From

Their Space
Education for a digital generation
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"Young people are spending their time in a space which adults find difficult to supervise or understand..."

Seeds of change:
Four characteristics of informal learning

In the last chapter we demonstrated that all children's digital activities are commonly grouped under one umbrella, and that little effort has been made to learn from children who interact creatively with digital culture. This chapter will look to 'digital pioneers' rather than 'everyday communicators'. Raza might seem exceptional in his sophisticated use of technologies, but there are characteristics that he has in common with other young people like him. Drawn from our conversations with young people these shared characteristics are seeds of change for the ways all children could learn from their digital interactions.

⇒ Self-motivation
Nobody tells Raza what he should be learning, and very few of his activities have tangible rewards. Impressing his school and his parents rarely figures in his objectives; he defines his own goals. Gaining the respect of his peers, satisfying his own high standards and expressing himself politically are some of the many things which drive him to master new skills. Like many of those teenagers we spoke to who regularly post on MySpace, he was motivated by the idea of a wider public coming into contact with his creations. For children pursuing their own interests online it is this element of self-determination which marks their behavior out from school, family duties or part time work.

⇒ Ownership
If digital activities tend to be self-motivated then they are also likely to be 'owned' by the individual child or group of children. It is clear that possession of their creative output would be damaged if an adult were to set the parameters of their activities. This is exemplified by a voluntary project which brings together a group of young people for a few hours a week to learn about and make films in Peckham. While there is adult supervision, this group of teenagers very definitely 'owns' their animation projects. They make the decisions, talk about ideas, write treatments and scripts, and then act, film and edit. They enter competitions and have collections on DVDs of the films they have made – they are also just about to launch their own channel on YouTube. This group is proud of their outputs and they all share a sense of joint ownership which distinguishes their activities from schoolwork.

⇒ Purposeful

The government response to Paul Roberts' Report of 2005/06 in November 2006 highlighted the importance of creativity with a purpose, 54 and this principle was in evidence across all forms of digital creative production we encountered. Digital pioneers always had end goals in mind, although these were unlikely to be recognized by any formal assessment system. Their aim may only be finding an audience to critique their work or designing a game rather than playing one. Three children we met at a youth group in Chelsea who learnt how to use a complex piece of computer software had their own distinct motivation. They wanted to be able to record and edit a film of a dance their friends had rehearsed for a festival. Having this objective made their learning more purposeful: 'It's more fun when you've got something to show for it at the end, isn't it?'

⇒ Peer-to-peer learning

Unlike the classroom, few informal digital activities are organized around a central authority or pedagogue. When asked where their knowledge was from, almost all children refer to the central role played by their friends or siblings. This 'horizontal' knowledge transfer maps well onto informal learning, dependent as it is on casual exchanges and loosely organized activities. Few of the digital pioneers we spoke to could have gained expertise without peer-to-peer learning, as one boy explained to us:

My friend showed me how to build a website and I showed him how to get into World of Warcraft.

Boy aged 14

In areas such as gaming, music or web design children find that knowledge is more likely gained from conversations with someone of their own age than a parent or a teacher. They feel comfortable blurring the line between teacher/student and professional/amateur – exchanging knowledge every day.

These four characteristics are not only confined to learning outside school; elements can also be transferred to the classroom without being subsumed into formal learning.