

**THE
NEVER-ENDING
STORY
OF STUDENTS
ABILITIES**

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces theoretical and empirical perspectives on the relationship between digital media, media literacy and civic participation. These perspectives are used to frame the qualitative analysis of the way teachers participating in AppYourSchool's Digital Ateliers (DA) evaluated their students' experiences in them. The analysis presents answers to the following three questions: what skills did students make use of? What were the main outcomes for them? and how did the Digital Ateliers succeed (or not) in generating these outcomes?

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The literature on the relationship between youth, media, media literacy and civic participation is both abundant and scarce: theories abound, empirical results are rare. From a theoretical standpoint, scientific, political and institutional discourses alike point to a strong potential of digital media towards the development of a more democratic, more participative, more inclusive society. Yet one needs to be careful not to fall prey to technological determinism, as there exists little evidence of the impact of technology alone on a massive investment of the population, and youth in particular, in mediated forms of civic life (Papaioannou, 2013). In an attempt to clarify the relationship between media and participation, Carpentier (2015) distinguished participation from access and interaction. Whereas access is defined in terms of presence of media in one's environment, and interaction in terms of socio-communicative relationships established with and through media, participation involves power and decision-making on and with media. In brief, Carpentier argues that while media access and interaction are preconditions for participation within and through media, they are necessary but not sufficient conditions for participation.

Additionally, the emergence of digital media has been associated with the development of alternative ways for young people to engage in society. For example, Bennett (2008) described how youth civic engagement shifted from the traditional model of a dutiful citizen—emphasizing participation in political institutions and knowledge about government and politics—to the model of an actualizing citizen identity—stressing “volunteer activities, local and online community engagement, youth philanthropy, social activism, political consumerism and lifestyle politics” (Papaioannou, 2013, p. 4). These new forms of engagement, which rely heavily on digital media, represent the integration of participation and self-realization, where civic engagement and the production of one's identity feed one another (Denouël, Granjon, & Aubert, 2014).

From this perspective, the AppYourSchool Digital Ateliers can be seen as an attempt to bring students from access to participation, and to actualize their citizen identity.

As the mere ubiquity of digital media does not per se guarantee universal civic participation, media literacy can be considered as a good candidate to convert the potential of digital media into participative practices. In its seminal formulation, media literacy was historically defined as “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes”¹ (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993, p. v). The wording of this definition is important. On the one hand, ‘ability’ points to the potential dimension of media literacy: it defines what individuals are able to do, not just what they do. What kind of ability? We will get back to this later. On the other hand, individuals are designated as ‘citizens’, drawing a clear connection between media literacy and citizenship. Extending this idea, Hobbs augmented the classic definition of media literacy with a reference to social responsibility and social action, adding two components to “access”, “analyze” and “create”:

REFLECT on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social responsibility and ethical principles

TAKE SOCIAL ACTION by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace and community, and by participating as a member of a community” (Hobbs, 2010, p. vii-viii, my emphasis)

In this definition, media literacy appears to come in support of the self-actualizing citizen. Jenkins and colleagues (2006) also noted how new forms of literacies were required to fulfill the promise of participatory cultures², and to help overcome three of the challenges of our networked society:

THE PARTICIPATION GAP

The unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow.

THE TRANSPARENCY PROBLEM

The challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways that media shape perceptions of the world.

¹ Many different versions of this canonical definition exist in the literature, but Aufderheide's version is most often referred to as the original one, and all include the three distinct components of access, analysis/evaluation, and creation/production.

² “A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006, p. 3)

THE ETHICS CHALLENGE

The breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants.” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3)

Compared to the theoretical landscape that has just been (too) quickly evoked, the literature presenting empirical results documenting the actual contribution of media literacy to civic participation is very limited. The available results mostly concentrate on variables that constitute proxies for actual measurements of participation: intentions or self-reported behaviors. For example, Hobbs and colleagues (2013) found that the self-reported intent to participate in civic engagement of high school students could be predicted by their self-reported positive attitudes about the news, self-reported media literacy competences, and self-reported in-class video pre-production experience. Similarly, in a quasi-experiment with 400 high school students, Martens and Hobbs found “[p]articipation in a media literacy program was positively associated with information-seeking motives, media knowledge, and news analysis skills. Moreover, information-seeking motives, media knowledge, and news analysis skills independently contributed to adolescents’ [self-reported] intent toward civic engagement.” (Martens & Hobbs, 2015, p. 120). Additionally, Kahen and colleagues concluded from a survey involving two large samples of high school students and young graduates that “[self-reported] digital media literacy education is associated with increased [self-reported] online political engagement and increased [self-reported] exposure to diverse perspectives” (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012, p. 1). Finally, in a quasi-experiment involving 239 university undergraduate students, Mihailidis (2008) found that students enrolled in a media literacy class both increased their critical understanding of the media and developed cynicism and negativity about the role of media in society. He concluded that media literacy curricula should not stop at teaching critical analysis of media, and should promote active citizenship.

