Supporting Awareness through Participation: Young People as Co-Researchers on Digital Media Use[1]

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Summary

Students from junior high and upper secondary schools are made active participants in the research process, as co-researchers in developing digital media use in Swedish public school. In the (new) sociology of childhood young people are considered active participants of the contemporary media culture (Prout, 2005) as they are fluent users of digital media (Buckingham, 2006; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). At the same time, the school environment (and especially so the Swedish public school) is constrained in the access to and the use of digital media, and hence school context is limited in relation to how the young people/pupils will experience and understand the affordances of digital media in general, and user created content in special. In this presentation we will focus on our methodological experiences and reflections on young people as partners in the research process. This methodological approach is influenced by the notion of "concientización", or consciousness (making conscious), as developed by Freire (1974).

Key words: Multimodal Expression - Digital Media - School - Children as Co-authors - Critical Perspective.

Introduction

Robinson (2011) is just one of many authors who comment upon the current state of the contemporary school, as being out of date and not being able to appropriate a sound relationship to the use of digital media. The arguments behind this critique are many: that society at large has changed with the ubiquitous use and access to ICT Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Castells, 1996; Robinson, 2011); that the labour market has changed and as a consequence the information society will have other kinds of needs than the industrial society had (Castells, 1996; Robinson, 2011); that we are developing new ways of interrelational communication (Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1995; Bruns, 2007; Hernwall & Siibak, 2011); that the use of ICT goes hand in hand with other ways of learning new kind of things (Lévy, 1997; Buckingham, 2006; Hernwall, 2010; Pédro, 2008, Burbules, 2008); that contemporary children use ICT fluently and in a variety of ways outside school (Tapscott, 1998; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Buckingham, 2008); that the use of ICT makes possible user created content (Papert, 1996; Manovich, 2001), and finally; that access to and appropriation of ICT gives way to multimodal literacy (Ventola, Charles & Kaltenbacher, 2004*;* Kress, 2010). There are also a large number of national as well as international initiatives aiming at supporting school development in this field, focusing on possible definitions of digital competences (Søby 2003;

European Parliament 2006; Ananiadou & Claro 2009; European Commission 2010; Hernwall, 2008) or evaluation of existent practices (Law, et.al. 2008; Hernwall & Vestby 2005; Tømte 2008, 2010; EURYDICE 2004).

A description such as the one stated above already gives reason to seriously consider what meanings ICT have in the everyday life of contemporary young people, as digital media is obviously a very prominent element in their lives. Adding to this ubiquitousness of digital media and its impact on everyday practices, we acknowledge the urgent issue of how the use of digital media – and in consequence the experienced qualities – are related to societal power structures. The PISA study 2009 (OECD, 2010; Skolverket, 2011) on 15-year old students performance in primary reading (but also paying attention to mathematics and science) states that Swedish students rank above average as compared with student from other 16 OECD-countries. Still, there are variations among the Swedish students, which are related to the analytic variables of gender (girls perform better than boys), ethnicity (immigrant students perform lower than non-immigrant students), and class (socio-economic factors make a difference in favour of better off students) (Skolverket, 2011). In other words, the already known societal power structures prominent in the formal learning situation (Medieval, 2009; Orvis, 2009) seem to be a determining factor in relation to students' use of ICT as well as the qualities this use generates. Hernwall & Lindkvist (2011) state that even the

educational setting (the classroom) seems to be one of the intersecting factors in the use of ICT among junior high school pupils.

Even though Swedish students seem to develop skills in using ICT at the same level of the average student in other OECD-countries, the appropriation of these skills are obviously related to societal power structures (gender, ethnicity, socio-economy, and milieu). This means, that there are great variations in how ICT are used, and consequently the qualities experienced vary. Of the many questions this raises, we will use this introduced ideas as a backdrop for saying that there seems to be a need to a better understanding of what young people actually *do* with digital media in their everyday life. This deepened knowledge about the use of digital media in the lives of young people is something that is necessary for society at large (as we do not know enough about what they do) and especially in educational environments (as we need to know more about the qualities appropriated from using ICT/digital media). This is also the main objective of the UNGMODs[4] research project.

The aim of this article is to present the methodology used in the UNGMODs research project, in order to get closer to the experienced use of ICT among junior high school pupils (i.e. about 13 years old). We set up a "crash course" in research methodology for these pupils, in order to introduce them to the research practice and to give them a sound base so that they could be co-researchers in the research project. This methodology is inspired by critical pedagogy as framed by Freire (1994), since one of its corner stones is the development of critical thinking competences among the learners. Freire argues that the knowledge and mastery of media, their languages and the mechanisms by which they are produced give the subject an opportunity to understand and uncover the underlying message that is mediated by the media. For Freire this is a necessary dimension of critical reading and a necessary condition to an education for change.

