Copyright 2013 by the National Art Education Association
Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research
2013, 54(2), 131-143

Visual Culture Learning Communities: How and What Students Come to Know in Informal Art Groups

KERRY FREEDMAN
Northern Illinois University

EMIEL HEIJNEN
Amsterdam School of the Arts/Radboud University

MIRA KALLIO-TAVIN
Aalto University

ANDREA KÁRPÁTI AND **LÁSZLÓ PAPP**
ELTE University

This article is the report of a large-scale, international research project involving focus group interviews of adolescent and young adult members of a variety of self-initiated visual culture groups in five urban areas (Amsterdam, Budapest, Chicago, Helsinki, and Hong Kong). Each group was established by young people around their interests in the production and use of a form of visual culture. The research questions for this study focused on: a) conditions of visual culture communities, b) group practices in visual culture communities, c) individuals in a visual learning community, and d) peer teaching and learning processes. The results of this study indicate that visual culture groups act as powerful student communities for auto-didactic and peer initiated learning. Although the education that occurs in these groups may be considered informal, students maintain them to increase their art knowledge and skills, as well as for entertainment and social networking. Several answers to each research question are reported and applications for formal art education are recommended.

> "Being in a [Visual Culture Learning Community] creates an atmosphere that formal education strives for but rarely achieves."

Authors' Note
Inquiries about this manuscript should be sent to Dr. Kerry Freedman, Jack Arends Hall, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, 60115. This research was partially funded by the National Art Education Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Fulbright Foundation for the visiting scholarship of Andrea Karpati at Northern Illinois University (NIU) to work with Fulbright Scholar alumna Kerry Freedman and we thank the NIU Research and Artistry program for its support. We also thank Chung Yim Lau for his contributions in Hong Kong and Richard Hickman for his hospitality at Cambridge University.

Adolescents and young adults learn more through their social interactions around favourite forms of visual culture than adults may realize. For example, many adolescents and young adults form their own visual culture networks outside of school that act as learning communities (Freedman, 2003; 2006). The influence of students' visual culture interests motivates the establishment of art-related social practices in these groups that result in an informal type of education.

This article is an account of an international study of these visual culture learning communities (VCLCs) of adolescents and young adults. The article reports on the data collected concerning learning about artistic creation in and around a visual culture form.

Contemporary learning theorists have conceptualized learning as a process of participation in meaningful group practices "where moments of understanding and new forms of knowledge emerge from social contexts. Knowledge in this sense is not so much an object to possess, but an activity to engage" (Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007, p. 847). From this perspective, knowledge is not a static possession but, rather, is continually and actively obtained, shared, and renewed. Researchers and theorists have argued that we have entered a new era in which cultural production is no longer the domain of professional experts; rather, it is a shared province in which experts and amateurs build cultural knowledge together, using digital technology to produce, publish, share, and remix content (Lessig, 2008; Mason, 2008; Shirky, 2010).

Examples of research exist regarding informal learning communities from the perspective of social learning psychology (Lave and Wenger's communities of practice) and from the perspective of informal art and media production (Jenkins's participatory culture). The phrase, *communities of practice,* was introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) as part of their theory of situated learning. They argued that learning is always an integral part of social practice situated in specific contexts. Lave and Wenger posited that the study of informal learning is important because people are all members of various formal and informal communities of practice in which learning builds.

Jenkins (2007) saw the activities of fan communities as exemplars of a broad cultural change in which the borders between producers and consumers, creators and audiences are blurred. This participatory culture is "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (p. 3).

Based on an earlier study of communities formed around types of visual art or design that involve art learning and production, Freedman (2003) emphasized the importance of situated learning and participation connected to student interests in art and art education. Freedman (2006) argued that some distinction should be made between two types of overlapping groups that function as visual culture communities. The first type is *heritage communities,* "groups of people who have long established forms of visual culture that represent them.… [in these groups] images and objects are used to enhance established social life. In a sense, visual culture becomes a superstructure of the community"

(p. 27). Heritage communities are long-lived, heavily influenced by older adults, including family and mentors, and embedded in daily life, as in the case of ethnic culture, religious, or gender groups.

The second type is *interest communities* that grow up around a form of visual culture per se, which tend to marginalize commonalities of daily life. For students in these groups, visual culture is often a means to enhance or escape daily life. These communities tend to be temporal in character in that their membership is limited by time constraints in students' lives and their members may move in and out of a group at will. Here, "visual culture is a substructure; community is built upon it" (Freedman, 2006, p. 27).

