# Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone
## From youth voice to young entrepreneurs: the individualization of digital media and learning

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**From Youth Voice to Young Entrepreneurs:**
**The Individualization of Digital Media and Learning**

Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone
Department of Media & Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science

### Introduction

The field of digital media and learning has reached the mainstream. From coding clubs for five-year-olds[1] to the popularity of EdTech in schools[2] to the teaching of media production to teens,[3] learning about and through digital technologies is no longer seen as peripheral. Educators interested in tackling social inequity have long seen the potential of digital media to empower young people by supporting the skills to "express themselves,"[4] by amplifying youth voice,[5] and by enabling digitally mediated inclusion and recognition for those facing problems of marginalization.[6]

In pursuing these expressive and collaborate aims, which mobilize what we here label the "voice" discourse, advocates recognize that equal opportunities can generate iniquitous outcomes, and so they try to focus resources on disadvantaged groups to support their agency, creative expression, and civic engagement. However, a rival discourse (here labelled "entrepreneurial") has more recently come to the fore. This also focuses on teaching young people to use digital media technologies effectively, but now the purpose is to provide opportunities fairly to everyone in the knowledge that some will prove more effective in gaining the tangible skills required to "get ahead" and not be "left behind" in a technologically-enhanced and increasingly competitive and precarious "new world."[7]

Guiding these discourses, which we will show to be contrasting yet sometimes overlapping, are the twin imaginaries that shape them. These belie divergent political positions. The voice discourse, we suggest, is embedded in a cultural imaginary now several decades (or even centuries) old that prioritizes social justice and which has developed a pedagogy that embraces collaborative learning, equity, and communitarian[8] values. The entrepreneurial discourse has been fuelled by what has been termed "the rise of neoliberalism,"[9] namely the widespread government and private sector endorsement of a cultural imaginary that prizes self-interest, individual competition, and instrumental values such as personal achievement, success indicators, defined targets.

In this article we explore and contrast these distinct discourses, tracing their parallel yet intersecting histories in digital media education and pedagogic practice. We complement this by drawing on our current empirical research[10] in digital media learning sites, in order to examine the relation between these two discourses, the practices they generate and the imaginaries that inspire them. Our concern is that, although at present they appear to co-exist, the considerable resources being provided to support entrepreneurial approaches to digital media learning threatens to obscure and undermine the social justice imaginary that originally inspired this field.

### *Analyzing educator discourses*

The definition of "digital media and learning" (DML) and the time span included here are intentionally inclusive. As Gee[11] noted, the DML label encompasses many traditions, from formal education to games design to computing to media studies to literacy/cies studies and beyond. Although not all the projects under this umbrella share the same approach, they do share a commitment to moving "beyond surface forays into technology… [so as to] encourage… designing, creating, and critiquing genres that connect to youth culture and engage youth."[12] This is partly due to the support of the MacArthur Foundation (the funder of our current project and those of many of those in this special issue), although DML is not coterminous with MacArthur.[13]

This article is based on a synthesis of policy documents, secondary academic literature and empirical research from two related projects. The first included interviews conducted by Blum-Ross as part of her research on participatory youth media from 2006 – 2012.[14] These interviews with educators reconstruct the history

of youth media initiatives over recent decades. The second included interviews conducted by Blum-Ross and/or Livingstone as part of our joint research on *Parenting for a Digital Future* in London from 2014 – 2015;[15] we analyze these to reveal the discourses currently shaping pedagogic and parenting practices as well as young people's own practices of learning and expression. Between the two projects we have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with over 70 educators from 34 different learning sites. Both projects also included participant observation of learning activities and interviews with children, young people and families.

