



[HOME](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[USER HOME](#)
[SEARCH](#)
[CURRENT](#)
[ARCHIVES](#)
[ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)

[OPEN JOURNAL SYSTEMS](#)

Home > Special Issue: Research in Action: Linking Communities and Universities > **O'Reilly-Rowe**

# DigiPopEd: Popular Education and Digital Culture

**Dan O'Reilly-Rowe**

University of New South Wales, Journalism and Media Research Center  
University of Sydney, Digital Cultures

## Introduction

A great deal of hype and expectation surrounds the potential for digital information and communications technologies to contribute to the development of new models of teaching and learning. Within academic discourse on the possible benefits of this paradigm shift in education on democratic participation in society as a whole (Jenkins et al 2009, Coiro et al 2009), enthusiasm for the role of new technologies often obscures the important contribution of the educators, activists, and academics whose development of popular education approaches prefigure contemporary participatory culture. While neoliberal policies drive severe cuts to public funding of research in the humanities, and the scope of university curriculum is squeezed into ever tightening boxes of skilling and training, innovative models of knowledge production and dissemination are being built in community organisations, after-school programs, study groups, and other informal educational spaces outside of institutions of higher learning.

This article examines the relationship between emerging practices and values of digital culture and the popular education approach to knowledge production. My discussion of this topic is anchored by a case study of BuildtheWheel.org, a web platform for the publication and development of popular education curricular resources. I will argue that the affordances of this platform, and the practices that emerge around it, highlight the potential for a synergistic relationship between popular education and digital culture. This article does not seek to evaluate the potential for this particular platform to directly bring about social change, or the broader role of popular education in progressive social movements, although its findings suggest that these could be fecund fields of inquiry. Rather, I intend to demonstrate the particular resonances between this pedagogical approach and one model of digital culture.

How do recent innovations in information and communications technologies affect the development and distribution of popular education resources? In order to set some context for the case study, I will first delineate what I mean by the key terms popular education and digital culture, and highlight parallels between the two concepts. Among the many and competing models for discussing digital culture, I draw primarily on the principal component analysis of Mark Deuze (2006). This model will be applied to a case study of the BuildtheWheel.org project. My understanding of the site is built on information gathered through an interview I conducted with one of the website's designers, Le Tim Ly, and through my own reading of the website as an artefact of digital culture.

## Context: Popular Education, Digital Culture

Popular education and its academic disciplinary double, critical pedagogy, are approaches to teaching and learning that are designed to empower people to take action to address unjust social conditions (Buras & Apple 2006). Popular education

[Journal Help](#)

USER

You are logged in as...

**danoreillyrowe**

- [My Profile](#)
- [Log Out](#)

LANGUAGE

English

JOURNAL CONTENT

Search

All

Search

Browse

- [By Issue](#)
- [By Author](#)
- [By Title](#)

FONT SIZE

[Make font size smaller](#) [Make font size default](#) [Make font size larger](#)

INFORMATION

- [For Readers](#)
- [For Authors](#)
- [For Librarians](#)

promotes the development of critical literacies as a fundamental component in the construction of an anti-oppressive praxis (Freire, 1972). In contrast to dominant models of education, which are characterised by a relationship between teacher and student in which knowledge is banked in the educator and transmitted to the learner, critical pedagogy reflects its focus on the nature of power relationships in the world back onto the classroom itself.

This approach promotes the agency of learners with the intention of supporting collaborative knowledge production in which all participants are both teacher and learner (Kincheloe, 2008). Lived experience is valued as a source of expertise in the popular education model. Participants are encouraged to acknowledge race, gender, class, and other multiple and intersecting social identities (Crenshaw 1989, hooks 2000), and to explore the ways in which systems of oppression and privilege shape their experience of the world. In this way, the work of popular education can be seen as connecting personal and political aspects of life.

