Confronting the challenges of digital media and learning: Advancing the debate on education, youth and citizenship

Wellington de Oliveira


Abstract

Our discussion in this paper is focused on digital media and education as powerful means for creating more opportunities for more youth to engage in learning that is relevant to their lives and prepares them for success and good life in school, the workplace, and their community. We will discuss how new media builds up a new social reality at school and how new media influences the configuration of the subjectivity of students and the implications of learning and development in newer forms of digital environments for issues like democracy, citizenship and ethics as debated in the DIGIT-M-ED Project.

Keyword

Digital media; Education; Student; DIGIT-M-ED Project.

Resumo

Nossa discussão neste trabalho focaliza mídia digital e educação como meios poderosos para criar oportunidades para os jovens como formas de aprenderem aquilo que é relevante para suas vidas e prepará-los para o sucesso na escola, no local de trabalho e nas suas comunidades. Discutiremos aqui, como a nova mídia constrói uma nova realidade social na escola e como as novas influências a configuração da subjetividade dos alunos e as implicações da aprendizagem e desenvolvimento em novas formas de ambientes digitais para questões como democracia, cidadania e ética debatidas no Projeto M-ED-DIGIT.

Palavras-chave

Mídia digital; Educação; Aluno; Projeto M-ED-DIGIT

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New Media and Learning: starting debate

The rapid development of communication technology in the last fifty years enabled the creation of an array of new artefacts to convey, recreate and produce the signs of modern society. This wide variety of means presents, organizes, materializes and institutionalizes the contents carried out in our culture, constantly and dialectically recreating modes of participation.

The instructional potential of multiple media is clearly promising. New digital technologies are said to contribute to disseminate information, to help incorporate material from the sites in daily instruction, and to display student-produced projects and comments on the sites (DESMET, 2009; MAYORA, 2009).

The large picture shows that these possibilities still remain a potentiality in Brazil. Although the majority of urban public schools in Brazil have computers connected to the internet – 92% according to research conducted by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br) in 2011 – only 4% of these are located in classrooms.

Schools are faced with the challenge of keeping up with a fast changing society. The 2010 Census showed a pronounced increase on the number of home computers and mobile phones. In fact, the number of households with a computer with access to the internet doubled in only five years (see table below). The number (27.4%) may seem minor when compared with over 95% of households with a television. On the other hand, the rate of growth in which digital media are entering lives, homes and work places in Brazil demands an immediate response from schools.

According to Maddux and Johnson (2011: 196), “it could be argued that in every case, the technology that succeeds and that is widely adopted in education is the technology that first achieves so much cultural momentum through wide implementation in the culture at large that the innovation simply cannot be ignored by educators.” That was certainly true with some analogical technology, such as televisions and VCRs, which were incorporated to many school classrooms and are now becoming obsolete. On the other hand, within classroom contexts these technologies remained in the hands of the teacher and, though offering an array of possibilities for incrementing lessons, were often underused and posed no shifts of power among teachers and students.

Now new digital media – computers, digital cameras, mobiles and handheld computing devices - have been at the centre of a commercial success story for over a decade, and gaming among both children and adults has hit new levels of popularity. At a much lower rate, some of these media are being incorporated by schools. Nonetheless they seem to be referred to as occasional activities and their role in the classrooms has not yet been integrated to schools’ routines. As indicated in the CGI report, “despite all investments in introducing ICT in education, there are still great challenges to the effective use of computers and the Internet by teachers in activities with students. The results of the ICT Education 2011 indicate that the most frequent classroom activities are the ones in which teachers use ICT the less”.

Moreover, the use of computers in classrooms has nearly entirely been dedicated to word processing and lecturing support. In other words, computers have been introduced as an alternative to notebooks and blackboards. Their actual potential has not begun to be fully exploited. The act of reading, for instance, has changed radically with the emergence of digital texts.

