Chapter XX
Adolescents Teaching Video Game Making—Who is the Expert Here?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a study conducted with nine adolescents hired to instruct week-long video game making camps over the course of one summer and the subsequent fall, working with younger children ages 9-12. Data was collected through participant observation, repeated interviews, and focus groups with the participant adolescent teachers. By engaging in teaching as well as playing, these youth have had greater opportunities to critically reflect on their learning, assessing the value of the technical and ideological approaches to video games. Several themes emerged as we reviewed the discussions we had with the instructors, related to knowledge of content, issues of management of learning environments, and learning how to teach. In this chapter we hope to point to the importance of the cultural and sub-cultural capital that adolescents bring to learning experiences, in order to better utilize their expertise and to recognize 'texts' such as video games as sites of meaningful learning.

INTRODUCTION

Although there has always been a knowledge and interest gap between adolescents and adults, rapidly changing technologies in the past decade have served to widen the gap. Teachers and parents often have a very limited understanding of the ways that youth are communicating, learning, and understanding the world. MP3 players, text messaging, blogs, wikis, and Wiis are all

strange and mysterious technologies to those of us who grew up in a world of radio, TV (black and white), and typewriters. A common response of parents and teachers to popular cultures and new technologies is to ignore them and relegate them to categories of "waste of time" and "bad for you." However, recent research (Gee, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Prensky, 2001) suggests that new technologies, and the users of new technologies, have a great deal to offer in our understanding of learning and teaching. Indeed, they are gaining expertise that is, and will continue to be, crucial to further educational developments. Additionally, we are recognizing the importance of creating opportunities for learners to be involved in the production (writing) of new texts as well as in the consumption (reading) of texts. That is, rather than simply telling students what they should know and directing them to reproduce the information that was transmitted, students need to create their own texts in order to learn more deeply and fully. By involving them in their own learning in active and meaningful ways, students have opportunities to think creatively and critically about their learning.

The study reported in this chapter will describe a series of learning and teaching experiences for a group of youth who had the opportunity to create their own video games, drawing on their extensive experience with playing and learning through video games, and then to teach younger children to also create original video games. By engaging in teaching as well as playing, these youth have had greater opportunities to critically reflect on their learning, assessing the value of the technical and ideological approaches to video games. In this ethnographic study of a video game summer camp, we sought to better understand how we could utilize adolescents' expertise in new technologies and new modes of learning not recognized by adult teachers and parents. Additionally, we examined ways that they translated their implicit and unexpressed understandings of

video game-play and creation into explicit directions and explanations for novices.

SETTING

How often do we get to observe older students teaching younger students? How often do we make this a possibility? *The Game Academy* owner saw the potential in having adolescents, who were keen about video games and technology, work with children who were interested in knowing more about video game design and creation. *The Game Academy* was a new business venture located within a middle class neighborhood in a mid-sized west coast city in Canada that catered to the growing video game interest. The site was a building (previously an office complex) organized into five rooms that each were equipped with big screens, surround-sound, leather couches, a snack fridge, and all the latest video game consoles. People of all ages were able to visit this facility to play video games individually, and more often, with friends. In the summer and fall of one year, video game design camps were offered to children ages 10-12, and over the course of a week, they would work in pairs with the software program *Stagecast* (*http://stagecast.com/*) coached by an instructor, each day for two hours, and at the end of the week they would present their product to the other participants. Although they had the choice of both working on one game, most of the children chose to create their own games.

The owner of the facility hired older youth, generally ages 13-16, to instruct the video game design camp participants, using a 'coaching' approach rather than a 'teaching' approach in order to create enjoyable experiences dissimilar from school—that is, providing an environment for a group with similar interests to develop their skills and knowledge, hence engaging them in an interesting process that would enable the creation of an exciting product, a video game. The owner

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