Global youth subcultures of many types have emerged increasingly as adolescents and young adults have gained access to people around the world. For example, in the 1980s, youth groups created a sophisticated set of visual, verbal, and gestural metaphors. Creating a lifestyle through visual culture, music, and performance, Darks of Goths, New Age Glams, Retro Hippies, and Ravers were seen on the streets of New York, Paris, and Budapest alike (Polhemus, 1996; Karpati & Kovacs, 1997).

Manifold's (2009) study of nearly 300 cosplayers and fanartists between the ages of 14 and 24 who publish their self-made work online at deviantArt.com, Elfwood, and Cosplay.com, demonstrated that making art is valued by these students, in part, because "mundane experiences were balanced by excursions into fantasy" (Manifold, 2009, p. 68). Fan participants who reach a high level of artmaking in these groups do not necessarily aspire to a career as professional artists, but construct meaning through personal expression, social interactions, and identity development. Because these fan-based practices are becoming increasingly rooted in various sorts of artistic production, based on his study of *dojinshi* art and artists in Japan, Wilson (2003) argued that art teachers need to act as negotiators among conventional art, emerging art, and student-initiated art.[1]

The current study was based on four main research questions: [AQ: What do the capital letters stand for in the questions below: K, A, E, M?]

Question 1 ~~(K)~~: Conditions of Visual Culture Communities–Why do adolescents and young adults form visual culture groups and how do they function?

Question 2 ~~(A)~~: Group Practices in a Visual Culture Community–What creative and social practices do group members use as part of their participation in a visual culture community?

Question 3 ~~(E)~~: Individuals in a Visual Culture Community–What types of knowledge do participants learn in visual culture communities?

Question 4 ~~(M)~~: Peer Teaching and Learning Processes–What processes and strategies do adolescents and young adults use to peer teach and learn in visual culture communities?

Because of the large amount of data collected during this study, we focus on the learning aspects of each question in this article and will address the peer teaching methods that occur in visual learning communities in future work.

Methodology

The project was conducted in countries that have different cultures but share a global media immersion in order to appropriately apply findings concerning the use of global visual culture forms across international contexts. The research sites were Amsterdam, Budapest, Chicago, Helsinki, and Hong Kong. The groups selected for this study were not institutionalized; rather, they are self-formed and operate outside the control of formal education.

Members from 10 visual culture communities participated in the study. In three of the cities, one high school (14-18 years old) and one undergraduate age group (18-25 years old) were selected for case studies. In one city (Amsterdam), members from three groups participated and in one city (Hong Kong) one group participated. The groups were established around the following visual culture forms: manga, video production, demoscene, street art, computer games, tabletop games, fanart, conceptual art, graffiti, and cosplay. The groups were of various sizes; 102 members across the groups participated in the study on a volunteer basis.

The groups were found through a snowball method of sampling that involved the researcher having contact with one or more members of the group and gaining agreement to be introduced to the group. The researcher then arranged for face-to-face focus group interviews.

Each of the visual culture communities was handled by a local researcher as an independent case study, but the same set of questions was used by all researchers to interview the participants. Visual data included original artworks and photographic and/or video documentation of group activities.

Voice-recorded, front-end interviews were conducted with members of each of the 10 groups. Transcripts based on recordings of languages other than English were translated into English before analysis so as to facilitate cross-check analysis by all members of the international research team. Focus group interview transcripts and creative products were then subjected to qualitative analyses using common phrase and close-reading thematic content analyses of the transcripts. The results of the focus group interviews are reported in the following sections with quoted responses.

Why Students Form Visual Culture Communities: Common Interests and Learning Outside of School

Two themes reported here emerged from the data concerning why the interviewees started and participated in VCLCs. The themes are: *social networking through common interests* and *a desire to learn about art/visual culture that tends to be missing from school curriculum*.

Social Networking Through Common Interests

It is the experience of the researchers that adults tend to think of VCLCs as formed primarily for purposes of participant entertainment. To some extent these groups are for entertainment and socializing. Students are motivated by the need to communicate regularly with others, to be entertained, and to address personal problems and interests (Drotner, 2008). The gamers, the only group in which not all of the members produce their own art, spoke consistently about using games as a form of therapy and escape.

