

Aguirre, Imanol

## Learning and attitudes towards the knowledge of the young producers of visual culture

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# Learning and Attitudes Towards the Knowledge of the Young Producers of Visual Culture

*Imanol Aguirre*

**Abstract:** This study strives to investigate the practices of youths as producers of visual culture that occur out of school. We attempted to determine how and where young people acquire the knowledge that they apply to their productions and identify their attitudes and interactions in relation to the learning processes. Consequently, we observed that the use of digital technologies and P2P learning dynamics, encouraged by the widespread use of the Internet, are central to the growing proliferation of creative practices engaged in by youth. All this occurs in a space of affinities, in which creation becomes indistinguishable from the learning and the socialisation. This is very different from what school can currently offer these students.

**Keywords:** visual culture production, youth studies, learning relationships

## Introduction and research questions

This study is a component of the larger research project titled, *“Young producers of visual culture: competencies and types of artistic knowledge in secondary education”*, which has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (EDU 2009-13712).

This study begins with evidence: while schools are seeking profitability and competitiveness, we are witnessing major changes in the social and cultural circulation of knowledge. For young people, these changes configure a kind of Bourdieu’s “habitus” that includes its own communicational skills and innovation and creativity processes at the same time that this gap between institutional interests and those of apprentice subjects is maturing.

From this assumption, our project strives to investigate the practices of youths as producers of visual culture that deviate from traditional master-apprentice and expert-novice relationships. These practices that occur along the margins of formal education (Drotner, 2008), in the realm what Trend (1992) termed “cultural pedagogies”. Indeed, we are interested in how and where young people acquire the knowledge that they apply to their productions, the types of competencies that these types of knowledge are associated with and their attitudes and interactions in relation to their learning processes. All this is to understand, ultimately, what we can learn to promote educational experiences linked with students’ real interests.

## Review of the literature. The theoretical framework

The life and learning experiences that young people conducted as cultural producers have not been a dominant line in educational research. However, the growing consideration of youths as innovative actors in digital media usage has increased the number of researchers who are interested in the new forms of literacy (Buckingham, 2007; Gilje, 2011; Hull, 2003) and in the new methods of learning that occur through these productive practices (Sefton-Green, 2013; Ito et al., 2010).

In the educational research area, particularly, we find a large number of studies that have delved into the analysis of the tensions between school and non-school literacy forms (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Buckingham, 2007). Many of these studies are primarily related to the introduction of new methods of learning into the context of formal education.

However, there are not that many studies *committed* to analysing the learning features that young people develop in an everyday context, particularly those devoted to understanding how they visualise media production practices that “*are embedded in a broader social and cultural ecology*” (Ito et al., 2010, p. 4). Between these practices, we can find the “Digital Youth Project” (Ito et al., 2010) and a very large and deep review of the topic in Sefton Green’s (2013) “Learning at non-school”, in which the author maps the different dimensions of non-formal learning in the cultural production area.

At the same time, we are living in an intensely visual time in which everyday life is permeated by what is known as visual culture (Mirzoeff, 1998). Consequently, the visual field has been explored from many perspectives. One of the most interesting is the approach that considers that research on everyday life representations “*should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during this time and with these images*” (De Certeau, 2000, p. xii). This statement refers to analysing what these representations mean for their consumers or practitioners and the aesthetic, cognitive or emotional use that they encourage. Indeed, this approach is a perspective that has several implications for education (Hernández, 2000) because it uses visual culture as a social space in which the representation or the ‘social fact’ of visibility occurs (Foster, 1988).

## Hypotheses

Our project begins with a couple of core beliefs that became our main hypotheses. The first belief is the idea that formal education does not consider how youths are using knowledge beyond their school activities (Charlot, 2001). The second is the belief that the learning involved in these activities does not follow the traditional master-apprentice and expert-novice relationships, although we consider the “expert” and “novice” relationship as dynamic or as a socially constituted interactional achievement (Vigotsky, 1979; Sally & Gonzales, 1991).