It’s important to clarify that we use the term digital media to describe media articulation where more traditional media, such as books, television, and radio, are converging with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication. We are
interested in the media articulation that youth inhabit today. We have used the term digital media rather than terms such as new media or interactive media because we are examining a number of changes to media technology that can’t be reduced to a single technical characteristic. Current digital media often rely on a convergence of digital and online media with print, analog, and non-interactive media types.

Although some of these applications can, and sporadically have, been used for educational purposes, they threaten the constraints of a predetermined curriculum, classroom space, controlled practices, predisposed views, fixed contents, and more. They threaten the so treasured control over the learner. Once the students are able to use the resources available by the media, they can operate more independently and play a more active role in their learning. This poses a demand for a change in the role of the teacher as well.

We claim that the use of multiple media in schools – with the operational understanding of their possibilities, the relational reading of their multiple modes and signs, and the encounter of their multiculturality – can transform the basis of relation among teachers and students. Furthermore, it could bring real life into the classroom, instead of creating this parallel, unrealistic life to be assimilated.

Lorenzi (2012:37) points out that "the presence of digital technologies in our contemporary culture creates new possibilities for expression and communication." However it is worth noting that the domain of its intricacies is not intuitive, demand learning. The school is the privileged space of learning that begins at home and spreads throughout the community in which we live and the spaces in which it circulates, whether real or virtual spaces. Therefore, as shows Lorenzi (2012:37), digital technologies increasingly longer part of our daily lives and, "as well as the technology of writing, should also be acquired."

Although we understand that schools draw on a not varied range of modes of representation and communication to introduce and dispose its subjects to students, it is even harder to realize that teachers have fairly few contact with media apart from the most obvious and basic ones. Brown (2008:16) states that new media use “raises important issues about traditional learner–teacher relationships, ownership of lecture content, and of control over the dialogue in a classroom.” Based on Illich (1971), he reminds that the roles of learner and teacher would not be fixed and learning would be far more collaborative, distributed, and personalised than either then or now.

The new digital media are a frontier that is rich with opportunities and risks, particularly for young people. Through digital technologies, young people are participating in a range of activities, including social networking, blogging, vlogging, gaming, instant messaging, downloading music and other content, uploading and sharing their own creations, and collaborating with others in various ways.

Define digital media as online conduct that is meaningful and engaging to the participant and is responsible to others in the community and society in which it is carried out. We argue that the new digital media, with all their participatory potentials, are a space in which the technologies of the new digital media; related technical and new media literacies; person-centered factors, such as cognitive and social development, beliefs, and values; peer cultures, both online and offline; and ethical supports, including the participatory citizenship and educational curricula.

Digital media can help learners to become more active participants in public life and, moreover, can facilitate critical pedagogy and social engagement. This also means that we need to stop ignoring the ways in which we teach behind closed doors and radically focus on media pedagogy as an urgent topic on which we should work together. In terms of digital media as a tool for education in a digital age, Flusser offers beyond all else is a vision; a vision and a warning. Flusser, who writes ‘all prediction damages the future’ (p. 159),
uncovers the materiality of media and suggests that society, has the potential to move toward a complete freedom of exchange and that the mediated interaction of the electronic era will herald a cultural revolution. Technical images are the absurd means by which to embrace and make meaning from an absurd existence.

However, the reverse side of this is the invention and creativity are those using the digital to find new way of educating would be aided by Flusser; Into the Universe of Technical Images provides a means of navigating what is still to come, a partial map for plotting a path through the thickness and thickets of a new techno-social reality. And soon, as Flusser himself puts it, ‘there will be nothing more we can say to one another, so now is the moment to talk it over’ (FLUSSER, 2011, p. 86).

Thus, we can understand that digital media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting. Youth respect one another’s authority online, and they are often more motivated to learn from peers. Their efforts are also largely self-directed, and the outcome emerges through exploration, in contrast to classroom learning that is oriented toward set, predefined goals in a relationship of mediation.

Mediation is understood here for us as intervention of the learning experience by focusing on experience during the processes of thinking and learning (metacognition) and has as its aims facilitating effective learning behaviour expansion of the transference of learning into new situations which the learner will encounter increasing the capacity of the learner to mediate their own learning in future, and thus, is largely about learning how to learn.

