



technology, children, schools and families

Re-imagining the future: young people's construction of identities through digital storytelling

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Abstract

This review paper explores a relationship between young people's identity construction and digital storytelling in the learning environment, especially those who are disaffected and at risk of being socially excluded. In particular, I will focus on the young people's engagement in learning despite various efforts to tackle youth disaffection, disengagement in education and training and lack of aspiration for the future. As a theoretical framework, I draw on in particular a sociocultural and cultural anthropological view of culture and mind (Holland and Cole 1995) and "history in person" (Holland and Lave 2000). The review links the current context of youth disengagement and disaffection to the increasingly popular practice of digital storytelling (technology-mediated production of stories). Lastly, it would consider implications for the future of education, in particular with the role of the teacher in the 21st century and the future of education as a technology-mediated learning environment.

Keywords: young people, disaffection, identity, storytelling, knowledge, economics, teaching, engagement

Discourse of young people at risk - disaffection and disengagement

Young people in Britain today are faced with multiple challenges, experiencing the effects of constantly changing political regimes and economic systems of a wider society characterised by information society, knowledge economy, globalisation and internationalisation (Olssen 2004). These locally and globally experienced effects have a positive impact on the way young people learn in schools and enjoy life with family and friends both in proximity and in distant places, in particular through the use of ICT in school and at home. However, there are some alarming consequences, which are manifested as youth disaffection, lack of civic participation (Younis 2005) and social exclusion (Newburn, Shiner et al, 2005) and decline of community. In recent years young people in Britain have been seen as a problematic subject. The youth is attributed to anti-social behaviour, drugs and alcoholism, teenage pregnancy and is often demonised. There is a sense of crisis invoked in public discourse such as media and political debate about young people and their role and place in the society.

However, sceptics have called the crisis into question as to what extent we should believe stories about the crisis. Although many would be in favour of initiatives, they would argue that occasionally crises are used to justify initiatives, thus a composed approach to thinking and planning the initiatives is necessary. Sears and Hyslop-Margison (2007) have argued that "much of the discourse and reform in the area of citizenship education presently reflects a cult mentality that fails to consider the nuances of reasoned educational reform" (p43). Of approaches widely known to tackle youth disaffection and disengagement are the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit and government policy such as "Every Child Matters" concerning social inclusion and wellbeing of young people (Hayton and Hodgson 1999). These policy and task forces are targeted to a group of disaffected young people who were, or were at risk of becoming, socially excluded (Hallam, Rogers et al 2006). Disaffection and disengagement is not a problem confined to those at-risk young people. There is a general tendency that young people and children in Western countries do not seem to be engaged in the learning experiences that the school offers (Hayton and Hodgson 1999; Riley, Ellis et al 2006).

Young people's disaffection has been widely researched (eg Craig and Coles 2002). It is argued that the debate on social exclusion has paid little attention as to how schools and teachers might rethink and devise more inclusive policies and practices for teaching and learning (Riley and Docking 2004), although guidelines on creating 'inclusive' schools have been published (eg Ofsted 2002). Mentoring is one of the most talked about forms of intervention aimed at reducing youth disaffection (Piper and Piper 2000; Newburn, Shiner et al 2005; O'Donnell, Bielby et al 2007; Rose and Jones 2007). Research suggests that in mentoring disaffected young people many relationships did not progress beyond basic 'mundane' social interaction (Newburn, Shiner et al 2005). Furthermore, regarding the risk of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), research addresses that projects should give them a sense of ownership and offer an alternative learning environment from school, and looking at individuals in a holistic way (Spielhofer, White et al 2005) and developing what Cote (1996, in Bynner and Parsons 2002) describes as "identity capital" comprising educational, social and psychological resources.

Findings and conclusions of the research seem to suggest the importance of offering opportunities of recognising young people's achievements, interagency collaboration and support of young people in their transitions into other education, training or employment options (Britten et al 2005). Especially research into the nature of engagement and how relationships are built in learning environments (in schools, homes and other spaces of socialisation) is imperative. Beside mentoring and promoting interagency collaboration

for supporting young people, the understanding of pupils voice (learner voice) is crucial in supporting disaffected and disadvantaged pupils (Riley, Ellis et al 2006). Riley and Docking argue that although recent government initiatives have drawn attention to the importance of listening to young people, there are scarce attempts to pay attention to their views about their education experience (2004). Drawing on two studies (see Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002) of disaffected and disadvantaged pupils they analysed what can be learned when taking their views into account (Riley and Docking, 2004).