## Methodology

The advantage of adopting this approach in our inquiry on youth cultural production is that it allows us to move beyond the simple description of the visual universe in which young people live, prioritising the study of their practice and context. This approach pushes us not only to explore the meanings and significance that young people attributed to their creation but also to research the learning relationships conducted while the creation occurs, the methods of production developed, the distribution practices that such activities generate or the forms of subjective identity that they build (Rheingold, 2007).

Indeed, these types of studies require qualitative research that involves the analysis of a variety of empirical materials to describe “routines and problematic moments and meanings of individuals’ lives” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). That is, a methodology capable of describing the phenomenon studied and, simultaneously, producing an interpretation that considers that its protagonists conferred with it.

Therefore, we have attempted to research ‘with’ and not ‘investigate’ young producers of visual culture (Aguirre, Olaiz, & Calvelhe, 2011), introducing a dialogic collaborative process in which young people were considered as subjects and not as mere objects of the educational research (Paulus, Woodside, & Ziegler, 2008). In accordance with this approach, our research project has been conducted over three distinct phases.

The first phase involved interviewing eight youths to determine which questions were the most relevant in relation to our subject of investigation. These talks resulted in a process of reflexivity (Macbeth, 2001), which provided us new experiential knowledge and caused us to redesign the direction of our research (Aguirre et al., 2011).

Based on this feedback, the second phase involved the design of a survey, completed by 786 students between 15 and 18 years of age from different regions of Spain; this helped us to obtain a general map of their activity as visual producers.

The third phase involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews of 12 young participants and analysing certain samples of their visual production. All these interviews were transcribed to allow the analysis of their contents.

The information obtained from the surveys such as the contents of the interviews was analysed by establishing categories or key concepts that helped us to articulate the results regarding the investigation’s main problems or issues: the learning environments of young visual producers, the function or meaning of their productions, their attitudes toward knowledge, the places and references that nurture their productions or the relation with school knowledge.

## Results and discussion

Based on the above mentioned different data sources, in this paper, we present the results obtained and discuss them, focusing on forms of learning that youths apply

while engaged in visual production and focusing on attitudes towards the knowledge that such activity offers.

### *Attitude of young people towards knowledge: self-learning and personal experimentation*

In general, we have found that the attitude of young people towards the knowledge needed for their productions changes depending on the media elected and the production's sense. The young people do not show the same attitude with creative activity, such as graffiti (preferred by 2%) or painting (2%); this implies the recognition of different levels of experience and expertise more than their attitude when they encounter a more common activity, such as drawing in notebooks (preferred by 12%) or photography (50%).

However, the young people show very different attitudes regarding what they call mainstream pictures; those created *"without thinking about them, as they come"* (Maider says) are called vocational pictures. David states it clearly when he says: *"any person can take a picture. But to take a good photo (with a good composition and so on...) you have to choose what you want to get and how."*

In general, survey and interview respondents claimed to have begun and advanced in their creative activity through personal experimentation via observation/trial/error. When asked how they began to engage in visual production, 35% of the youths surveyed claimed to have executed their first steps alone, and another 29% reported to have developed the skill with friends. Approximately 14% reported beginning the activity in a family setting, and approximately 9% claimed to have begun through school activities.

Even in cases in which the productive activity responds to the vocational approach referred to by Maider, we find self-learning attitudes. It is David, again, who explained that his method of learning involves scrupulously analysing interesting photographs to understand how these photos were created: *"looking at how they made these photographs, and based on this, you can do it ... above all, handle the camera. You can take the same photo of this – 20 photos. Moving this up, opening the f-stop, closing ... you can go for hours."*

David's explanation is interesting because it situates the question of the role of the references in the visual culture production of the young. At this point, our survey has provided controversial information<sup>1</sup>. In fact, 32% of the respondents recognise the Internet as the main provider of images (always or often), whereas television, video games or advertisings provide images in 12%, 13% and 11% of the cases, respectively. However, at the same time, an overwhelming majority of the respondents say that their creations originate always (or at least often) from their own imagination (76%), whereas 5% of respondents claim they never use their own inventiveness.