The challenge of developing a critical media literacy

The accounts of children as competent users of ICT in their leisure time are numerous (i.e. Buckingham, 2006; Livingstone, 2009). Still, in the school environment, the use of digital media is scant. In the (new) sociology of childhood young people are considered active participants of the contemporary media culture (Prout, 2005), as they are fluent users of digital media (Buckingham, 2006; Livingstone, 2009). Young people should be considered active and competent users in two senses. They are competent human beings acting intentionally (as in contrast to passive "human becomings"). Consequently their use of digital media should be viewed as reflecting *their* needs and interests, rather than fulfilling the wishes of the surrounding world. Usually, children and young people are viewed as a new generation leading the

way to a more elaborated and qualitative use of digital media (Robinson, 2011; Buckingham, 2008).

Given the plasticity of digital media (Clark, 2003), one of its essential features is the possibility of a personalised use. This will inevitably mean that the use of a single user is "limited" in relation to all the imagined (and believed) possible uses. Simultaneously the opposite is true; it is practically impossible for a single user to grasp more than a fraction of all the possible uses yielded by the digital media. This leads to the fact that one of the more fundamental dimensions of any contemporary media literacy is to appropriate underlying qualities of digital media (c.f. Burbules 2007) rather than a pre-given set of more or less mechanical skills. A digital competence worthy of its name should in this line of reasoning focus on developing critical reflection, subjective judgements, evaluation of situational qualities, and a flexible use of digital expressions (c.f. Burbules, 2007; Buckingham 2006; Pédro, 2008; Erstad, 2005; Hernwall, 2010). But even if young people have a developed set of technological skills, they might lack the experience of being in the world necessary to   make them fluent in using digital media consciously and effectively. An illustration of this is the complexity demanded for interpreting the flow of information and for making critical judgements. And in this vein, according to critical pedagogy, the school has an important task: to educate pupils "to become critically literate" (McLaren, 2007, Burbules 2007, Graviz 2012).

The UNGMODs research project and pupil involvement

Early in the UNGMODs research project, seven pupils from a junior high school (Stockholm, Sweden, grade 7) took part in a seminar series on research methodology. The aim of this participation was for us to get closer to the leisure time use of digital media among junior high school pupils, to deepen their reflections on their own use, and to make them able to conduct minor empirical studies themselves. Giving the pupils the role of co-researchers means recognizing them as competent subjects and at the same time competent users of digital media as autonomous subjects. The overall aim of the UNGMODs research project is to study the qualities of multimodal configuring ("gestaltung") paying special attention to this use of digital media in relation to learning, knowledge development and the development of personal identity. Pupils from junior high school as well as upper secondary school were made partners in the project when studying their use of digital media in school and in their leisure time.

In the UNGMODs research project we have used a number of different methods for collecting data on the use of digital media in general, and for multimodal configuring in special among these pupils such as observations in the classroom; interviews with pupils and teachers; designing school assignments with teachers; analysis of different multimodal configurations (school and leisure time) and access to the hard drives of the pupils

school computers (junior high school pupils). Nevertheless the focus for this article is to describe the crash course in research methodology that a group of pupils from junior high school participated in. We will return to this shortly.

When doing research on young people, the level of their involvement can differ greatly. Hart (1992) speaks about eight different levels in the "ladder of participation", going from children being manipulated to participate to child-initiated research. This ladder illustrates the challenge in getting the unique perspective of the child (the subject). The first level of this ladder is "manipulation" where the child is in some way tricked to participate. In the next step the child becomes "decoration" and a charming element rather than a valuable contributor. Hart defines the third step in the ladder as "tokenism", where the child becomes a kind of hostage for the research. Thereafter the child is "assigned but informed", they have no choice but to participate, nevertheless they are informed on the aim of the research project. "Consulted and informed" as the fifth step should be understood as a step where the child has a voice of his/her own, even if research work is still controlled by adults. The sixth step in the ladder is "adult-oriented, shared decisions with children", which means that the child now can at some level influence the work, even though adults are still in charge. At the seventh step the work is "child-initiated and directed" the perspective is changed, and the work is now both initiated and directed

by children The eighth and last step in this ladder of participation is defined as "child-initiated, shared decisions with adults", and now the child has the responsibility to inform and even engage adults in the work.