### How digital media and learning became mainstream

Inspired by the radical politics of the time, the first availability of portable film and video cameras, and drawing on Paulo Freire's famous "pedagogy of the oppressed" calling for the "development of the awakening of critical awareness,"[16] in the late 1960s and early 70s, activists and educators began what became the field of youth and community media. A media educator in London, who founded a project during this period, described it as "very utopian and ideologically driven." Another long-time educator, working in New York, described how he saw filmmaking as a means for young people to not just "answer the questions [but]… to pose questions." While many such projects operated at the grass roots, some were given wider platforms by broadcasters to provide a "voice to the voiceless."[17]

Community and especially youth media projects were hailed as offering a means of empowering marginalized groups.[18] For example, they sought to foster critical media literacy in non-dominant communities by deconstructing mainstream media to see how bias (including biased representations of those self-same marginalized youth) is reproduced.[19] But such efforts were often under- or insecurely funded, and as a result educators and organizers have faced a hard task in justifying their work to funders and policy makers. In the process, they have thus honed their skills in accessing resources, often reluctantly instrumentalizing their work[20] by specifying particular and timely goals in the language of prevailing policy concerns.[21] As another well-established London youth media educator put it, "you're always quite schizophrenic, going in lots of different directions for funding. Very few people actually want to fund what you are."

By the 1980s and 1990s, the increasing availability of funding saw youth and community media grow in reach and scope. However, with this growth came the incremental institutionalization of the sector.[22] The Thatcher government in the UK

and Regan in the US introduced a brash new form of conservative politics informed by increasingly neo-liberal ideologies.[23] These placed an increased emphasis on the individual rather than on state or welfare provision. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim describes the social consequences in terms of "individualization,"[24] arguing that the displacement of the traditional structures of social class or community or religion on the one hand opened up new opportunities for individuals to define their own pathways and interests and, on the other hand, burdened them with the costs of failure should they lack necessary skills or make poor choices.

For media educators, the result was two key changes during this period. The first was an emphasis on identity. Funders prioritized what one educator described, as "personal politics" which he noted, with some sadness, "became more pressing for some people than grassroots working class community organizing." Media creation was seen as helping individuals "organize around their *own* experience."[25] Another London-based media educator who established her organization in 1990 reported that their remit was for "young people to have the tools and skills to tell their *own* stories." Nevertheless, identity is a complex concept, and in retrospect, it seems that while educators often meant to support community or classed or marginalized identities, the discourse increasingly referred to the self-definition or self-actualization of individuals.

The second shift was the emergence in the 1980s of the "entrepreneurial" rhetoric couched in terms of "job-readiness" or "skills." The growing public discussion around computing was one of the key arenas in which this discourse took hold. While in the 1970s the general public had no real knowledge about or thoughts on the utility of computers, by the early 1980s this "blank canvas" was being inscribed.[26] As early as 1982 the British government designed an 'Information Technology Year' whose slogan was "there is no future without IT."[27] This future, it was made clear in marketing, was an economic future where technology was a bulwark against "economic decline and permanently high levels of unemployment."[28] Although there was little evidence base for these claims for educational achievement and future employment, [29] this economic instrumentalism[30] had become the naturalized discourse of new technologies, with ramifications into the present.[31]

In the 1990s and into the 2000s the language shifted yet again. "Creativity" became "flavor of the month" in British arts and educational policy, a "magic ingredient"[32] "assumed to produce all sorts of transformative effects."[33] For example, in 2001 the

UK Film Council created First Light, a dedicated fund aimed at harnessing young people's "creativity as a tool for learning."[34] Still seemingly inspired by the social justice imaginary that originally motivated digital media learning, the goal of enhancing "participation" among often-disengaged young people emerged as a newly inspiring policy driver. A second youth media funder, Mediabox, was launched in the 2006 with £6million to fund its first year. The then-Executive Director described its vague origins by saying it "probably just came from a special advisor who said something about letting [young people] have a voice... so there was already a realization that young people were portrayed quite poorly in the media and [also] this whole consultation thing that local government were mad for."

The increased convergence of media production and computing technologies in the 2000s offered an opportunity to revitalize the voice discourse in a new digital landscape.[35] Youth media organizations began to invest in the opportunities offered by Web 2.0, posting their productions online[36] seeking, although not always finding, audiences to engage with them.[37] The increased availability of ways of sharing youth voices, however, begged the question of whether all voices could really be made to matter?[38] For example, in the set-up of Mediabox young people had fed into the design and branding and the award of some early rounds of funding, but as the funding source became oversubscribed this youth participation became increasingly minimal. Critical questions became pressing - creativity as a community resource or an individual asset? Participation in what and for whose benefit?[39] The discourse of participation, while on paper echoing elements of the "voice" discourse, was in the case of Mediabox ultimately a form of tokenism. Individual young people were asked to speak on behalf of others, but the structures of power that invited this form of participation left little room to respond to what was said.

