

Supporting Participatory Culture Without Undermining It: Balancing Tensions of Agency and Structure

New media technologies provide today's youth with unprecedented opportunities to express themselves creatively, collaborate on large-scale projects, and engage meaningfully in civic activities. Many young people are experiencing new possibilities of agency as they use digital media to follow their interests and create new opportunities for themselves.

But interest-driven exploration, on its own, does not necessarily lead to expertise and competence. Often, young people need support and structure to develop more complex media productions, engage with more complex concepts, and learn to navigate more complex systems.

The panel will examine this tension between agency and structure.

On one hand, the panel will discuss what types of structures are needed in youth learning environments to support a full range of creative expression and conceptual development – enabling young people to grow increasingly sophisticated over time in how they use new media tools to explore ideas that are personally relevant and socially significant.

On the other hand, the panel will examine how these structures might undermine the interest-driven engagement and agency that are critical to participatory culture. The panel will discuss how enforcement of adult-developed learning agendas could potentially transform participation into an act of compliance as opposed to one of liberation and joy.

The panel brings together four leading researchers involved in the design and study of creative learning environments. Each of the panelists will share specific examples from their own research environments, highlighting the tensions and tradeoffs between agency and structure. Then, the panelists will engage in back-and-forth discussion (including questions from the audience), aiming to develop strategies for dealing with this tension.

Sasha Barab, Professor in the Learning Sciences program at Indiana University, will discuss examples from Quest Atlantis (<http://QuestAtlantis.org>), a multi-user virtual world that immerses young people in meaningful inquiry tasks in the context of educational videogames.

Michael Cole, Professor of Communication, Psychology, and Human Development at University of California at San Diego, will discuss examples from his work at after-school community-based centers in low-income communities.

Nichole Pinkard, Visiting Associate Professor at DePaul University, will discuss examples from YOUmedia, a public learning space where high-school students produce new media artifacts including music, games, videos, and virtual worlds.

Mitchel Resnick, Professor of Learning Research at the MIT Media Lab, will discuss examples from the Scratch online community (<http://scratch.mit.edu>), where young people program and share interactive stories, games, animations, and simulations.

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