The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age

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Abstract

To understand how, in a heavily mediated society, a "digital thread" is now woven through the fabric of young people's personal, social and learning lives, I undertook a year-long ethnography with one class of 13-14 year olds. This revealed the intersecting ways in which young people appropriate digital media to find spaces of personal autonomy and agency while their parents and teachers try to deploy digital media normatively to shape young people's present achievements and future prospects. This is played out through the subtle enactment of variously motivated or problematic connections and disconnections sustained within and between home and school. The result is that digital media – although not necessarily determining young people's lives – have become a key site of anxiety and struggle between the generations.

1.   Growing up in the digital risk society

How is digital technology – now occupying the eyes and ears, pockets and pillows of so many children – becoming interwoven into the fabric of their lives? Does it mediate connections or disconnections, improvements or problems in young people's lives? I recently spent a year embedded in the lives of an ordinary class of 13 to 14-year olds in a suburban, multi-ethnic, complexly-classed London secondary school (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016). Grounded in the ethnographic method, we spent time getting to know 28 teenagers at home, at school, with their friends and online, to explore how they negotiate the pressures, opportunities and constraints of these intersecting worlds. As a social psychologist, my work has always been motivated by the desire to understand people's lives holistically; across the sites and institutions they are part of; across boundaries from private to public and back again to see how each infuses the other. As a media researcher, I've always wanted to see how people's everyday uses of media may reconfigure their possibilities for agency and imagination, communication and participation, identity and relationships – but to do so by sidestepping the utopian and dystopian hyperbole about the transformations of digital media and, thereby, of childhood, "outing" the notion of "the digital age" and "the digital native" for the rhetoric that it is (Helsper and Eynon, 2010).

In *The class*, Julian Sefton-Green and I positioned ourselves within the structures and practices that have the most power to shape children's opportunities – family, school and peer group – and we listened carefully to how children talk about and find spaces of agency in relation to these. We sought to reveal the subtle embedding of the media in young people's lives precisely by decentring the media as our object of study. This allowed us to recognise that in many ways, children's lives today are not so unrecognizable from our childhoods – engrossed in family, school, friends and humdrum daily neighbourhood life, with its modest excitements, commonplace frustrations and perennial hopes and fears. It allowed us to realise that the rhetoric of the digital-this and the e-that is itself doing discursive work, acting as a lightning rod that encapsulates and reveals both society's problems and the nature of their solutions. Thus technology is promoted as a way of legitimating politicians' quick-fix solutions for so-called "broken schools" or "broken families". It is imagined by anxious parents as crucial to "getting ahead" or "keeping up" or "being good parents". The discourse of the digital is even called upon by young people seeking to assert their autonomy as the emerging yet misunderstood "digital generation".

Somewhere in between the mundane realities of everyday life and the rhetoric of rapid change, our ethnography revealed a host of active struggles to shape young people's ways of living and learning in ways that both reflect and yet are easily masked by the character of the "digital age", as this chapter will discuss. But first a little context.

This work is located within and funded by the MacArthur Foundation's Connected Learning Research Network (Ito et al., 2013). The network has spent the past five years thinking about the challenges facing education, the inequalities in society, and the coincidence between these major structural problems and the ways in which young people are whole heartedly embracing digital media – especially those who are disadvantaged or marginalised. So, can digital media scaffold new pathways for creativity and participation? Some of the extraordinary youth identified by other projects in the network – actively building gaming communities or organising through fan creativity – indeed suggests new possibilities for connected learning (Jenkins et al., 2016). But what of the "ordinary" young people, the "average" kids such as we met in *The class*? There were few if any hackers, vloggers or entrepreneurs in their midst. So can connected learning open up new opportunities for them? And what difference might that make? This brings me to our sociological framing.

