

# MacArthur Foundation's Connie Yowell Speaks about Children

by Steve Hardin

## ASIS&T 2008

**H**ow are young people using the web? And what does that mean for education? The closing plenary session at the 2008 ASIS&T Annual Meeting featured a woman who's involved with finding the answers to these questions. Connie Yowell is the director of education at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Program on Human and Community Development. The Foundation launched its five-year, \$50 million digital media and learning initiative in 2006.

Yowell began with a video of eight-year-old Sam, whose favorite activity is Pokémon. It's both a card game and video game, and since it came out in 1995, it's become the second most popular video game in history. There are more than 493 different Pokémon. The goal is to capture as many Pokémon as possible. The video showed Sam and his friends playing on Nintendo Wi-Fi so they could all play the same game at once. They also write stories, draw comics and search the web. Yowell says you can imagine what Sam will be like when he goes to college in 10 years.

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Yowell says each day, 60% of U.S. teens use a computer, 50% of young Internet users have created media content and 33% have shared their content on the Internet. But what are they doing with this digital media? The MacArthur Foundation funded a three-year ethnographic study on youth and digital media, focusing on middle and high school kids. [The results of the study, released a few weeks after Yowell's presentation, are at [www.macfound.org](http://www.macfound.org).]

Yowell says young people's participation in digital media isn't generic. There's a distinction between friendship-driven and interest-driven participation. Friendship-driven participation most closely resembles the offline world. Its purposes are about the same as in the offline world: dating, friendships, sharing news. Interest-driven practices are "remarkably different," she says. They are highly social, where participants pursue things in which they are interested. Rather than being isolating, the games are forms of social interaction. Interest-driven networks are also peer-based – with peers defined by shared interest, instead of by age.

Researchers thought digital media would replace TV or books. Instead, Yowell says, the media are converging. For young people, it's about the content, which they follow across different platforms. Sam doesn't distinguish much among working on a computer, drawing a comic or writing a story: It's all about Pokémon to him.

She showed a slide of the communities a 14-year-old girl shares. As she starts at home, goes to school, proceeds to after-school activities and eventually goes home again, there's ongoing engagement in online activities. She's using YouTube, MySpace, Pokémon, Galaxy Zoo and Wikipedia, and she is an active member of a Harry Potter fan fiction site. She's interacting with others all along the way, connecting across local and global communities. Researchers concluded that schools are now just one more node on young people's networks – they're no longer the primary learning site for them.

What's new about all this? First, there's a rich array of learning opportunities. Second, there are low barriers to participation and production. Third, there's easy access to expertise and communities of peers. And fourth, there's the ability to take on different identities, to get

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beyond some of the labels we had in high school. Now you can be a jock and a nerd at the same time. There's not as much social fallout in experimenting with interests in the online world.

Is this good or bad? It's a tool, Yowell says; it can be used either way. The researchers found young people are also developing expertise in harmful areas. For example, there are networks encouraging anorexic behavior. Creating the new media isn't intuitive, either. It takes a new set of skills and literacies. Currently we don't have places for kids to learn these skills. Rather than the digital divide, researchers are becoming more concerned about the participation divide, she said.

What does this mean for our institutions? Henry Jenkins at MIT put out a paper outlining 11 core media skills. ([www.digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS\\_WHITE\\_PAPER.PDF](http://www.digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF)) One skill he listed is "performance," the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. Traditional education teaches students about things. In digital media, students are actually participating in those things. Are we able to shift our learning experiences for young people?

Another skill is "appropriation," the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. Some call it mashups; others call it plagiarism or copyright violation. We'll probably come up with definitions in the middle.

Then there's "collective intelligence," the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others in pursuit of a common goal. In these communities the assumption is that everyone knows something, but no one knows everything. Kids with different skill sets play together and try to help each other;

Another skill listed by Jenkins is "transmedia navigation," the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities and different forms of media. We saw that with Sam's ability to go across media.

Yowell concluded by describing two projects. The first is "ThinkeringSpace" at the Illinois Institute of Technology ([www.id.iit.edu/ThinkeringSpaces](http://www.id.iit.edu/ThinkeringSpaces)). The idea is to create a physical space in the library where students can work with each other and with books. Participants can swipe a book code and see

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its content. As a student leaves the space, and leaves her work behind, others can add to it and use it. It becomes part of the social work of the kids as they create. Relevance is obvious to the students, and their engagement is high.

Finally, she talked about the “I Dig Tanzania” virtual summer camp in Teen Second Life ([www.holymeatballs.org/second\\_life/i\\_dig\\_tanzania/](http://www.holymeatballs.org/second_life/i_dig_tanzania/)), a joint project of Global Kids and the Field Museum in Chicago. The kids built a virtual replica of where paleontologists were working in Tanzania. Participants learned what the paleontologists were doing by looking at videos they sent, and by using satellite phones. The teens said it felt like they were working side by side with the scientists. At the end of the project, the group flew to Chicago to meet other teens and share their experience. Yowell said it was obviously an important experience for them. ■

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Nancy Roderer shares a final word with plenary speaker Connie Yowell.