UC Berkeley-USC project to study 'digital kids'

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A University of California, Berkeley, professor is spearheading a team just awarded $3.3 million to study "digital kids."
"It will be exciting to investigate kids' innovative knowledge cultures, and how they learn using digital media, in order to think about the consequences for public education as 'digital kids' flow through the school system," said Peter Lyman, a professor at UC Berkeley's School of Information Management & Systems (SIMS) and one of three principal investigators for the project funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

The study will document how youth from ages 10 to 20 are using new digital media to create and exchange knowledge, assess how these phenomena affect learning, and encourage use of its conclusions for the improvement of schools.

"Technology is changing all our lives, but it may be revolutionizing the way that young people think, learn and experience education," said Jonathan F. Fanton, president of the MacArthur Foundation. "Common sense suggests that exposure to digital media affects young people in formative ways, reflected in their judgment, their sense of self, how they express their independence and creativity, and in their ability to think systematically. So far, there is little empirical evidence to back this up."

Lyman's principal investigators include Mizuko Ito, a research scientist at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center for Communication, who has studied youths' use of digital media in the

United States and Japan, and Michael Carter, an educational software developer with the Monterey Institute for Technology and Education.

The three will spend the next three years working with SIMS students to document how and to what effect youth from ages 10 to 20 use cell and camera phones, Web logs, instant messaging, game devices and other new digital media.

The Internet and mobile phones are helping youth build and sustain much wider social networks than in the past and enabling them to communicate in new ways, said Lyman. But while these digital media expand the social life of youth, they also serve as a new mode of learning about how to create knowledge and work collaboratively with others, he said.

Half of the ethnographic study's research sites will be online and include the use of blogs, new online play sites such as Neopets and online games. The other half will include sites like libraries, community centers, game centers and after-school programs that have digital media.

Some of the research will last for a few months, while some will continue for the full three years.

"Our primary focus is on the teen years," Lyman said. "But we are interested in how children are introduced to digital media, how teens bring digital skills to college or the workplace, and how those skills are used."