

Amateur Cultural Production and Peer-to-Peer Learning

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For the past few years I have been looking for learning in somewhat unexpected places—in young people's social and recreational practices surrounding new media. I have been guided by the belief that interactive, digital, and networked forms of media are supporting new forms of engagement with knowledge and culture with unique learning dynamics. My fieldwork is indicating that a key trigger for these learning dynamics is the peer-to-peer traffic in media and knowledge that accompanies young people's engagement with culture and knowledge that they are passionate about. As they become more pervasive in our everyday lives, networked and digital media become a vehicle and an infrastructure for this peer based learning and sharing.

My work has looked primarily at the kid-driven learning that accompanies engagement with Japanese popular culture that is social, challenging and entertaining, for example, Yugioh, Pokemon, fan fiction, video remix, and fan comics. These forms of media all support practices with learning dynamics that differ in some important ways from the learning that kids encounter in more formal and adult-driven settings. A more complete analysis and description of these dynamics requires lengthier treatment (Ito 2008). Here I present a few general principles and some illustrative examples from my most recent fieldwork.

What characterizes learning in settings where kids are engaging in popular, networked, and viral new media cultures?

First, there is very little explicit instruction, and learning happens through process of peer-based knowledge sharing. People engaged in a practice seek out information or knowledgeable peers when it becomes relevant to their work, and in turn, they help others when asked. Although there are people acknowledged as experts, they are not framed as instructors.

Secondly, rather than working to master a standard body of material and skills, participants in these practices tend to specialize. Much like we see in academic life, there are opportunities to develop status and a role as an expert in a particular, often narrow specialty. Alternately, this can involve developing a particular style or signature in creative work. It is not about trying to acquire the same body of knowledge and skills as all one's peers in a given community of practice.

Finally, these environments are based on ongoing feedback and reviews of performance and work that are embedded in the practices of creation and play. These groups also have contexts for the public display and circulation of work that enables review and critique by

their audiences. Competition and assessment happens within this ecology of media production and consumption, not by an external mechanism or set of standards. In other words, individual accomplishment is recognized and celebrated among peers in the production community and other interested fans, providing powerful motivation for ongoing learning and achievement.

We can see these dynamics at play in a wide range of settings; these are not processes that are exclusive to new media engagement. New media becomes significant when it enables kids to have greater access to these specialized practices of peer learning, knowledge sharing and amateur communities of creative production. For this paper, my goal is to illustrate these dynamics through some examples taken from an ethnographic case study. This work is part of a larger study funded by the MacArthur Foundation as part of their Digital Media and Learning initiative. I've been working with a large team of researchers examining different sites of young people's informal learning and knowledge networking, where they are engaging with and mobilizing new media.

My particular focus has been on amateur cultural production within the English-language fandom of Japanese animation (anime). This is a complement to my ongoing work on gaming and fandom in Japan. For this case study, we've conducted interviews with 70 fans who engage in different forms of fan production and mobilization, including the creation of anime music videos, fan fiction, fan comics, online forms, fan subtitling, and the organizing of anime clubs and conventions. Our focus has been on anime music videos (AMVs) and fan subtitling (fansubbing). We've also participated in conventions around the country, and have conducted ongoing observations on related online forums and Internet relay chat channels.

I should provide a bit of background for those who are not familiar with different practices within the anime fandom. Although anime fans are consuming and referencing a shared body of subcultural media referents, their specific modes of engagement, literacy, and creative production are extremely diverse and often highly specialized. Fansubbing is one of these specialized practices, though it is in many ways the backbone of the online anime fandom. Although English-language fans consume a great deal of media that is commercially translated, subtitled, and released in the US, a large proportion of anime distribution happens through amateur fan networks, where fans will do the translation and subtitling of the work before it is commercially released overseas. In many cases fansubs are the only English-language source of anime that fans have access to, as many anime series are never released out of Japan. Another form of fan amateur production are remix videos, or anime music videos. AMVs involve taking commercial anime footage, stripping out the soundtrack, and re-editing it to conform to a song or another soundtrack of their choosing. In addition to these practices that may be unfamiliar to those outside the anime fandom, fans also create fan fiction and fan art that is distributed widely on the Internet.

Our depth case studies on AMV creators and fansubbers are a way of getting at some of the details of how particular amateur cultural production communities within the fandom

operate. For the remainder of this talk, I'll be focusing on how peer-based learning dynamics operate in these two different forms of fan practice.

Attention to specialized and esoteric knowledge is characteristic of all fandoms, but is even more accentuated in highly technical fan practices such as AMV creation and fansubbing. The development of technical knowledge and expertise is enabled by an online knowledge network and ongoing exchange between producers. Creators will often describe how they moved from being a casual viewer and creator to a more competent and expert one by gaining access to an online community of expert creators. One 18 year-old editor, Gepetto, describes this trajectory, beginning with the first time he saw an AMV. His friend had given him a CD with some anime episodes, and there was an AMV on it as filler. "I was amazed at the idea that such a pretty little videoclip was made by a fan just like me.. I was really affected by the video. I put it on loop and watched it several times in a row." He went on to make his own video soon after seeing this first AMV. "My first video took about two and a half hours to make and it turned out extremely horrible. But I loved it."

