A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change
Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown
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It takes courage and a great deal of confidence to challenge the dominant belief system in education by writing a book that claims “the kind of learning that will define the twenty-first century is not taking place in a classroom” (p. 17). The vast majority of public-education stakeholders will inevitably resist such a claim. Perhaps that is why Thomas and Brown modify their bold declaration with this reassuring qualification: “at least not in today’s classroom” (p. 17). Questioning the classroom proves the least of their “crimes” against the traditional educational system. Anyone with a serious interest in education should read the 137 inspiring pages of this brief book, particularly because Thomas and Brown dare to criticize several basic assumptions of the field, and they do so with great confidence.

Brown is the former director of the famous Xerox Palo Alto Research Center and cofounder of its spinoff, the Institute for Research on Learning. Thomas is a young, associate professor from USC’s Annenberg School for Communication who has studied computer culture intensively. I believe this cooperation between Brown’s long-term research on learning and Thomas’ deep knowledge about the many new global cultures, composed of millions of citizens who have emerged online, gives these authors both the courage and the knowledge to provide thought-provoking answers to the challenges the educational system currently faces. Theirs is a major contribution to the necessary rethinking of why, how, and where we teach and learn.

Perhaps the most difficult, yet imperative, question in education today is whether or not our teaching goals and methods are still appropriate for educating our children and young people. Concerns stemming from this uncertainty have for years caused unrest among public-education stakeholders—and with good reason, because there is no simple answer. Obviously, we cannot ignore the question and continue to maintain our faith in the present educational system while the surrounding society transforms rapidly. A claim for action is the explicit premise of the book, and Thomas and Brown per-
sistantly emphasize that the importance of learning has increased significantly in the knowledge society. According to Thomas and Brown, we need a lifelong ability to learn more than ever, and traditional teaching in schools cannot fulfill this need.

The book’s critique of current educational institutions begins by noting that these schools were developed for societies in which change happened much more slowly than it does today. Traditional educational approaches, where everything new must be taught at a specific place and time, will simply be ineffective when almost every skill and capability—and all our collected knowledge—changes constantly and quickly. Therefore, education must shift from a teaching focus, in which the instructor transfers knowledge to the pupil, to an emphasis on student learning.

Many educators and commentators have sought new educational solutions that can cope with the fast-changing state of affairs, but few have discovered successful ideas. Thomas and Brown believe we do not have far to look for inspiration, but we must look in unlikely places. They believe a transformation from teaching to learning is already occurring on a large scale. A new culture of learning with the power to change the way we think about teaching and education has formed around the new communication technologies. Many people are unaware of this phenomenon because such learning occurs outside educational institutions, looks very different from how learning is described in most educational theories, and is, therefore, essentially invisible.

Thomas and Brown argue that a new culture of learning is rapidly evolving in the many, large-scale, online communities that attract people of all ages worldwide. The authors assert that learning flourishes in these online worlds through the dynamics of play, games, and imagination, like a culture in a petri dish. The kinds that flourish are peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, inquiry-based learning, experimentation, tacit learning, passion, and collaboration. These are familiar aspects of learning in all the well-known, recent research on learning theory, but it may surprise us, may even seem improper—almost frivolous—to find them applied to online games such as World of Warcraft or Star Wars Galaxies. Nevertheless, Thomas and Brown convincingly present the success of these games as a “nearly perfect illustration” of a new learning environment that can and should inspire future education.

In fact, Thomas and Brown’s celebration of successful, commercial, online games may prove problematic. Even though the authors carefully substantiate their claims both theoretically and empirically, many educators, parents, politicians, and others will likely reject the work out-of-hand, perhaps even without reading it, because of this idea alone, deeming it implausible that playing computer games can promote serious learning, let alone foster innovation in education. That is unfortunate. Because modern learners live part of their lives in online universes that shape their world view, this book offers insights into a real-life phenomena that already influences education. Thomas and Brown suggest that rather than fight such development, we should embrace it and learn to harness it.