Children, far more than adults, have always had to live in circumstances not of their own making. Young teenagers in particular look for opportunities for agency and self-realisation within structures that are in some ways blind to their efforts and in other ways keen to anticipate and shape their efforts towards particular, often pre-determined goals. The resulting challenges are in some ways enabled but also undermined by today's historical circumstances of late or reflexive modernity – a risk society in which individuals are disembedded from tradition, collectivities are crumbling and new uncertainties and indeterminacies assail us on all sides (Giddens, 1991). This is a historical period, at least in the West, whose contours are defined by the global flows of people, goods, money, technology, ideas and meanings (Appadurai, 1996), by human-created risks (more than natural hardship and disaster) and by immersion in a highly individualised, future-focused, competitive, media-saturated culture in which our experiences and possibilities are visualised and narrated for us in ways that promise greater choice and control and deliver the opposite, generating intense anxiety that further fuels the process of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Thus it is characteristic rather than unusual that our class lived within a few square miles of each other, within which people speak a host of different languages, melding diverse cultures and encompassing the world's religions. In the school, unusually perhaps, but typical of London as a "superdiverse" global city (Watson and Saha, 2012), the refugee's child sits next to the millionaire's child. In their homes, each child can access multiple large and small screens along with fast broadband but most rarely visit the city centre just a few miles away. It is also a world bifurcated by social class – marked, classically, by the railway line passing through those few square miles of suburb, with half the class living on the right side and half living on the wrong side of the tracks.

For children, late modernity is repositioning children's place in society in a host of ways, visible for example in the reconstruction of family, competitive

pressures on schools, extended transition to adulthood, uncertain employment, and heightened ambitions in celebrity culture (Chambers, 2012). It is also repositioning how society imagines children and childhood – Beck talks of children as representing the last hope of "enchantment" in our cynical lives; Giddens (2006) sees how we invest in and worry about children as our way of investing in – trying to control, even 'colonise' – the future. So we have smaller families, and we try to give each child the very best of everything; respecting their rights in the newly democratised family (to use another of Giddens' phrases) even as we worry that this makes us overindulgent; keeping them indoors and wrapped in cotton wool even as we worry that this saps their resilience; pushing them to learn violin and coding even while remembering nostalgically our own past freedom to stay out all day getting muddy and lost. Lest I digress into an account of all society's troubles, my point is that the digital both promises solutions and yet is just one particular thread in a much larger tapestry of social change. So how did the digital thread itself through the lives of our class of 28 13-14 year olds?

The methods employed in this project are outlined in Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016 as well as blogged at www.parenting.digital. Suffice it to say here that our aim in spending time in the key sites that structure children's lives (home, school, peer group) became the main sites of our fieldwork, with our focus being on the interrelations between them, whether or not underpinned by digital media. The sites intersect because the children move across and between them all, creating connections and disconnections through their daily practices. This matters because, although each site is important for children, they are disconnected from the adults' point of view. Thus, in ways that turned out to be important, teachers rarely see into the home, or parents into the school, or adults the online or peer spaces of children's lives. Only the children themselves make the connections in practice – and, in some ways, digital media, by increasingly connecting up previously unconnected activities. Also, of course, for one year, we as researchers moved across the sites, insofar as we were able (we discuss the ethical and methodological challenges in Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016, chapter 2).

2.   A day in the life of "digital" teens

Consider, to set the scene, a typical school day. Arriving at school in the morning was stressful for us and the teenagers as we made the transition from sleepiness to being on full alert, from the comfort of pyjamas at home to the stringent rules of school uniform, from family who knows our ways to teachers stationed in crowded hallways checking on conformity with theirs. Fesse was usually late, partly because he played Xbox till late into the night, partly because he relied on his older sister to

chivvy him out of the house each morning. Salma arrived neat and calm, having texted her friends early to synchronise walking to school together, chatting all the way.

For much of the day, the class faced the interactive "smart screen" at the front as teachers integrated YouTube clips and other electronic resources into lessons. You could see teachers are still working out how to do this not only practically but also pedagogically. For instance, they incorporate digital media in subject lessons as a convenient window on the world in geography or history ("look at this country" or "look at that historical period") at the same time as critically deconstructing text and image in media studies classes. Relatedly, there's little connection between the teaching of music and music technology in school and the children's love of music listening or learning at home – Fesse, for instance, his family lacking money for lessons, was teaching himself guitar via YouTube tutorials but his teachers seemed unaware and this effort gained no recognition at school (Sefton-Green, 2013).