This discussion also finds support in new media theorists that try to look at how emerging kinds of media like websites, blogs, wiki pages, and digital video both delimit the ways people can use them, and provide, new avenues for the production of social relations and meanings. For Bolter and Gusin (1999, p.55) all mediation is remediation. We are not claiming this as an a priori truth, but rather arguing that at this extended historical moment, all current media function as remediators and that remediation offers us a means of interpreting the work of earlier media as well. Our culture conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, redeploy, competes with, and reforms other media. In the first instance, we may think of something like a historical progression, of newer media remediating older ones and in particular of digital media remediating their predecessors. But ours is a genealogy of affiliations, not a linear history, and in this genealogy, older media can also remediate newer ones.

For the authors remediation lines up the logic of mediation for social actors in light of advent of new media, is not to suggest that all of our culture's claims of remediation are equally compelling or that we could necessarily identify all of the strategies through which digital media remediate and are remediated by their predecessors. Thus, in the Bolter and Gusin’s words, the double logic of remediation can function explicitly or implicitly, and it can be restated in different ways: As they explain:

Remediation as the mediation of mediation. Each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media. Media need each other in order to function as media at all.

Remediation as the inseparability of mediation and reality. Although Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and simulacra might suggest otherwise, all mediations are themselves real. They are real as artifacts (but not as autonomous agents) in our mediated culture. Despite the fact that all media depend on other media in cycles of remediation, our culture still needs to acknowledge that all media remediate the real. Just as there is no getting rid of mediation, there is no getting rid of the real.
Remediation as reform. The goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate other media. Furthermore, because all mediations are both real and mediations of the real, remediation can also be understood as a process of reforming reality as well. (BOLTER and GUSIN, 1999, p.55-56)

DIGIT-M-ED: the project

DIGIT-M-ED is a project coordinate by Michalis Kontopodis & Manolis Dafermakis, co-funded by Marie Curie Action. The focus of the proposed investigation is the digital capturing, editing and circulating of audio-visual data, although the digital technologies employed by young people in marginalized urban spaces differ across the geographic areas.

It is widely recognised today that we live in a ‘globalized media world’, yet few researchers are trained to study the complexities this involves. Young people around the world today have significantly greater access to globalised media and to technologies. This development challenges some of the theoretical and methodological assumptions of earlier research on youth, culture, education and digital media and technologies use. This collaborative research endeavour will explore these crucial issues, consider current and future directions for research on media use by youth across the globe, and address issues of how to use digital media and technologies in order to facilitate learning and intercultural understanding. This interdisciplinary international research staff exchange will thus contribute to new knowledge and understandings of a very complex issue that has major implications for Europe and the whole world. It will be highly beneficial to the researchers, greatly expanding their possibilities to contribute to socially responsible cutting-edge research in Europe as well as in Brazil, Russia and India with regard to media and youth.

The exchange will concern the social, cultural, historical, media-analytical, psychological and educational dimensions of digital media practices with a focus on the devices that are used for capturing, editing and circulating video data. It will apply interdisciplinary perspectives and knowledge to analyse how these digital media and technologies practices are shaped by and shape today’s global youth. Solid research synergies between German and Indian traditions of anthropological and sociological youth research, British scholarship in media analysis, Greek and Brazilian educational and youth research and Russian learning theories will be constructed more fully and creatively. Moreover, the methodological contribution of the project is very important. One of the main project aims is to develop an innovative methodology for the interdisciplinary and comparative/cross-cultural study of emerging digital media and technologies practices and constellations with special attention to the voices and perspectives of the young people involved in research.

With its focus on marginalized urban youth populations, DIGIT-M-ED addresses directly the following issues which are of high priority both as seen from a European perspective and on global level: 1) media and competitiveness in a knowledge society, 2) media, youth policies and social exclusion, 3) global interdependence and transfer of knowledge through media use, 4) well-being of democracies and political participation, and 5) promoting sensitization to cultural diversity and social justice through media. The transferred knowledge will thus be an important resource for educational policy makers, legal institutions, non-government organisations, web-designers and teachers[1].