Popular education workshops are often interactive and multimodal (Olds, 2004). They might include the analysis and production of media and performance arts as a way of looking at how ideologies and relationships of power are transmitted and internalised through cultural practices. By constructing learning environments in which participants are encouraged to enact, embody, and experiment with relationships of power, popular educators encourage participants to envision models of what alternate realities could look and feel like (Boal, 1979).

When compared against the defining characteristics of the emerging digital culture and its technologies, remarkable resonances can be seen with some of the key attributes of popular education. Collaboration, interactivity, and multimodality are commonly noted by theorists (eg Quiggin 2006, Ryan 2004) as essential features of digital textuality. The collaborative nature of knowledge production in popular education, wherein groups of participants come to gain deeper understanding of the world through the exchange of perspectives rooted in lived experience, finds its echo in the many to many model of the networked communication structure of the world wide web, although we should be cautious not to directly transpose the anti-oppressive goals of the former onto the latter.

The ability of digital technologies to present and facilitate interaction with information in numerous ways, and through various sensory channels, is a key feature that differentiates new media from pre-digital media such as print, radio, and television. Multimodality and the analysis and production of various media forms also appear in popular education workshops, following from the principle that literacies are multiple and modes of education cannot be universalised into one standard, print-based mode of knowledge production and transmission (Kincheloe 2008).

Deuze (2006) puts forward a model of digital culture that is defined by the interaction of three principal components: participation, remediation, and bricolage. Participation here closely resembles the concept of agency that is central to popular education, referring to learners' sense of being an empowered actor in the world. Remediation, a concept Deuze borrows from Bolter and Grusin (1999) involves the recognition that the emergent digital culture builds on, and often exists in tandem with, pre-digital cultures and their models for making sense of reality. Bricolage is the process by which elements are drawn together from various sources to reflexively assemble our own particular versions of such reality (Deuze, 2006 p66).

Each of these principal components is mirrored in the values and practices of popular education. The apparent synergy between the capabilities of digital technologies and the popular education mode of learning has not, however, led to the rapid adoption of new media by educators working in the popular education tradition. In fact, most popular education curriculum is generated today in much the same way as it was before the advent and general adoption of networked information and communication technologies. BuildTheWheel.org is one of a handful of recent experiments in using the capabilities of digital publishing to support the development of popular education, and it is by no means guaranteed to succeed in its goals.

In the case study that follows, I will first describe BuildTheWheel.org's functionality and affordances, and then reflect on the applicability of Deuze's interpretation of the components of digital culture by examining where these attributes can be seen in the

website and its associated practices.

### **Case Study: BuildtheWheel.org**

BuildtheWheel.org is an online community website designed to facilitate the sharing of popular education workshops and multi-media educational resources. At the time of writing this article the site is in a beta preview stage, meaning that it is functional but still undergoing testing and revision before a projected launch in late 2011. The site currently hosts hundreds of workshop outlines and other resources shared by organisations working on a wide range of social justice issues, including gender justice, environmentalism, anti-racism, migration, and labor issues.

Collaboration among educators in the development of curricular resources is not a new development created by the emergence of digital culture. The sharing of materials and techniques among teachers is a well established practice in both mainstream and popular education. However, when compared with pre-digital media, websites are particularly well suited to the storage and transmission of content. Websites facilitate readily accessible information exchange and feedback in ways that previously depended on the establishment of personal and professional networks by individuals or organisations (Quiggin 2006). BuildtheWheel.org is designed in such a way as to allow participation in a network of educators and political organisers with a very low threshold for professional experience, education, or organisational affiliation. Its design consciously incorporates features that encourage participation and a degree of collaborative curriculum design among its users.

Participant-users who wish to have access to BuildtheWheel.org must first register an account. Their account profile contains biographical information that they wish to share with the community, and may also contain information about the users organisational affiliation. Partnered organisations have their own profile pages that contain information about the groups work, their contributions to the site, and the ability to post news updates via an RSS feed.