Reflections on ethics

In the UNGMODs research project we have put special attention to ethical and methodological requirements for qualitative studies with children and youngsters (see Christensen & James, 2000). We have acquired informed consent from the schools where they are pupils, and the schools have informed the legal guardians of these children about the aim and content of the research project. Of course, it has been of major importance that the children themselves have been informed that their participation in the research project was voluntary and that they themselves had the right to decide whether to continue participating or not.

Regardless of what level of participation the child is expected to contribute with, research on, or with children put forward special demands on ethical and methodological considerations. The child is per definition not of age, and thus not fully responsible for his/her actions. In order to conduct research where children in one way or another are involved, the consent from the child is not enough. Such consent on partaking in the activities of the research project needs to be asserted with the consent of the legal guardians. Then it is of critical

importance that we as researchers do not take advantage of the situation, but we must be aware that we belong to the group of what Mayall (1994) describes as "child workers". As researchers, we have children as our target group and so their welfare, according to our more or less subjective definition, is our interest. Here it is possible to understand the many dimensions of children's perspective, as a perspective *on* children, *for* children or children's *own* perspective. Perspective *for* children is seldom found in the cultural sector, perspective *on* children is portrayed in i.e. the clothing industry, while children's *own* perspective is often filtered by the representations that wish to stress the authentic inside-perspective (Qvarsell, 2010).

Methodology and Data Collection: The young as "co-researcher"

As it was said above, the focus of the UNGMODs research project is to get close to young people's own experience and understanding of digital media in their everyday lives. We believe that by studying how young people use digital media and their perceptions of its affordances, we can deepen the understanding of the (growing) significance of digital technology for young people in their knowledge development and learning process.

Naming the pupils "co-researchers" is a deliberate choice, as we have not just studied them, but also have invited them to participate in the exploration of digital media and digital media use.

In the study presented in this article about the "crash course" in research methodology, the young were not only informants about their own media use. They were, furthermore, active explorers of their peers media use, and eventually also dialogue partners in the analysis of collected empirical data. We consider that it is essential that the voices of the young are given prominence in the research project. Löfberg believes this inside perspective is often necessary to make it possible to understand what is new and what is different:

> […] how new techniques are appropriated and made part of our modern culture must be carried out through the eyes of the people involved. It is only people themselves that perceive the world and who attribute affordances to what they see, and who can use what they see as a quality for enhancing action (Löfberg, 2006, s. 19).

The crash course in research methodology

We developed a short course in research methodology and research method to introduce students to the role of co-researchers. The aim was preparing them for collecting data on the use of digital media among their peers. The research methods crash course, which was conducted during 2009, had two main objectives. The first objective was to provide training for the co-researchers to collect data and to develop the co-researchers critical approach by discussing themes such as research ethics, perspective and data analysis.

The senior researchers conducted group exercises in methods for observations, techniques in interviewing and analysis of empirical data. The second objective of the crash course was to collect data on young people's use of ICT in their leisure time. This was done during the seminars, where the participating pupils told the researchers about their own use of ICT. The empirical data that they were to collect later on was a valuable extra dimension on young people's use of ICT in their leisure time. (See also Graviz & Lindkvist, 2010, and Hernwall & Lindkvist, 2011.)

During the methodology course, we strived to allow students to use their own experiences to reflect on how they could do interviews and observations among peers, the ethical and methodological dilemmas and challenges they might face, etc. Each occasion in the method course was thus an important opportunity to deepen our understanding of their use of digital media too. Their reflections and analysis of the material they collected was a valuable part of the empirical basis of the research project.

The four seminars

We met with students on four occasions to discuss research and research methods, and another time when we reflected together on the empirical material they collected between the third and fourth seminars. (See also the overview description of the content of this crash course in the appendix.) On the first occasion we focused on the

perspective of events and researcher perspectives relevant to the research process. Besides a presentation of research in various sciences and the differences between them, there were also perspective exercises. These exercises were then used as a starting point in the discussion of how data is produced and differences in perspective. This was also an opportunity to examine why they were interesting for the project both as students, as young technology users and as personal observers of their own use.

Focus on the second occasion was on their use of digital technology. The students did an exercise in observation on the topic: University students' media use in public settings (Södertörn University cafeteria). It was the first time they visited the university cafeteria. Students were asked to describe the environment, take notes of impressions and make interpretations. Students made observation for about twenty minutes and then we talked about students' own expressions and beliefs about technology use in relation to personal interests and the context, in this case "Södertörn University cafeteria".