However, we refer to these groups as VCLCs because each group of adolescents and young adults studied during this research project was initiated as a result of a common interest in a visual culture form. As one female video artist group member stated, “It is our common interest in mass communication, the selection of themes, times when we criticize the products, films, photos, etc., that makes us wish to hang out together.” A male street artist stated, “I’m convinced that people with the same interests will always find each other in the end. Whether I’m in Spain, the Czech Republic, Morocco… you’ll always meet people from the scene.” Often, members of a VCLC also have common interests with regards to the ideas and messages conveyed through their visual culture form. Their ability to express these ideas develops through their membership in the group. A male manga artist stated: “When I was younger, I didn’t think about social issues, but now my work focuses more on those topics—such as dissatisfaction with social conditions that I wouldn't tell someone about, but I can do it in my comics."

Members of most of the groups view the products of their groups as a form of creative work, at least in the sense of creating a work of art. As one male video artist said, "It may be strange for you to hear that there are kids who come together in their free time to 'work,' to produce something, and not just hang out, but it is exactly like that."

The gamers view their group activity as a creative endeavor in the sense that their escape from one world is a process of participating in the creation of another world. As a male gamer stated: "It's also the fact of fantasy… it's part of the game; it's supposed to be better than their own [life]. That's why they play it because they want to experience what this person's action/gaming figure is experiencing."

Many VCLCs are formed as a result of friendships and are sustained, in part, because friendships have developed. Relationships in these communities develop as a result of interactions that forward the group's interests and are similar to friendships that emerge among colleagues in professional communities. "So, this is 'a working relationship' in a way, but really, isn't it something like in real life? When you go out and work with a team, you do not have to love them all!" (female video artist).

A Desire to Learn About Art Missing From School

Most of the young people in these groups freely acknowledge their desire to learn and seek a form of art education in VCLCs: "basically, I want to learn all about media. We learn a lot from each other, we become more experienced, we share ideas" (male video artist). Many of the participants stated that it is important to gain knowledge from other group members. One female conceptual artist stated, "We learn from each other." Another female conceptual artist stated: "We inspire each other… we need each other." A male street artist said: "The people around me are my sources of inspiration—the people I hang with."

VCLC members report that these groups are formed because formal education seems to be artistically or culturally narrow. Some of the comments made about this issue concerned a lack of availability of art classes. But most of the group members who discussed this issue saw it as a deliberate decision on the part of art teachers to teach traditional forms and avoid teaching what students are interested in learning. One male fanartist group member stated:

> Instructors were pushing to get the anatomy right so that when you go into doing 3D, your anatomy was right; it wasn't anime. They did kinda discourage doing anime style or something that was already been done, I guess. They wanted you to look at the body and see how it looks, how it set compositionally on the stage, look at the lighting, try to do that rather than try to conform it to an anime style type thing. [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

However, other participants said that the problem is an adult bias against p
forms in formal education that precip
need for the students to establish the
learning networks outside of school.
members stated:

I guess you can set the standard for this, Kerry

> We have [members] that tend to have a style closer to something anime or Japanese style. Instructors would tend to have a more negative view toward it simply because they feel that in a more Western area you should be focusing more on a Western theme. (male fanartist) [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

And, "they gave us a legal [graffiti] spot in the bike shelter. But when I drew graffiti-style in art class, the teacher told me that I had no talent for drawing" (male graffiti writer).

Group members are extremely committed to increasing their knowledge about the visual culture form to which their group is dedicated. In fact, a surprising number of the participants specifically stated that they are members of these groups to learn. “You are here to learn something about the media and making good movies, so you learn from the others through discussions” (female video artist). Many of the gamers discussed learning about the games, how to improve their play, and how to role play as motivations for belonging to the group. Most group members across VCLCs and locations are so dedicated to their form that they devote most of their time and money outside of school learning about and making their art form. These groups are formed to support that commitment, although group members have some difficulty in describing the feeling of their commitment to adults. One male fanartist group member revealed the struggle to explain their commitment to art particularly well:

> Every single minute, every single second, every single nanoseconds that I can spare, even if I’m not making art or putting what I vision, what I see, into a medium, I mentally observe and think about how the art is structured visually as a imagery rather than something that exists in a medium, and so—it’s a huge passion of mine and—what was the original question? [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

How Visual Culture Communities Function: Codes of Behavior and Collaboration

The participants we interviewed meet in these and other groups using several venues, including online. However, the VCLCs chosen for this study all meet face-to-face on regular occasions. Their face-to-face social interactions and production practices are often determined and supported by tasks the groups set for themselves. For example, the groups often break into subgroups or pair up; the gamers sometimes play individually in the same room and sometimes play in local teams. Two major forms of social interaction are reported that emerged as ways the groups functioned: *codes of behavior* and *collaboration*.

