Researcher explores learning habits of skateboarders

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A skateboarder and videographer analyze the skater's attempt — and failure — at a specific trick as well as the videographer's efforts to capture it. Credit: Ty Hollett

There's a common misconception that education must be a formal process that involves a content-based curriculum and teacher-led instruction. But learning takes place all around us and, many times, kids

are their own teachers.

"I believe that students learn best when they pursue their own interests," said Ty Hollett, assistant professor of learning, design and technology in Penn State's College of Education. "With interest-driven learning, kids are doing their own thing, teaching themselves and teaching others."

Hollett, whose research focuses on the learning sciences, said it is important for educators, administrators and researchers to understand how students learn. Every student is different and those differences lead to different ways of learning. Informal learning is just one of the many components of the learning sciences that give educators a glimpse at how students' individual differences cultivate learning and an education.

Hollett first began investigating how youth learn in informal, interest-driven settings while completing his dissertation at the Nashville Public Library in Nashville, Tennessee.

When he came to Penn State in 2015, he began looking at youth action sports, specifically skateboarding and BMX riding, and how digital media is used in the learning process.

"I was put in touch with people at a nearby action sports camp and I was able to continue my research on out-of-school, interest-driven learning," Hollett said. "I really look at how people talk, how they move, how they interact with one another and how they use technology to help facilitate their learning. And action sports is really just a perfect place to study all of that."

During the summer of 2016, Hollett spent three months watching and recording youth action-sports participants to better understand how they learn. "I was basically able to just hang out at this camp and I collected about 200 hours of video data," he said.

"One of my first days at the camp, I was walking around with a professional videographer who started the digital media program at this camp," Hollett said. "He pointed out a trio that included a 16-year-old videographer, a 15-year-old photographer and a 15-year-old skateboarder and said, 'These guys are going to grow up together. They're going to call each other up and shoot film and photos and skate together over time.'"

This intrigued Hollett and he started focusing on these types of relationships. "I really became fascinated by the power of these partnerships and the analysis that was happening."

"They were using the videos and the photos they were shooting to go back and sort of debrief, have these quick little debrief sessions where they're reflecting on the trick and how it looked and how it can be improved," he said. "But then they also discussed the shot and how it looked, how the video looked and how it could be improved."

A trio consisting of a skateboarder, photographer and videographer all shoot and skate together. They will collaboratively develop their respective skill sets over time. Credit: Ty Hollett

The more time he spent at the camp, the more he realized that their learning was interdependent and contingent on the success of these partnerships.

"As I was talking with one skateboarder, he said 'You gotta vibe with the guy that you're shooting with or skating with. And if you don't vibe, then you're not going to get that trick or that shot,'" Hollett said.

"Vibing," Hollett explained, is the result of a symbiotic learning

partnership that includes cycles of reflection and nurture. He observed this firsthand when an athlete and a videographer worked together on a new trick. The skateboarder failed his attempt at an alley-oop backflip, which caused the videographer to stop filming.

However, immediately after the failed attempt, the athlete and videographer watched the film and briefly analyzed and discussed what went wrong and how to improve. They continued this process for more than an hour, during which they openly asked questions that created opportunities for critique and, ultimately, learning.

Reflecting on the attempts also created a nurturing environment where the videographer provides encouragement for the skateboarder to succeed, Hollett said. After all, without the successful completion of the trick, the videographer cannot successfully complete his task.

"They depended on each other to analyze and to reflect and to support one another," he said. "This is really powerful because, often times when we think about learning, especially in informal settings, we ask, how can one youth get better at X-Y-Z? And here, it wasn't just collaboration but it was kind of a dependent collaboration in that you really needed that other person there to be present with you in order for both to succeed but then also to let other people see your work."

Hollett said he was drawn to the culture of action sports because its athletes are typically youth who find themselves in the margins of more formal, school-based learning settings.

"Society says that youth who have these interests and hobbies often do not mesh well, or at least that is how they are perceived, in those predominant or privileged ways we view learning," he said. "We need to understand more and more about how youth learn in order then to begin to think more deeply about both school and out-of-school learning

settings."

While hanging out at skate parks and watching cool tricks was fun, Hollett said his goal is to get educators thinking about the different ways in which students learn and make adaptations to accommodate that learning.

"When we look at schools, broadly, they've looked the same for the past 100 years or so," he said. "As a researcher in the learning sciences, I'm looking for new and innovative ways to help reframe what learning looks like and redesign some of those settings, whether it is in school or out of school."

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