The interaction between researchers and co-researchers would continue and during the third occasion the students in pairs of two (girl & boy) wrote an interview guide that could be used as a basis for peers interviews. After they have created an interview script they tested the questions for the students by trying them on one of our senior researchers.

There, we acted and tried to answer as if we were thirteen. In addition, we gave feedback on both the issues and the implementation of the interview, then discussed and evaluated interview questions with all participants.

The fourth and final moment of the qualitative group was an all-day workshop at their school environment. By this time, the would be co-researchers students had completed both their interviews and observations about what other students were doing with digital technology, mainly computers and the Internet. Individually, each student presented and discussed, together with a senior researcher, the collected materials and "created data". The main target of this exercise was Reflection: both reflection on the realization of the workshops exercises as well as reflection on the interpretation of the data.

The idea of the crash course

The idea behind the methodology of the course was that the youngsters must not only be our co-researchers in the sense that we have a dialogue about the research focus. Our co-researchers had also a search mission, where they were also active partners in data collection. To reach what we had planned we approached the course in the form of workshops. Seven pupils participated in the crash course and the senior researchers met with the seven pupils at four times. The discussion topics for each workshop were: What is research? Quantitative and Qualitative research

and what is to know?, Research Ethics, Anonymity, Data collecting: Interviews, Observations and Data Analysis.

We believe that by working with young people as co-researchers, it is possible to assign young people a more active role in research, since they are very good witnesses, bearing unique experiences and perspectives. Our task, as researchers, in the analytical phase of the research is to create relevant perspectives, interpretations and if necessary, generalizations. It is for this aim that the methodology course was developed, where a concept such as co-researchers was central. Together with the young, through generative conversations, we created jointly developed interpretations and understanding of other young people multimodal design and at the same time, hopefully, about their own lives. In extension, we assume that this will lead to increasing their critical understanding of both their own and their peers use of ICT in both school and leisure time.

Authentic witnesses

As in any other research project, it is crucial to find the authentic witnesses, the ones who have experiences that challenge and/or develop existent (pre-) conceptions. The voices of these witnesses should, ideally, also be relevant for a larger population, i.e. the contextualised setting of the study (or its general universe). Obviously, the researchers' way of interpreting the data is crucial in this respect.

The crash course gave us new data on the use of ICT among young people today and thus provided us with the opportunity to get closer to the children's perceptions of their use of such artefacts both in their leisure time and in the school setting. One main objective for the crash course was to instruct the pupils to become important contributors in the UNGMODs research project, by way of giving them an active role in both collecting and interpreting empirical data. It is our conviction that this group of seven junior high school pupils became aware of some of the most fundamental principles of qualitative research: the importance of making conscious our analytical perspective; the different qualities of different kinds of empirical data (such as observation, interviews, etc.); etc. The crash course also gave us, as senior researchers, a unique possibility to get deeper into the perceptions of these young persons, and in consequence also their peers.

Supporting awareness through participation

According to the eight levels of engagement, in the "ladder of participation" (Hart, 1992), we consider that the crash course in research methodology and research methods invited the pupils to the sixth level: "adult-oriented, shared decisions with children". The young had the opportunity not just to participate in the UNGMODs research project, but also to influence it. However, the research project is still managed and controlled by a small group of adults.

Of central importance in the UNGMODs research project, is to find the authentic witnesses, or the undistorted voices of the young. As Qvarsell (2010) writes, there is always the risk that children's own perspectives are filtered by the researchers own interpretations and interests. As it is obvious from this study, the pupils used the concepts introduced by us in the crash course, in their collection of and analysis of empirical data. This influence was of course intended, and did add extra qualities to their achievements as co-researchers. Still, it can serve as an illustration of the challenge in getting through to the "true" or "essential" experiences or feelings.

With that in mind, we think it is relevant to raise the question: *What is the child's perspective?* Our preliminary results reinforce the need of asking questions about validity and reliability of the data. Have we really got the authentic perspective(s) of the young? Is this "youth perspective" already adapted for us as adults? Or is this child/youth exactly like that, portraying a "true" child perspective and a (mild form of) exercise of authority/ power? Are the young "hostages" to a wish that they should be untouched by the adult world, and thus remain more genuine? Our reflection on questions as these is that the empirical data collected give us insight into a more or less authentic perspective of these young persons. But being authentic does not necessarily mean all-revealing or without bias. The challenge is to differentiate those accounts that are self-revealing from those that are accommodated to

suit what they believe is what we as adults want from them/what we want to hear. As a consequence, this means that every account communicated is a product of the free choice of perspective and expression of the subject. What then becomes communicated is, most likely, that which is in our co-researchers experience, harmless for their integrity when shared with the adult world. And understood as such, the data collected in the crash course is mostly valuable and highly complex.