This should be a bold head, like on page 134: "Why students form...

Group Codes of Behavior

A surprising result of this research was the extent to which codes of behavior were established within these communities. Because adults tend to believe that these groups are established primarily for entertainment, they may think that all of these groups are freewheeling and unstructured. However, many VCLCs have developed a code of rules, some of which are quite strict. Some of the groups, like the graffiti writers, the manga group, the cosplayers, and the fanartists, have common aesthetic rules as well as behavior codes. Within the graffiti subculture, many rules exist to define different styles and their associated behaviors, such as *tags, throwups,* and *silverpieces*. The manga group is extremely rule driven in terms of what is acceptable in maintaining style. The fanart group, too, has a code of ethics. A male fanartist stated,

> I guess you just have to be respectful. Like don’t do anything distasteful with the character. It’s just something fun—if it’s just something fun, I think it’s okay, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable putting their characters in situations with drugs or alcohol or things like that. Steer clear of that and just be respectful with someone else’s characters or environments. [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

The older members of the group, some of whom are, or plan to become, professional artists, are more likely to develop their own characters, but they make fanart to sell online and at conventions. The code of ethics for fanart is supported by what sells; artwork with beloved characters that are in similar clothing, environments, and situations to their main storylines appeals to fans. At times, fans have voiced anger when they felt members of the fanart group have gone too far in appropriating these characters.

All groups maintain rules about originality, copyright, and copying. Although some of the rules are exacting and overlap with those we recognize as copyright laws, most of the participants tend to be fairly permissive about borrowing and sampling from other members of their group. This aspect of VCLCs emphasizes that art is conceptualized as a shared object of inquiry and creation. As one female video artist participant said, "thinking of it, we all have some borrowed stuff, a camera movement, the still you select, a scene… we learn from each other, this is our common resource."

Interactions Between Individual and Collaborative Artmaking

An important characteristic feature of VCLCs is the collaborative aspect of their art form. Most of the group members work together or at least work in the vicinity of each other to receive face-to-face feedback. Even those participants who discussed individual characteristics of their art were conscious of the benefits of a working environment shared with peers.

Most VCLCs, like the video, graffiti, and demoscene groups, make collective work. But, other groups work together and share skills or ideas face-to-face and online: "The way of working in a collective and communicating with each other are things I learned" (female conceptual artist). "You learn how it will be when you get out of school, have to start working with a bunch of strangers… you have a boss who does not take no for an answer" (male video artist).

Being in a VCLC creates an atmosphere that formal education strives for, but rarely achieves. For example, members appear to produce more in less time when observing and being observed by a peer who is inspiring and creative. The fan-artists regularly utilize this mutual reinforcement, gamers rely on it, and cosplayers use the group as each plays a part in the performance context for one another. Demoscene members, the manga group, and video group crews, who distribute work within these groups based on who has the best skills and ideas, cannot work without cooperation. "Usually that is an interesting process. Somebody has created something that inspires the others who want to continue with it or use it as a beginning to something else" (male demoscene artist).

Creative group practices involve not just production, but also, group meaning making dependent on a shared set of aesthetic ideals and values. This is developed, in part, through formal rules established by the group, the aesthetic of the form, and the group character of the process: "You tell the audience about each other's works. You don't just show your own work. Everyone knows why another group member made something… you know about the process, you were there during the process" (female conceptual artist).

What Participants Learn in Visual Culture Groups: Artmaking Knowledge and Art Context Knowledge

Once we established that adolescents and young adults initiate and join these VCLCs for auto-didactic learning about visual culture, a central question in the research was to uncover what young people learn by participating in these local networks. Other research reports have listed a range of learning not specific to artistic production that occurs within informal student groups. For example, studies among groups of gamers show that playing complex popular computer games can offer players situated experiences in which they actively construct meaning, expanding their gaming knowledge and creative skills (Prensky, 2002; Squire, 2006; Veen & Jacobs, 2008).