<sup>1</sup> A similar controversy can be found in Reis (2014).

### *Other sources of youthful imagination: Family, school and expert knowledge*

These data confirm the perception that a large majority of the study participants consider themselves to be self-taught, reflecting a general tendency among creative youths that has been identified in previous studies (Lange & Ito, 2010, Sefton-Green, 2013). However, the interviews allowed us to refine this information and, at the same time, identify other sources of youthful imagination.

Family is one source. Ana, for instance, reported that she works in handicrafts with her mother, who buys materials and provides feedback on Ana's projects. Similarly, Rebeca admits that this incipient childish curiosity regarding images solidified into true productive activity through helping her brother:

"I always saw him taking photos, with these super cameras that weigh a ton and he always told me 'come along, carry my camera!'. I began to take photos, tried it and liked it, because I made some really nice photos, and they conveyed a lot of emotion ... to me, it is a very beautiful world."

Although school is rejected by the vast majority as not suitable for their visual productions, participants recognise that certain types of school skills, particularly technical and formal skills, may provide a useful basis in a different learning context. Leire and Aroia, for instance, acknowledge the impact that their teacher has had on their impressionist painting techniques and how the art curriculum has enabled them "*to have a basis*". Similarly, Raquel and Eduardo recognise that certain knowledge learned in class (above all, composition and colour) has been useful for their photographs, "*in the sense of providing basic ideas*" (says Raquel).

In any case, youths consider that these influences are merely elements that they are using at their convenience, within their own process of self-taught experimentation. This assertion can be suggested because this idea of autodidacticism is accompanied by an evident rejection of the transmissive modes of learning and a lack of interest in acquiring expert knowledge to improve their creations.

When experiencing technical difficulties, more than half the respondents claim to consult Internet resources and, to a lesser degree, their friends. However, when the youth are not satisfied with the aesthetic results of their projects, this trend is inverted slightly, and more trust is placed in the opinions of friends than in information found in magazines or on the Internet.

However, in general, the respondents trust completely in autonomous experimentation as the best method for refining their results. Although they do not dismiss it outright, the respondents do not consider it absolutely necessary to learn or take specific courses that would improve their projects. David explains it as follows:

"I didn't sit down and read books like a maniac ... or take courses ... but instead kept experimenting and... if you want to do something, then you do it on your account or by looking for people or whatever... in order to develop what you are looking for."

Those people, to whom David refers, are not necessarily specialists in that field. Those people can be other producers who have the 'recognition' (Ito et al., 2010) of their peers, which is the acknowledgment of their achievements (Schmidt, Geith, Håklev, & Thierstein, 2009).



In the same line of estrangement from the usual transmissive modes of learning, youth participants disregarded information provided in manuals and instructional materials that accompany many of the tools and software packages they use for their projects. Leire describes the following reason for this type of behaviour: *"I read the instructions and don't understand anything and so I prefer to just try it myself and see what I get."* Aroia reinforces this opinion, claiming that she prefers to *"keep on investigating how it functions. With more freedom, it's more fun."*

### *The role of digital technology on the identity and practices of young people as creators*

The revelations made by Aroia and Leire provide clues that help us to understand the manner in which they outline their relation to knowledge, both in the pedagogical and technological dimensions.

On the one hand, visual culture fosters a learning environment in which they can learn in a free and fun manner. This environment is a means of learning that is radically different from what the producers find in institutionalised settings, traditionally marked by norms, compulsory subjects and time framing, which makes schoolwork less engaging. As Raquel expressed, *"it gets tedious"*.

On the other hand, contemporary visual culture has a technological dimension that stresses the role of tools in experimentation and collaborative problem solving (Bohuijs, 1998. Quoted by Gwee, 2003). Digital technologies and Internet tools have also significantly shaped the creative and distribution practices engaged in by youths (Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007); this occurs at the same time that the diversity of these practices is continuously reshaping the tools, as stated by Boyd (2002).

