

Chapter 26

Do-It-Yourself Media in U.S. Education: A Brief Overview of an Uneasy Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The phrase “do-it-yourself”—or “DIY” for short—has increasingly become the new watch-word when describing the wide variety of self-driven activities that individuals are now capable of with the assistance of Web 2.0 technologies. The combination of the economic recession and the proliferation of innovative, affordable technologies have resulted in more and more individuals and businesses opting to complete projects themselves. On the K-12 landscape too, DIY learning is also playing an ever-increasing role in the way students acquire and transmit information. Kids now have ready access to websites and software applications that make creating and sharing digital media a seemingly routine process, and youth often enter the classroom with a far more vast knowledge of how to manipulate media than the teachers in front of them. However, rather than ignore or even condemn such innovation, educators are best to view them in terms of opportunity. This topical article investigates the social and economic origins of the DIY movement and explores how innovative school leadership alongside the latest digital technologies can increasingly promote a DIY environment within schools and make learning a more self-driven, perpetual process.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2009 *New York Times* op-ed piece, *The World is Flat* author Friedman designated the country’s current financial state as “The Do-It-Yourself Economy”, writing that the combination of the recession and the proliferation of innovative,

affordable technologies has resulted in more and more individuals and businesses opting to complete projects themselves in order to save money. Whether building one’s own company homepage instead of hiring a web designer or using streaming video and podcasts as a cost effective way to advertise, people across the country are tapping into the potential of Web 2.0 technologies to conduct business more inexpensively—and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-068-2.ch026

often more effectively. Yet while Web 2.0 applications play an emerging role in the way people work and communicate in general, one domain of American life has remained largely absent in their growth and proliferation—U.S. schooling. This chapter explores the need for K-12 schools to better address the growing number of Web 2.0 applications available to children. Too often there is the assumption that children already know how to do it themselves and that they can attain technological competency simply because they are exposed to the latest technical devices outside of school. As the so called “digital natives” of 21st century learning (Prensky, 2001), kids are often thought to automatically acquire the requisite critical and creative skills to effectively engage with digital media simply by the nature of their age. Researchers however have shown otherwise (Shields & Behrman, 2000; Wartella & Jennings, 2000). Rushkoff (2010), a prominent media theorist and former unequivocal proponent of Web 2.0 technologies, recants on some of his previous beliefs about the inherent power of DIY media:

The kids I celebrated in my early books as “digital natives” capable of seeing through all efforts of big media and marketing have actually proven less capable of discerning the integrity of the sources they read and the intentions of the programs they use. If they don’t know what the programs they are using are even for, they don’t stand a chance to use them effectively. They are less likely to become power users than the used (¶ 2).

Considering Rushkoff’s point, how can U.S. schools better address the benefits of and potential problems with Web 2.0 applications as a means to better engage children in their own learning and encourage a “do it yourself” ethic among youth? Two recent books—*DIY Media* (Knobel & Lankshear, 2010) and *DIY Media in the Classroom* (Guzzetti, Elliott, & Welsch, 2010) have christened children’s use of Web 2.0 technologies as “DIY Media” and the term is increasingly be-

ing used by media theorists, education reformers, and school leaders. But to what extent do we understand the acronym itself and how can the “rugged individualism” and “non-conformity” often associated with DIY enmesh with the character of schools—institutions that are still largely hierarchical and frequently conformist in nature. The first part of this chapter will explore the origins of the term itself and classify DIY as both a practice, a movement, and an ethic. The second part will briefly investigate how DIY learning has been introduced in K-12 schools in the past, examining the progressive philosophy of John Dewey, in particular. The final part of the chapter will examine the future potential of DIY media in schools and highlight the points that teachers, theorists, and school leaders need to consider if such technology is to be effectively introduced and used in classrooms.

BACKGROUND

Organizing and Categorizing DIY

While everyone now seems to know what DIY stands for, to what extent is there any consensus as to what the “it” in the phrase do-it-yourself” means? Home improvement? A personal hobby craft? Technology applications? And why do people choose to do it themselves? Economic reasons, personal sensibilities, political beliefs, a mixture of all of these? In his introduction to the *Journal of Design History*’s special edition on DIY, Atkinson (2006) addresses this issue of definition, pointing out that one of the reasons DIY has no immediately apparent definition may stem back to the dearth of published studies on the subject. While Atkinson (2006) offers no single definition of DIY, he does designate four categories of DIY:

- *ProActive DIY*: activities which are self-directed and rely upon the skilled manipu-

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