to help support the effective integration of learning across radically different activities, sites, institutions, media, networks, and communities. We need to understand the role of passion, affect, emotion, and feelings of all kinds in different learning and development processes. We need to understand how people are motivated to identify with particular elements of popular culture, particular affinity groups, and particular personal and social projects and agendas. The study of online learning cultures is one good starting point for

these inquiries. If we do not understand these matters well enough to make a better future, others will be happy to make us a worse one.

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Weblinks

http://www.fanfiction.net/book/ -- A portal to fan fiction texts and sites.

http://www.the-leakycauldron.net/ -- A fan site for the Harry Potter universe.

http://www.americasarmy.com/ -- Official site for the America's Army computer game.