Walking home from school turned out to be a significant moment away from adult scrutiny, a relaxed in-between time, often the last chance to talk to friends face-to-face before returning home, only then able to reconnect via digital media. The class liked to stretch out this journey as they unwound from the demanding rhythm of the school day. Giselle told us how she made it a "slow journey," while Abby said with relief: "We'll like, go shopping or just, like, go out to the park or something or just, like, just go do anything really, that we feel like doing". Yes, they had their phones in their hand, checking for messages and sharing updates and jokes. But the point was to do what they felt like doing, and to do it together face to face.

Once at home, homework was often accompanied by Facebook, partly as a distraction and partly for a bit of peer guidance in maths or French. Some became quickly absorbed in computer games – Nick with the school mates he had spent all day with, Giselle on her family's Minecraft server, Adam with people he only knows in the multi-player game where he felt, finally, that he could really be himself. Abby's extended family enveloped her in a world of talk about and despite the music and TV playing constantly, while Megan constructed a private space in Tumblr, hours passing by unnoticed. Max, Jenna and Alice would gather at Alice's house to chat, mess around and talk about Harry Potter, and Shane would go out on his bike whenever he could. Each found themselves drawn, to varying degrees, into their parents' efforts to gather "as a family", sometimes over supper or shared hobbies but more often than not, simply chatting in front of the TV, albeit each with phones or tablets at the ready, before peeling off in separate directions.

The "ordinary diversity" of teenagers' lives is thus threaded through with digital media but not really about them except insofar as they serve to connect or disconnect people in meaningful or frustrating ways. In the book we develop such observations to argue that young people no more wish to be constantly plugged in than do the adults around them. What they want, rather, is to have the choice when

and where to disconnect from the often rule-bound and sometimes conflictual world they find themselves in. In other words, using digital devices has become teenagers' way of asserting agency: choosing not to listen to sometimes bossy parents or annoying younger siblings or seemingly critical teachers; choosing to reconnect digitally with sympathetic friends or not to miss out on the ongoing peer "drama". The overriding importance of agency is also shown by teenagers' choice to escape the growing digital embrace of their school – for when teachers use digital media in class or contact home via email or the intranet, students are likely to whisper to each other behind their hands in class or act as if they have no idea teachers have posted extra maths exercises on their blog so students can extend their studies in their leisure time. But using digital devices has also become adults' way of trying to reach and guide teenagers – in ways that young people do not always welcome.

3.   Learning in the digital age

Most of the families we visited made some effort to anticipate – and support – the learning environment of the school within the home, providing a desktop workstation or creating a quiet corner of a bedroom or living room as a place of study. In so doing, parents tried to imagine what might help their child's learning, usually with little knowledge of the hardware, software or pedagogic practices of the school. One case highlighted strongly the efforts that parents are making to use digital technology to improve their child's prospects. Yusuf was the eldest of four children in a devout Muslim family that had emigrated from East Africa when he was little. His father had been a trained nurse but in London could only obtain work as a ticket inspector; his mother spoke very limited English. At school, we saw that Yusuf worked quietly and conscientiously in lessons and was doing well in math and science. When we visited him at home, we found that two distinct learning practices were high on his parents' agenda. First, his twice-weekly attendance at Quran school, which involved a considerable amount of rote learning (in Arabic) that he did not always fully understand, as well as more open discussion of moral and social issues. Here, progression was measured by learning the suras (verses of the Quran) by heart.

Second, his father had purchased an integrated series of math and English programs on CD for around £3,000 – a considerable expenditure for any family and especially for one with such modest means as Yusuf's. The CDs provided a series of graded activities and tests; when a certain number of tests have been passed, the company that makes the CDs issues bronze, silver, and gold certificates. At home, one of the bedrooms had been turned into a "classroom", with large wall charts marking the children's progress through the tests along with a careful arrangement of further educational resources: CDs, books, worksheets, and

test materials. Yusuf's father referred to himself as a sort of head teacher, and each child was expected to complete a certain number of tests weekly, filling in the appropriate cells in the wall chart. This demanded considerable discipline since Yusuf's father was often absent on shift work, and his mother could not communicate well with the children.