A New Culture of Learning actually promotes play as a focal point for future-
proofing education. Allow me to end this
review with a short account of one argu-
ment the authors put forth in favor of play,
an argument which illustrates the many
elegant and convincing lines of reasoning
in the book. They point to Jean Piaget’s
theory of child development, where play
and imagination are the indispensable
tools by which children adapt to change.
They call attention to this fact and note
that, in a world of constant change, play
becomes an efficient strategy for everyone,
not only for children, to respond to these
constant changes. In fact, they argue that
we will have difficulty coping with the con-
stant flux of the world, no matter our age,
if we are unable to play and use our imagi-
nation. One will have to look carefully to
find a better argument for the importance
of play these days than the one Thomas
and Brown offer.

—Carsten Jessen, Aarhus University,
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Hanging Out, Messing Around,
and Geeking Out: Kids Living
and Learning with New Media
Mizuko Ito, Becky Herr-Stephenson, Dan
Perkel, and Christo Sims
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Recently, I received an invitation to par-
ticipate in a small group consultation for
an arts-oriented foundation. The program
officer wanted to hear how digital media
creates new opportunities to support
interest-driven learning amongst today’s
youth. It was a diverse group: museum
educators, academic researchers, youth
media educators, and even a magazine
publisher. At the start of the day, some-
one asked if we could clarify our terms.
What did we mean, exactly, when we used
the phrase “interest-driven” learning? In
response, the facilitator asked, to establish
a common frame, who had read Mimi
Ito’s book, Hanging Out, Messing Around,
Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with
New Media.

Everyone raised a hand.

I share this not to suggest the book has
become ubiquitous. Far from it. But it is hard
to ignore that the framework promoted by
the book, often condensed to HO-MA-GO
(rhymes with the egg sushi “tomago”), was
a point of reference among those gathered
at a conference on learning.

As Ito would be the first to clarify,
although she was the lead writer, the book
is based on the work of more than two
dozen researchers who produced twenty-
three related research studies. It is written
in a collective voice integrating vast ethno-
graphic material collected during a three-
year period and offering analytic insights
by the project’s researchers. So while we
might call it “Ito’s book” as shorthand, we
more often, and more correctly, refer to it
as “Ito, et al.”

But enough of the semantics. What
is the book about? It was one of the first
projects funded about five years ago by the
MacArthur Foundation’s then-new Digi-
tal Media and Learning Initiative (Global
Kids, where I work, was also a recipient of
Initiative funds). At the time, the media
was full of fears regarding young people’s
use of digital media—of video games and
violence, of social networks and sexual
In *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*, Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown approach education with equal parts insight, imagination and optimism to deliver a refreshing vision for the relationship between education and technology, where the two progress synchronously and fluidly—a vision that falls somewhere between Sir Ken Robinson’s call for creativity in education paradigms and Clay Shirky’s notion of “cognitive surplus.” The book touches on a number of critical issues in digital learning, from the role of remix culture to the importance of technology. Thomas and Brown invite us to change our starting point by asking how people learn today in a world with unprecedented access to information. The authors invite us to recall that disturbing memory—when America was poised to invade Iraq, most US citizens could not find Iraq on the map. But some, Thomas and Brown suggest, would simply draw on their internet facility to find the answer. “A New Culture of Learning” by Thomas and Brown should be a required read for all educators. The text walks us through how students interact in today’s world. A couple of things have always interested me while teaching. A New Culture of Learning book. Read 77 reviews from the world’s largest community for readers. The twenty-first century is a world in constant change. I... By exploring play, innovation, and the cultivation of the imagination as cornerstones of learning, the authors create a vision of learning for the future that is achievable, scalable and one that grows along with the technology that fosters it and the people who engage with it. The result is a new form of culture in which knowledge is seen as fluid and evolving, the personal is both enhanced and refined in relation to the collective, and the ability to manage, negotiate and participate in the world is governed by the play of the imagination.