In the perspective of these results, the AppYourSchool seems to pursue this recommendation, by putting students at work, calling upon their digital skills and offering them ways to act within their community, at different scales, from their classrooms to their extended social environment.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEACHERS’ AND EXPERTS’ EVALUATION SHEETS

The remainder of this chapter provides a look at the AppYourSchool project through the lens of what the teachers involved in the Digital Ateliers said about them after the fact. An inductive thematic content analysis of the ‘Teachers and Experts Evaluation Sheet’ filled out for the 43 completed Digital Ateliers (DA) was completed. QSR Nvivo 11 Pro, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to code the evaluation sheets. As the Digital Ateliers were designed and implemented in different ways, depending on the national contexts and partners involved, the analysis examined recurring themes as much as it sought to document the diversity of issues in the teacher and expert evaluation sheets.

The analysis presents answers to the following three questions: what skills did students make use of? What were the main outcomes for them? And how did the Digital Ateliers succeed (or not) in generating these outcomes? As for the empirical literature cited in the first section of this paper, the answers to these questions provided by the analysis need to be taken for what they are: interpretations based on indirect data, consisting in the teachers’ perceptions of the DA.

WHAT SKILLS DID THE STUDENTS MAKE USE OF?

The idea of youngsters being “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), naturally competent to use digital technology, has been nuanced by a number of research works. For example, in the context of internet use, while they appear to master operational skills (such as operating a web browser), youngsters seem to be lagging behind their elder counterparts in terms of information skills (e.g. defining one’s information needs, searching for and evaluating information) and strategic skills (i.e. making decisions and taking actions to accomplish one’s goals with digital media) (van Dijk & van Deursen, 2014).

At this point it may be useful to distinguish between competences and skills. Whereas skills refer to abilities involving the simple reproduction of learnt procedures in ways and contexts that are similar to those in which they were assimilated, the concept of competence (Scallan, 2004; Rey et al., 2012) refers to the ability of the individual to engage intentionally in relevant courses of action in complex, novel and non-stereotyped situations, by drawing on their knowledge, skills and attitudes, and on the external resources available in the situation. In short, if digital media literacy is defined in terms of competence, while the technical know-hows of students may be described as skills, they do not qualify as full-fledged media literacy competences.

How competent are the students who participated in the Digital Ateliers? It is difficult to say without access to extensive observational data, or advanced assessment instruments, neither of which were available. However, the feedback from the teachers allows us to identify what types of extracurricular skills-as-resources students made use of, and how the design of the Digital Ateliers pushed them to collectively make use of these skills in ways that would foster their critical and creative media competences and support forms of participation.

As a matter of fact, teachers emphasized how students made use of a whole array of technical skills pertaining to the use of digital technology: from smartphone and tablet use to photo and video editing, to online search, to video gaming, etc. However, in line with the literature, a number of teachers pointed out that these skills were basic, and sometimes unevenly distributed in groups. Nevertheless, in the majority of countries where DA were experimented, teachers also noted their students’ ability to explore new tools and learn to use them on their own, thereby extending their skills. Teachers also noted that the extracurricular abilities their students used exceeded ICT-related skills, and included a variety of broader, more generic competences (e.g. collaboration, problem-solving, reading, writing, orality, or artistic skills). Finally, the Digital Ateliers seemed to have allowed students not only to put their skills to use, but also to showcase them to their classmates, and in some cases to discover them for themselves, and/or to improve them as a result of their participation in the Digital Ateliers.

WHAT OUTCOMES DID THE DIGITAL ATELIERS YIELD?

One may look at the outcomes of the Digital Ateliers in terms of the evolving relationship that participating students develop with technology, with their environment, with school, and with themselves.