The participants in the current study mentioned various learning results, depending on the type of VCLC the participant is active in. However, two main learning themes surfaced across the groups: *artmaking knowledge* and *art contexts knowledge*. These themes are subdivided into four categories.

Technical Knowledge: Development of Visual Techniques and Skills

In all the VCLCs, a great deal is learned regarding visual techniques. Participation improves their techniques with regard to drawing, painting, video production, costume design, sewing, make-up skills, lettering, stencil cutting, or computer programming. The gamers mentioned visual skills developed through game playing activities: "I think that you can learn proportions and you can learn how stuff could look even if it's not how it can look in real life" (male gamer).

The only group that questioned their learning of technical skills is the conceptual art group. One female conceptual artist group member said: "I think we're better conceptually than technically."The conceptual art group members were the only participants in this research project who made a distinction between the development of ideas and technical skills. After years [illegible]ying their conceptual skills, they now feel the urge to learn more about professional techniques: "We all are capable of inventing nice things now, but how to realize them is not always very clear" (female conceptual artist). In all the other interviewed groups, the learning of visual techniques and the development of (artistic) ideas is a parallel process.

space missing

In the digital age, it is striking that traditional media and techniques like drawing, painting, and sewing are still h[illegible] Some groups use n[illegible] techniques; others combine these techniques.

see full reference in mail

Conceptual Knowledge: Development of Aesthetic and Artistic Ideas

Even in these rule-driven communities, originality is valued and encouraged. Each of the groups pushes new ideas. As one male demoscene artist participant stated, "The group has to come up with something new all the time. The spectators get easily bored with 'one trick ponies.'"

Aesthetic rules are clearly present, but within these frameworks, there is a lot of room for personal expression of new ideas. "We have 'productions' and we have our own pieces too" (female video artist). This involves, for example, group members creating their own characters and stories: "Creating your totally own figure, like this one I did, by putting all the extra pieces together without any instructions" (male *Warhammer* player); "we come here to be unique, to find our own character and give it life" (female cosplayer).

The search for individual style depends on persistence and is valued by the group: "[Your] style changes and becomes more powerful and better over the years. But at the basis is this same letter that you put on the wall for a thousand times" (male street artist). A male gamer said it this way, "I took it off images from games created into my own kinda style and I take video game styles and make it into an awesome picture."

For "outsiders," style and quality differences are often hard to recognize because they lack the trained eye that members of these VCLCs develop. Group members realize this: "A lot of stuff resembles each other, but when you take a closer look you can identify personal styles" (male graffiti writer). But, as was the case in Bowen's (1999)[AQ: Bowen not found in references?] study of graffiti artists, we found that participants tend to think of their peers as their primary audience because they are considered more qualified to judge the quality of visual work than people who know less about the form.

Knowledge of the Visual Culture Field

In order to participate in a VCLC that functions around a particular visual culture form, members must understand the field within which that form exists. All of the groups gain knowledge from other people who are immersed in their visual culture form. "I've learnt skills, I have been shown resources, books and Internet sites…it is the culture that sucks you in, when you are among fans of this culture" (female cosplayer). Participation in each VCLC includes depth of study about the form and results in "insider knowledge" about its cultures of practice.

This kind of knowledge, which is essential to membership, is shared and discussed when members meet in real life or online. "If you start doing graffiti as a young kid, you just have to know where graffiti came from to start with. If not, you're not taken seriously" (male graffiti writer). As Lave & Wenger (1991) pointed out, knowledge comes from participation: "Reading books is okay for outsiders, but if you want to enter the culture, to really get inside, you have to do things and be things" (female cosplayer). Knowledge of the field functions as a membership card.

In the conceptual art, demoscene, and video production groups, the focus is particularly on professional fields like contemporary art, computer programming, and audiovisual production. These VCLCs can be seen as the amateur or experimental version of existing professional fields. The community offers participants ways to learn about and enter the professional field: "The group helps me to meet people who are ahead of us, that is really interesting" (female conceptual artist); "we all are keen to understand why and how people make art. What they have done and what there is to be done" (male demoscene artist).