Although youth media advocates continue to promote an "empowered conception of citizenship," increasingly this has co-evolved with the new goal for the digital age (or "the information society") of developing "skills valued in the modern workplace."[40] Can the voice discourse survive under austerity? Or is it become subsumed by more entrepreneurial, individualized discourses? Consider that the Conservative-led government that came to power in the UK in 2010 swiftly did away with or deeply cut both First Light and Mediabox. Instead of talk of participation or creativity or the inclusion of "voices from below," we began to hear words such as "excellence" and "enterprise."[41]

Indeed, the 2015 Conservative government has relied almost solely on economic justifications in providing for youth involvement with media and technology production. The Education Secretary in 2013 stressed the importance of preparing "students to work at the very forefront of technological change."[42] The informal learning sector is witnessing an explosion of clubs for coding, app and game development and digital media production. Technology advocates claim the jobs of the future "are digital jobs"[43] and that digital skills are vital for the future workforce. Some of this entrepreneurial discourse is promoted by the creative industries themselves,[44] concerned to sustain their work in the new climate and to provide fruitful pathways to work for the young people they engage with. In other cases, DML organizations try to reinvent themselves in order to ride the wave of the current trend that invests the creative and cultural-industries of post-Industrial Britain with society's hopes for future economic productivity. Thus DML is being refashioned, or perhaps submerged, by initiatives such as the newly celebrated computing curriculum in the UK.

While many of the DML advocates represented in this volume try to resist this competitive language, even at the 2015 DML conference there seemed at least as many, if not more, references to employability as to voice. For example, keynote speaker Van Jones described how he wanted to increase social equity by using DML to create "new pipelines" to connect young people of color with jobs in Silicon Valley through the #YesWeCode initiative.[45] At the same time, in response to the criticism of succumbing to individualistic, even "neoliberal" discourses,[46] the DML community is currently clarifying the importance of communitarian or social justice values in "Connected Learning" outcomes as they emerge from interest-driven, peer-supported learning processes.[47] Managing these discourses – within the community of practice and more widely, including to funders and policy makers, remains a significant challenge.

### *Competing and overlapping educator discourses*

In our *Parenting for a Digital Future* project we interviewed formal and informal educators in a national project working with schools to create apps (App-Starter), a digital media learning center teaching video arts and music technology to children from diverse backgrounds (London Youth Arts - LYA), a primary school optional coding club in a poor neighborhood (Bluebell), and an elite summer coding camp (DigiCamp). This allowed us to identify the everyday practices shaped by these competing discourses, along with the broader imaginaries that inspire them.

Gus, an educator at LYA (funded mainly through public and some third sector grants) describes it as "a performing arts media place. You know, we're not trying to work out numeracy and literacy, we're just, it's all about fun and the arts and using the arts as a way of communicating." He goes on to link youth voice to equity issues, saying: "I think the mixed ability teaching environment at LYA where everyone is on an even keel doesn't exist at school. And doesn't exist much elsewhere." Gus himself teaches those with special educational needs, and relishes how the technology motivates spontaneous collaborative engagement that gets the best from the group, drawing on their interests, working with their intellectual strengths and limitations, producing a result they can all admire. Describing the use of a 'painting with light' app on the iPad, he enthuses:

> They started this in order, they made a bed. No, that was just a green square, we didn't know where this was going. Someone said that was a pillow then someone added a TV in, because then it became a bedroom because that was a bed. Someone added a bean bag so then they created this piece of art so that has been projected into a corner, they become part of the art then there is a group building up around them. It was a really fun workshop ... so my intention was setting this up, showing them how it works and then they made it. There and then, it was…it happened all within 10 minutes it was fantastic.