The primary function of BuildtheWheel.org is to share curricular resources that can be downloaded for use in popular education workshops. To publish a workshop on the site, a registered user uploads a workshop plan document and provides supporting information which can be used to help others identify content that is of interest to them. This information may also help support the use and adaptation of the workshop by other educators. Content providers are asked to identify how they wish to assign copyright of the material. In the interests of promoting a free and open exchange of resources, the program offers a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike licensing agreement as its default setting. It is also possible to select an All Rights Reserved option, which preserves the workshop authors rights as described under standard US copyright law. Content providers are able to limit which other users have access to the resources that they upload, and in the future a function might be added whereby content providers can charge money for particular resources and collect payment through an e-commerce payment system. BuildtheWheel.org developer Le Tim Ly explains the development teams approach to issues of ownership of the content in this way:

We want to respect where everyones at with their particular approach to the materials they produce, meaning that some folks actually produce materials to be sold, and some folks produce materials just to share openly. Our leaning is towards a perspective that the information, the education, the materials are for the common good and cant be proprietary.

The ability for content providers to determine not only what they share, but how they share it, allows for organisations and individuals with differing needs and attitudes to coexist within the community, without administrators dictating a narrow way in which the content providers must behave.

For participants seeking resources to download, the ability to search for materials that are relevant to their needs is central to the sites functionality. Although still in its beta stage of development, BuildtheWheel.org already hosts over a hundred individual workshops, many with supporting multimedia resources. To trawl through all of these pages would be prohibitively time-consuming, so the site provides various tools for

filtering those materials that are most relevant to the user. Keywords can be used to search for workshops by language, duration, appropriate audience, and subject matter. It is also possible to see all of the resources that have been provided by a particular organisation.

The site includes several social media features, and it is here that the potential for collaboration and collective knowledge production can best be seen. Ratings and comment threads are embedded on each workshop's summary page. Unlike in traditional print-media editing or peer review processes, this feedback is available not only to the author, but to the wider community of users. Beyond leaving comments, users can revise and adapt workshops or translate them into other languages than that which they were originally uploaded in, and submit these derivative works for display along side the original material. Users can also group workshops into compilations according to their own logic, and have the choice to make these sets either public or private. This feature could be used to create themed sets of workshops, programs for specific groups or goals, and could also be used as a recommendation system, whereby users seek out individuals whose opinions and expertise they value and use their sets as an entry point to the wider database of materials.

In combination, these features consciously draw on the practice and theories of digital publishing to create a participatory online environment for knowledge production and dissemination, and are highly compatible with popular education methodology. To be genuinely in keeping with the values and intent of popular education, however, collaborative knowledge production of this sort must be seen as just one element in a broader push towards action to further struggles for social justice. Le Tim Ly acknowledges that there are limits to how far a website can go in this regard:

Were talking about the process of coming together to imagine a different world and a different way of being, and then fighting for that. I think theres limitations to how that can be done, from what Ive seen, in the online world. Because its ultimately about building relationships and crossing comfortable areas. Organising, if its being effective, shouldnt be too comfortable. Youre talking about bringing people together that are being pushed apart...

### **Reflection**

BuildtheWheel.org demonstrates the applicability of Deuzes formulation of the principal components of digital culture, and suggests the potential for the use of digital technologies towards a reorganisation of the production and consumption of knowledge.

Remediation is apparent here in the simultaneous departure from existing processes of educational publishing and the informal sharing of resources among popular educators, and the reproduction of some of these models of knowledge production's core values. The online popular education workshop both diverges from and reproduces its precedents in print and oral traditions in form and content. Interactive, multimodal work was a characteristic of popular education before the digital age, and continues to be in many learning environments that do not have access to computers, the internet, or even electricity. BuildtheWheel.org's designers have not designed a platform for education to occur in an online space. They have created a tool for the development of educational resources in a digital environment to be deployed in physical spaces where groups of people gather to address oppressive conditions.