The different DA appear to have impacted the student's relationship to technology in different ways. On the one hand, some teachers stressed how the DA gave students the opportunity to try new apps and acquire knowledge about technology. On the other hand, other teachers highlighted how the DA encouraged divergent or creative uses of technology. This difference reflects a tension between two views of digital media literacy:

- a functional view, in which individuals are expected to comply with technological innovation, and use technology in instrumental ways to accomplish their goals ;
- and an extended view, in which compliance is supplemented by inventivity, and individuals are expected to be creative and critical in their uses of technology (Collard et al., 2017)

It is probably in the ways in which the DA affected the students' relationship to their environment that their participative dimension can mostly to be found.

First, the DA allowed students to acquire knowledge about their environment, be it their natural environment (e.g. its biodiversity in the *Eco-friendly city* DA in Lithuania) or their social environment (e.g. *Citizens* DA in Poland), requiring them to establish a relationship with inhabitants of their town, or to develop forms of intergenerational cooperation ("Lesson in the museum" in Lithuania).

Second, students contributed to their social environment by making their own work visible to their community, either through exhibitions, or online, which, as one teacher noted, provided an occasion to learn that sharing supports gaining new ideas and insights from others.

Third, and maybe most importantly, several DA confronted students with alternative viewpoints on their experienced world, for example by comparing their personal productions (*Self-portrait and identity* in Czech Republic), using media to produce alternative perspectives on their city (*City Fonts* in Poland), explore alternative ways of perceiving reality (*Different visions* in Czech Republic), or considering alternative interpretations of captioned images ("Five ways" in Greece). This is an important avenue for media literacy development, as each of these instances are occasions for students to develop a critical understanding of how "media shape perceptions of the world" (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Regarding the students' relationship to school, some teachers mentioned how the Digital Ateliers, by bringing them to do things not usually done in the classroom, may have motivated them to engage in school activities.

Finally, teachers noted how the DA affected the student's relationship to themselves, by providing them with an opportunity to express themselves and to experience the pride and pleasure of personal success, but also to question their own beliefs and explore their own identity.

HOW DID THE DIGITAL ATELIERS PRODUCE THESE OUTCOMES?

The main properties of the DA (as a pedagogical process) that were mentioned by teachers in connection with their outcomes can be grouped into four classes.

Among them, the fact that students enjoyed the activities and were motivated by them is the most often cited (and it is mentioned in every national context).

Second, most teachers shared the impression that the DA both promoted and highlighted the creativity of participating students (although the evaluation sheets do not make clear how teachers define creativity, a difficult concept to circumscribe).

Third, teachers emphasized the importance of group work (or in some instances peer work) in the DA. Some of them noted how this collective dynamic worked well in combination with the fact that skills that were useful to the DA were unevenly distributed among students, allowing them to learn from one another, and some to mentor others. Other teachers noted how group work in the DA stimulated shy students and revealed their skills, which may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Fourth, teachers from all national contexts highlighted how the DA's learner-centered approach favored active learning, albeit in a number of different ways:

- Learning by doing was cited as a major factor for the DA's success in five out of eight national contexts.
- The way learning was adapted to each student, and each student could make choices, learn at their own pace, and take responsibility for what and how they learned was cited in three national contexts.
- The possibility to learn by trial and error, in a supportive environment where students needed not be afraid to make mistakes was also cited in three different national contexts.

Finally, teachers noted how the confrontation with real life situations outside out the school walls fostered authentic learning, and opened up a space for discussion about the students' environment, which represents a strong opportunity to change their relationship to said environment, as discussed above.

This enumeration may cause the impression that the DA. Of course, some teachers also noted factors that acted as impediments in the unfolding of the DA. For example, two partners (Lithuania and Greece) reported that students were, at least initially, confused by the DA, as it represented non-habitual practices in the classroom, and did not require them to follow the common school rules. Another partner (Italy) noted how some students did not see their media practices (e.g. video gaming) as related to any valuable competence, an attitude that may be reinforced by some teachers dismissing passion-based activities in the classroom as "just play". Finally, another partner (Czech Republic) observed that the students' media productions did not always meet the teachers' expectations in terms of artistic quality.

CONCLUSION

Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) described how media literacy could support engaged citizenship in a participatory democracy, by producing critical thinkers, creators and communicators, and agents of social change. Based on the feedback from participating teachers, DA seemed to be at their best when they propelled the students in these three roles, by capitalizing on the students' extracurricular skills, and allowing them to share and improve what they knew about digital technology, to express themselves in public space and to engage with their community.

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