

Extending Media Literacy: How Young People Remix and Transform Media to Serve Their Own Interests

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A teen listens to her music on her iPod when her friend sends her an instant message with a link to a recently uploaded dance video on YouTube. She stops working on her Yankee/Red Sox rivalry mash-up video for history class to check it out. Her friend knows how much she loves to dance and how she's always looking for the next new moves to try. The next day, the teen and her friends watch the downloaded video on her iPod and try to copy the routine. She quickly masters it and adds a few steps to make it her own. Her friends contribute more steps until together they have created a new dance routine. Between classes, they videotape each other doing the new dance and load it back on YouTube. When the teen gets home from school, she logs online and tags her YouTube video. She comments on the video that influenced her new moves and links her video to her MySpace page to share with her friends. By the end of the evening, over 10,000 people have viewed her video, including the guy with the original moves. Lucky for her, he thinks they're awesome and can't wait to spin her moves into something new.

New Media's Participatory Culture

The above scenario is one example of what Henry Jenkins and his MIT research team at Comparative Media Studies' Project New Media Literacies (NML) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, call "participatory culture," stressing the role of teens as creators, connectors, communicators, and collaborators—rather than simply *consumers*—of media. Young people participate in the creation and circulation of media content within social networks that extend from their circle of face-to-face friends to a larger virtual community around the world.

NML is part of a larger network of media scholars, educators, librarians, lawyers, public policy advocates, and others who have been brought together by the MacArthur Foundation to create a field of research focused on youth and digital learning.¹ In "Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century," NML researchers offer a conceptual framework for thinking about the social skills and cultural competencies young people need to acquire in order to fully participate in this emerging cultural realm and to provide suggestions for ways these skills might be incorporated into classroom and after-school activities.²²

NML's primary goal is to develop a theoretical framework and curriculum for K–12 learners that integrate new media tools into broader educational, expressive, and ethical contexts. We partner with schools to help young people both make and reflect upon media and, in the process, acquire important skills in teamwork, leadership, problem solving, collaboration, brainstorming, communications, and project completion, which will prepare them for a broad range of academic and professional careers.

The future of technology-savvy students needs new media literacies in education. Media literacy is a social skill that links education with interactive information sharing. Integrating these skills has the potential

¹ MacArthur Foundation, 2006.

² National Media Literacies Project, 2005.

to enable a shift in the scale and speed with which information circulates and cultural innovation occurs. New media literacies are participatory, collaborative, and distributive. The teen girl and her friends collaboratively shared their different dance moves to create something new. In a low-tech environment, these girls could have developed new dance moves by watching and imitating others' dance steps at a club outside of school.

Traditional media literacy is important. It urges young people to ask hard questions about the media that enters their homes, but that is where it stops. As a result, we can't assume that young people know how to respond and interact by creating their own media and sharing their creations beyond the borders of their own neighborhoods. A new media literacy framework is necessary to examine how best to teach and guide young people through the process of learning and become versed in interpreting, using, and sharing the media in their lives.

Current Traditional Media Literacies

There has long been grassroots and collaborative media production, as represented through homemade zines, fan fiction, sound tapes, and other forms of do-it-yourself culture. Since Marshall McLuhan's popular theory that "the medium is the message," a host of approaches toward the legitimization of media studies have made their way into schools. For example, in the mid-1990s, About-Face used this now-standard format for teaching young people to critically review media and, in this case specifically, the influence of media's perceptions of women and their bodies (which affects young people immensely as they grow and form their identities).³³ What resulted was a framework for questioning the rhetorical assumptions that media makers and media consumers employ:

- Who created the message?
- What techniques were used to deliver the message?
- What values are represented by the media presentation?
- How might different people understand the message?
- Why is this message being sent?

These questions made girls more aware that media retouching in magazines had an impact on the ways they perceived women's bodies and thus helped to shape their sense of themselves. What's more is that these study questions focused attention on the *contexts* within which these messages were created, the goals that they served and agendas they promoted, and their impact on receivers. This tradition understands that different people might understand the message in different terms but there was no assumption that these young people might be able to remix and transform the content to serve their own interests.

While traditional models saw literacy through a lens of personal expression, the new media literacies emphasize the social and cultural dimensions of media production as young people exchange content within and beyond larger communities of practice. Knowing how and what it means to create, connect, communicate, and collaborate is part of the new media literacy education.

Toward New Media Literacy Practices

With the Nintendo and millennial generations, new technologies enable teenagers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content on a previously unanticipated scale; the lowering costs of these

³³ About-Face, 2006.

new media tools puts them in the reach of a growing number of young people who are often generating and sharing content.