All these initiatives and projects mentioned may have offered a short-term solution and indeed may have made an impact, but the challenge lies in ensuring the sustainable support and special provision and taking a holistic approach to working with young people. Provided that the rapidly changing society has constantly changing demands on individuals, groups and their environment, it is important that educators, carers, and those who work with young people evaluate continuously and consider as to what would be the appropriate and best provision and support for young people.

Constructing identities

The core of the problem of youth disaffection and disengagement seems to reside in the way that young people are perceived and therefore perceive themselves in positive terms, or rather lack of it. Several decades ago, our conceptualisation of identity drew on the psychological concept of identity (Erikson 1963). Other sibling psychological terms such as self-concept, self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), or self-esteem have constituted orthodoxy and are largely focused on the individual as a centre of investigation. Within the last few decades, this view has been challenged as it tends to view identity as socially constructed, fluid, multiple, relational, and dialogic and open for re-description (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Against an essentialist view, Hall insists that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; they are never singular but multiply constructed across different discourses, practices and positions (1996).

History in person: identity from a sociocultural perspective

If we were to understand how young people build relations with social others and make connections with community and the wider world, the concept of identity should incorporate a historical, developmental and sociocultural view. Holland and Lachicote present a review on the new sociocultural studies of identity" (2007, p101) in association with the legacy of Vygotsky and Mead. They argue that "Vygotskian developmental concepts help us to understand how people come to be able to organize themselves in the name of an identity" (2007, p134). This view is highly relevant to understand the way in which young people not only re-author their personal narrative, but also transform the context. It would help us understand the way in which young people develop different and alternative trajectories and envision life chances through reflecting on the individual history together with peers, teachers, and parents and how they themselves see their worth and significance in the collective history in relation to the school and its wider community.

In studies of youth culture (eg Epstein 1998), identity development involves an exploration of alternative futures (eg Grotevant 1997). Hundeide (2004) draws on Giddens' notion of late modernity's sense-making as "personal meaninglessness - the life that has nothing worthwhile to offer" (Giddens 1991, p9). She coins a term "identity alternative" in examining new counterculture of youth movements (2004). Perhaps it may be fair to say that the youth's disengagement and disaffection from education and learning can be viewed in the way in which young people turn to alternative identity and lifestyle to cope with late modernity's personal meaninglessness. Countercultural groups are said to offer a feeling of belonging to a community, strong identification and emotional attachment to a charismatic leader, a new identity with which young people commit themselves to new goals and activities and a place that has new order and new reality. If these are to be the key to keeping young people involved in learning for skills and development of personality, would there be a role of education and learning in and out of schools? How can teachers and carers work with them?

The role of education - how to approach the issue of "identity crisis"

Our orthodox, conventional and commonsense certainly tells us that we teachers and other carers including family members have got to work together to support and nurture a positive learning environment. In the testing and exam culture, young people know from an early age whether they will be successes or failures in the education system. Many of those disaffected youth have broken families and working parents who do not get the kind of support needed outside work. An additional factor is overcrowded schools with teachers overloaded by work who cannot simply cope with those personal and pastoral needs of the youth to nurture their potential and provide the context and support for unlocking their talent and creativity. Furthermore, in addressing the role of education, I ask how it is possible to make the classroom activities and lessons meaningful and relevant to young people as sustained engagement with young people in education (and training). This should be applied to not only the disaffected youth but also to all young people and children

How do we capture young people's imagination and interests? One possible way forward is to help them develop new identities and afford them to author/narrate possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) for finding a trajectory and connections with their own family, community and a wider world. Hassan's point about history is relevant here: "any learning a child encounters in school has a previous history. It seems... that this history favours children differently in today's industrialized pluralistic societies" (2002, p124). A task for educators and those around young people might be to provide opportunities to explore and gain awareness of history and the sense of connectedness to the community and the world beyond as well as a sense of historical change in terms of the past, present and future. In other words, the focus of the learning should be geared toward creating learning activities where young people can author (and re-author) narratives of self that recognise individual uniqueness, whilst maintaining a sense of historical continuity and cultural cohesion to the community in which they are based. It is this reflection that is essential for forming, developing and transforming to a positive, forward-looking identity.

