Children's representation of self in social media communities

Abstract

This is a study of how children represent themselves when performing participatory identities in social media communities with relevance to constructing a learning self. Children in contemporary society interact with tablets, mobile devices, and social media, consuming and producing multimodal representations as part of their "...powerful out-of-school teaching and learning journeys..."(Gee, 2018, p. xi), learning to be within particular local cultures (Gee, 2001). In order to enhance the possibilities of schools for educating learners for the changing world they are entering; the interest should be children's experiences guiding our understanding rather than a normative idea of childhood. Therefore, the following questions guide this study: How are children's learning trajectories expressed as self-representations in social media communities? What kind of participatory identities emerge in the process when children represent themselves in social media communities? The study is theoretically framed by Wenger's theory on learning as social participation (Wenger, 1998/2008), as the children participate in social media communities. A social media community is here used for a smaller entity of a participatory culture, sharing the same social media context but differ in the way the productions are being published. In a participatory culture, these are public for anyone to see. A participatory culture has low barriers to artistic expression, strongly supports creating and sharing creations to other people and make members believe that their contribution matters (Jenkins, 2007). As children now acquire and create information, outside of schools, new conditions for learning are introduced (Biesta, 2017; Stephen & Edwards, 2018). In this process, children use social media for self-representation, communication, friendship maintenance, information (Gleason, 2016; Ito et al., 2019) and share their productions with each other and often with a world-wide audience (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016; Wernholm, 2018). With multimodal self-representation I refer to narrative constructions using pictures, sound, movement and design to create digital productions, placing children in a social context with expressions of who they are and what they do as interrelated with where these actions are taken and the mediated means they use. The growing number of social media communities that children participate in and the multimodal character of digital technologies have in significant ways altered the communicational landscape (Ito et al., 2019; Jewitt, 2011) and added a complexity of interaction, representation and communication (Jewitt, 2011). Social aspects of learning have previously been connected with physical participation. But in social media communities, participation and presence need to be manifested digitally. Physical appearance in a physical place is interchanged for participation in social media communities, which requires active representation of the self, using different modes (for example a choice between word, voice, image, film, space, place, movement, color and music). Data was generated by filming eight children (6–11 years of age) talking about and showing their multimodal self-representations. On their out-of-school learning journeys, the children came into presences as 'a someone', in social media communities. Multimodal interactional analysis was applied to move the analysis beyond transcripts of texts to include actions children take with or through multimodal mediational means. The results display significant aspects of children's learning trajectories in self representation, presented as: Input from comments, understanding the other, preparing for a performing self and taking actions. Out of these acts of participation, three different participatory identities were constructed: the user, the producer and the designer. The main results show how children through participation, widen their learning repertoire and critically reflect on space and place. This research adds to

the educational field by presenting children's experiences from navigating new worlds and enacting participatory identities, which is of relevance for their ongoing construction of a learning self.

Method

A pilot-interview was conducted and filmed with a hand-held iPad. Using a hand-held device made it possible for the researcher to zoom in on the child's artefact when the child was showing something and also to zoom out capturing, for example, gestures and facial expressions. This method was regarded suitable since it did not hinder the interview process and the choice of using a freestanding recording device was dismissed. The children were asked to bring a choice of multimodal representations that had been produced in social media contexts with them to the interviews (stored on the children's mobiles or iPads). The point of departure for the interviews were children's choices of multimodal representations:

- * 3 videos/pictures they were really satisfied with
- * 3 videos/pictures they were not so satisfied with
- * 3 videos/pictures from which they had been inspired.

The interviews were staged around the children's artefacts (mobile and iPads). The follow-up questions served both as a support for the children to keep telling their stories, and also to get the children to further explain or show how something was done. Using the device proved to be a facilitator for the children and supported the interaction. When explaining something, the children could illustrate by adding modes and thereby enhance their story, for example by illustrating their point as capable subjects. The more experienced children used the device to show how something was done, for example to choose music for a video production in Musical.ly, making it certain that the researcher had understood. Being a teacher and having ten years' experience of talking to children in special needs and familiarity with the social media contexts, helped in the process of generating and understanding data. To talk to children in special needs requires the ability to build relationships of trust, which is often achieved by showing genuine interest in the child's experiences and trying to understand these, by listening carefully without judging. Data generated by researchers who have built relationships of trust with children is likely to be of considerable use and validity, according to Walford (2008). The interviews were transcribed shortly after being conducted, using quotations marks to indicate what the children said, describing and including the pictures or videos the children showed and writing in parenthesis actions children were taking.

Findings

This study contributes with valuable knowledge to the field of educational research, by bringing forward younger children's voices (Gleason, 2016; Ito et al., 2010; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016) and acknowledging their lived experience of participating in social media communities. The strength of these children's narratives are the detailed descriptions of how their learning trajectories widen their learning repertoire, and how they talk about and reflect over actions leading to change, when adopting and putting a social media community's shared repertoire into play, in the creation of stories about the self (c.f Ito et al., 2010; Wang & Edwards, 2016). The elements in the new learning repertoire, which have been put into play and been reflected, have contributed to a change made in the children (Dewey, 1916/2011). As a result, the children have learnt something that can be integrated into an already existing learning repertoire, leading to a co-construction of the learning identity (Arnseth & Silseth, 2015). This study also illustrates the complex processes behind children's multimodal self-representations and adds how children critically evaluate their own multimodal representations as semiotic resources, and how several aspects are weighed in orienting their actions creating an acceptable total, including the recipient's contextual

knowledge. The children express tensions between the right to be who you are and the risk you expose yourself to by showing who you are. Thus, the findings strengthen that the children are reflexive in their identity work (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016) and supplement by revealing how children have found ways to use social media to support each other, and care for each other's mental wellbeing. These are examples of children adjusting to and learning from technological change, not being passive, but actively involved in sustaining distinctions and boundaries and at the same time challenging them.

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