In the online community space, a single authoritative editor does not compile workshops and resources into a popular education canon. Instead, a web of autonomous bricoleurs upload, classify, and combine materials. This ability to tailor content by the user's particular identity and interests results in what Deuze describes as ghyperindividualisationh (Deuze, 2006 p.85). In the case of BuildtheWheel.org, I would argue that this ability to customise content works in such a way as to promote a sense of the intersectionality of identities and struggles and that this could have the effect of promoting solidarity across identities by fostering discussions towards a broader shared power analysis incorporates various issues.

BuildtheWheel.org users participate in the communityfs creation of value by uploading, downloading, rating, commenting, and compiling. Through participation in the

community, users take part in the development of a collective knowledge base and a shared set of values and practices. Importantly, these practices do not begin and end at the fingertips of participants logged into the site. By virtue of the propensity for popular education to encourage engagement with material conditions and social relationships, the digital culture around BuildtheWheel.org has the potential to affect the wider practices of social movements, both on- and offline. The workshops developed and shared in the online space are generally intended for use in physical learning spaces, and as such the impact of the online community reaches out into the world beyond hyperindividualised online activities and into rooms full of people engaged in critical analysis of their conditions.

It is far too early to make any demonstrable claims regarding the success or failure of this particular platform to produce a meaningful shift in the curriculum development practices of popular educators. That said, by creating a working model for the collaborative publication, distribution, and revision of pedagogical resources, synergies between popular education methods and digital culture are highlighted. This raises a number of important questions around the role of informal learning spaces and emerging models of collaborative knowledge production in relation to the established processes of research and publication seen in the university context. If community activist models of teaching and learning that prefigure the rise of digital culture are indeed highly appropriate to the new technological and cultural landscape, how might these same practices be taken up as legitimate processes of scholarship in academia? In what ways can universities and their academic staff both support and learn from experiments such as BuildtheWheel.org, given their position of relative wealth and authority when compared to the community and activist organisations that are engaging in such innovative work? As universities devote a greater portion of their budgets towards training workers for industries rather than conducting research, how can informal community education projects working with digital publishing tools help to redress this shift?

As an opening point to answering some of these questions, academics might have to face the uncomfortable fact that they have much to learn about the collaborative knowledge production in digital culture from non-accredited, informally affiliated, politically motivated networks of activist-educators.

### **Bibliography**

Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.

Bolter, J.D. & Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Buras, K. & Apple, M. (2006). The subaltern speak: curriculum, power, and educational struggles. In Apple, M. & Buras, K. (Eds), *The subaltern speak: curriculum, power, and educational struggles*. New York: Routledge.

Castells, M. (2000). *The Rise of the Network Society* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Coiro, J. Knobel, M. Lankshear, C. Leu, D.J. (Eds.) (2008). *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Crenshaw, K.W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139-168.

Deuze, M. (2006). Participation, remediation, bricolage: considering principal components of a digital culture. *The Information Society*, 22(2), 63-75.

Dolgon, C. (2004, December 6-8). *Cyber or internet-literacies for collectivities as opposed to individuals* (abstract). Education and social action conference, Centre for Popular Education, University of Technology Sydney, December 6-8, 2004, 21.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody*. Cambridge: South End Press

Jenkins, H. Purushotma, R. Weigel, M. Clinton, K. & Robinson, A.J. (2009). *Confronting*

the Challenges of Participatory Culture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kincheloe, J. (2008). *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction*. London: Springer.

Martin, A. (2008). Digital literacy and the digital society. In C. Lankshear & M. Knobel (Eds.), *Digital Literacies*. New York: Peter Lang.

Olds, L. (2004, December 6-8). The North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education and the movement of movements, Education and social action conference, Centre for Popular Education, University of Technology, Sydney, December 6-8, 2004, 65-69.

Ryan, M. (2004). Multivariant narratives. In R.G. Siemens, S. Schreibman & J. Unsworth (Eds.), *A companion to digital humanities* (pp 415-430), Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Quiggin, J. (2006) Blogs, wikis and creative innovation. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(4), 481-496.

Journal of Community Informatics. ISSN: 1712-4441