

Chapter 26

Mind the Gap: Digital Practices and School

Eduarda Ferreira

*CICS.NOVA, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Portugal*

Cristina Ponte

*CICS.NOVA, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Portugal*

Maria João Silva

InED, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, Portugal

Celiana Azevedo

*CICS.NOVA, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,
Portugal*

ABSTRACT

Digital practices are pervasive in the everyday lives of young people. However, to be emerged in digital networked practices does not inherently provide competences to critically examine media and online content. Formal learning could profit from young people's interests and enthusiasm in informal learning contexts, bridging the gap between formal learning and everyday digital practices. The school has an urgent and decisive role to promote digital literacies and to prepare young people to adapt to a changing world. This paper presents results from the project Net Children Go Mobile in Portugal to analyze the gap between digital practices and school. The digital gap between the culture of the school and the culture of children's lives outside school is not just about having more access to technology or more ICT training, it is essentially about having the competence of using critical thinking and a diverse set of skills in digital practices.

... we are witnessing a widening gap between the culture of the school and the culture of children's lives outside school. (Buckingham, 2007)

INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, as in many other western countries, almost all young people have at least one mobile device that they use intensively (Simões, Ponte, Ferreira, Doretto & Azevedo, 2014). The access to the internet is pervasive and they are almost “always-on” (Oblinger, 2004) and available for digital communication

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with mobile devices (Ferreira and Tomé 2010). However, it is important to highlight that this reality is not universal, in many parts of the world the internet is still generally restricted to the richer, better educated, younger, males in the community (Green, 2010).

Young people who attend our schools today were born and lived all their lives in a world with the internet, having access to the digital language of computers, video games and interactive media, being designated by Prensky (2001) as “digital natives”. Digital communication has become as frequent and natural as face-to-face. It is possible to say that young people have “digital lives” (Green & Hannon, 2007) considering the ubiquity of technology and of digital forms of communication. However, being a “digital native” and having “digital lives” does not mean that young people have automatically digital competences and digital literacy/ies (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Selwyn, 2009).

Media landscapes are rapidly expanding in many parts of the world at the same time that the degree of personalization of media technologies increase, supporting a more diversified and individualized use of media. Young people in particular are taking advantage of these opportunities, being deeply engaged with social media and having an active participation in networked publics (Boyd, 2014). Social media allows young people to build networks of people and information, having access to their friends regardless of their physical location, enlarging their possibilities to create and participate in networked communication.

Leisure-time digital practices in addition of being focused on personal interests and experiences, are also problem-based and tangible as a work process. These practices involve identity performances and the handling of mediatized complexities which are more diverse and wide ranging than the specific training in technological skills that is emphasized within most schools in Western societies (Drotner, 2008; Kupiainen, 2013). In contemporary societies being comfortable using digital technologies is increasingly important for everyday activities and has become as important as being able to read and write.

Considering that media in general, and digital technologies in particular, as Drotner (2008) argues, are constitutive elements of contemporary societies, of social positioning, political power, and cultural practices, it is crucial to have the competence to engage productively with digital networked situations, e.g. the ability to control how personal information flows and how to look for and interpret accessible information. Intensive digital practices are not automatically equivalent to digital literacy: although young people are intensively emerging in digital networked practices they do not inherently have the knowledge or perspective to critically examine media and online content (Buckingham 2007). Being born in an age when digital technologies are pervasive does not make young people savvy interpreters of the meaning behind the internet and social media (Boyd, 2014; Helsper & Eynon, 2010). This is why it is so important that the school creates educational settings to promote pedagogical strategies for critically evaluating online media and for using Web 2.0 tools such as social networks and blogs, for self-expression, creating and sharing online content (Silva & Ferreira, 2011). If the school does not engage in promoting digital literacies the obvious result will be a widening of “digital divides”, not only of social, ethnic and gender divides within particular societies, but also a widening of divides between societies (Drotner, 2008; Selwyn, 2011).

Portugal is an interesting case study in what concerns ICT in schools. In a decade, there have been significant changes in the modernization of the ICT equipment and infrastructure, and the increase of internet connections. In 2001/2002 primary and secondary schools, public and non-public, had a ratio of 17,3 students per computer and 33,8 per computer connected to the internet. Less than ten years later in 2009/10 there were 2,0 students per computer and 2,2 per computer connected to the internet¹. It is a remarking difference mostly due to the Technological Plan for Education (2007-2010). This paper pres-

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