Lange and Ito (2010) for example, support the findings of other researchers regarding the above topic, describing how the expansion of digital cameras and camera phones has resulted in many ubiquitous forms of capture and image sharing (Okabe & Ito, 2006; Villi, 2007). Similarly, other researchers such as Manovich (2008) or Gilje (2011) emphasise the role that certain software development plays in visual creation.

Behind these possibilities is hidden the idea that the knowledge needed to develop creative works has been previously included in the tools provided by technology. This inclusion may explain why photography is the visual production activity of choice for the overwhelming majority of youths. Certainly, modern cameras enable forms of production that do not require the mastery of expert knowledge. Digital camera use allows youths to engage in the instantaneous dynamics of testing, commenting with peers and composing again, which would not be possible using other media.

Eduardo is conscious of the potential included in the configuration of current photographic cameras and confesses to have ceased his training in professional photography:

*"It's like now everyone has access to a good-quality camera ... people have stopped relying on professionals ... because when all is said and done, you put it on automatic, take a photo,*

and if the camera is good and knows how to take the photos well, then you will produce a good photo.”

Because the camera “knows”, as Eduardo tells us, its mere possession eliminates any difference between professional expertise and the amateur’s knowledge. When a medium does not offer all of the features that youths need for their projects, they can often use other pre-programmed tools to accomplish a task. Aroia and Leire, for example, report using easily accessible online programs that retouch and edit images.

Such programmable knowledge has been instrumental to the growing popularity of Instagram among youth. Rebecca reports that she is hooked on this program because it offers a tool that “*gives you the option of retouching it (the photo), of adding different effects*”, which can improve the quality of one’s projects, more than obtaining feedback from peers.

The impact of technological devices also shapes the identity of the young person as creator. In fact, the respondents to our survey have a rough vision of self-creation, related solely to their own imagination (76% of those surveyed) and nearly totally divorced from a consideration of the visual production as a result of complex knowledge acquisition processes.

Such confidence in the potential of the tool places the knowledge out of the margins of the game of creativity and connects to the old romantic idea that creativity is something that is already in individuals, who only need good tools to achieve good results (Sefton Green, 2014). We verified this impression when 67% of those surveyed agreed with the idea that having access to quality resources more effectively improves production capacities than increasing the engagement in learning.

However, the mediating influence of technology is not solely relevant to youth photographic production. We have found that this belief is held equally between those who engage in manual activities, such as drawing, which entails significantly less need for media. In our interview with Pablo, he reports how he uses specialised software to resolve difficulties with watercolour techniques:

“... with Nintendo DS it’s easier... using Art Academy. In order to spread colour a little bit, you have to take the brush, moisten it a bit...and it comes out right, but I do this in real life, and it is very difficult for it to come out right!”

Maider also explains how she and her friends use the apparently limited possibilities for design offered by the game *The Sims* to realise their aesthetic decisions and to decorate private places where they meet for leisure purposes.

### *The uses of the Internet in the learning and distribution practices of visual producers*

Software options for media, games and social networking are omnipresent in the lives of young people. However, the visual culture environment that has really changed the type of relation that young producers established between themselves and with apprenticeships has been the Internet (Boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2009; Buckingham, 2007); this has led to what Ito and her colleagues have called ‘connected learning’ (Ito et al., 2013).

In our research, we have identified different forms and levels through which youths use the Internet for visual production. One of the most basic is one that uses the Internet as a huge repository of inspirational resources. Leire and Aroia, for example, tired of the green landscapes they observe every day at home, find images of different landscapes and colours that allow them to introduce variety into their oil paintings. This behaviour also applies to Pablo and Ana, who frequently use the Google image search service to find photos that they use as a reference for the hand-crafts they make, fostering a singular link between manual productions and new technologies. Pablo's case is quite particular because he showed us a drawing of the Alhambra created from a picture downloaded from the Internet, although he can view many images of the monument or the monument itself every day in his city, Granada.

