

Free culture and education - Thoughts on possible directions for free culture research

Free Culture Research Workshop
Harvard University, 23 October 2009

J. Philipp Schmidt
P2PU.org, UNU/MERIT, Shuttleworth Foundation
phi.schmidt@gmail.com

Much free culture research has focused on incentives that compel individuals to contribute, the governance of free culture communities, open innovation processes, and the intersection of law, culture and society, and technology. An area that deserves more focused attention, and which has the potential to become a key driver for the free culture movement is education.

Education has been a mechanism to shape and manifest common culture, for example in the case of the Humboldt University, the model for today's modern research university. Yet, education not only shapes culture, but is in turn influenced by it. The content of education and the methods of teaching and learning are very much products of their time. There is the same interplay between the free culture movement and education today. The free culture movement can drive innovation in education, and at the same time education has the potential to become a key driver of the free culture movement. I am interested in two aspects of free culture and education: a better understanding of the learning processes in free culture communities as a model for online social learning, and the notion of a community-based reputation as a form of accreditation.

Understanding Learning

The very principles of sharing and collaboration that underpin the concept of free culture are inseparably connected to the concept of learning. Culture evolves as new generations learn about and adapt the works of their predecessors. Innovation and invention rest on the possibility to inspect and learn from the work done by others. Opening up and sharing existing codified knowledge as well as parts of the innovation process itself (including idea generation, testing, and prototyping) creates new opportunities for others to learn and to participate. It is therefore not surprising that upon inspection of different commons based peer-production communities we find learning at their core.

Participants in open source software projects state that gaining new knowledge and sharing knowledge with others (learning and teaching) are key motivations for their involvement. Equally, learning is an intrinsic part of user-centered innovation processes where individuals exchange designs and improve upon them. Learning in free culture projects is not limited to facts and ideas, but extends to social behaviors and dispositions. Participants in online gaming communities develop communication and leadership skills, and contributors to social media sites exhibit high levels of digital literacy, comfortably working with video, audio and photo.

Despite its fundamental role in free culture, relatively little is known about the process through which learning takes place in free culture communities. Learning in general is of interest to researchers in many fields, including economics, (especially the economics of innovation), education, biology and psychology. These disciplines have focused on different aspects of how humans learn, but their findings have not been applied sufficiently to free culture learning.

A better understanding of learning processes in free culture will shed light on questions ranging from why individuals participate to how open communities can produce high quality outputs. This in turn will help us design peer-production communities that maximize value to participants and society.

Recognition and Reputation

Reputation as an external measure of an individual's achievements plays an important role in free culture. On one hand, participants gain reputation from participation in open communities. This reputation can be expressed in the form of increased responsibility (software developers are allowed to "commit" code to the code base) or titles (Wikipedia has different titles that are awarded by the community on the basis of demonstrated contribution) or other less formal ways, for example by displaying the amount of an individual's contribution (some online tech support forums show the number of posts a user has made as a measure for their seniority). There is another form of reputation, which is the result of an individual's online activity not necessarily in free culture communities. A recent experiment at MIT indicates that a person's sexual orientation (heterosexual or homosexual) can be learned -- with some level of error -- by analyzing their network of friends. In homophobic societies this information could lead to discrimination. Research around privacy and reputation in free culture communities is needed, but my interest lies in the first type of reputation.

The idea that reputation is an economic good, the value of which is determined by aggregated opinions of an online community, is especially interesting when applied to the context of education. Evidence from open source software communities indicates that community-based reputations can be transferred into job opportunities -- similar to traditional academic degrees. The idea that a community of peers can assess and evaluate the contribution of one of its members and that the result can in some cases replace academic accreditation is powerful and deserves attention by economics and education researchers.

Reputation as Accreditation

In such a framework of reputation, the concept of learning and assessment of learning become inseparable. Education research argues that authentic learning is a more effective than repetition of facts and that tests are imperfect measures of a student's knowledge. Open source software communities do not require their participants to submit exams, but determine a participant's knowledge as part of the project's inherent quality review process. Acceptance of one's software code into the release of the application is the equivalent of passing an exam. Open source communities perfectly embody these new forms of learning and education and applying their principles to other domains creates opportunities for innovation in education.

Social learning communities that recognize each member's contributions in the form of a reputation, which has value outside of that community, seem like a far-fetched idea. In fact however, they predate the concept of the modern credentialing university. Medieval guilds accepted members as apprentices who would rise through the ranks as their knowledge increased. The titles that were conferred upon them by the community signaled skills and experience to outsiders. An important difference is that participation in the guilds was limited, whereas free culture projects allow (with limitations) anyone to join, making the pool of potential co-learners much larger and more diverse.