Technological, information society and its impact on the formation of identity (or identities)

Beyond the quick fix of making policy, acting with initiatives and projects, it is important to step back and look at this issue as a question of identity and ask how the changes in society impact on individuals, groups and communities. The crisis about young people mentioned earlier seems to address the question of identity formation. It is possible to analyse the breakdown of community and understand socialisation of young people in terms of the use of technology and its impact on identity formation. Acharya (2007) questions "how the wide-ranging uses young people are now making of new information and communication technologies and global media may possess the potential to transform their cultural identity and how educational institutions should understand and respond to this evolving cultural reality" (p340). She seems to suggest that there is a sense in which we are undergoing an identity crisis (2007). With the rapid innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) we go through in the global, postmodern and information era, it is important to examine how identity construction has become increasingly complicated. Appadurai (1996) and Castells (1996) propose that we look at the modern network society dynamically, in terms of disjunctive, networks of flow of things, people, ideas and finance that get transformed and organized. These features of the society seem to have bearing on the late-modern meaningfulness with which young people find difficult in coping when it comes to identity formation.

It is in this sense that the question of how ICT is involved in the transformation of cultural identities, or any notion of identity markings inscribed in individuals in the era of changing patterns of global and local image, and information spaces, has implications for learning in the 21st century (Wells and Claxton 2002). Wells and Claxton, in their edited book titled *Learning for Life in the 21st century*, present a forum in which social scientists and educational researchers have sought to gain inspiration from sociocultural perspectives. Among the new ideas, approaches and potentials to the future of education, the role of technology (ICT in education) and narratives are most important issues as they have transformative capacities of human mind, society and the environment. The radical and rapid changes have made a profound impact in the way we understand early childhood education, human development, the nature of participation and language as mediational means.

Problem of social participation

Other review papers in the project have focused on the issue of citizenship and democracy and discussed the implications of technology for identity construction. Also the Ajebo report (DFES 2007) has documented challenges and implications for diversity and citizenship education. Therefore, I shall not replicate the discussions of new forms of participation in the society. Beyond the notorious labelling of youth as the ill of the society, the problem of youth disaffection and disengagement in education and training has far-reaching consequences. Research has shown that disaffection and disengagement with learning is closely related to the problem of social participation, disintegration of the traditional sense of community bound by place, nation, race, ethnicity and other social categories. Lamenting over a demise of close-knit community, some scholars seek an alternative to characterise the current condition. Termed as 'thin communitarianism', Olssen (2004) argues for a version of cosmopolitan democracy. If survival and security are to be possible, then strategies that "preserve the openness of power structures, based on dialogical communication are necessary as a way of keeping

the conversation going" (Olssen 2004, p231). Is it possible such conversations have been taking place? Nick Couldry (2008) argues that digital storytelling is one way of keeping the conversation going.

In extending the notion of identity argued in this paper, I turn to a specific practice called digital storytelling, which has become increasingly popular in empowering youth and engaging those marginalised and disaffected from the mainstream.

