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What Teens Get About the Internet That Parents Don't

By Mimi Ito

Parents more often than not have a negative view of the role of the Internet in learning, and young people almost always have a positive one.



GuitarLessons365Song/YouTube

My 15-year-old daughter has been playing the viola since the fourth grade at school and she's been encouraged by her teachers to keep at it since, among other things, it's marketable for college. She has been contemplating a new instrument, guitar, more in line with her interests and what she listens to

with her peers.

This is how the conversation goes about the guitar. Me: "Do you really want to add a new activity?"

Her: "We already have a guitar. I can learn on my own and with my friends." Me: "It seems like you should get lessons for the basics." Her: "Mom, that's what the Internet is for." It turns out she's already been practicing with the help of YouTube tutorials.

My daughter's comment is ironic: She knows I've spent the past decade researching how young people are learning differently because of the abundance of knowledge and social connections in today's networked world. But in certain ways, our interactions are also typical of struggles that many families are facing in balancing the competitive pressures of college-readiness, the need for unstructured learning and socializing, and the role of the Internet in all of that.

Today's young people are more stressed than ever. They are facing a dismal job market. Tuition is soaring and student loan debt is at an all-time high. As Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and David Ashton argue in *The Global Auction*, globalization means greater competition for jobs, but also greater competition for good schools. We can no longer rely on the common wisdom that if kids work hard at school, get good grades, and go to college they will be set for life. A college degree is a requirement for most good jobs, but no longer a guarantee of one.

Consequently, kids feel pressure to not only do well on tests and in school, but in their out-of-school activities as well. [Trends](#) indicate that families with the means to do so are investing more and more in enrichment activities to give their kids a leg up. Whether it is the robotics club, violin lessons or athletics, too often it is less about genuine interest and more about padding resumes for college.

It's an arms race in achievement -- and the cost isn't just a financial one. [Studies](#) have documented how it used to be the struggling student who was more likely to cheat, but today college bound students are just as likely to do so when it comes to high-stakes tests and exams. Other [research](#) shows that wealthy teens suffer higher rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse than teens in other socioeconomic groups. The pressure to succeed along narrow paths is exacting a staggering cost on the values and well being of our children.

It is no wonder my daughter wants to mess around with the guitar and the Internet and pursue some interests at a pace that doesn't feel like the relentlessly scheduled pressure of school and structured activities. For her, the Internet has been a lifeline for self-directed learning and connection to peers. In our [research](#), we found that parents more often than not have a negative view of the role of the Internet in learning, but young people almost always have a positive one.

When we interview young people, they will talk about how the Internet makes it easy for them to look around and surf for information in low risk and unstructured ways. Some kids immerse themselves in online tutorials, forums, and expert communities where they dive deep into topics and areas of interest, whether it is fandom, creative writing, making online videos, or gaming communities. They

also, of course, talk about spending time hanging out with their peers, but this too is a lifeline that is sorely lacking in many of today's teen's schedules.

In his state of the union address, President Obama took universities and colleges to task for rising tuition costs and their failure to foster skills that connect young people to job opportunity. Obama's remarks reflect our economic realities, as well as our longstanding assumption that college is where career-relevant learning will happen. We are also seeing a growing push for universities to put their offerings online, in the form of "massive open online courses" in addition to long standing online, distance, and extension offerings. While I would be the last one to argue against getting more good educational material online and accessible, I do question whether our focus should be exclusively on classroom instruction.

Young people are desperate for learning that is relevant and part of the fabric of their social lives, where they are making choices about how, when, and what to learn, without it all being mapped for them in advance. Learning on the Internet is about posting a burning question on a forum like Quora or Stack Exchange, searching for a how to video on YouTube or Vimeo, or browsing a site like Instructables, Skillshare, and Mentormob for a new project to pick up. It's not just professors who have something to share, but everyone who has knowledge and skills.

When my daughter graduates from college, I want her to be able to ask interesting questions, make wise choices in where to direct her time and attention, and find a career that is about contributing to a purpose that's more than her own self-advancement. I am proud of her for managing a rigorous course of study both in school and out of school, but I'm also delighted that she finds the time to cultivate interests in a self-directed way that is about contributing to her community of peers. The Internet and her friends have offered my daughter a lifeline to explore new interests that are not just about the resume and getting ahead of everyone else. In today's high-pressure climate for teens, the Internet is feeling more and more like one of the few havens they can find for the lessons that matter most.

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