New media literacy skills include:

- Play*—experimenting with one’s surroundings as a form of problem solving
- Performance*—adopting alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery
- Simulation*—interpreting and constructing dynamic models of real-world processes
- Appropriation*—sampling and remixing media content in a meaningful way
- Multitasking*—scanning one’s environment and shifting focus as needed to salient details.
- Distributed Cognition*—interacting meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities
- Collective Intelligence*—pooling knowledge and comparing notes with others toward a common goal
- Judgment*—evaluating the reliability and credibility of different information sources
- Transmedia Navigation*—following the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities
- Networking*—searching for, synthesizing, and disseminating information
- Negotiation*—traveling across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

Each of these skills represents a principle or approach to learning. The concepts of judgment, multitasking, performance, and networking are not necessarily tied to high-tech, high-cost technologies. But digital technologies make those activities and skills more salient and, in some ways, more transparent. NML plans to highlight these emerging skills and practices and to make their use and value more accessible and transparent in a variety of learning settings.

Yet in many of those settings, access to technologies is limited. For some, everyday social networks and production and circulation skills are already familiar, enabling those who use them to play a much more visible and active role in the civic sphere. For example, in 2005 when Abercrombie & Fitch released T-shirts that said, “Who needs brains when you have these?” (referring to women’s breasts), teens formed a “girlcott” by organizing a campaign that circulated their protest to 21 cable news segments, 312 local TV news markets, 6 national and international radio spots, 67 regional newspapers, 4 national newspapers, 8 international newspapers, and 23,000 stories on the Web, plus hundreds of e-mails in support. The “girlcott” urged teen girls to connect with their local news shows to broadcast their concerns, which in turn influenced the company to remove the offensive T-shirts from store shelves. And then after Abercrombie & Fitch didn’t go with the girls’ suggested new t-shirt line, they created their own line and used Café Press to distribute it.⁴ Here, teens applied new media literacy skills—judgment, distributed cognition, networking, and negotiation—in ways which were socially empowering. At the same time, they were able to show how their access to and familiarities with the influence and usefulness of media can enable them to participate as citizens within their own communities and contexts.

The Participation Gap

Some have argued that young people are acquiring these skills outside of adult supervision, talking about a growing divide between those who are born into a world in which media tools and ethics are already a part of their lives (so-called “digital natives”) and those for whom uses and interpretations of digital

⁴ See www.cafepress.com/girlcott.

technologies is a foreign or even misunderstood concept and practice (so-called “digital immigrants”). Yet, such rhetoric ignores the very real participation gap, which separates teens who have had extensive access to new media resources and experiences outside of school from those wholly dependent on schools and libraries for access.

Early research suggests that those with extensive access may have a much greater understanding of how information gets produced and circulated within digital networks. Those with limited access remain passive consumers. They get online, get the information they need, and get offline again without really developing a critical understanding of where the information comes from, how to evaluate it, or most importantly how to change it. These youth may lack the ability to express their own ideas or create their own content.

New media literacy skills are central to the lives of *all* young people, who will increasingly communicate and rely upon technology into their adult lives. These skill sets, however, are not just about high-tech activities and we cannot assume that access to technologies enable thoughtful participation. This participation gap, as we call it, reflects the assumption that access equals meaningful participation. Any librarian staring at a room full of computers with few people using them will tell you that access is only one factor in the role that media literacy plays in our lives. Without focused, explicit instruction and experience with these skills, students miss out on participatory practices made more explicitly significant by newer technologies. New media literacies provide opportunities to help young people acquire skills on how they process knowledge so they can participate in new ways.

Purposeful Integration of New Media Literacy

Young people need resources and learning principles to acquire new skills and to think critically about their own relationships to the media. Intentional learning and practice of these skills will enable all young people to analyze and create media rather than just consume. Though young people do create media, it is often outside the fabric of schools and education. It is in the best interest of schools world-wide to take on a new media literacy approach to teaching a fast-paced, technology-based generation.

Take for instance, the new media literacy skill appropriation. Appropriation involves a complex negotiation between the self and the larger culture—an absorption and transformation of shared resources into the raw materials of one’s own (collective and personal) expression. The digital remixing of media content makes visible the degree to which all cultural expression builds upon what has come before. Appropriation may be understood as a process that involves both analysis and commentary. Sampling intelligently from the existing cultural reservoir requires a close analysis of existing structures and uses of this material; remixing requires an appreciation of emerging structures and latent potential meanings.