Digital storytelling

Storytelling is primary and fundamental to human society. It can function as a cornerstone of the society passing on wisdom and can share enduring values and expectations for the youth to deal with the life that is not yet imagined (Farmer 2004). In recent years, a storytelling (or narrative) approach has been popular in the tackling of problems in development of literacy and other cognitive skills and children's librarianship (Farmer, 2004). In the digital age, when adding audio and visual features to this ancient human practice, digital storytelling has been practiced in solving problems of education in various settings. One of the pioneers in the practice of digital storytelling is James Lambert (2002), who established the Center for Digital Storytelling in the U.S. The center evolved out of the community arts practices, helping people make art for civic engagement, and the media explosion of the late 1980s and 1990s. It assists people in making short media pieces that combine a spoken narrative, still images, and design elements using digital photo manipulation and digital video editing tools. The visual culture is being used to bring people back into language and the written word. In the last few years, digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful teaching and learning tool that engages both teachers and their students (Robin 2008). It allows computer users to become creative storytellers through the traditional processes of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script, and developing an interesting story (Robin, 2008). The claim with digital storytelling is that it can be used to engage and motivate both teachers and students, but the current ICT lesson remains mainly to enhance technical (computer operational) skills without much consideration to wider issues such as enhancing the knowledge in the subject matter and the real world needs of today's classrooms (Robin, 2008). Hicks suggests that the current use demands a challenging task for developing the ability to think about and use technology in critical, creative, and responsible ways (2006). I would like to show here that technology in the classroom, in particular in digital storytelling plays an important role apart from enhancing the student's motivation for learning. In other words, it would help create a space for collaborative thinking and opportunity to reflect critically the student's sense of self in relation to others.

Some recent research suggests that education can help bridge in-school and out-of-school literacy practices by encouraging students to engage in hybrid texts that draw on multiple modes of representation. Research in the US by Ware and Warshcauer (2005) concerns 'the digital disconnect' between the diverse ways that students use the internet at home and the narrower ways that they use it at school to discuss the concept of hybridity as a way to bridge it. The analysis is focused on the students' hybrid texts and practices in a digital storytelling project.

Apart from the visible features of collaborative capturing, interpreting and sharing of experiences both in and out of classroom settings, digital storytelling possibly offers an innovative way of dealing with the problem of young people's disengagement and disaffection. I consider three principal characteristics of digital storytelling which contribute to the nurturing and fostering of identities. Firstly, digital storytelling employs

multimodal representation. It tends to appeal to those students who have poor literacy skills or under-achieve academically and those who have learning difficulties. Unlike a traditional sense of storytelling taught in the formal subject lesson, which emphasises a particular, often one-directional, sequential, rigid structure and content of stories, what is powerful about digital storytelling are digital multimodal texts (Hull and Nelson 2005), in particular, the powerful roles that digital multimodal texts play in real-world contexts, revealing semiotic relationships between and among different, co-present modes. It is in these relationships, as Hull and Nelson argue, that the expressive power of multimodality resides. It is possible that through digital storytelling young people with less academic confidence and cognitive skills can overcome difficulties in telling experiences and make sense of them.

New social space – a new form of engagement

Secondly, digital storytelling offers new performative social space for young people. Advancement of technology has made us rethink the notion of space when it comes to social space (Lefebvre 1991 (1974)). For Lefebvre, understanding the importance of space is linked to the reproduction of social relations. With virtual space made possible by internet technology, new forms of social relations and practice of communication such as social networking have emerged. Drawing on new social space and social relations, a new form of engagement with non-traditional students was explored beyond the traditional notion of literacy in a space called "the Third Space" (Gutiérrez 2008). In her case study of the Migrant Student Leadership Institute, a collective Third Space is interactionally constituted, in which traditional concepts of academic literacy and instruction for students from non-dominant communities are contested and replaced with forms of literacy that privilege and are contingent upon students' socio-historical lives, both proximally and distally. What is reported in her study includes hybrid language practices; the conscious use of social theory, play, and imagination; and historicising literacy practices linking the past, the present, and an imagined future (Gutiérrez, 2008). They are akin to the benefits and advantages, which the proponent of digital storytelling claim. Clearly, "the Third Space" is an alternative learning space where young people can explore their identities and imagine alternative futures. With the open-endedness of storytelling, digital storytelling makes it possible for dialectical transformations of young people in relation to others as well as possible selves which they envision. Digital storytelling is open-ended, transformative and critically reflective and dialogic. Therefore, the digital disconnect (between school and outside school) would provide young people liminal space (ie in between), offering a site for them to explore a new sense of creativity.