Both the Quran school and the home investment in educational technology mirrored the emphasis on structured learning tasks and quantified indicators of progression that we saw at school in its implementation of national curriculum levels. Yet the school was unaware that Yusuf was engaged in either of these learning activities out of school. Nor was it clear to us that the family's investment particularly aided his achievement at school or his learning for its own sake. This disconnection between home and school learning environments was particularly ironic because in many ways the father was extending the school's logic into the home. At school, the master metaphor for learning was that of "levelling". At its most straightforward, this meant assessing student progress on the national curriculum through reference to standardised grades (called "levels"). But as a discursive practice, and as a metaphor for progress, it was thoroughly embedded in school life (I overheard a teacher ask a student: "have you been levelled for art yet?"). This was enabled through the efficient operation of the digital and networked School Information Management System (as discussed in Livingstone, 2014). This system was used to encoded the students' attainment and behaviour on a continuous basis, with multiple data points entered for each child each day. The sheer effort of maintaining the system meant teachers spent a lot of class time staring at the computer, with both students and also teachers becoming subject to constant surveillance and monitoring.

Learning, thereby, became instrumentalized – if it could be levelled, it counted – but if it could not (informal or home learning, for instance, or cultural knowledge outside the curriculum) it just didn't count, literally. Parent-teacher evenings became an extraordinary discursive exercise of working out, through often fraught parent-teacher negotiation, whether what a child had learned outside school could somehow be recorded in the system and thus valued by the school. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Yusuf's father liked the school's standardized approach to learning. But so did many of the others – many children could tell us what level they were for each subject – including their actual level, predicted level, target level and stretch level! As Salma explained: "It's quite good because they keep what track, like, if you're going on track. All your levels, they know all your levels and they know if you have to boost it or you're doing good. So I think it's good that they have all that". And middle class Adriana's dad explained to us carefully that visible metrics make the school fair: "Given the kind of school it is and the kind of intake it has… you know, they have to be fair and they can't just sort of selectively be disciplinarians for the people who they think might be trouble and let the others do what they like".

We were tempted to argue that the school exemplified the inexorable logic of a mediatized institution of surveillance and control, imposing a relentless regime of discipline and the standardisation of learning that reduced knowledge to test results (Rawolle, 2010; Livingstone, 2014). But since the families liked the system, we found ourselves wondering whether growing up in an individualised society where traditional anchors have become disembedded, and the struggle for success is acutely felt, perhaps this system offered a welcome clarity and even a sense of justice. Can one really ask today's risk-averse parents to experiment with flexible and unproven forms of learning and assessment when the payoff is risky?

4.   World Challenge: connections versus disconnections

One of the advantages of spending a full year with the class was that we could follow how some events developed slowly, over time. In such ways, the subtle patterns of connections and disconnections – both desired and problematic – could be traced across the sites of home, school and peer group. For instance, at the start of the school year the whole year group of some 250 13-year-olds were invited to participate in a "World Challenge" – a two-week trip to Malaysia for those who could win the competition to enter and raise the necessary (and sizeable) funds to participate. The prize was to see the rainforest and learn about the lives of people in developing countries – it promised "an amazing journey of self-discovery", connecting individual and collaborative activities across school, home, and community, locally and globally, through digital networks (for a more detailed account, see Livingstone, 2015). Around one-third of our class entered the competition, with a seemingly sensible set of decisions resulting in just a handful being selected – all from middle-class homes, mostly white.

