Book Review: The Digital Youth Network: Cultivating Digital Media Citizenship in Urban Communities by Brigid Barron et al.

28/11/2014

*This book describes work of the the **Digital Youth Network**, an ambitious project to help economically disadvantaged middle-school students in Chicago develop technical, creative, and analytical skills across a learning ecology that spans school, community, home, and online. **Sara Marino** heartily recommends the book to mentors, researchers, and organisers who are interested in the design and implementation of similar digital media initiatives.*

The Digital Youth Network: Cultivating Digital Media Citizenship in Urban Communities. Brigid Barron, Kimberley Gomez, Nichole Pinkard, and Caitlin K. Martin. MIT Press. 2014.

Find this book: amazon LSE Library Services

The Digital Youth Network is a compelling, rigorous report of a pioneering three-year project founded in 2006 by Dr. Nichole Pinkard at the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute that supports organizations, educators, and researchers in learning best practices to help develop the technical, creative, and analytical skills of young people. More specifically, the book aims at discussing how the learning environment can provide opportunities for young people to develop the critical and technical skills that the digital age is now requiring as prerequisites of digital media citizens.

The ease and speed of the digital revolution is posing economic and social challenges that many have observed. For example, the UK Digital Skills Taskforce report expressed concern about the shortage of digital skills in the economy, and programmes at The Prince's Trust are working to introduce unemployed young people to creative technologies and digital product design. Students, as seeds of the future, need to absorb these challenges within today's "participatory culture", through the use and consumption of social media and learning networks, blogs, and online communities. The Digital Youth Network project represents both an experiment and a challenge for illustrating what it means to create structures, to apply digital media literacy, and to develop skills in meaningful ways inside and outside the learning environment. Richly documented, the reading is supported by an accurate analysis of data collected through survey research, interviews, artifact analyses, and case studies through eleven chapters.

As Maryanna Rogers and her co-authors observe in Chapter 4, "education today must focus on helping students *learn how to learn* so that they can manage the demands of ever-changing information, technology, jobs, and social conditions" (p. 99). This is probably the most important source of inspiration we can draw from the book. Ultimately, it serves a better understanding of how a sustained engagement of collaboration and research, together with the development of an ambitious performance, will prepare the next generation to be "critical consumers of digital media, constructive producers of digital media, and social advocates for better futures" (p. 23). Education is here perceived and examined as a powerful and empowering strategy for nurturing citizens with something to offer to the local and global community.

The contributors also note that "interests are powerful catalysts of learning" (p. 167). In fact, what the authors suggest is that "beyond expertise and skills, these interest-driven pursuits may engage processes that support
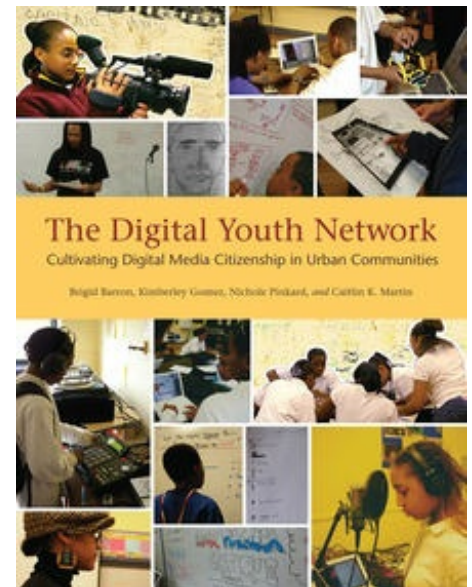
emotional resiliency, providing a route to social resources that help one cope with stressful social or academic circumstances" (p. 190). We can see that enhancing education is understood as a revolution within traditional teaching, in the sense that the learning environment is produced and consumed as a comfortable, creative space where students can test their abilities, create projects, share ideas among the peer group, and learning by doing.

Students create a stop-action video using photos they took with digital cameras. Credit: Fort George G. Meade Public Affairs Office CC BY 2.0

What emerges as particularly thought provoking in Chapters 7 and 8 in particular is the ecological lens through which the learning process is sustained and nurtured. The reason why the project sustains an ecological perspective is both personal and professional. First and foremost, it involves a variety of actors such as teachers, artists, mentors, families, community-based programs, and peer groups, all engaged in creating a connection between digital media, traditional academic content, domestic spaces, and leisure times. Secondly, it includes different abilities such as critical thinking, creative working, technological skills, and personal and social responsibilities (p. 205).

In Chapter 7, "Patterns of Engagement: how depth of experience matters", Caitlin Martin and her co-authors suggest that in order to assess the impact of learning, educators should provide a framework to measure "what learning opportunities and resources youth have access to and are using at home, at school, and at other places in the community" (p. 206). This framework will imply the consideration of cognitive (problem solving skills, creative ability), intrapersonal (self management and self evaluation) and interpersonal (sharing knowledge and working with others) competencies of students. Very poignantly, the authors mention four specific clusters that the framework will take into consideration: technological learning ecologies, technical expertise, identity as a creator, and social learning dispositions. Within this assessment, identity and social learning are discussed as crucial ways for enhancing students' confidence in generating new ideas, sharing with others, connecting to broader communities, ad promoting civic engagement.

Worth noting is Chapter 9's recommendations for future challenges in education. According to Brigid Barron and her co-authors in "Creative Learning Ecologies by Design", "innovative approaches are necessary, especially those that capitalize on the potential of hybrid designs that include physical spaces that nurture sustained face-to-face relationships and digital spaces that support engagement across setting and time" (p. 273). More to the point, educators and policy makers will find the suggestions here useful in terms of enacting learning spaces and practices to facilitate digital media production, of building community participation, and of supporting a robust technology infrastructure.

Perhaps the major credit of this book is the fact that it does not only provide a framework to understand today's

challenges, but also potential solutions to contemporary obstacles in education. As repeatedly stated, a better education involves many levels of actions and a variety of actors, from educators and mentors to families and learners. In the new digital mediascape, everyone should stand for the implementation of tools and spaces, but also activities, practices, and ideas that can inspire future generations of producers and consumers. The book clearly reminds that even if it is not easy, this is definitely not a mission impossible: by helping educators to assess the impact of digital media products, assessing the value of digital media in the domestic space, supporting the hybrid role of educators, and developing metrics to assess the quality and diversity of social resources within and across learning environments, a more informed education is possible.

Reading *The Digital Youth Network* has been a precious gift. Usual recommendations about who should benefit from this reading will not be able to fully explain the relevance of the project. Perhaps the most effective, and straightforward appeal is summarised in the concluding statement by Pinkard and Martin: "we are making a call to teachers, mentors, administrators, researchers, students and organisers to work together to design, adapt, implement, remix, and create learning opportunities that enable every child to be a powerful and conscious producer and consumer of digital media" (p. 308).

Sara Marino is Research Fellow at the University of Westminster and Associate Lecturer at University of the Arts – Central Saint Martins. She studies the impact of digital media (online communities, social networks, discussion forums and blogs) on European migration flows, in particular on Italian migration. She also writes on transnational cinema and transnational stardom, with a specific focus on von Trier's cinema and the representation of Otherness through the cinematic experience.