Furthermore, the alternative space that digital storytelling offers for learning and exploring their creativity can be used as a resource for critical reflection. Through the creative process of digital storytelling, it produces aesthetically appealing, multimodal expression of selves in relation to social others. It then creates a dialogic opportunity and space, beyond physical space in which students' collaborations with peers and teachers and active engagement in making sense of their own experiences and the world around them can be facilitated and encouraged.

Mediation

Couldry argues that digital storytelling makes possible the open-ended dialectical social transformations (Couldry 2008, p374). Digital storytelling represents a novel distribution

of a scarce resource. A key concept underlying digital storytelling is the concept of "mediation" in a complementary, partner (and dialectic) concept 'mediatization'. Of relevance to the current discussion of the social consequence of digital storytelling is a transformation of societies. According to Couldry, we approach digital storytelling as mediation. Beyond the term used in the media research, which is the act of transmitting something through media, mediation is referred to as "the intervening role that the process of communication plays in the making of meaning" (p379). Drawing on Silverstone's definition, Couldry emphasises a non-linear aspect of mediation, describing it as the dialectical process and suggests that understanding how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that individuals and institutions have to that environment and to each other (Couldry, p380). In line with the Vygostkian concept of mediation (Vygotsky 1982), digital storytelling can be viewed as a meaning-making process and it can be used as this paper's main focus for the way in which technology-mediated storytelling contributes to transformation of the individual (or identity) as well as transformation of the social and cultural environment.

With respect to a claim to re-engage community and a potential contribution to democracy, Bennett examined the way in which young people participate in online communities and the relationship between online action and civic and political engagement (2007). Observing a social anxiety arising from youth disaffection with politics, Loader and other scholars explore alternative approaches for engaging and understanding young people's political activity with a particular focus on the adoption of information and ICT. They consider ICT as a means to facilitate the active engagement of young people in democratic societies (Loader 2007). Likewise, Couldry suggests that the digital storytelling "represents a correction of those latter hidden injuries since it provides the means to distribute more widely the capacity to tell important stories about oneself... as potentially political agent... in the public domain" (2008, p386).

Digital storytelling as a social practice of remembering

Lastly, as in any storytelling and narrative, digital storytelling and its outputs can be a resource for making inter-generational links between the youth and their parents and older generations. Researchers involved in the large international have reported that the experience of making of digital stories has a profound effect on human collective and personal memory. "Recorded experience becomes a life memory, and, as a communication medium, is sharable with others to enhance our sense of community" (Mase, Sumi et al2007, p213).

A group of Finnish researchers present an analysis of the organization of experience-related activities in the mass event focuses on the active role of technology-mediated memories in constructing experiences. Continuity, reflexivity with regard to the self and the group, maintaining and re-creating group identity, protagonism and active spectatorship were important social aspects of the experience and were directly reflected in how multimedia was used. Particularly, they witnessed multimedia-mediated forms of expression, such as staging, competition, storytelling, joking, communicating presence, and portraying others; and the motivation for these stemmed from the engaging and shared nature of experience. Moreover, they observed how temporality and spatiality provided a platform for constructing experiences. The analysis advocates applications that not only store or capture human experience for sharing or later use but also actively participates in the very construction of experience and support a view that digital

storytelling helps nurture, constructing identities in interaction with others by being involved in activities (Jacucci, Oulasvirta et al, 2007).

Caveat for use of technology in education

My argument on technology so far may imply that technology provides solutions to problems. However, it is rather contrary. There is a danger of over-reliance on technology, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) remind us of the danger of technology as a blanket solution to education and any other social problems. MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) They emphasise that the popular way of thinking about technology is still technological determinism that acknowledges a one-way relationship between technology and society in which technology causes social change and impacts on people.

In line with MacKenzie and Waicman, Acharya highlights a dynamic relation between technology and people and society. Technology does not just bring about change and transformation of the individual, institution and society, but "[it] is also a driving force behind the process of internationalization and globalization of the economy, science and culture; indeed, they have mutually reinforced each other" (2007, p344). The decentralizing and liberating nature of information and computer technologies encourages individuals to participate in a 'global village' (McLuhan 1967) or 'network society' (Castells, 1996), a condition characterized by the interconnectedness of economic, social, political and cultural activities as well as regions, cities and individuals. Such a condition is profound because it fundamentally challenges the diverse locality and traditional values, reduces the sense of social and cultural distance between communities, and affects our relationship to time and space, the fundamental coordinates of experiential reality" (Giddens 1994 cited in Archrya, p344).

