

Computer Games Can Make Kids More Social, Not Less

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Contrary to common education wisdom, computer games and other technologies can foster community-building, a strong sense of identity and higher-level planning even in very young students, UC Davis researchers report.

"There is a lot of hemming and hawing among educators about the introduction of technology in the early grades," said Cynthia Carter Ching, associate professor of education at the University of California, Davis. "But the worst-case scenarios just don't pan out. Technology can facilitate creativity and social awareness, even when we don't design the use of it to do so. And when we do design technology activities with these things in mind, the possibilities are endless."

According to Ching, early childhood educators often argue that technology can squelch young children's creativity and social interaction in the classroom.

But in two recent studies of kindergarten and first-grade students, Ching has observed that children find ways to transform their experiences with technology into fun, highly organized group activities. She also found that technology-based activities can be explicitly designed to foster social reflection and advanced planning among young children.

Ching and her collaborator, X. Christine Wang from the University at Buffalo, SUNY, will presented the research today at the annual meeting of the American Association of Educational Research in New York City.

In their first study, Ching and Wang observed children who chose to play a computer game during their free time. Though only one child could play at a time, the children negotiated turns and gave each other advice about how to play the game.

"Though this is hardly the ideal setting for social interaction and higher-level thinking, the children exhibited a great deal of executive planning skills and complex social negotiations without any guidance or interference from adults," Ching said.

In the second study, children were given digital cameras and told to create digital photo journals. The students displayed creativity and engaged in complex planning at every stage of the assignment, from how they framed their shots to how they chose to organize them to tell a story, Ching found.

"This study shows that rather than technology being something that children merely use, it can be a creative tool for increased reflection on social networks, friendships, relationships with teachers and a sense of self within the world of school," Ching said.

Ching and Wang received the Jan Hawkins Award for Early Career Contributions to Humanistic Research and Scholarship in Learning Technologies at last year's AERA meeting.

Source: UC Davis

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