Are Computers Part of a Bridge from Adolescence to Young Adulthood?

Instructions for Teachers:

The documentaries, “Growing Up Online” and “Disconnected” reveal two very different sets of stories about coming of age with the internet. Rachel Dretzin’s “Growing Up Online” aired to great acclaim in January 2008 on PBS’s Frontline and rang an alarm bell about the private/public lives of teens in Morris County, New Jersey. “Disconnected,” produced by students at Carleton College, tells the stories of three students for whom acting out on the internet in defiance of parents and school officials is not a significant issue.

This lesson assumes that these two films are “companion” documentaries and have additional educational benefits when viewed and discussed together. “Growing up Online” is available on the PBS Frontline website. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kidsonline/

To use the films together will require multiple class meetings at both the high school and college level.

Viewing both documentaries together will allow your students to observe and question the meaning of these behavioral and attitudinal differences of students who are only a few years apart in age. Relative to the teens of Morris County, the Carleton students seem to have crossed a developmental bridge to young adulthood.

How did this happen? What role do computers play in helping young people to recognize the expectations of the stage in life they are experiencing? Ignore those expectations? Rebel against those expectations?

The expression “arrested development” has now become part of our popular culture. But what, in the context of these two documentaries, does it mean? Do computers decelerate the maturation of adolescents, while accelerating the development of young adults? Why would that be the case?

Educators often observe that young women mature intellectually and emotionally more quickly than young men. Is there evidence in either film that the pace of development varies significantly by gender? Does either film offer evidence that computers play different roles in the development of young men and women?

For the additional investment of time and trouble, you may want to extent the discussion of both films to a larger project. Since both films explore the peripheral roles that parents often play, you may want to challenge your students to host a series (including the viewing of both documentaries) of intergenerational conversations on the role of the new media in the lives of young people.