Our interest was in the "digital" dimension of the World Challenge. The participants were meant to connect with each other locally and globally to co-ordinate shared activities and monitor progress. Several digital networks were established to enable this: an email network for the participants and teacher at school; an intranet to record their progress and funds raised; a website to explain about the wider Challenge, with forums to network with those in other schools. Yet we observed a catalogue of minor but telling problems over the year, and for us they exemplified related difficulties of digital technology that we witnessed in classrooms, after-school clubs and efforts to connect school and home. We watched the teacher try to demonstrate the World Challenge website to the students on the day that the school's internet went down. On another day she had forgotten her password. When she posted meeting minutes on the school's intranet, it turned out that the students did not know how to access it. And so on.

This is not to say the project failed – it was successful. But it succeeded as a highly local, largely "offline" effort. The young people met face to face after school to review their progress and discuss the next tasks. They organised fundraising events at school (a parent quiz night, a cake sale, an Easter egg hunt) and in their neighbourhood (babysitting, car washing, bag-packing in an upscale supermarket). Only after they finally got to Malaysia were the photos of the trip delightedly uploaded to Facebook for all to see.

So isn't this the digital age? Well, yes, but the imperative to connect is not as straightforward as often supposed. For, while digital networks can connect home and school, youth and adults, local and global spheres, both teachers and young people have a lot invested in keeping their lives separate, under their own control and away from the scrutiny of the other. For instance, we suggested to both the teacher and the students that it would be helpful to set up a Facebook group to co-ordinate World Challenge activities. The teacher thought this a good idea, but worried that it would give the students access to her profile, her personal life. Unbeknown to her, however, the students had already set up a Facebook group to co-ordinate themselves, but they didn't want to give a teacher access to their profiles either!

Since the school, as we have seen, was very competent in handling the school Information Management System, we cannot conclude that the problems of the World Challenge reflected limitations less of skill than of will. Interviews with teachers revealed they precisely did not want to use digital media to connect to students and parents. To protect their time, their privacy, their authority, and to avoid the influx of mess and muddle that they imagined was dominant at home. Still, it isn't that nothing is changing for young people in the digital age. The World Challenge, as with use of the School Information Management System – although undertaken conscientiously and often pleasurably, surely reinforce the ethos of instrumentalized knowledge, individualised competition and reproduction of social advantage, bolstering rather than transcending barriers between home and school, and far from managing to realise the potential of digital media to scaffold new forms of learning or build new pathways to opportunity.

5.   Conclusions

Now that digital networks underpin and enable social networks, it seems that the logic of the digital age dictates that connection is good and, therefore, disconnection is bad. In our public and private lives, at micro and macro levels, getting more connected is called for, planned for and celebrated. Connections are heterarchical, agentic, creative. Many hope that the affordances of digital, networked technologies can be harnessed to connect disaffected or "underperforming" young people

with exciting learning opportunities, or disillusioned teachers with innovative ways of engaging their students, or marginalised families with knowledge traditionally accessible only to the privileged. But how many connections do people need or want? And do our institutions yet know how to sustain them? After spending a year with the class, it became clear to me that, on the one hand, there are plenty of reasons why disconnections could be positive and connections intrusive, and, on the other hand, plenty of reasons why connections could be improved – better mediated digitally, but also better connections across home and school, child and adult.

In our book we concluded in terms of 3 C's. First, a dominant theme was competition – the competitive individualism of the aspiring middle-classes, now spreading also to encompass the diversity of families including many poor ones. This often led to enthusiastic adoption of digital media goods along with the latest digital skills; but the vision is not necessarily that of connected learning, and it certainly doesn't promote social justice. Undercutting the pressure to compete we also saw various forms of conservativism, with a little "C", as parents sought reflexively and children more instinctively to resist the onward rush of social change, shoring up traditions, evading the demands of commercialism, remembering to value conversation, face-to-face where possible, and finding tactics to resist the reach of the digital. Digital media were often appropriated for these purposes too, although often not particularly creatively. The third C is for connections. If we are to get more ambitious for our children, and if we are excited by the potential of digital media to overcome barriers to interaction, enabling hybridity and flexibility, it will be vital to respect people's conservative desire to protect traditional interests, find better ways to undercut the pressures to compete, work with rather than against young people's imperatives as agents, and make a more compelling case for the opportunities that shouldn't be missed.

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Biography

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