Identity Formation: Knowledge of the Self and the World

The fourth major type of learning that was revealed in the study concerned learning about oneself in relation to the world. Almost all of the groups report learning that has to do with the diversity of people. Through the VCLC, members felt that their social networks become bigger and more diverse: "Being in these groups you're not just exposed to people who share your interests; you're exposed to people who… come from completely different backgrounds (female fan artist).

In many of the groups, knowledge about other people and cultures has extended because they developed an international network: "You meet these people from different countries in the streets. It influences the way you see the world" (male street artist).

In the cosplay and fanart groups, the social network expands via online communication:

> Sometimes, I find it jokingly sad that I have more online friends than friends I interact with on a regular basis in person, and most of those online friends are incidentally artists. So, it's definitely a social movement as well. (female fan artist, 2010) [AQ: personal communication?]

Another theme that was addressed through almost all the VCLCs is ways the groups help individuals to develop self-confidence. Participants increasingly value themselves because they are taken seriously by a large group of people: "It gives your life meaning when you have no meaning in your life. It gives you accomplishment. You go out, you paint and think: 'whoa, I've done something,' rather than sit at home and do nothing" (male graffiti writer). "It is great to feel competent! I am good at cosplay, have always been, and it is fantastic to see how others enjoy my looks" (female cosplayer).

Self and Peer Initiated Learning: Learning by Doing and Group Support as Motivation

The methods of autodidactic and peer initiated learning vary to some extent in the different types of visual communities. For example, peer interaction as a way to stimulate learning might seem to be hidden in "hanging out" together and exchanging technical tips in the gaming group, among the *Warhammer* players, the street artists, and the graffiti writers. Other groups, such as the video production, conceptual art, and demoscene groups, deliberately use peer interaction as a structured method of learning. And the manga artists, fanartists, and cosplayers function somewhere in between. However, in all of the groups, peer initiated learning processes are fundamental to group practice. Group members tend to share the idea of learning as a part of the chosen lifestyle: "living it and learning it… it is really a way of living" (female cosplayer, 2010).

Learning Through Immersion

VCLCs illustrate the importance of learning through the immersion of the group. One of the male graffiti writers pointed out, "Doing it alone is not as much fun than with a group." The learning process may be so immersive for the participants that they think of the visual method itself to be the educator. As a male gamer explained, "The process of the game, like Halo or CoD, it teaches you." And, a male street artist said, "The street is your teacher."

Learning through immersion often includes group discussion. For gamers, for example, hanging out and talking about other issues than game strategies with other gamers while playing might help them concentrate and learn, as well as ease the pain of losing when needed. "And it's really when somebody's talking to you when you're on a game, if you can multi-task while you're doing that it's great so you can just sit there and talk with them" (male gamer). In gaming tournaments, learning happens through confronting new gamers, new strategies and new games.

The process of learning through production is often represented by group members as a matter of being influenced by one another. Many of the group members explained this situation: "You're also influenced because of collective graffiti making. Want it or not: you'll always influence each other, unintentionally" (female graffiti artist); "I am constantly being influenced, I am under influence" (male cosplayer); "we feed off of each other in the group, we gain different perspectives that influence your own work" (female fanartist); "you pick things up from everyone that does graffiti" (male street artist).

These influences occur both directly and indirectly. For example: "We [directly] observe each other's work processes and give ideas, in couples and in bigger groups (male demoscene artist). But, VCLC members continually learn and teach media techniques and other aspects of the production process indirectly by observing other members as they work:

> When I noticed that [another street artist] is always holding his spray can at a slant, I tell him that it works better when you hold it upright all the time. I told him also to try to keep less distance between the can and the wall. These are useful tips that will improve your painting immediately. (male street artist) [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

When immersed in their group and its products, members learn indirectly by listening to peer discussions: "I learn rules by listening [to] other people['s] conv[illegible] of ideas from listening [to] other people" (male *Warhammer* player).

see info in mail

VCLCs act as vehicles for allowing such influences to occur while catalyzing influence and enabling reflection to occur. As group members produce visual culture, they learn by studying each other's work and the work of artists outside the group. One of the fanartists referred to her VCLC as "a study group" in which members helped each other to develop skills. A manga artist gave an example,

> I learned from another group's manga… they made Mr. McDonald's the god of death… he is making everyone addicted to his hamburgers. It was funny, but also had an important social message. I learned that we could combine social message with our stories. [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

Group Critique as a Motivation for Learning

Positive support and feedback as well as critique play important roles in every VCLC. In loose communities, this tends to involve feedback around completed works. However, within the more structured groups, various types of support and critique are offered during the production process:

> Getting feedback from own work is very important, as is the group support. Alone I get doubts about my ideas, but the group helps me to believe in that what I do. The group helps to get the stuff done that would otherwise be left unfinished. (male demoscene artist) [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

A significant contribution of VCLCs to the personal growth of group members is motivation to continue unfinished projects, even when they feel frustrated or bored. Positive feedback helps to acknowledge the value of the work. Critical feedback by close and trusted friends inside of the group is also important:

> If you are critiqued by someone you respect and look up to, you will take that on board… it all depends on who the criticism is coming from.… I wouldn't give feedback easily to a stranger, a person that I don't know very well. I myself don't like to get feedback from strangers. (two male graffiti artists) [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

The production within a supportive group is a unique quality of VCLCs an [illegible] improve the work and learning of individuals and the group as a whole. Perhaps one of the fanartists said it best:

see info in mail

> With the group, since everybody is excited about something, when you contribute to an idea and everyone accepts that idea, you feel very much connected together… you want to trigger that sensation again and again and again; so it would only make you more addicted to produce more art because you feel you are accepted into this society. (female fan artist) [AQ: quote source? Personal communication?]

Conclusion

VCLCs are playgrounds for creativity that have a synergy of personal and professional growth. They are what schools tend not to be: places of authentic learning where learners act on intrinsic motivation in an atmosphere of sharing. The characteristic qualities of VCLCs that motivate and facilitate learning among their adolescent and young adult members are often at odds with classroom art instruction. Auto-didactic learning, cooperative learning, and peer initiated learning are uncommon in K-12 and undergraduate classrooms. Most schools, with their large student populations, inflexible schedules, and limited access to outside experiences are not well-suited for authentic, situated practice. And, when well-intentioned instructors try to initiate auto-didactic learning using traditional techniques, a laissez faire approach often results that lacks in the structures of rules, leadership, and student accountability that this research has demonstrated are important aspects of VCLC learning. VCLCs are based on situated rules of ethics and aesthetics (such as, copying is acceptable under certain conditions), leadership based on peer mentor knowledge and experience, and accountability through group forms of assessment.

Several specific recommendations can be made based on the study of VCLCs to aid class-[illegible]truction.

1. *Artmaking knowledge develops across as well as within visual culture forms.* This study demonstrates that although participants focused on learning about a particular form of visual culture in each VCLC, much of their art knowledge can be applied across visual culture forms. Each particular visual culture form led students to learn about related forms, concepts, and skills. Helping students make connections among art forms in and out of school can be an important contribution to art learning.

2. *Students have a desire to learn about visual culture forms not included in curriculum.* Changing curriculum to intersect with student interests in art requires that instructors understand what art learning can develop from studying visual culture that students find interesting. This research has shown that students realize that teachers may not support their visual culture interests because "outsiders" do not understand these forms and the behavior associated with them. Although most students would not want their visual culture forms subjected to a systematic appropriation by educators, learning *through* student interests can be a vehicle for developing art concepts and skills in school. In order to for this to occur, teachers need to know something about the subtleties of knowledge, quality, and influence of the range of visual arts.

3. *Artmaking can promote social networking, which reinforces artmaking.* Social networking is important to most adolescents and young adults. Establishing face-to-face and online social networking opportunities or groups in and through the vehicle of an art class or club can enable students to talk about their art interests and experiences, memberships in VCLCs, art knowledge they seek, and the visual culture forms they resist, which can help teachers and students get a good picture of common interests.

4. *Connecting individual and collaborative artmaking supports learning.* Although some students prefer to work alone, collaborative artmaking can be constructive and facilitated in classroom settings by allowing students with common interests to work together on group projects with individual parts or on individual projects that relate to one another. Brainstorming individual interests can help to establish groups that can work together. Substantial research has demonstrated for decades that students learn best cooperatively in other schools subjects (e.g. Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Johnson 2009), and this study reveals its strengths for art learning.

5. *Collaborative interactions result in the establishment of group codes of behavior.* Rather than just classroom management, art classroom rules may be most successful when tying ethical decision-making to aesthetics so that they are both situated and motivated by artistic production. Students should be responsible for making and upholding classroom rules when possible. Traditional laissez faire techniques seem to have been based on a misunderstanding of student interests as desiring complete freedom. This research has demonstrated that students want structure and guidance in learning about art, even when working through their visual culture interests.