Furthermore, what is relevant here in conceptualising identity in the technological age is identity that is placeless and non-linear. As Morley and Robins (1995) suggest, referring to simulation, virtuality and hyper-reality:

"What is being created is a new electronic cultural space, a 'placeless' geography of image and simulation... a world in which space and time horizons have become collapsed... a world of instantaneous and depthless communication... that is profoundly transforming our apprehension of the world: it is provoking a new sense of placed and placeless identity and a challenge of elaborating a new self-interpretation." (cited in Acharya, 2007, p345)

Therefore, it is possible to utilise this concept of identity in digital storytelling and explore how it would help young people re-imagine the future.

Re-imagining the future

Another important feature of digital storytelling is its possible use for making inter-generational links overcoming hierarchical and age differences. It would help create a space where the teachers and students and friends and family participate in joint remembering in and across the horizontal (peer) relation as well as in the vertical (teacher-student, parent-children) relation. It is a site of communication where new

meanings of friendship, family relations and other issues of socialisation and personality development are explored together with others (in the learning environment). This would nurture a strong sense of belongingness (a lay hallmark of identity inscription) and historical continuity. Every practice of learning involves history (of practices, such as schooling and subject lessons, but not in the sense of history lessons as subject taught in school) (Hassan 2002). It is a larger sense of history, in Vygotskian terms, phylogenic and ontogenetic development observed in the practice of digital storytelling.

Implications for identity formation in technology-mediated education mediated by technology

In the 21st century it is clear and almost inevitable that we will have to learn to live with constantly changing and advancing technologies in the educational settings. Learning and education are inseparable from technology, making use of and inventing a new technology that would facilitate and bypass the complicated mechanism and concept behind our everyday ideas and practices. Digital storytelling is technology-based and mediated, but the heart of the storytelling, as in any storytelling practice, is dedicated to emotional and moral engagement, critical reflection and inward gaze to oneself and others and the world around. The activities and experience of digital storytelling is a tool (technology)-mediated meaning-making practice that affords personal and social transformations.

First of all, instead of a positivistic and optimistic approach to technology use in education, which looks for a technological fix to educational problems, the emphasis should be on solving educational problems by not advocating computers or other technological tools for the sake of technology, but by questioning their proper role in educational settings and reflecting on how technology may cause both positive and unintended negative results in social environments.

With properly guided teaching and scaffolding tasks, digital storytelling would help create a new space where the teachers and students (and friends and family) participate in jointly remembering. It is a site of open communication where new meaning of friendship, family relations and other issues of socialisation and personality development are explored together with others (in the learning environment). This would nurture a strong sense of belongingness (a lay hallmark of identity inscription).

It is important that educators, especially classroom teachers, ensure a "fair use of other people's material without infringing on their protections under copyright" (Ohler 2008, p192). Teachers and adult others involved in the digital storytelling project should be aware of the legal and ethical issues such as copyright protection, child protection, confidentiality and anonymity if the stories will be made available in the public domain. The teacher could teach the rule of respecting other people's work and make the student aware how they want their work to be used and credited. This is not just to commodify the stories created and limit the ownership of the stories, but to acknowledge and respect the joint effort put into the work of digital storytelling.

This paper highlighted the importance and challenge of dealing with a new form of socialisation and a new concept of performative space for young people. Taking an account of individual and personal history and centrality of meaningful learning activity, a new form of engagement with the concept of identity from a sociocultural perspective is deemed relevant and offers a theoretical framework for the empirical work to continue. Young people will be given and exposed to a means to explore and re-imagine

the future and the sense of self that they feel they can aspire to gain. A caveat for over-reliance of technology is indeed an imminent danger of technology as a blanket solution to education and any other social problems (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). For this reason, the role of the teacher who can plan, set and organise learning tasks in the practice of digital storytelling is key to successful implementation of digital storytelling.

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