Many of the forms of expression that are most important to American youth accent this sampling and remixing process, in part because digitization makes it much easier to combine and repurpose media content than ever before. Jazz, for example, evolved through improvisation around familiar themes and standard songs, yet the digital remixing of actual sounds which occurs in techno or hip-hop music has raised much greater alarm among those who would insist on strong protections of copyright. Fan fiction clearly involves the transformative use of existing media content, yet it is often treated as if it were simply a new form of piracy. Collage has been a central artistic practice running across the 20th century, one closely associated with the kinds of new creative works that young people are generating and manipulating through Photoshop.

Despite the pervasiveness of these cultural practices, school arts and creative writing programs remain hostile to overt signs of repurposed content, emphasizing the ideal of the autonomous artist. Yet, in doing so, they sacrifice the opportunity to help young people think more deeply about the ethical and legal implications of repurposing existing media content; they often do not provide them with the conceptual tools students need to analyze and interpret works produced in this appropriative process. In fact, most of the classics taught in schools are the product of appropriation and transformation—or what we would now call sampling and remixing.

Like many media literacy projects, NML encourages opportunities for young people to acquire new skills and to think critically about their own relationships to new media. At the same time, NML works hard to show how those opportunities and experiences of making and using new media should be grounded in the concepts of good literacy learning, concepts that include learning as it happens within the community contexts. Take, for instance, hip-hop culture. For the most part, hip-hop has four main aspects: rapping, DJing, tagging, and break-dancing. Though born in the United States (by way of Jamaica), hip-hop is “now the center of a mega music and fashion industry around the world,” crossing social barriers and cutting across racial lines.⁵ Students might learn that *National Geographic* magazine recognizes hip-hop as “the world’s favorite youth culture” and “just about every country on the planet seems to have developed its own local rap scene.”⁶

Therefore, this summer the ProjectNML team worked with 10 teens from the Boston-based video production program Facing History and Ourselves: Digital Legacies.⁷ During the workshop, teens learned how to remix content using a cut-up method. First, they listened to remixes and mash-ups of original music and discussed whether the resulting music was less original than the borrowed tracks and, if so, why. This discussion led to a second activity: *Cut-ups—Method one*. The NML team chose “Neon,” a slam poem by Michael Salinger, for the cut-ups activity. A cut-up is created by taking a finished text (printed on paper) and cutting it into pieces, each containing several or single words. The resulting pieces are rearranged into a new text with the teens compensating for the haphazard word breaks by adding their own words.

In the third activity: *Cut-ups—Method two*, teens again used the poem “Neon” by Michael Salinger and mixed it with an early 20th-century poem, “Strings in the Earth and Air,” by James Joyce. The cut-ups become mash-ups when two different texts are cut up with a few or single words on each piece of paper. The resulting pieces are *rearranged* into a new text but no new words are added. During the workshop, the teens appropriated, transformed, and remixed poetry using cut-up methods. Through discussion, they learned how these remixing and editing practices relate to other media editing techniques, such as those used in video and music. These activities present new experiences and opportunities for young people to use and learn new media skills, to take ownership of the media, and to use it as a means to be active participants in both creating and using media for civic and ethical purposes.

The goal of MIT’s Project New Media Literacies is to create not only informal learning tools but also concepts and principles for teens and youth-serving professionals (whether in after-school programs or in the classroom) that exemplify these new ways of thinking about the potentials of technology and media.

5 Walker, 2006.

6 Pryor, 2008.

7 Facing History and Ourselves, 2008.

They include videos and both high- and low-tech activities centered on youth participation. The new media literacy experiences offer teens the opportunities not only to experiment with new media technologies but also to understand what it means to participate successfully from within media-making communities in and out of school.

If we return to our opening story about the teenage girl and her dance video, most of our core media literacy competencies are applied. For example, the teen *multitasks* moving between different activities and thoughts, focusing her attention and energy as appropriate. She shares and *negotiates* knowledge with her friends as they *collectively* work both synchronously with those in their own community and asynchronously with others in the YouTube audience. Both teens *appropriate, simulate*, and transform the content of the original dance video, and when they *perform* the dance, they see it less as an artifact to be consumed and more as an activity that invites their participation (as well as others). Together, they show an understanding of effective strategies for navigating and *networking* across online communities, attracting interest in their work, and *distributing* their work widely online. These teens have remixed and transformed media to find their own meaning, matching their interests with content that is self-produced and easily distributed. Implementing new media literacy practices can be fun. For educational purposes, these models can be successfully applied in working *with* young people to enhance their collective intelligence and knowledge production within a technology-advanced world.

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