6. *Students learn through immersion.* Since traditional school structures usually do not facilitate immersion, connections should be made between art done inside and outside of school. For example, auto-didactic learning, and the application of classroom learning in an immersive environment, can be assessed in school. To demonstrate auto-didactic learning in class and the application of classroom learning outside of school, we recommend that students include auto-didactic work, and explanations of the conception and context of that work, in their school portfolios. Authentic learning is best seen in school assignments that are complex, longitudinal, and connected to experience outside of school.

7. *Immersion deepens both art and art context knowledge.* Art is always attached to contextual knowledge that adds depth and complexity to meaning-making. This study reveals that youth art experiences are, to a greater or lesser extent, social experiences that involve various types of real and virtual contexts. These real and virtual places for artmaking need to be taken into account in art classrooms, so as to associate school-based practices with subculture or interest group based forms.

8. *Group critique and nurturing are motivations for learning.* A process-oriented, ongoing discussion of ideas, initial plans, drafts, and works-in-progress is essential for fostering creative solutions. A climate of openness and sharing that is structured both in terms of pedagogy and aesthetics helps students teach and learn from each other. Peer learning occurs through peer critique as well as mentoring and nurturing. The art of teaching is to establish the delicate balance among these forces as part of the studio environment. The study of VCLCs reveals new perspectives on the capabilities of learners to develop self-initiated plans and new pathways to their learning that teachers can follow.

Participant culture involves a new understanding of learning, not in terms of the development of techniques, but in terms of the experience of being alive and of being in the world. A social perspective on learning is a perspective of learning that focuses on becoming a person who has a certain experience of the world (Wenger, 2007).

REFERENCES

Drotner, K. (2008). Leisure is hard work: Digital practices and future competencies. In D. D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, identity, and digital media* (pp. 167-184). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Freedman, K. (2003). *Teaching visual culture: curriculum, aesthetics, and the social life of art*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Freedman, K. (2006). Adolescents, identity, and visual community: The formation of student communities based on popular visual culture. *Visual Arts Research, 32*(2), 26-27.

Jenkins, H. (2007). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Johnson, D. W. (2009). *Reaching out: Interpersonal effectiveness and self-actualization.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, F. (2009). Joining together: Group theory and group skills. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Karpati, A., & Kovacs, Z. (1997). Teenager art: Creating the self. *Journal of Art and Design Education, 16*(3), 295-302.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate paeripheral participation*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Lessig, L. (2008). *Remix. Making art and commerce thrive in the hybrid economy*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic.

Manifold, M. C. (2009). What art educators can learn from the fan-based artmaking of adolescents and young adults. *Studies in Art Education, 50*(3), 257-271.

Mason, M. J. (2008). *The pirate's dilemma: How hackers, punk capitalists, graffiti millionaires and other youth movements are remixing our culture and changing our world*. London, England: Allen Lane.

Polhemus, T. (1996). *Style surfing: What to wear in the 3rd millennium*. London, England: Thames & Hudson.

Prensky, M. (2002). What kids learn that's positive from playing video games. Retrieved from www.marcprensky.com/writing/default.asp

Sefton-Green, J., & Soep, E. (2007). Creative media cultures: Making and learning beyond the school. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook of research in arts education* (pp. 835-854). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Shirky, C. (2010). *Cognitive surplus: Creativity and generosity in a connected age*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Squire, K. (2006). From content to context: Videogames as designed experience. *Educational Researcher, 35*(8), 19-29.

Veen, W., & Jacobs, F. (2008). *Leren van jongeren: Een literatuuronderzoek naar nieuwe geletterdheid*. (*Learning from young people. A literature review on new literacies*). Utrecht, The Netherlands: Stichting Surf.

Wenger, E. (2007). Informal learning and e-learning. Keynote address at the eLearning Congress, Lisboa, Portugal. Retrieved from http://euroaelearning.blogspot.com/2007/10/informal-learning-etienne-wenger.html

Wilson, B. (2003). Of diagrams and rhizomes: Visual culture, contemporary art, and the impossibility of mapping the content of art education. *Studies in Art Education, 44*(3), 214-229.

ENDNOTE

[1] Each of the research team members collated thematic content across all transcripts as well as within their own transcripts.