However, beyond this primary use, the real change introduced by Internet use to produce visual culture originates from the new dynamics of interaction and learning that enable online participation in networks and communities (Mesch, 2009); they have clearly broadened the limits of the local environments available to youth.

Occasionally, these networks operate as situated "communities of practices"<sup>2</sup>, such as those studied by Freedman, Heijnen, Kallio-Tavin, Kárpáti, & Papp (2013) or Martin (2015), in which youth activities of visual culture production are increasingly developed at higher intensities and frequencies. However, in our research, we have not found young people engaged in these types of groups formed around a specific issue or hobby. Nonetheless, we have detected random interactions and relations, which can be stable, casual or sporadic, that occur in the realm of other scenarios that also involve the dynamics of youth apprenticeship and action. These relations have been coined by Gee (2004) as "affinity spaces".

In several cases, such spaces exploit the dynamics fostered by pre-formalised social networks, such as Fotolog, Facebook, and Instagram, to which the youths in our research subscribe to find other youths with whom they share common interests. Such spaces generate broader communities that include co-friends derived from the local neighbourhood or school environment (Livingstone, 2008), as well as other collectives of individuals that Boyd (2006) calls "friendsters": individuals who typically do not know one another personally, but who form a larger space that fulfils the same functions as the local group.

These networks establish contexts in which individuals recognise each other and provide youths a new friendly space contiguous to their established and localised relationships; this leads to what has been known as participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2006). For our collaborators, these networks become an arena for obtaining knowledge and for legitimising one's productions (Ito et al., 2010). Thus, the growing Internet usage by young people has resulted in major changes to the definitions of their public life. Online spaces have multiplied the opportunities for apprenticeship and for articulate identity (Livingstone, 2008; Boyd, 2002, 2006).

David agrees with this perspective and further contrasts the online environment with formal education:

2 "Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002, p. 4).

“The Internet is the best place for learning from people who are in the same place you are. The people who are interested in the same things as you are the ones who are going to teach you the most – more than a teacher or a professor.”

Because of these features, a large quantity of youth interactions centred on visual culture activities occur online, particularly in networks that allow participants to post their creations (most typically photographic projects) and receive other people's opinions and comments (Soep, 2006). This phenomenon is what occurred with Raquel, who describes the learning experiences that she obtained upon posting her photos on Flickr:

“Sometimes I got comments from people in the USA or England, who said ‘here you should do this or that’... Then, I would upload it right away following what they had said and... it was very good. I like these things a lot. They don't want to criticise, they just want to help you and I like that.”

In addition to formal online networks through which young people recognise each other, we also examine the importance of youth activities that are facilitated through other online spaces that are more transient and anonymous and in which this kind of recognition is not required (Schmidt et al., 2009).

The methods by which the interviewees move through these spaces are similar to the approach that makes the flâneur to the city, as Baudelaire and Benjamin (1927) define, or more precisely, with the one proposed by Situationist International.

The Internet is used by the young, not as a predefined space to live, but rather as an environment that can be constantly (re)created through practices resembling the techniques of the *dérive* and the *détournement*, proposed by the situationists (Debord, 1956; Debord & Wolman, 1956), or similar to those that De Certeau (2000) called “arts of doing”. That is, practices that involve the creative appropriation and reorganisation of what the Internet offers young people, with a critical-analytical goal and a creative and constructive, but opportunistic, behaviour.

The organised system of information through hyperlinks, associated with the ease of access to pre-indexed information, allows youths to find information that they are not specifically seeking but that they will recognise when they view it. This occurred for Ada, who described how she found Tumblr, a network unknown to her or her friends, by chance:

“So, I was on the Internet and found Tumblr and liked it. I thought, ah, look at this blog! And I followed it for about a year or so. Then I realised that it was a separate social network. I made myself a Tumblr, and didn't know how to use it”.

It is interesting to emphasise how these precarious, diffuse and occasional journeys facilitate deinstitutionalised, intermittent and casual learning opportunities. Indeed, these opportunities allow practices of knowledge that fall outside of the regulatory control, typical of the sound and stable structures that usually support disciplinary knowledge.