By bringing together some of the world’s leading senior researchers with talented early career scholars from Europe, Brazil, India and Russia, DIGIT-M-ED will offer advanced training in innovative approaches and research methodologies; will enhance the understanding of emerging digital media and technologies practices; and strengthen quantitatively and qualitatively the human potential in research focusing on the specific processes of media use.
The everyday lives of young people across diverse cultural contexts. On long term basis: the exchange will be a terrain for the early career researchers to acquire and reinforce research management and methodological skills, global thinking and intercultural understanding and acquire additional competencies necessary to interdisciplinary cross-cultural research. These skills will enable the early career researchers from the different countries to establish solid leadership positions and maintain/ further develop lasting research collaboration.

At the same time, DIGIT-M-ED also creates opportunities for long-lasting collaborations among world's leading research centres such as the London Institute of Education, the Free University Berlin and more peripheral – but outstanding – universities such as the University of Crete, the Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil as well as the Jawaharlal Nehru University. In this way, the proposed IRSES supports the development of periphery (European and global) and concomitantly promotes European traditions of theory and research. Moreover, DIGIT-M-ED aims to provide the framework for the development of joint postgraduate training and/or project-related exchanges of young researchers.

**New media and youth: exploring boundaries in Digitmed Project**

As Michalis Kontopodis explored in his recent book “Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development” young students and their parents throughout the industrialized countries know that they can no longer expect a job for life. In Brazil the situation looks quite better for now – but the chances that a crisis will emerge are quite high. Individual success can no longer be the quest of education and human development in this context. Tomorrow’s citizens and workforce need to be prepared to solve real problems, using multiple disciplines, and drawing on the very best knowledge that the world has to offer, as to face global challenges such as climate change, global economic crises and poverty or increased levels of violence and national hostility.

Education is a complex process. It demands the very best from parents, teachers, students, and administrators. Here newer forms of digital media have a strong potential: fast, secure, reliable, and integrated internet networks provide collaboration tools that can transform learning. Teachers can work together to develop new material and learn from each other. Students no longer face the choice of either working flexibly at home or in school in teams: they can do both. All can benefit from virtual experiences, places, and events never before possible.

The DIGIT-M-ED teams in several parts of world have recently explored the purpose and the mission of education and the uses innovative technology to connect communities and people, thereby helping people improve their lives. This impact, this cross-communication, enhances cultural sensitivity and helps us better understand differences in views, perceptions, and potentially solutions. When technology meets humanity, the way we work changes and the way we live changes. We call this the social technical citizenship.

In the classroom, the use of new media, more precisely digital cameras, may lead to a rich, collaborative learning experience focused around authentic, project-based learning depending on how teachers introduce and use these media. Students and teachers should have access to materials, formative assessments and each other "anytime and anywhere," and be able to draw in experts from around their system or around the world at the touch of a button. This use includes:

*Collaboration:* Solutions that facilitate inclusiveness and encourage collaborative decision-
making among students, faculty, staff, citizens, and public/private partners and help effectively harness the efforts to solve problems and create value.

*Borderless Networks:* As the interactions of students, faculty, staff, outside experts, community members, and other resources extend beyond physical classrooms and school buildings, a "borderless network" provides security, flexibility, and access that enables institutions to implement their learning model at any time, using a wide range of devices.

The DIGIT-M-ED project allowed teachers to learn about ideas outside of their school or school district. Too often we are isolated within our classrooms, within their schools, and within their school districts, and they made assumptions about how certain educational practices should be done. When they see other schools doing things differently, it makes us wonder how they could change or improve their own practices. While other digital media have this capability, social media enables teachers to both find out about an alternative practice and discuss the details of implementing this practice directly with whoever has created.