The key here is that beginning editors see AMVs as inspiring and impressive, but also something that they can aspire to, something made by "a fan just like me." Gepetto made his first AMVs on his own, by looking at manuals, and using the editing software that shipped with his PC. A few years later, he is now an active member of the AMV community online, and looks to his online community of creators for help and feedback, as well as becoming an expert resource himself. "I love the forums, I love the chats, I love answering questions and having mine answered in turn. I could spend 24 hours straight discussing AMVs without so much as a coffee break."

Although he managed to interest a few of his local friends in AMV making, none of them took to it to the extent that he did. He relies heavily on the networked community of editors as sources of knowledge and expertise, and for models to aspire to. In fact, in his local community he is now known as a video expert by both his peers and adults. After seeing his AMV work, one of his high school teachers asked him to teach a video workshop to younger students. He jokes that "even though I know nothing," to his local community "I am the Greater God of video editing." In other words, the development of his identity and competence as a video editor would never have been fully supported within his local community; it was the networked relations mediated by the Internet that led to ongoing peer-based learning and specialization. Eventually, as an editor becomes more accomplished, the networked community becomes the audience for the work. When I interviewed him last year, he said his goal was to get one of his videos accepted into an annual group project called "AMV Hell," which consists of a compilation of short pieces by well-known editors. This would be an important step in being recognized as a core member of the AMV editing community, and would guarantee a large audience to his work. In turn, the viewers of the work become a source of feedback and motivation for improving the craft.

In the case of fansubbing, most participants get involved in initially as fansub consumers. As they get more familiar with the online anime scene, they might begin to follow

particular releases and particular fansub groups, and eventually make a bid to join a group, usually by taking a test or responding to a recruitment drive for a particular “job.” While there is ongoing help, sharing, and apprenticeship, particularly within any given production group, overall, the barriers to entry are high. Fansubbers talk about the clear distinction between “leechers” or fansub consumers, and “contributors” or fansub producers. Established groups will generally have formal tests and trial periods before admitting a new member.

In fansub groups, there is a high degree of specialization within each production team as well as in the community overall. Each fansub group will have a “raw provider” who collects the original episode in Japanese, a translator, an editor, a timer who times the length of time the subtitles should be on screen, a typesetter, an encoder, and usually several quality checkers who review the final episodes. Although many fansubbers will experiment with different roles in a group, they will usually have a specialty that they will build their reputation around. For example, one encoder described how initially he became attracted to the specialty because of the depth of knowledge that he could pursue within an expert community. “It just got interesting because other encoders were like, ‘here are some tips and tricks’...there were so many tricks in how to handle that stuff that it got pretty interesting.” Mastering esoteric knowledge becomes a source of status and reputation. After gaining this status as an expert, a subber will find that their services are in great demand in the tight-knit community.

Because of the high degree of competition between many fansub groups, expertise is often only shared between close colleagues or within a group. One experienced subber explains. “In the encoder channel, they are all beginners. The experts don’t like to be in there. The experts don’t like to share. With typesetters too their effects are considered their trademarks and they don’t share them.” Gaining access to experts in these communities requires self-directed learning, as well as a track record of performing good work. In turn, groups and individuals acquire reputation in the context of public scrutiny by their peers and audiences. Often thousands or even tens of thousands of fans will be downloading and viewing fansub episodes, and there is ongoing debate on numerous online forums and chat channels about the speed and quality of work that different groups perform.

Although my descriptions of AMV creation and fansubbing have been necessarily brief, my hope is that they have provided a small window into the social and learning dynamics that drive participation in these practices. The cases of AMV creation and fansubbing are examples of how digital media are enabling young people to produce and traffic in cultural products at the peer-to-peer level. From an educational perspective, I’ve been interested in these practices because they represent emerging models for peer based learning, assessment, and reputation building.

Our usual lenses would insist that fannish engagements with anime not only rely on cheap and debased cultural forms, but that they are highly derivative and unoriginal. What I have been trying to argue, however, is that we broaden the lens through which we view these activities. We need to keep in view the social and collective outcomes of

participation as well as acknowledging the creativity involved in making derivative works. While I am not suggesting that content is irrelevant to how we assess these practices of wired youth, I do think it is just one of many rubrics through which can examine the role of new media in young people's lives.

Participatory media cultures (Jenkins 1992) like anime fandom have unique dynamics that are based on a very particular genre of participation embedded in a whole fabric of community life and social communication. While the specificities of these practices are unique to this fandom, the turn towards amateur cultural modes aided by digital media and networking is a much broader sociotechnical trend. I hope that the examples I've presented provides at least some hints of the motivations and passions that young people are bringing to digital media production pursued on their own terms. And I hope it has also illustrated the ways in which new media are helping to constitute communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) that support highly specialized and expert forms of learning.

References

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