Tech and teens

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Scientists in UCI's Digital Media & Learning Research Hub explore the societal and recreation use of the Internet and digital media by young people. Photo: Daniel A. Anderson

(PhysOrg.com) -- Digital media use is transforming the way young people learn, UCI researcher Mizuko "Mimi" Ito has found, and schools should take note.

There's a learning revolution under way in the U.S., but it's not inside the classroom. Technology is changing how young people acquire knowledge, play and participate in community life, says UC Irvine's Mizuko "Mimi" Ito.

A researcher in humanities and information & computer sciences, she's studying kids' use of the Internet, digital media and social networking sites - supported by $2.97 million from the John D. & Catherine T.

MacArthur Foundation.

The grant funds the new digital media & learning research hub in the Irvine campus's UC Humanities Research Institute. Findings are expected to help schools, libraries and museums plan programs to better prepare students for the workforce.

"Kids today are learning outside the boundaries of formal education," Ito says. "Technology is allowing them to access information and craft their own identities in unprecedented ways, without interference from parents or teachers."

In a recent study, Ito and 28 other researchers interviewed more than 800 teens and spent thousands of hours observing them on social networking sites over a three-year period. Their research forms the basis of a new book, Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media, which examines the intricate dynamics of youth culture in a digital age.

Ito's team found that - contrary to what adults may think - adolescents develop important life skills when using the Internet or such gadgets as iPods and cell phones to play games, socialize with friends or search for information.

They're able to grapple with social norms, explore interests, hone technical abilities and experiment with self-expression. And teens have embraced the digital world, Ito says, because it facilitates self-directed learning and independence.

Her work has inspired an outreach project called YouMedia at the Chicago Public Library. Free to kids with library cards, the 5,000-square-foot center makes online resources and digital media available to urban teens from largely working-class backgrounds who might not otherwise

have access to this new world. Separated into "hanging out," "messing around" and "geeking out" sections, the center also offers workshops in digital photography, graphic design, and video and music production.

Further integrating digital media into the classroom could help schools maintain their relevance, Ito says. Because the process of [learning](link) is changing, the role of educational institutions must also change.

"Kids learn on the Internet in an autonomous way, by looking around for information they're interested in or connecting with peers who can help them," she says. "This is a big departure from how they're asked to learn in most schools, where the teacher is the expert and there's a fixed set of content to master."

Provided by UC Irvine