Suzanna, who runs the prestigious (and expensive) DigiCamp, also draws on the notion of children's interest-driven learning but positions it within an entrepreneurial frame, emphasizing independence, self-interest and high aspirations. She is frustrated by the approach of schools and educational charities, hinting at a rejection of the 'voice' discourse when saying, "There's, kind of, a moral judgment about… yes, there's this weird anti-commercial thing in education, which I don't understand and I didn't expect." For her, it is not even the expectation of 'digital' jobs already waiting 'out there' but the creation of economic opportunities for and by youth as entrepreneurs that excites her and, as she sees it, the children she teaches. She describes, how "all the things that we do are done in such a way to make them independent learners… We hear all the time the kids saying, why did I spend £50 on a game when I could just build my own games? You know, that's what we hope for." As she elaborates:

The kids are very entrepreneurial, and what we do want to start running is some, is, kind of, some start-up, boot camp kind of stuff, so the kids, like, if you've done a game and you wanted to do it, so what do you, what do you have to think about? You have to think about coding teams, you have to think about marketing, you have to think about monetization and distribution ... the kids have millions of questions about that stuff, and the kids, like, this is part of what's exciting to them.

Doubtless betraying our own endorsement of the social justice imaginary, we asked her how she balanced between the notion of entrepreneurialism with the "voice or storytelling side?" A little thrown, she resolved our implicit challenge by claiming hers to be the truly child-centered approach:

This is, all that comes from the kids themselves... I mean, they know that, like, tech's really important, but also, like, these are the products that they like, so they say, like, oh, I'm making this really great product and I can, I can share it with my friends or maybe I can sell it, so that's, sort of, coming from a natural place rather than from us saying, 'employability skills.'

Suzanna is herself an entrepreneur, experienced in fund-raising and planning to expand her already-successful business. She contrasts DigiCamp to well-meaning efforts based on volunteers and enthusiasm, saying, "I just don't think you can count on people" unless they are paid, managed and branded as part of a professional enterprise. The level of ambition is high – she discusses how the parents hope their children will become the future CEO who understands the digital world, not the guy in the basement fixing the office email. It is not school but, despite what Suzanna says, it doesn't feel like 'not-school' either [48] and is, perhaps, respected by its largely-wealthy parent clientele for just this reason. In our observations of DigiCamp, we indeed saw highly motivated children progressing in their learning, but they were strikingly individualistic: there was little collaborative learning or even socializing among the children in break time, and only cursory effort was made to draw the at-times uneasy mix of loners, geeks and high-achievers into a common cause or even shared conversation.

Bluebell school, with twice the national average of students on free school meals and its majority of African, Afro-Caribbean British or British Asian students, is a far cry from the managed brand of DigiCamp. The school has severely limited resources

to run any additional programs so was pleased when Beth, a local parent, volunteered to run an afterschool coding club. Beth and another volunteer were both PhD students in computer science, running the club as part of their participation in a "women in STEM" community outreach project. Beth linked up with a national coding organization aimed at inspiring "digital making" and "computational thinking,"[49] and received some basic training and a set of resources to use each week. The sessions are constructed to walk kids through the steps of making basic games with Scratch, the coding language for kids developed at MIT.[50] Beth hoped that the participants would gain "some kind of fundamental understanding of how you code and how you give instructions… completely independent from different programming languages and stuff; how those fundamental concepts, like, just get really embedded."

Though the curriculum from the parent organization was fairly mechanical, following a set trajectory to learn how to create increasingly complex games, Beth tried to push the group further. She brought in an old computer from the school library to take apart and put back together and convinced the school to use limited resources to purchase an Arduino to teach about circuitry. Beth, notably, echoed the language of 'creativity' often associated with new media arts, describing that she hoped the projects would give the students "some grounding that they can take to their next thing, both in the design and creative sides… to think creatively about different, like, technology tools, and to think that they can do something creative with those tools." Implicitly echoing Beth's balancing of the technical skills and affective dispositions, the mother of a 9-year-old Nigerian/Jamaican boy in the club also incorporated intertwined future narratives. When asked what she hoped her son would get out of the club she said:

> He has always said that he wants a job working with computers. So I said, well maybe this might help you. You know, I said, you're going to secondary school soon… it will be helpful if you knew exactly how computers worked, just for his own knowledge really, you know, just an interest.