David showed us an example that illustrates the type of sporadic learning relation that can emerge from this use of the *dérive*. He explains how he casually met an Italian individual on a site devoted to photography, of which neither was a member. David noticed that the Italian participant commented on other's photographs and decided to send the Italian his works for feedback. David told us he was very satisfied

with the remarks made by the unknown Italian colleague because they affirmed his ability to engage in photography, an activity that he immensely enjoys; in addition, this was what David had desired foremost.

This case is interesting because, after that contact, the two individuals did not meet again. David never saw photos taken by his Italian critic. He does not know whether the Italian had ever returned to the website where David found him by chance because he does not intend to remain in this type of community.

David, as with many other youths, clearly knows what he wants from these interactions and believes that engagement in stable networks is not necessary for learning to occur. Although he does not discard the possibility of participating in more stable forums, David would engage in such networks if they offer him “*a good environment*” and offer what he calls “people with capacity”, i. e., individuals who take the craft seriously.

## Conclusions

The visual culture of young producers is characterised by its variety: different topics, different media, different places and different sources of knowledge. However, nearly all the studies we know regarding this topic place much emphasis on digital culture. In contrast, our study has revealed widespread interest in traditional production techniques, such as drawing and handicrafts; this can be explained by the age of the youths in our investigation. However, this interest can also be attributed to the more recent introduction of the digital world in our country, compared with other places (Gilje, 2011).

Regardless of the technique used, the survey and interviews clearly showed us the perception that young people view themselves as self-taught producers who learn through autodidactic experimentation. Therefore, the young accord great importance to P2P<sup>3</sup> dynamics to advance in knowledge. Friends and ‘friendships’ (Boyd, 2006) are the real supporters of their activities as visual culture producers, disregarding the pursuit of more expert knowledge.

In this regard, we have found, as many researchers did previously, a large gap between school learning and what is generated through these P2P dynamics because schools cannot compete with learning spaces that are based on immediacy, the uncertainty of experimentation, the propensity for change and constant interaction. However, exploring their perception of self-teaching more deeply, we have found that young people have more references and resources, even inside the family or school, than they admit.

Furthermore, we have confirmed that, related to this idea of autonomous learning, an old idea of creativity, which is based upon individual inspiration, survives among the youths in our study. However, most recognise the importance of knowledge in regard to creating more elaborate or artistic products.

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3 Acronym for Peer to Peer. Born in the computer world, refers to systems that communicate to each other directly, without passing through a central server.

Thus, the role that young people grant to the tool in shaping the autodidactic environment is striking. Therefore, we have found that the immediacy of responses and the capacity to revise results provided by the technology young people use, particularly digital cameras and editing software, allow the attainment of creative products and facilitate the attitude of self-teaching that young people exhibit.

In this respect, our study emphasises the idea that new possibilities offered through technology, particularly through digital technologies, are central to the implantation and to the growing proliferation of creative practices engaged in by youths.

In our research, we have found that the Internet is the main realm of resources, opinions, references and models for youths, who use it at different levels and with different objectives. The Internet is used, at a primary level, as a large provider of resources. However, the main factor that has introduced and facilitated the use of the Internet by youths for visual culture production is that it has significantly broadened the possibilities for interaction. The Internet provides the occasion to have stable or sporadic participations in affinity spaces and a background through which young people can act and move as a new flâneur, always ready to hunt for new suggestions and learning opportunities.

Therefore, it can be considered that the immediacy of responses and the capacity to revise results that are offered by digital media for image production, in combination with the multi-directional interactions and the peer-to-peer dialogue, are allowed by the dynamic provided by the Internet. Thus, we can conclude that the acts of creation become indistinguishable from the acts of learning and socialisation.

In short, a visual culture production environment provides youths the occasion to feel free to experiment, a community or audience in which to earn recognition, trust and complicity, and the opportunity to access many unexpected resources. These are items that today's Spanish school, institutionally, is not in a position to provide.

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