Our project is still in the beginning, but some examples of this type of communication can be found on our You-Tube channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCow1jHEY3TgMb4QdrD1h_RA

The activities with digital filming typically included one or more of the following:
- Generating new knowledge
- Acquiring valuable knowledge from outside sources
- Using this knowledge in decision-making
- Embedding knowledge in processes, products, and/or services
- Facilitating knowledge growth
- Transferring knowledge to other places (Brazil/ Europe, Urban/ Rural etc.)

Using films, digital and social media educators from different places, as network, collaborated to solve problems that none of them could individually solve. It is a collective attempt to capture a glimpse of how modern individuals face and negotiate the crisis of global capitalism, as well as the formation of identity in the realm of media, education, and culture in a highly dense, networked world.

There were also a few problems (or maybe they are more accurately named opportunities?) with digital media. In DIGIT-M-ED we have seen many examples (and participated in many examples) of miscommunication that occurred because of the general terseness of the medium, and sometimes because of a fundamental disagreement about what the language being used means. For example, in a meeting to discuss media and empowerment in Greece, we had a half-an-hour-long argument with another educator, who only ended when we realized that she was using a completely different definition of learning than us. It is important to take the time to clarify language, and where necessary, link to less concise explanations of what we mean. This is one reason why we think that every educator who participates in digital media should have some web-space available to which they can link when necessary.

We are living in times within which even the existence of a solidity that “melts into air” is questioned, and where individuals are forced into a type of identity-virtual mode that requires the complex and simultaneous negotiations of time, space, nation, and self simply to
remain intact. It is in this rapidly moving and changing terrain of social relations that the contributors of Virtualized Identities explore issues that range from popular culture and education to digital technologies and the fluidity of race and identity.

The newer forms of digital media facilitated the cross-communication, which was very significant for information sharing and especially in citizenship education. Citizenship education need not always be formal; it can be carried out in an informal manner in most communities. Using new digital media in evaluating social education is an imminent need between youth continuing to improve it, wherever it is available, is important.

Our further aims in this direction include: visible reduction in social conflict, shaping perceptions, promoting integration, sharing case studies, peace and conflict awareness, as well as a wider reach to different groups in the society. This expanded outreach would make it easier to learn from conflict indicators and trends in other parts of the world, train students and lecturers to acquire skills in the use of new digital media, reduce social violence, increase in social harmony and cooperation, and increase positive activities in the school, because this use reveals possibility and belonging to voiceless people in communities.

Digital media by itself will not change education - that responsibility lies with the people, who use it, but change starts with desire, and social media can provide information, which may lead to a desire to change.

Conclusions

With the support of new digital media, social education may be promoted to address social justice, conflict drivers in Brazil, Greece and all over the world; it may be redirected toward global citizenship, and disadvantaged youth may be transformed. The issue of attitudinal change in educational processes may benefit the war against corruption, reduce ethnic conflict, maintain constructive social controls, promote interpersonal relations, and encourage joint problem solving in terms of 21st Century issues such as virtual economy and casino capitalism, transnational movements of immigration and ecological crisis, emergence of nationalist movements and war.

With newer forms of digital media we envisage a social justice and global citizenship education based on the core values of citizenship and integrity, and respect for diversity. Through the integration of newer digital media into the schools, both teachers and students alike will gain the ability to make and reflect upon media and in the process, acquire important skills in teamwork, leadership, problem solving, collaboration, brainstorming, communications, and creating projects.

Our point is digital media represents a new social space where individuals are becoming who they are. Ontologically speaking: the use of digital media in classrooms with youth reveals a new space of living and being. It (re)presents our individual and social subjectivities, our social intra-actions. As responsible educators we should inquire, interrogate, seek understanding, and re-imagine what identity and human subjectivity look like in a post-Cartesian, midiatic and emergent world.

In short, we comprehend that digital media offers the promise of a new learning system that motivate individual talents, skills, and interests. Discussing about media aims to drive positive change in education that builds on the new modes of learning observed among young people using digital media and related tools.
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