The club's contribution, she felt, was not just in teaching how to code but rather in giving an opportunity to persist through difficulties. She said of her son, "if he wants to work for Sony [as a games designer] he's going to have to be, you know, the sort of person that Sony wants to hire." Thus an orientation towards future work isn't just about mechanical skills but is also about affective dispositions, including

curiosity, hard-work, sociability and other "soft skills." These are important, also, to the creators of Scratch who imagined in the program and accompanying social network a place where children and young people could "share and remix" ideas while learning "important mathematical and computational concepts, as well as how to think creatively, reason systematically, and work collaboratively: all essential skills for the 21st century."[51] While the club showed evidence of some of these goals, the sense of shared accomplishment was noticeably absent. The computer room was mainly silent, except for the occasional moment when students helped each other when they got stuck or (more commonly) asked the tutors for advice. The sense of accomplishment was directed mainly towards adults when finishing a complicated sequence of commands. Our field notes from the session read: "a palpable sense of excitement when different tasks are completed, shouting out to me or to Beth 'Miss! Miss! Come see! Come and look!' when they have successfully gotten the rocket to get to the moon or made the sun turn into crazy colors." For reasons of privacy and 'child-protection' the school does not encourage any use of social networks outside the school firewalls and so the social affordances of the Scratch community itself are inaccessible.

For Leroy at LYA the social aspect of art-based learning is both a goal in its own right and the means to further goals. Asked what the children learn at LYA he says:

> Skills that they can transfer when they're in the schools. A lot of them come because it's friendship, making friends, the social element... sometimes the actual parents come back and feed back to us, the tutors and myself, and say they've noticed a difference where the drama's really helped such and such a person come out of their shell. They're getting more confidence etc. and they actually realize things – [one boy told me] he didn't realize he liked Music Tech and he can create music.

Consistent with the connected learning[52] vision, Leroy seeks synergies between interest-driven, peer-supported and academically-recognized learning, and he sees the technology helping to support and bring these elements together. Although in many ways LYA had considerably greater freedom than the other sites, the entrepreneurial discourse had also entered. Diana, who taught animation, began one Saturday class by encouraging the students – a mixed group of young teens, most of them Black boys – about how their learning would aid their future employment options. Our field notes captured as follows:

[Diana says] 'When this is done we'll put it together on a website to have something to show for your time. You're at that stage where you should be initiating your own projects. Can you do that independently?' (the student must, as often occurs, repeat a dull task because he can't recall where he saved his previous version). 'You're picking up lots of skills here. Copy this and edit it, that'll give you a few skills.'

Such (marginally) independent practice of technical skills is arguably necessary for developing competence, but it lacks the enthusiasm, collaborative energy or creativity of many of the educators abstract accounts of learning. For instance, we watch one boy spend several classes laboriously erase the Shutterstock logo with Photoshop from an image he wants to include in his cartoon strip, while Diana encourages – in the future, he could make £40-50k per year by Photoshopping images of Beyoncé and similar for fashion magazines. As for Suzanna, meeting ambitious parental expectations in the end of term show is motivating for educators if a rather remote goal for teens. Thus we wrote in our field notes, "Staff are a bit torn about whether to let the kids have fun or getting the kids to achieve and perform – their ideology pushes them to the former, their pride to the latter."

### *Conclusions*

We began by charting the growth of the digital media and learning field in the past several decades. Our interviews with educators conducted over nearly 10 years, with the interviews themselves reflecting on several decades of change, allowed for a historical perspective that unpacks and complicates what is sometimes presented as a fixed and stable discourse. Many of the early youth media and literacy projects in the late 1960s onwards – those early pioneers who emphasized practical media production using a range of newly accessible technologies – were explicitly aimed at increasing empowerment and youth voice. These set the stage for later efforts at encouraging youth participation and civic engagement. However, the parallel discourse – centering on new possibilities for personal computer use in homes and classrooms – began to emerge from the 1980s onwards. This gave rise to a future-oriented and more entrepreneurial discourse that values the contribution of media learning less for its potential for community expression or solidarity, but insofar as it prepares the individual for future study or employment – as evident in the contemporary rhetoric of "21st century skills."

In the contemporary moment, when the promise of jobs in the technology industries beckons, we have argued that the rhetoric of future-oriented skills for employability has gained prominence. Despite disagreement about whether there truly is a coming shortage of skilled workers in the technology industries[53] or indeed whether such jobs are accessible to the diverse young people that many DML programs seek to target,[54] these imaginaries loom large. All of the educators we quoted above talked broadly of their hopes for the young people they work with. While in some cases, the emphasis was on creativity and others it was on skills, overall their talk tended to prioritize the future success of the individual, rather than a more communal vision rooted in voice and participation.