The crash course can furthermore be described as a moment of action research. This course was designed to stimulate the active participation of the pupils/co-researchers in the research process. During the crash course both the pupils/co-researchers as well as the senior researchers are affected by, as well as affecting, the phenomena under study. Or, in other words, there are different parallel learning processes of the participating subjects dialectically intertwined with each other as well as with the phenomena studied. Each part is thus affected by, but also responsible for, affecting the other parties in this inextricable relationship.

An important aspect of the crash course in research methods and methodologies was that the data collected by the young co-researchers where analysed together with the senior researchers. In this analysis the interpretations was scrutinized as the co-researchers were encouraged to reflect upon how the researcher implicitly (as well as explicitly) can colour the results by interpreting the data in accordance with subjective experiences and values. By introducing this level of reflection we wanted to make explicit what is often implicit and/or unconscious. This process of making what is often hidden visible is named "concientización" (of making conscious) by Paulo Freire (1974), and is one of corner stones for the development of critical thinking. We believe that the crash course has contributed in the emancipatory ambitions of both the research project as well as the practice of the formal pedagogics by making visible and noticeable what is perhaps often taken for granted and/or considered everyday experiences. And in this case it also made possible asking questions about the value of, and more specifically, the possible learning outcomes of using ICT. One example of how we tried to encourage this process of concientizatión, was the interview and observational guide that helped the co-researchers in their data collection. This guide was written and handed out by us, and was based on our discussions on previous crash course seminars. Questions supporting the reflection on differences between everyday knowledge and knowledge created by systematic collection and analysis of specific and defined phenomena were of central importance in this guide. That is, the construction of knowledge according to scientific criteria. As previously stated, the main objective of the crash course from the perspective of the co-researchers, was not only a deepened sense of reflection in relation to their use of ICT in

their everyday life, but also, a deepened reflection on how to understand this use of ICT, its qualities and meanings. The crash course developed into, presumably, both a more elaborated *concientizatión* of their use of ICT and its values, as well as an assistance to the UNGMODs research project with unique insights in the use of ICT among Swedish teenagers.

During the analysis of the collected data material we found that the crash course encouraged critical literacy (McLaren 2007) among both the co-researchers as well as the senior researchers. In the analysis, preconceptions, as well as in some instances prejudices, on the use of ICT among young people were made visible, especially on use related to gender categories and norms about possible harms from computer use. According to McLaren (2007) the core challenge for the educational system is to educate students/pupils into a critical literacy. One way of achieving this critical literacy is, he says, to give legitimacy and relevance to the experiences and knowledges that young people bring with them to the classroom. Thus the world of the young is related to the teaching practices of the school as well as the curricula. The mission of the pedagogical practice, according to McLaren, is to "offer students a "language of critique" and "a language of possibility" so that they can conceptualize, analyze, theorize, and critically reflect upon their experiences" (McLaren, 2007:51).

To summarize, we consider that the crash course in research methods and methodologies can be understood in relation to the challenges of education, as described by McLaren (2007). These are challenges that are first and foremost related to the development of "language of critique" and a "language of possibility". By educating pupils into co-researchers they obviously develop another level of critical insight into their own everyday life. In this sense, we have seen examples in later stages of the UNGMODs research project when the pupils continue using concepts from the crash course in discussing and describing not just the use of ICT in their everyday life, but also in their approach to school assignments.

Notes

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Appendix

Overview of the crash course in research methodology and research method, UNGMODs research project, fall 2009.

Meeting 1	**The basics of research**
Whole class. In their classroom.	What is research? Qualitative and quantitative research; what it is to know something; what is a (everyday and research) perspective.
Meeting 2	**Collecting data, analysis**
Focus group. At University campus.	Hawthorne-effect; ethnography; collecting and storing of empirical data; analysis of empirical data. Exercise: observation.
Meeting 3	**Ethics, anonymity**
Focus group. At University campus.	Anonymity; research ethics (informed consent, etc.); collecting and storing of empirical data; analysis of empirical data. Exercise: interview (preparing and conducting).
Meeting 4	**Analysis**
Focus group. At conference centre.	Analysis of study done. Each pupil/co-researcher has collected empirical data (between meeting 3 and 4). Discussion and analysis.