However, although our broad argument suggests a linear shift from a more communal vision to an increasingly individualized one, we recognize that discourses are overlapping and that change is iterative, with previous narratives never entirely eclipsed by new ones. As we also saw, while educators tend each to talk the discourse of their funders and institutions, what happens in practice is not always so very different, and long-standing educator practices and norms continue to be influential across contexts. To put it another way, successful project organizers and educators gain the essential professional skill of creative doublespeak – fitting themselves to the restrictive and ever-changing language of funders, while simultaneously attempting to provide continuity and growth for young people. So while their justifications may have changed substantively over time, it is possible that their practice has shifted rather less.

It is noteworthy that any kind of future-orientation is reminiscent of the notion that children are simply "people becoming," much critiqued by the recent sociology of childhood.[55] This in itself poses a challenge for the many digital media and learning initiatives that aim to shape these not-yet-adults into the future producers of tomorrow,[56] whether or not they aim to make them, in both obvious practical and subtler attitudinal ways, "workforce ready." Throughout the educator narratives we discern the sometimes explicit (Suzanna), but often implicit (coding club parent) specter of the "market" in which these children will someday have to compete. Even creativity in the code club is instrumentalized according to this same logic.

Perhaps it is going too far to read these trends in terms of "neoliberalism", which Davies describes as "an attempt to remake social and personal life in its entirety, around an ideal of enterprise and performance. Here, an ethos of competitiveness is seen as permeating culture, education, personal relations and orientation to the

self."[57] But to reassert a civic or communitarian vision for DML one must see young people as rooted in their communities, not in competition with them, for it is "only by participating in a community that you can help to define what the common good might/should be".[58] It is striking, then, that one of the only examples we encountered where the main objective of the project was to create present forms of solidarity as processes in-and-of themselves (rather than for an anticipated contribution to academic achievement or employment) was from Gus at LYA, who worked with young people with special needs. In this case a less deterministic set of expectations for the future acted, perhaps, as a freeing mechanism.

Throughout our interviews explicit discussions of the state were notable in their absence, though funding was a constant preoccupation. DML educators frequently contrasted their methods to teaching in schools, and in most cases had actively conceived of their models as providing alternatives to or making up for perceived deficits in state-funded education. This is an identifiable overlap between the voice and entrepreneurial discourses. Both agree that, for digital media learning, a new and inventive model is required, and both – like Freire – actively build on a critique of the traditional model of schooling. Interestingly, though LYA remains a site committed institutionally to a vision of empowerment and social justice, it is currently undergoing changes in setting up a wing of a "free school" (broadly analogous to the charter school movement in the US) to serve disengaged local young people. While the LYA senior staff were dubious about the source of funding, they felt the move was necessary for ensuring future sustainability for the organization. With this status comes some stability and some flexibility, but also support of a system which many argue fosters inequality[59] and intentionally opens up education to a vision of competitiveness.[60] Again, the seemingly inevitable rise of neoliberalism, mediated by contemporary forms of state funding, appear to foreclose the possibility of pursuing a vision of DML as an intrinsic good.

In an interview conducted at the time of this writing a youth media educator in New York commented on how it was only in the past year that she'd noted the language of "job-readiness" becoming dominant. While acknowledging that the board of her organization needed to keep their eye on prevailing trends in order to raise money, she implied that program staff felt slightly uncomfortable with this direction. Instead of explicitly helping young people become "job" or "college ready," one of her colleagues had proposed, what about using the term "life-ready?" The argument was that this rhetorical shift moves from purely economic instrumentalism but still has an anticipatory emphasis. Yet this forward-facing imperative is a far cry from

the joys of participatory culture and voice hoped for by others. [61] Our recommendation to educators, while acknowledging the deep financial insecurity of many DML organizations, is to try to be intentional about this language. The move from "voice" to "entrepreneurs" is not been inevitable, nor should it necessarily be uncritically embraced.

## Acknowledgements

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